NAVIGATING ACCREDITATION IN THE U.S.-AFFILIATED PACIFIC

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Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Education,

Indiana University

November 2021
Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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September 9, 2021
Dedicated to Maya and Elric
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the following institutions, organizations, and funders for their financial support of my graduate studies: Indiana University School of Education, the Center for Postsecondary Research, the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust Fellowship, the National Institute for Transformation and Equity, Dr. Nancy Chism International Travel Scholarship, the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education, the University of Hawaii at Mānoa Student Equity, Excellence, and Diversity Office, and Empowering Pacific Islander Communities.

My sincere thanks to Dr. Lucy LePeau, Dr. Phil Carspecken, Dr. Jillian Kinzie, Dr. Amy Ribera, and Dr. Erin Kahunawaika‘ala Wright for your encouragement and constructive critique. Special thanks and alofa’s to Dr. Samuel Museus, for your mentorship and friendship. Thank you to my family and friends for all the love and support, especially Dr. Gizzy Face, Dora, David, Kathleen, Tony, Ursa, Joy, Jenna, Inoke, Troy, Demeturie, Ting-Han, Ania, Stephanie, Adrianne, Layhannaara, Christen, Varaxy, Sylk, Kara, Michele, Darsella, Kika, Keith, Juliann, Rachel, Scott, Patrick, and Alisa: Faaetai tele lava mo le fesoasoani. Mase and Agnes Saelua (Dad and Mom), I’m forever grateful for your guidance, love, and prayers. Faaetai mo le alofa! Myles, Maya and Elric, thank you for your patience during this process, and for all the support. In loving memory of Uncle Frank, Auntie Peta, Auntie Nia, Uncle Vena, Faletua Cindy Faletagaloa, Uncle Gus, and Kawen.

This dissertation was birthed in libraries, coffee shops, softball fields, and my homes on East Iowa Drive (Aurora, Colorado), Walnut Street Pike (Bloomington, Indiana), and Waikalani Drive (Milibani, Hawaii), across three states and eight years. I gratefully acknowledge the Indigenous caretakers of the lands I called home during my doctoral journey, especially the Tataviam, Tongva, Arapahoe, Miami, Delaware, Potawatami, and Shawnee tribes, and the Kanaka ʻOʻiwi caretakers of the Waipio Ahupuaa.
Accreditation has evolved into a cornerstone of U.S. higher education, and reflects the histories, norms, and values of the U.S. academic system. It is an institutional process with visibility at the highest levels of federal government with far-reaching consequences for the institution and local communities. However, despite its importance, relatively little is understood about how institutions, especially those institutions that continually face challenges during each cycle of renegotiating their status, navigate accreditation. For the last two decades, accreditation has been a challenging process for postsecondary institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific (which includes the territories of American Samoa and Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and islands in free association with the U.S. including the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau). The following research question guiding this study: How have institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigated accreditation? To address this question, I engaged in an Indigenous inquiry project to collect organizational sagas related to accreditation, the stories that institutional leaders circulate and remember about how institutions of higher education in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific have successfully achieved accreditation. Fifteen institutional agents (faculty, staff, and senior level administrators) from two institutions (American Samoa Community College and the University of Guam) participated in the study, providing detailed accounts of their experience with the accreditation process. Findings reveal that accreditation sagas exist and circulate within institutional communities, and that these sagas include a diverse array of strategies deployed by staff to navigate accreditation. Two accreditation sagas are presented, along with a comparative analysis, which reveals how institutions navigated accreditation through specific processes, (re)shaping attitudes about accreditation, relying on or reframing Indigenous culture, and with the support of leaders, to meet accreditation demands and achieve reaccreditation.
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Curriculum Vitae
Chapter 1: Introduction

Accreditation has evolved into a cornerstone of U.S. higher education, and “reflects the histories, norms and values of the U.S. academic system,” (Altbach, 2015). This process invites the gaze of an evaluative body (either a regional, national, faith or career-related, or program-specific) to determine how quality and accountability are processed, measured, and understood at educational institutions. It has become a fine-tuned machine, comprised of three cumulative pieces: self-study, through which institutional agents gather information about their institution’s ability to foster student learning and achievement (Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges [ACCJC], 2019, p. 1); peer review, where visiting teams comprised of an expert panel visit the campus and conduct case study-like research; and final judgement from the accrediting agency. It is an institutional process with visibility at the highest levels of federal government with far-reaching consequences for the institution and local communities (Ewell, 2008).

Institutions on the verge of losing accreditation face many negative consequences. Such loss can affect academic plans and goals of students; jobs held by people working at the college; access to higher education for the surrounding community; connections between the school and local industries; and relations with stakeholders such as alumni, government officials, or concerned community members. As a result, accreditation has evolved into one of the most important processes to be navigated by institutional leaders, even though it is not the most well-known or understood by the public.

Despite its importance, relatively little is understood about how institutions, specifically those institutions that continually face challenges during each cycle of renegotiating their status, navigate accreditation. This issue is especially relevant in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific Islands (American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, the Federated States
of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau), where a disproportionate number of institutions have come close to losing accreditation. This research project explores how institutions of higher education in this region, and the people that work at these institutions, navigate the U.S. accreditation process.

Figure 1: Map of U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Territories

Alt text: Map of the Pacific Ocean, indicating islands with political affiliation to the United States.

Problem statement

For the last two decades, accreditation has been a challenging process for postsecondary institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. Four of the six community colleges in this region have at some point in the past 30 years been placed on “show cause,” or final warning before institutional accreditation is fully revoked. The situation was so dire that in 2006, leaders of the accrediting
agency for this region, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) released a white paper titled “Enhancing and Sustaining Higher Education Quality in the Pacific: Challenges Facing Institutions Seeking to Acquire and Maintain WASC-Accreditation” (Beno, Moses, Rota, & Takeuchi, 2006). In it, the authors declared that the entire region shared common challenges that need to be addressed to maintain good standing with the agency and “improve higher education practice and for adequate student outcomes” (ibid, p. 3).

1) Geography as a barrier.

2) Evolving definitions of good practices that raise requirements for accreditation.

3) Inappropriate local government control or influence.

4) Institutional governance issues.

5) Inadequate development for institutional leaders and potential leaders.

6) Inadequate levels of public support.

7) Under-prepared entering students.

8) Insufficient scale to permit effective and efficient operations. (Beno et al, p. 3).

While the practical problem of accrediting institutions in the Pacific points to challenges within the institutions, critical perspectives offer interesting alternatives to the challenges described above. U.S. accreditation has prompted an intense focus on accountability, especially on defining institutional quality through the measurement of student learning and achievement (Spooner, 2015; Shore & Wright, 2015). This overarching climate of accountability has become intimately linked to the accreditation process, leading to situations where many colleges and universities (particularly those that serve minoritized and Indigenous communities) come close to losing their accredited status. These institutions, often situated at the margins of U.S. higher
education landscape, become passive receivers of policies and procedures, language, beliefs, and habits that are determined by actors, agents, participants, and defenders of an accountability culture which operates across a vast distance (metaphorical and physical). For scholars dedicated to decolonizing education, it is not difficult to pick out elements of neocolonialism\(^1\) in this unidirectional policy environment.

Accreditation in the U.S. Pacific territories has been problematized by the primary accrediting agency, ACCJC, as an *institutional* problem, evidenced by the white paper published by commissioners referenced earlier. In this dissertation, I frame *accreditation* as the problematic element, for Pacific institutions as well as in other contexts which have experienced U.S. colonization and imperialism. In my study, I shift attention onto accreditation as the focus of analysis and aim to reveal the ways in which people and institutions understand and experience the accreditation process. In doing so, I hope to reveal the tensions that are produced by accreditation for institutions serving Indigenous people, and to explore how these institutions navigate the demands from the national quality assurance, assessment, and accountability movements through mandatory participation in systems such as accreditation. These are the core problems at the heart of my study.

**Purpose of the study**

The accreditation process in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific can provide important insights into the role that national and international quality assurance efforts and the assessment and accountability movement – shaped by, and shaping, the U.S. accreditation process – have played in influencing higher education institutions, particularly those that serve Indigenous communities. This study is premised on the notion that examining the stories of people/institutions navigating

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\(^1\) Ghanian theorist Kwame Nkrumah (1975) defined neocolonialism as "imperialism in its final and perhaps its most dangerous form...the essence being that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. *In reality, its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside,*" (emphasis added).
accreditation is a useful way to glean insight into the organizational sagas being shared about accreditation, and how these sagas are influenced by the Indigenous culture, as well as the U.S. assessment movement. Accordingly, collecting stories from educators about how they, and ultimately their institutions, navigated the accreditation process can offer a useful perspective into the intersection of structural power and Indigenous articulation at Indigenous serving institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. The purpose of this qualitative research project was to understand how educators at Pacific institutions navigate accreditation in their work to assess their institution, define and meet their own standards of quality, and ultimately serve their island communities. I conducted a qualitative research study to collect organizational accreditation sagas that focused on how institutions of higher education in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific have successfully achieved accreditation.

**Research questions**

The overarching research question guiding this inquiry is: How have institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigated accreditation? My secondary question is, what is the organizational saga communally embraced by educators for Pacific institutions which have successfully achieved accreditation?

**Significance**

This study holds both practical and theoretical significance. Practically speaking, this research sheds light on a portion of the accreditation process that does not receive as much attention: how institutional agents navigate accreditation and meet standards set by accreditation agencies, to serve their stated mission and meet the needs of students and the surrounding community. Much of the existing literature about accreditation is focused on its history and evolution, or in critique or defense of the current system (Alstete, 2007; Brittingham, 2009; Thelin, 2011; Wolff, 2009). Literature on assessment and quality improvement provides some insight into accreditation, but most of this literature focuses on the success stories or how-to case studies.
There is a broad emphasis on “best practices,” and sharing models or structures that tend to generate positive results, and comparatively less information on how institutions move through difficult or challenging circumstances to achieve reaccreditation.

Second, this study offers a close analysis of, and possibly provides remedies to improve, the accreditation process in the U.S. Pacific territories. Accreditation is a cyclical process, and this study may inform institutions about how to achieve the goal of accreditation more efficiently and effectively in future cycles. This is significant because it serves a practical, action-oriented, and culturally relevant purpose: to support and sustain institutions in the Pacific and ensure that they can successfully achieve accredited status and to serve Pacific communities. Through this research project, I document the individual, subjective experience of educators in navigating the accreditation cycle, and share the sagas of two institutions which have successfully navigated accreditation.

My study may also hold important theoretical significance to the literature about higher/postsecondary education in the Pacific. First, the scholarship that is available on institutions in the USAP is heavily influenced by dialogue on minority-serving institutions (Conrad & Gasman, 2015), particularly Asian American and Native-Pacific-Islander Serving Institutions, or AANAPIsIs. What gets advanced and perpetuated by this scholarship is a racial paradigm for categorizing or framing institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. As a result, the role of these institutions in supporting and serving Indigenous students (in many cases, the majority group on campus) on Indigenous lands, is overlooked and/or overshadowed by the more dominant, well-known, and readily available AAPI racial project that casts an all-encompassing umbrella over Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander populations (Omi & Winant, 2014). Finally, this project models research ethics advanced by Indigenous scholars (Smith, 2012) and provides an opportunity for research by Indigenous people, for Indigenous people.
Definitions and terms

In this dissertation, I rely heavily on a set of concepts, terms, and place names that need to be clearly defined. This serves both practical and cultural purposes – to define that which may be unfamiliar, and as a research project reliant on decolonizing methodologies, to perform Islander protocol by recognizing and honoring place and relationships. Much of the material below is taken from the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Office of Insular Affairs, which administers the political relationships between the U.S. executive branch, and U.S. territories (Department of Interior, n.d.)

- **U.S.-affiliated Pacific**: Due to a prolonged period of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the United States has a set of colonies in both the Pacific and Caribbean. In this study, I refer to islands in the Pacific Ocean which share a political relationship with the United States. Through these relationships, these islands have developed educational systems that are deeply influenced by the U.S., at all levels and especially postsecondary institutions. Two types of political relationships exist: islands which share a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the U.S., and islands that are territories of the U.S.

- **Compact of Free Association (COFA)**: Three separate treaties held by former Trust Territory of the Pacific (TTP) islands with the United States, including the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), Republic of Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. Collectively, these three islands are referred to as COFA nations, or the Freely Associated States (FAS). While each compact is unique, they share several key elements:
  - each island is an independent nation with its own government and sovereignty over all matters except the military, which is controlled by the United States.
  - Citizens of these three island nations are eligible to travel to and from the United States without a visa, for work or educational purposes.
- FAS institutions are eligible to receive federal financial aid, if accredited by a U.S. regional accrediting agency.

- Territory: Official political status of American Samoa. The territories are distinguished by incorporated and organized status. Citizens of American Samoa hold U.S. national status, also without eligibility to vote in federal elections. No visa is required to travel to or from the United States, and all citizens of the territories are eligible for benefits of federal social programs such as social security and Women/Infant/Children (WIC) support.

- Incorporated/unincorporated territories: Relating to the application of the U.S. Constitution. Incorporated territories are extended the full protections of the Constitution, as it is applied in the 50 states. In contrast, only certain sections of the Constitution are applicable for unincorporated territories. The CNMI and Guam are incorporated territories, while American Samoa is unincorporated.

- Organized/unorganized: Describes whether Congress has enacted an organic act for the territory, which would include elements such as a bill of rights and a form of government. The CNMI and Guam are both organized territories, while American Samoa is unorganized.

- Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia: Popular nomenclature used to describe distinct regions and cultural groups in the Pacific. Polynesia refers to islands in the South and Central Pacific, and is inclusive of Hawai‘i and American Samoa, as well as Tonga, Fiji, New Zealand, Tahiti, and several others. Micronesia describes the cultural region in the North Pacific and includes the three COFA nations (Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau), Guam, and CNMI. Melanesia refers to the islands of Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

- Pacific Islander (PI) or Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI): Primary racial category that is inclusive of the Indigenous people from the three cultural regions (Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia). PI and NHPI will be used interchangeably in this proposal. NHPI is
one of the seven federal racial groups mandated by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

**Education in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific**

With these definitions provided, I now turn to a brief overview of the Pacific Islands, followed by a discussion of U.S. imperialism and colonization in the Pacific Ocean, impact on education systems, and major characteristics of higher education institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific.

The Pacific Ocean is the largest body of water on Earth (Salesa, 2014). All the world’s continents could fit into the Pacific basin, which covers approximately 63 million square miles (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [NOAA], n.d.) – one-third of the Earth’s surface. The Pacific is home to an incredibly diverse array of human and non-human life and is characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. Pacific islands are typically classified into three regions: Polynesia (including Hawaii, Samoa, Tonga, New Zealand, and Tahiti), Melanesia (Solomon Islands, Fiji), and Micronesia (Palau, Marshall Islands, Guam). This was originally a racial distinction (Stillman, 2017) but has been appropriated by Islanders, along with the identity of “Pacific Islander.” Over hundreds of years, the inhabitants of the region cultivated a tapestry of what historian Damon Salesa has described as “native seas,” (Salesa, 2014) the layered, cultured places, named and narrativized by generations of Indigenous Pacific Islanders. He writes:

“...taken as a collective, these native seas blanketed the inhabited Pacific, like a kaleidoscopic weave of maritime places, constantly being made and unmade, with Islanders holding all of it together with warp and weft-like voyages. It was a moving and changing map, like the ocean itself,”

Native seas were constituted across both vast and local distances, facilitating travel and communication, as well as the exchange of goods, stories, and bloodlines. For example, the vasa
loloa, or sea of stories, refers to the waters surrounding Uvea, Futuna, Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji (islands in the South Pacific), and has been well documented in oral histories and legends for the heroics of legendary mythical figures, the tangled bloodlines of the elite, even songs of how traditions such as tattooing were passed from one island to the other.

Pacific Islanders first encountered Europeans during Ferdinand Magellan’s circumnavigation of the Earth in 1520. Spain’s early engagement with the Pacific was followed by a trickle of encounters in the next few centuries, of European travel/conquest through this new-to-them ocean, eventually leading to a downpour in the 19th century. This led to an accompanying literature of travelogues, journals, and ethnographies (for example, Williams, 1984) which created a durable, romantic, and covetous understanding of the Pacific and its people by an avidly curious European and American public. Colonizing nations were especially eager to plant their flags across the Pacific Ocean in the mid-late 19th century, and what followed was a “web of benign protectorates and pugilistic conquests” (Stillman, 2017) pursued by European, American, and Asian military, religious, and commercial interests. Islanders responded to this incursion in multiple and regionally specific ways: embracing new ideas and religions, waging warfare on colonial agents, supporting (or confounding) their scientific and cultural endeavors as guides, translators, or informants (Salesa, 2014).

The development of United States’ economic and political power in the Pacific has been characterized by at least four components: 1) U.S. possession of Hawaii, Guam, and American Samoa at the turn of the century (1898-1899), formally establishing U.S. colonialism; 2) World War II: the U.S. entered the war in the Pacific, to engage the Japanese after December 7, 1941, 3) U.S. involvement in post-war reconstruction in Japan, and also control of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands; and finally, 4) in the 1990s up to today, engagement with the Pacific Rim and multinational economies (Stillman, 2017). Militarization has been (and continues to be) a core component of U.S. dominance in the Pacific region. The U.S. Navy maintained jurisdiction over
Guam, American Samoa until 1951, after which coordination was transferred to the Department of Interior. Meanwhile, the Micronesian islands of the Northern Marianas, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau were administered under the former Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI) until the 1980s. Upon conclusion of the TTPI, these islands obtained sovereignty but chose different paths: the islands north of Guam chose to become a U.S. Commonwealth (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, or CNMI), while the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau became independent nations. These three nations entered, and are still associated through, Compacts of Free Association with the United States. The through-line of this history is the presence, and cultural and material impact of U.S. imperialism. This imperialism has been and is expressed through (1) militarism, including the construction and maintenance of military bases, proliferation of military-connected personnel, and the public, private, even cultural commemoration of the U.S. military (Camacho, 2011) and (2) the deeply entrenched impact of tourism and the travel industry. The confluence of these two processes has been labeled militourism by Teresia Teaiwa (2016).

Today, the three Pacific territories (American Samoa, CNMI, and Guam) and three nations holding compacts of free association with the United States (the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, and Palau) are oriented in varying ways to the U.S., depending on the nature of their political arrangement with the U.S., as well as Indigenous engagement with social or cultural issues. While some island communities are deeply committed to the relationship with the U.S., others are ambivalent and demand change. But higher education is a space where a discernibly coherent community can be identified, in large part due to institutions’ shared access, and responsibility, to federal laws and funding which impact all education systems. There are even shared origin stories amongst these institutions: most of them evolved out of secondary schools, and most were founded with the purpose of teacher training to build an Indigenous teaching pool (Kupferman, 2012). All Pacific postsecondary institutions began as junior or community colleges,
and the majority remain so today. Because of varied political status, the territories and COFA nations hold unique educational policy and accountability contexts from the states (Sablan, 2015). The Pacific Postsecondary Education Council (PPEC) offers an organizing space for higher education institutions, although this entity does not meet consistently. Most salient to this study, all institutions in the Pacific territories and COFA nations are required to seek U.S. accreditation to retain eligibility for receipt of federal financial aid.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, there are currently six community colleges, one public university, and one private university in the U.S. affiliated Pacific (excluding institutions in Hawaii), totaling eight institutions (see Table 1). These institutions serve a total of 11,666 students as of fall semester 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), and five of the eight institutions serve a vast majority of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander students – a racialization of the Indigenous population. Financial aid is indeed an important factor for students; at least 60% of first-time, full-time students in this cohort were awarded federal financial aid. By virtue of the federal definition of AAANAPISI, all these institutions are eligible for this federal designation, which calls for an enrollment of at least 10% Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander as well as some minimum financial criteria (USDOE, n.d.). I contend that this “minority” serving institution designation is misleading, given the context of the population which these institutions serve.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Total Enrollment Fall 2018</th>
<th>Percent NHPI</th>
<th>Percent of full-time, first-time undergraduates awarded financial aid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Samoa Community College</td>
<td>1,037</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of Micronesia-FSM</td>
<td>1,931</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College of the Marshall Islands</td>
<td>1,119</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Guam Community College 2,082 53% 75%
Northern Marianas College 1,194 43% 81%
Pacific Islands University 62 82% 100%
Palau Community College 497 98% 92%
University of Guam 3,744 47% 66%

**Indigenizing the Pacific**

The primary lens that has been used by U.S. researchers to understand institutions in the Pacific is the “minority-serving institution” framework which rests on a racialized understanding of institutions that serve “minority” populations. Specifically, Pacific institutions are cast under the wider “Asian American and Pacific Islander” umbrella, and what little research that exists subsumes them under the AANAPISI category (for example, see Conrad & Gasman, 2015 or Teranishi, 2011). However, considering the cultural and political context of these institutions and how Pacific colleges and universities prioritize a focus on Indigenous cultures and languages, a racial paradigm cannot adequately capture their scope and depth.

In this study, I argue for a paradigm shift in the way we consider these institutions as well as the communities they serve, uplifting an Indigenous perspective. Following in the footsteps of native Pacific studies scholars (Diaz & Kauanui, 2001), I call for the conceptualization of a “native sea” consisting of islands that currently hold political affiliations with the U.S., one that I have already gestured to in this proposal: the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. This native sea is animated by both federal and international policies, priorities, and commitments which keep the U.S. facing the Pacific; as well as the cultural, social, economic, and educational currents which keep Pacific Islanders facing the U.S. In this way, we can accept that the U.S.-affiliated Pacific is more than just dotted islands in an all-encompassing ocean (Hau'ofa, 1999); it is a living, identifiable place, constantly being “made and remade” (Salesa, 2014) by the intentions and actions of Indigenous people.
Indigenous perspectives are both viable and necessary in tracing the contours of higher education in the Pacific territories, and how institutions and people have navigated the ideas and priorities being circulated by U.S. national and international assessment and accountability movements. For this reason, I turn to the work of Indigenous scholars to shift the paradigm, and what I refer to as Indigenous critical race theory, or Indigenous CRT. Indigenous CRT is informed by the work of Indigenous education scholars and researchers such as Bryan Brayboy, Erin Kahunawaika’ala Wright, and Nicole Alia Salis Reyes, who have expanded critical race theory by aligning its tenets with experiences of Indigenous people. For example, Brayboy’s Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy, 2005) or Tribal Crit, contains an explicit emphasis on U.S. colonization and imperialism, and the impact of these policies on the education of Indigenous people. Tribal Crit analysis opens the possibility of considering how accreditation may be an extension, or indicator, of colonial, neocolonial, and/or neoimperialist impulses. While there is some attention on the regional or federal contexts within which these institutions navigate accreditation, there is virtually no engagement with the unique cultural or political properties which influence their development and trajectories. Indigenous CRT focuses on the role of colonization, imperialism, systemic racism, and militarism in the formation of higher education for Indigenous people in the U.S (Brayboy, 2005; Wright & Balutski, 2016; Salis Reyes, 2018). These theories emphasize Indigenous storytelling, oral histories, and building an archive of narratives to promote a culturally relevant, community-oriented strategy for educational research by, and for, Indigenous people. I rely on Indigenous CRT conceptually and methodologically to shed light on educators’ experiences and perspectives of the accreditation process.

Finally, I claim this dissertation as an Indigenous inquiry project (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. ix.), which means I have prioritized Indigenous epistemology, methodologies, pedagogies, as well as the voices, experiences, and worldviews of Indigenous people in this study. In these ways, I explore the social and political forces that have influenced educational strategy in the Pacific.
native sea, and the role that accreditation plays in the function and delivery of higher education in this region. I will share more details of Indigenous CRT in the next chapter, and what Indigenous inquiry means, in chapter 3.

**Overview of Dissertation**

In this chapter, I have laid out the rationale for the current study, focusing on the problem, purpose, context, and significance motivating the following research question: How have institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigated accreditation? My secondary question is, what is the organizational saga communally embraced by educators for Pacific institutions which have successfully achieved accreditation?

In the next chapter, I turn to a review of the relevant literature, with a focus on accreditation and the Pacific region. I then introduce my conceptual framework and describe how I rely on this framework to better understand Indigenous Pacific higher education generally, with a focus on institutional accreditation.
Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter, I offer a review of the relevant literature which informs this dissertation. I begin by examining literature on accreditation, pointing out major themes as well as an overview of the nascent literature on accreditation for institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. I unveil the gaps in the research as well as some of the implicit assumptions, and where I see my own project positioned within these conversations. Then, I turn to my conceptual framework, and describe how organizational studies on saga as well as Indigenous critical race theories led to a conceptual framework which I refer to as an “indigenized organizational saga.” This framework emphasizes sociopolitical contexts, organizational culture, and storytelling to understand the organizational saga of Pacific institutions to navigate, and ultimately achieve, accreditation.

Accreditation

Accreditation is generally understood as a system of quality control, by means of comparison to a prescribed standard (Alstete, 2007). Institutional accreditation is rooted in the 19th century and was first associated with the medical field. The American Medical Association (AMA), the first accrediting organization in the United States, was founded in 1847 to identify and enforce a set of standards regarding medical education and to curb the proliferation of illegitimate medical programs (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This resulted in closures or mergers, and significantly narrowed the number of medical schools, as well as major revisions to curriculum (Harcleroad & Eaton, 2011). Today, scholars and practitioners alike distinguish between 1) programmatic accreditation including the function served by AMA – targeting specific types of programs, such as medical education or other professional programs; 2) national accreditation, which target for-profit institutions or religious institutions; and 3) regional accreditation, which receives the bulk of attention from scholars. Six accrediting associations (including the Western Association of Schools and Colleges or WASC, founded in 1924) cover various zones, or regions, of the United States, and work in tandem with the federal government to govern the self- and peer-review process that
institutions use to show evidence of their quality to the public (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2019). In the current era, accreditation is required for institutional access to federal financial aid, but also has implications for public perception and peer recognition (Alstete, 2007). For this research project, I focused on regional accreditation.

The basic cycle of regional accreditation consists of the following steps. First, accrediting agencies communicate accreditation standards to all the institutions under their purview. When an institution is approaching the time designated for review, people within the institution will embark on a self-study process, to gather evidence that reveals their process for continuous improvement. The self-study (a key/central document to this process) is compiled and sent to the accrediting agency. The accrediting agency selects a team comprised of 4-6 people from peer institutions within that region to review the self-study, conduct a site visit of the institution, speak with educators, students, and community members, make observations, and gather necessary data. Upon their return, they write up a summary report to the accrediting agency, along with a recommendation for renewal, renewal with recommendations, suspension, or withdrawal of accreditation. The accrediting agency publishes its final decision to the public. If accreditation is renewed, the institution enters a monitoring phase until reevaluation. This is the full cycle of accreditation (Alstete, 2007).

Literature on the U.S. accreditation system can generally be sorted into the following categories:

- chronicling its history and development (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Brittingham, 2009).

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2 The six regional accrediting agencies are: Higher Learning Commission (HLC); Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE); Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU); Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (which includes Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) and WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC).
• exploring its impacts on institutions and systems of higher education (Altbach, 2015; Ramirez, 2015).
• critiquing and/or offering solutions to those critiques (Eaton & Neal, 2015); and
• providing support for institutional agents moving through the accreditation process (Alstete 2007; Astin & Antonio, 2012; Banta & Palomba, 2014).

Each of these strains of the literature has some bearing on how we might think about accreditation as a process, a product, or a phenomenon, and how accreditation has impacted the development and circumstances of higher education in the Pacific native sea.

**History and Development**

Most scholarly books on the history of American higher education acknowledge the importance of accreditation and its unique character and development (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2011). For example, historians Arthur Cohen and Carrie B. Kisker’s comprehensive history *The Shaping of American Higher Education* includes multiple entries investigating the social and political environments that produced the need for accreditation. They point to elements such as the massification of higher education after World War II and passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill), which provided benefits to institutions that were approved by state education agencies (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Brittingham (2009) also emphasizes the structural role that the U.S. Constitution, the Supreme Court, and Congress have played in creating the environment which produced the accreditation system.

One characteristic that is continually highlighted in the literature is its exceptionalism, meaning its unique development in the U.S. and how it reflects American cultural values. Throughout its development, the accreditation system has remained both quasi-governmental and volunteer-run. This is a consequence of the lack of a central, federal agency that could coordinate higher education, as is the case in other countries. This deliberate omission in the U.S. Constitution
left the organization of higher education systems up to the individual states, promoting diversity across the landscape of institutions that were established (Brittingham, 2009; Cohen & Kisker, 2010). This exceptionalism can be traced to the way accreditation reflects distinctly American cultural norms and values, such as problem solving, entrepreneurship, individual achievement, volunteerism, and self-contemplation (Brittingham, 2009).

By looking at the history and development of accreditation, we can acknowledge the mutual, reinforcing relationship between accreditation and U.S. higher education. The need for accreditation was produced as colleges and universities developed, and as accreditation expanded, it also shaped and redefined higher education.

**Impact of Accreditation**

A major strand of literature is focused on understanding the impact of the accreditation process on national higher/postsecondary education. Accreditation has made an indelible impact on how institutions measure and report on student outcomes (Wright, 2002). Learning outcomes assessment has ascended as the most important measurement of institutional quality, in large part due to the increased attention on accountability for federal funding which flows to institutions through student financial aid (Gillen, Bennett, & Vedder, 2010). Assessment of student learning by outlining, measuring, and reporting student outcomes has become the dominant way institutions prove quality, so much so that it has engendered an entire genre within higher education literature, several national organizations³, and multiple annual conferences that gather and connect assessment practitioners. It is a field of study, complete with options for certification, its own discernible history, even a cadre of elders who are invited to pen memoirs detailing their experiences and philosophy in several published volumes and journals (for example, Banta, 2002).

To fully understand why accreditation standards have evolved into the current form, it is

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³ For example, the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education or AALHE, and the annual Assessment Institute hosted by Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI).
imperative for scholars of accreditation to understand the language and logic of assessment. While not the focus of this dissertation, assessment is an underlying and influential feature of the accreditation process and must be acknowledged.

Aside from the mutual and tangential development of assessment, accreditation literature contains a more specific focus on how minority-serving institutions (MSIs) such as historically black institutions (HBCUs) and tribal colleges and universities (TCU) have been impacted by accreditation. In a recently published position paper, the United Negro College Fund's (UNCF; 2019) Frederick D. Patterson Research Institute outlines four grievances HBCUs have with the primary accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC, commonly referred to as SACS). These grievances include uncertainty in the peer review process, lack of transparency, lack of exposure to SACS self-assessment of its processes, and unfair comparison across institution size or type. This position paper confirms and clarifies earlier scholarship by Donahoo and Lee (2008), who examine the kinds of accreditation decisions reported by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the impact of these decisions on institutions. They found that MSIs, and especially HBCUs, “disproportionately experience harsher sanctions from regional associations than other institutions...the inconsistencies perpetrated by the regional accreditation upon these colleges and universities not only punish them for their infractions, but also often jeopardize their ability to function and survive,” (Donahoo & Lee, p.485). Ultimately accreditation ends up discrediting the very institutions that need the most support.

Scholarship on tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) acknowledges similar difficulties faced by institutions serving Native American/Indigenous students (Guillory & Ward, 2008). Accreditation is listed as one of the current issues facing TCUs, due to increased attention on accountability and the difficulty in using Western kinds of measurements on institutions which are focused on prioritizing non-Western knowledge (Abelman, 2011; Guillory & Ward, 2008). In a survey of 14 tribal college leaders, for example, they expressed concern with how tribal colleges
were to be evaluated by the same standards as mainstream institutions due to their unique characteristics such as their efforts to preserve tribal languages and cultures and populations served (Putman, 2001). Putman's study also articulated concerns that accreditors from regional agencies did not fully understand the history or mission of tribal colleges.

This latter concern was addressed by the American Indian Higher Education Council in 2013, with the publication of *Distinctive and Connected: Tribal Colleges and Universities and Higher Learning Commission Accreditation Considerations for HLC Peer Reviewers*. The publication was created to “promote a solid understanding of the unique role of TCUs and their contribution to higher education” (American Indian Higher Education Consortium [AIHEC], n.d., p. 3), providing in-depth information about their history, mission, and cultural characteristics. In addition to contextual information, an entire section outlines necessary cultural competencies or awareness for visiting team members to successfully navigate their visit, relaying the importance of ceremony, cultural customs, communication styles, and underlying core values that would influence the pace, tone, or structure of a site visit.

There are two takeaways from reviewing this strand of accreditation literature. First, UNCF and AIHEC have positioned themselves as policy advocates for HBCUs and Tribal Colleges respectively and use that advocacy in part to speak directly to the primary accreditation agencies with the most influence on their institutions (HBCUs focused on Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, and TCUs focused on the Higher Learning Commission). While it is unclear what the impact of their efforts have been, it is evident that institutional and community leaders felt that the effort was warranted given the high stakes involved in accreditation. The second takeaway builds on the first: the presence of advocacy literature for HBCUs and Tribal colleges is noticeably absent for more recent iterations of minority-serving institutions, including Asian American and Native Pacific Islander serving institutions (AANAPISIs) or Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). This is undoubtedly due to their policy-driven origins,
which includes a firm set of demographic criteria to determine institutions that are eligible for AANAPISI or HSI designation or funding.

**Moving Beyond Compliance**

Across accreditation and assessment literature, researchers and practitioners alike make mention of compliance-driven approaches to accreditation (Kinzie, 2020; Wolff, 2009; Wright, 2002). Much of the assessment scholarship is focused on moving institutions from a compliance-driven motivation, to shifting the institution’s culture so that assessment becomes embedded in teaching and learning. In 2002, Wright acknowledged the painful reality that many people hold “a superficial, compliance-oriented view of assessment as a required activity without connection to anything the institution values, without integrity or deeper learning or the promise of transformation,” (Wright, p. 241). Wright illustrates the human side of the work, acknowledging that for many institutions, educators approach assessment focused on the minimal amount necessary to achieve accreditation. Over time, accrediting agencies such as WASC Senior offered more support for institutions to promote “…fundamental change in accreditation from minimum compliance with existing standings to promoting, even requiring, that institutions demonstrate ongoing systems for self-assessment and data analysis, especially with respect to student learning, and the development of action plans for improvement,” (Wolff, 2009, p. 85). Overall, authors urge institutions to shift the paradigm and promote cultures of evidence or organizational learning around assessment of student learning, and many models or methods on how to do that (for example, Banta & Palomba, 2014; Astin & Antonio, 2012).

**Communal Quality of Accreditation**

A major feature of accreditation literature is its communal quality. A thriving community of practice provides support for institutional leaders moving through the accreditation process, and practitioners are invited to submit their best practices to journals such as *Assessment Update*, founded by Dr. Trudy Banta in 1989. The journal acts as a weathervane for assessment trends being
taken up by institutional researchers, which are dispersed across the higher education environment, influencing the kinds of data and information that gets communicated through self-studies as well as the expectations of external team members. The conference circuit provided by, and for, assessment and accreditation staff is just as important for maintaining this community: regional, state, and national meetings promote a network of support, diffusion of trends or technology, and provides a sense of belonging to its members.

**Critique of Accreditation System**

Several scholars and organizations leverage critiques of the existing accreditation system. Alstete (2007) notes several critiques from prominent scholars and organizations who 1) question accreditation’s so-called “voluntary” nature, since access to student financial aid is incumbent upon institutions maintaining accredited status; relatedly, 2) question the mandated connection between accreditation and financial aid, characterizing the system as a “rubber stamp” process which results in high costs for the institution, or 3) conclude that accreditation does not promote sincere or thoughtful reform. Alstete points to these critiques as a major reason for the shift to student learning by accrediting bodies, as well as an overall policy environment that had grown increasingly sensitive to demands for accountability to students and families, the “consumers” of education. This assessment is confirmed by Wolff (2009), who notes that “the coupling of federal aid to accreditation has made accreditation a powerful agent of both quality assurance and governmental interest...various national reports have called for increased accountability of U.S. higher education – to state and federal governments, and to the public – reflecting mounting concerns about the quality and effectiveness of higher education,” (Wolff, 2009, p. 83). Organizations such as the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) take a more assertive and critical stance, asking “Why are six private corporations the gatekeepers of billions of dollars of federal education funding annually?” at the top of their accreditation reform website (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2021). ACTA is primarily concerned with the accreditation
system’s failure to ensure academic quality (indeed, its active role in suppressing quality), and its interference with trustee governance.

Critical scholars have also asserted critiques of accreditation, assessment, and the overarching global shift towards accountability and evidence-based education (Lincoln, 2018; Shahjahan, 2011; Shore & Wright, 2000). In 2000, Shore and Wright articulated the rise of an “audit culture” in higher education, tracing the migration of audit technologies and sensibilities from the financial sector into the discourse—and eventually, function, processes, systems—of higher education. They point to the inflation of the concept of audit to become associated with terms such as performance, quality, accountability, transparency, and accreditation. This transition is meaningful in that the concept of an audit instantiates a power relationship between a scrutinizer and the observed, “the latter...rendered (as) objects of information, never subjects of communication,” (Shore & Wright, p. 59). Shahjahan (2011) uses an anticolonial theoretical framework to examine policy discourse of evidence-based education. He points out how education scholarship has been positioned as needing “civilizing,” in comparison to other professions: that education scholarship is too often posited as less rigorous or low quality compared to more “established” fields such as political science or economics, and in need of evidence-based approaches so that educators can make more objective, neutral decisions. Overall, critical scholars seek to make sense of accreditation within a broader structure or movement fueled by corporatization and neoliberalism (Engvall, 2010).

Accreditation in the Pacific

Turning to the Pacific region, it is difficult to find literature addressing accreditation issues for Pacific institutions, beyond the accreditation documents posted by these institutions on their public websites. Published literature on Pacific higher education institutions is predominantly focused on the history or development of postsecondary education in the region (Crocombe &
Published literature on accreditation and higher education is focused on individual jurisdictions, with most literature focused on the Republic of the Marshall Islands (citations). Kupferman (2008), a White educator who spent time in the Marshall Islands and married a Marshallese citizen, explores the values and agendas that “control” higher education in the Marshall Islands and finds the mission and vision of the institution fundamentally at odds with Indigenous Marshallese culture. He reveals the conformity of higher education institutions in the RMI to Western standards, reinforced by participation in American accreditation to gain access to federal funding such as Pell grants, thus influencing the College of the Marshall Islands to adhere to standards and practices dictated by the accrediting agency. His analysis (based on ethnographic data collected in and around the college) leaves no room for agency of the institution’s leaders or educators, and anecdotes detailing the confusion of Marshallese staff during professional development activities reveal the author's disconnect to the nuances of cultural communication and bias against English language learners.

**Takeaways**

In this literature review, I focused on accreditation literature that was salient to my study, pointing out the major issues that get taken up and addressed by scholars, and reviewed the nascent literature available on accreditation in the Pacific. I pause now to provide my analysis of this literature, and how I built on this work to move towards a conceptual framework that was aligned with my epistemology and goals for this research project.

First, it is evident that most of the literature on accreditation is written by scholars from a state-centric context. Because most of the accreditation literature is produced within an assumed shared context, the problems identified are known, made visible, and addressed in a particular way.
As a result, the literature which informs accreditation in the state context is made meaningful and influential for institutions located in non-state contexts. The overall impact of this literature is to flatten differences across institutions between 50 very diverse states, and across states, territories, and nations in free association with the U.S.

Second, accreditation is treated as an organizational process, not as a socially constructed phenomenon, one that has the potential to produce, and reproduce, beliefs and stories about the institution. While scholars of assessment provide an abundance of examples of how to navigate accreditation, they focus on elements required for success, and do not center how people navigate relationships, difficult meetings, and diverging viewpoints as they work to ensure their institution's accredited status. The human element of accreditation is entirely absent from the literature.

Third, literature on accreditation in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific is both regrettably thin and lacks a foundation in Pacific Indigenous knowledge or epistemology. Moreover, educators in the Pacific are written about, as object of study; there is little that features the voices, experiences, or stories of people in the Pacific navigating the accreditation process.

Based on these three observations of accreditation literature, I turn now to my conceptual framework, offering details on the theories I used to shape and frame my study, which is focused on addressing these gaps in the literature.

**Conceptual Framework**

As stated in Chapter 1, I am interested in shifting the paradigm regarding the way scholars understand and articulate how institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigate accreditation. Moving away from the predominant AAPI racial paradigm which is typically engaged by the higher education community that examines Pacific institutions (for example, Conrad & Gasman, 2014), I embrace a framework which rests on Pacific Indigenous epistemology and expands the concept of a native sea: a physical, Indigenous space in the Pacific sea of islands (Hau’ofa, 1999) demarcated by
its shared political, cultural, and economic ties to the United States. To advance our understanding of postsecondary accreditation in the native sea, I developed a conceptual framework that engages organizational saga and Indigenous critical race theory to understand accreditation in Pacific higher education. Below, I offer an overview of these theories and explore how they inform my research project.

Organizational Saga

The first theory animating this dissertation is the concept of organizational saga. Introduced by sociologist Burton Clark in 1972, an organizational saga is “...a collective understanding of unique accomplishments in a formally established group” (Clark, p. 178). Clark theorized the ways in which organizations story their development into life and imbue that development with tradition and culture, a process that over time becomes a saga. For a saga to exist, Clark outlines four conditions: there must be a set of beliefs 1) rooted in history, 2) with claims to a unique accomplishment, 3) held with sentiment, 4) by a group of believers (Clark, p. 179). As the group of believers tells and retells the saga, it evolves into something stronger than history or organizational culture, emotionally laden with “nonstructural and nonrational dimensions of organizational life and achievement,” (Clark, p. 178). Once the saga has become established, it becomes a defining and durable element of the organization, “affecting the definition and performance of the organization and finding protection in the webbing of the institutional parts,” (Clark, p. 179).

According to Clark, an organizational saga is initiated by a strong leader or cadre, who conceive of or champion a particular effort. Sagas can be initiated across three scenarios: 1) within an autonomous new organization, where there are no set rules or boundaries; 2) within an established organization in the middle of decay or deep crisis; or 3) within an established organization not yet in crisis, but ready for change. He then outlines five components at the center of saga development:
1) Personnel: Clark call out the role that faculty must play in sustaining the saga. Their belief and accommodation are necessary, especially once the initiator is gone from campus.

2) Program: a specific academic program, or class, or tradition, that students take part in.

3) External social base: such as alumni, who leave the campus but stay emotionally invested in the way they experienced the saga.

4) Imagery: traditions upheld in sayings, statues, institutional self-image, public image, memories, or impressions that form a symbolic whole.

5) Student subculture: current students, who consume the saga and imbue it with their belief. Clark mentions that this element is not as important but still necessary to support a saga.

In a chapter written over twenty years later, Clark posed the following questions about organizational sagas:

“From the study of [organizational saga] we can draw ideas about the distinctive expression of values in the organized tools of education. What are the conditions for moving effectively toward a unifying and noteworthy emphasis in the organization as a whole? If the group wishes to travel the road to distinctive character, to what organizational features must attention necessarily flow? What is the place of the great leader, and how much does his influence explain organizational distinctiveness? Among all their specific historical and structural differences, what developments do distinctively excellent colleges perhaps have in common? Can any feature of their natures be grasped hypothetically as central to all others?” (Clark, 1999, emphasis added)

While there are a limited number of organizational studies of community colleges that deploy the organizational saga framework, only one (Prochnow, 2011) uses this framework to examine accreditation. This qualitative study focuses on organizational efforts that led to successful implementation of student outcomes assessment at a California community college, and reveals that institutional agents held a unique perception of that institution's culture and found ways to
personally relate to the initiative. These elements contributed to an organizational saga which members of the institution circulated, and to which the institution’s success was attributed. My study employs the concept of organizational saga in a more deliberate way and adds to the limited research on accreditation from an organizational perspective.

Indigenous Critical Race Theories

The second set of theories I engage are Indigenous critical race theories. Within the field of higher education, Indigenous scholars have addressed the experiences of Indigenous people within Western education systems (Brayboy, 2004; Salis Reyes, Wright, Goodyear-Kaopua, & Oliveira, 2020). Thinking about higher education in the U.S. affiliated Pacific, and the relative dearth of education research addressing Indigeneity, I am led to consider theoretical frameworks which: a) prioritize Indigenous communities; b) center the historical, social, and political contexts of colonization and imperialism in the creation of education systems meant to assimilate indigenous people; and c) engage with Indigenous epistemology and ontology. For these reasons, I highlight Indigenous critical race theories (CRT) as developed by education scholars such as Brian Brayboy, Erin Kahunawai Wright, and Nicole Alia Salis Reyes.

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged out of critical legal studies, to expose the centrality of race and racism in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and includes the following tenets:

- CRT posits race and racism as endemic to American society.
- CRT questions dominant claims to neutrality, meritocracy, and color-blindness.
- CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on contextual and historical analysis of the law.
- CRT insists on recognition of the experiences of people/communities of color in analyzing law and society.
- CRT emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary work.
• CRT scholarship works to eliminate racial oppression as part of broader goal to end all forms of oppression (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crensaw, 1993).

Tribal critical race theory (Brayboy, 2004), or Tribal Crit, builds on and extends the reach of critical race theory by acknowledging how both racism and *colonization* are endemic to the U.S., and that “policies towards Indigenous people are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and desire for material gain” (p. 429). While the theory speaks specifically to the experience of Indigenous people of the North American continent, it is also relevant to Indigenous Pacific Islanders, who experienced similar treatment by the U.S. government (Thompson, 2010) in islands which have been incorporated into the U.S. body politic. Using the lens of Tribal Crit, Brayboy embraces an underlying commitment to challenge dominant ideologies about educational systems. This perspective leads Brayboy and other Indigenous scholars to explore how imperialism, colonization, and racism have shaped the contours of the existing higher education system developed for Indigenous communities.

Kanaka Maoli scholars such as Nicole Alia Salis Reyes, Erin Kahunawaika‘ala Wright, and Brandi Nalani Balutski have advanced a place-based approach to Tribal Crit, more finely attuned to the experiences and realities of Indigenous people in the Hawaiian archipelago. Wright and Balutski (2015) offered a Kanaka ʻŌiwi- focused CRT (ʻŌiwi Crit) as a synthesis of their engagement with critical race theory and Hawaiian critical consciousness, to explore and express the moʻolelo (narrative, stories, histories) of Kanaka ʻŌiwi navigating higher education. Similarly, Salis Reyes (2018), explores the resonance and dissonance between Tribal Crit and Kanaka Maoli, and advances a more fitting theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of Native Hawaiians. Taken together, these Indigenous and Hawaiian CRT frameworks offer a starting point

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4 While I am aware of recent discourse about the complexity of critical race theory being used as a theory in higher education scholarship (Cabrera, 2018), articulating this dialogue in the context of my conceptual framework is outside the scope of this research project.
in framing colonization and imperialism as a central factor in the organization and development of
Pacific higher education and calling out the specific ways these forces have influenced
education/schooling in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific.

Towards an Indigenized Organizational Saga

As I engaged in these two theories, conceptually I began to consider if an organizational
saga framework might be useful in exploring accreditation; and how Indigenous CRT might inform
the organizational saga framework. I decided to make two interventions. First, I explored the
possible consequences of Indigenous CRT on a higher education organizational study and began
theorizing a new set of components that might emerge from an Indigenized organizational saga,
with a focus on accreditation. Second, I considered how this reimagined theory could be employed
in a culturally compatible way to the Pacific region. Both interventions are detailed below.

Indigenous CRT informing organizational saga

First, I explore the possibilities and consequences of Tribal Crit, Kanaka ‘Oiwi Crit, and other
Indigenous articulations of critical race theory on a higher education organizational study,
especially studying organizational saga. To do so, I went through the relevant themes and tenets,
and asked myself, how could I extend this theme or tenet to an organizational study? I humbly
present my current thinking about this below.

1. Colonization is endemic to U.S. society and has had pervasive and unique
   consequences on Indigenous lands.

   Brayboy’s first tenet in Tribal Crit calls out colonization as a central feature of U.S. society. Many
education scholars have explored colonization and its impact on education in the Pacific (Cristobal,
2018; Helu Thamar, 1997; Hunkin-Finau, 2006; Salis Reyes, 2018; Wright & Balutski 2016). Wright
and Balutski (2016) extend this thought by addressing the specific ways U.S. colonization,
imperialism, and occupation have impacted the experience of Kanaka ʻOiwi in higher education. Taken together, these scholars prioritize and pay attention to the local, specific manifestations of colonization and the enduring influence of American hegemony on island education systems and the organizations embedded within those systems.

Applied to an organizational study, this initial tenet encourages me to think about, explore, and, when appropriate, make prominent these forces in my research project. Primarily, I engage this tenet by providing historical and political context of the Pacific jurisdiction where an institution of higher education is located.

2. U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, White supremacy, and a desire for material gain and military power (Brayboy, 2005; Wright & Balutski, 2016).

Working through the tangled, interconnected threads of imperialism, White supremacy, capitalism, and militarism, scholars have illuminated the discourse and logics undergirding U.S. possession of the Pacific (Salis Reyes, 2018; Teaiwa, 2016; Thompson, 2010; Wright & Balutski, 2015). In Pacific higher education, U.S. policies rooted in these ideologies have led to:

- White supremacist policies that prioritize English language acquisition over heritage languages (Hunkin-Finau, 2006).

- Articulations of student success which are narrowly focused on preparing students for labor within a global economic structure, and an emphasis on pathways to the U.S. military (DeLoughrey, 2020).

- Teacher education programs that do not prepare teachers to teach within Indigenous contexts (Hunkin-Finau, 2006).

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5 I qualify this because within the Pacific, and within Pacific Islander communities (including my own family), there are varying opinions about colonization and its impact on Pacific societies.
Like the first tenet, this tenet encourages me to critically explore how U.S. policies (particularly federally mandated educational policies) may still be influenced by these structures.

3. **Indigenous people occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of our identities.**

Wright and Balutski (2016) capture the nuance, and impact, of race and politics on Indigenous identity, particularly in how Pacific Islander peoples are lumped into a broader “Asian Pacific Islander” or “Asian American and Pacific Islander” racial project. These racial categories impact how Pacific Islanders are identified or known, particularly within data systems which do not disaggregate Pacific Islanders from the larger Asian/Asian American. Moreover, racialization may mask the political realities of people from the Pacific jurisdictions, particularly those from the Freely Associated States which are politically independent from, yet economically dependent on, the U.S. As a result of these structures, Pacific indigeneity (which remains relevant as people, families, and villages maintain and actively contribute to their connections to a physical place, be it land or sea) remains liminal at best, and completely hidden/ignored/overlooked at worst.

Thinking about how this tenet applies to an organizational study, I am led to consider how institutions in the Pacific jurisdictions occupy a liminal space characterized by:

- The jurisdiction’s political relationship with U.S. and resulting access to (or exclusion from) federal systems and structures, especially pertaining to education.
- The racialized nature of institutions, evidenced by resources for institutions that serve Asian American and Native Pacific Islander students (through federal funding for AANAPI serving institutions).
- Existence within, and opportunities to engage, broader Pacific region, beyond the borders of the Pacific native sea.
Applied to an organizational study, these points may serve as important context for the institution and may also inform what people do or say as institutional agents.

4. **Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification.**

Although the term “tribal” is not necessarily aligned with Pacific Indigenous social structures\(^6\) (Salis Reyes, 2018), self-determination and identification are critical concepts and resonate within prevailing literature from Indigenous Pacific scholars (Diaz, 2004; Ewalt & Mokuau, 1995; Stillman, 2004; Trask, 1999). Political movements for self-determination in Hawaii and Guam have deeply influenced generations of Indigenous people, scholars, activists, many of whom continue to work within institutions of higher education in academic or student services (Wright, 2018; Lipe, 2015; Lipe 2018). For example, Punihei Lipe (2018) shares how Native Hawaiian female educational leaders working to transform their institution, the University of Hawaii, Mānoa, into a Hawaiian place of learning led by Hawaiian concepts of *moʻokauauhau* (stories, especially as related to connection to each other and to the land, genealogy), *kaikuaana* and *kaikaina* (interdependence), *kuleana* (right, privilege, concern, responsibility), and *ka hoʻoko kuleana* (fulfillment of *kuleana*). Their work is ultimately tied to their deep love for, and loyalty to, their *lahui Hawaiʻi* – the Hawaiian people, lands, and seas.

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\(^6\) While the term “tribal” is not typically in use to refer to Indigenous Pacific social structures, these communities are organized in very similar ways through close-knit and extended family, and by association to specific places or locations (for example, village, district, or island). For example: on my father’s side, I belong to the Sā Fiu in Leone, a village in Lealataua County on the western end of Tutuila, American Samoa. Sā Fiu is comprised of the descendants of my great grandfather, Ene Frank Gibbons (and through Ene, I am linked to a larger family structure within Leone known as ‘Au Losi or the Ross family, after a Jewish-British ancestor). My last name is derived from my grandfather, Saelua Peni Umi (originally from the island of Aunuʻu) who upon investiture as the Fiu family matai, took the matai title as his first name and Saelua as his last name: Fiu Saelua. As a result, as a child of my father, I belong to the Saelua family, Sā Fiu, ‘Au Losi, and as such, have claim to lands within the village of Leone.
If we accept and anticipate this tenet within an organizational study, we can be mindful of the multiple ways this desire shows up in how:

- Institutional agents describe their processes, priorities, the way they work together, and/or the way to work towards organizational goals.
- Indigenous culture is featured within the institution or processes (is it central, or periphery?).
- The institution is positioned to support sovereignty or self-determination.

5. The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens; and not all knowledge is available or free to share.

Guided by this tenet, any organizational study examining Indigenous organizations would forefront these concepts and explore cultural influences on knowledge and power with nuance and intimacy. For example, this leads me to consider:

- Culture: What or whose cultures are present within an organization? How does Indigenous culture emerge; how/why is Indigenous culture deployed or suppressed?
- Knowledge: What is considered knowledge? Who has knowledge, and who does not? How is knowledge wielded/used? How is this culturally mediated?
- Power: in the organization, who holds power? How is power demonstrated? This also leads me to think about leadership: how is leadership positioned within the organization? Is the organization based on patriarchal notions of leadership? How does Indigenous culture influence notions of leadership within the institution? How are leaders influenced by Indigenous culture?
- The intersection of culture, knowledge, and power: for example, who holds cultural power or cultural knowledge; what does it look like?
Wright & Balutski (2016) point out the power, *mana*, embedded in certain knowledge, and that within Indigenous societies, not all knowledge is freely available or meant for public consumption; some knowledge is sacred, and can only be understood by a few. Reflecting on this point, I accept that an organizational study may not yield all the answers; some things may be withheld; and that for some things that are shared, a researcher may need to make decisions about what is included as “data” for the study. As a Samoan, I relate this to the concept of *va*, or sacred relational space (Sauni, 2011) and the responsibilities of a researcher working within Pacific communities to uphold the sanctity of a relationship with whatever power they wield.

6. **Governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation; and Indigenous people are actively reconceptualizing higher education to decolonize systems and structures.**

This tenet uplifts the central goal of assimilation and consequently, how logics of assimilation permeated the creation and maintenance of schooling, or more broadly educational organizations, in the Pacific jurisdictions. Crocombe and Meleisea (1989) trace the development of higher education across the Pacific region and point out how certain nations created spheres of influence – for example, the U.S. sphere of influence (Hawaii, the Marianas, American Samoa, the Philippines) expanded after World War II to include the Trust Territories of the Pacific (later, the Freely Associated States). Postsecondary education in the U.S. Pacific jurisdictions largely developed after the massification of higher education in the continental U.S., which resulted in part to the community college system (Cohen & Kisker, 2009).

An organizational study might consider how these logics manifest across the organization (for example, institutional language, actions, organizational priorities, methods of communication). However, I am more curious in exploring how this might also show up in the relationships that an
organization navigates with federal entities such as the U.S. Department of Education; their accreditting organization; or the U.S. Department of Interior, Office of Insular Affairs (the administering organization for territories within the federal government).

Building on this tenet, I want to explicitly think about the ways in which Indigenous people have resisted assimilative education, and have created their own ideas, programs, schools, and degrees which are intimately linked to the goal of liberation. I think there is something generative in exploring multiple facets of concepts like assimilation, colonization, and looking at how institutions have reversed the cumulative effects of these policies. Wright and Balutski point to the notion of kuleana: the culmination of Kanaka ‘Oiwi mo ‘olelo about their educational journeys and the ways in which they enact agency (p. 94). I embrace their gesture towards agency.

7. **Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being.**

Across Indigenous CRT, a major takeaway is to prioritize storytelling as a culturally appropriate method for theorizing educational issues which impact Indigenous people (Wright & Balutski, 2016; Cristobal, 2018). If stories are our theories, then collecting stories about an organization, freely shared by the people within it, is an irreplaceable step in an Indigenous research project. This tenet asks us to prioritize, honor, and respect people; to recognize that people and their experiences are the most important element in understanding an organization.

**Conceptual framework**

Taken together, these theories led me to construct a conceptual framework that blends organizational saga with Indigenous CRT, which I tentatively thought about, and referring to, as an indigenized organizational saga. I offer the following initial set of ideas, which guided my study of accreditation in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific.
Figure 2: Model of Indigenized organizational saga

Alt text: Model depicting three elements (organizational culture such as leadership, process, or personnel; external forces impacting the jurisdiction such as histories of colonization, imperialism, and militarism; and storytelling as a key source of knowledge) comprising the conceptual framework described in this section.

I posit that to understand an organizational saga in an Indigenous context, and especially in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific, the following elements are required:

- First, I must understand the **external forces impacting organizations.** Specifically, I must understand how U.S. colonization, imperialism, militarism have shaped educational systems, and consider how current political relationships/treaties, policies, doctrines, funding streams, or initiatives might intentionally or continually represent these forces.

- Second, I examined **elements of organizational culture** (broadly thinking about the organizational culture, and more specifically exploring institutional cultures as well as Indigenous cultures) and how they may influence accreditation. Within this bucket, I include relevant elements of Clark’s organizational saga theory as well as Indigenous
attempts to decolonize education and transform their institutions. I intend to explore the following:

- Leadership or the role of leaders within the organization’s accreditation saga. While Clark emphasizes or bases his conception of a saga on a strong leader (typically white male leadership), I also engaged existing research on Pacific leadership (Lipe, 2018; Sims, 2018) to tease out the particularities of leadership in the Pacific regional context that might show up in the data.

- Process: I extended Clark’s conception of a program to look for evidence of a particular kind of process that institutional agents take part in, and the nuances of that process within each institution related to accreditation. Who drives the process? How is the process characterized?

- Personnel: Like Clark, I examined the role that different people on campus (faculty, staff, students, external stakeholders) play in sustaining the saga.

- Imagery: Also, like Clark, I examined traditions related to accreditation that are embodied in sayings, statues, institutional self-image, public image, memories, and/or impressions that form a symbolic whole.

- Indigenous culture, knowledge, and power: I examined the agency of Indigenous people within institutions to uplift Indigenous knowledge, engage Indigenous communities, and ultimately work for the liberation of Indigenous people.

- Third, I prioritized stories and storytelling as a key source of knowledge for these institutions, and uplifted Pacific wisdom and Indigenous knowledge systems to create a complete organizational saga.

\[7\] While I specifically name these elements, I refer to them not as a prescriptive list, but rather an initial set of possible factors based on my review of the literature.
Taken together, I posited that these elements shed light on the existence of an organizational saga for institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific, and furthermore, were useful in exploring the stories that institutional agents share about their accreditation process. I emphasize that this framework was drawn from Indigenous critical race scholars and was predicated on a place-based approach to developing the saga. This means that for each institution included in the study, I explored each of these elements in great detail; I paid close attention to the elements pointed out by Clark in his conceptualization of an organizational saga, as well as the unique ways that Indigenous people of each island are doing things; and finally, I recognized opportunities to compare and contrast, and balanced that with the need to honor and respect each institution individually.

With this conceptual framework, I engaged in a research project that responded (in a small way) to the gaps in the literature that I pointed out earlier:

- First, most of the literature on accreditation is written by scholars from a state-centric context. The conceptual framework I proposed purposefully highlights how these institutions exist within different historical, social, and political contexts.
- Second, accreditation is treated as an organizational process, not as a socially constructed phenomenon, one that produces, and reproduces, beliefs and stories about the institution. Through this framework, I centered the lived experiences of the people who went through accreditation rather than the mechanics of successful achievement of accredited status.
- Finally, literature on accreditation in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific is thin and the available literature lacks a foundation in Pacific Indigenous knowledge or epistemology. This project builds what we know about this region, was informed by the contributions of Indigenous Pacific scholars, and centered the everyday wisdom of people (especially Indigenous people) to understand the organizations they serve.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by providing my analysis of the accreditation literature in higher education. I focused on its history and development, the impact of accreditation on how institutions demonstrate quality and on minority-serving institutions, the focus on moving past compliance mindsets, and how accreditation is communally oriented. Then, I provided an overview of some of the critiques of the accreditation system, how Indigenous scholars and higher education leaders have sought an alternative approach to accreditation, and the nascent literature on accreditation in Pacific higher education. Following this overview, I introduced my conceptual framework, articulating an Indigenized approach to Clark's concept of an organizational saga, which I think of as an indigenized organizational saga. I deployed this conceptual framework to investigate accreditation as a culturally and contextually mediated, socially constructed organizational process, woven into a saga by the stories of people who went through it. In the following chapter, I lay out how this framework informed my research methodology.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Decolonizing Methodologies

I began by claiming this dissertation as an Indigenous inquiry project (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008, p. ix.), which means I have prioritized Indigenous epistemology, methodologies, and pedagogies throughout this study. This is an approach to research that highlights the voices, experiences, and worldviews of indigenous people, and was articulated to international audiences by Maori scholar Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngata Awa, Ngati Porou). In her seminal work, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2012), she offers her own experience as a Native person pursuing research within her own communities, and how her doctoral training failed to prepare her for the unique experiences and interactions she would encounter (Smith, p. 12). As a result, she decided to articulate Kaupapa Maori (literally, the Maori way) methodologies, drawing from, and contributing to the vitality of her indigenous culture and heritage. Kaupapa Maori paradigm in education upholds three principles: 1) takes for granted the validity and legitimacy of Maori knowledge, 2) the survival and revival of Maori language and culture are imperative; and 3) and elevates the central desire for Maori people for sovereignty and autonomy (Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002). Smith also described the function of Kaupapa Maori to be for Maori people, for the benefit of the community – like the function of community-based participatory research (CBPR).

For me, Smith’s articulation of decolonizing methodologies serves more than just a set of guideposts to support the kinds of methods used, but focuses on the personal, intellectual, ethical, and political considerations that indigenous scholars must make in research projects. She writes:

“In contemporary indigenous contexts there are some major research issues which continue to be debated quite vigorously. These can be summarized best by the critical questions that communities and indigenous activists often ask, in a variety of ways: Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its
questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated?” (Smith, p. 10).

These are serious questions that any critical scholar grapples with, but in the context of Indigenous communities, these become even more imperative, because of the way research has been wielded by Western scholars within Indigenous communities.

This perspective led me to reflect on research that has taken place in the Pacific, and the lingering effects on Indigenous Pacific societies (Sivasundaram, 2014). For example, Margaret Mead's efforts in the early 20th century had a profound impact on the reputation of Western research in the Samoan Islands (Foerstel, 1994), as well as the reputation of Samoans culture and society in the United States and the Western world. Mead, an anthropologist trained by Franz Boas at Columbia University, developed a research study on adolescence and sexuality in the Samoan islands of Ta'u, Manua, advancing an argument that the West had imbued adolescence (particularly female adolescence) with cultural markers and strictures that were the result of intentional social design, largely influenced by religious belief (Mead, 1928). She argued that in a “pure” society, unencumbered with those strictures, the period of adolescence was neither celebrated nor exonerated. Mead contended that in Samoan culture, girls were allowed to grow into their maturity, in the context of a culture tolerant of (and comfortable with) female sexuality. Her ethnography exemplifies the kind of researcher objectivity that was considered essential for an “authentic” representation of a culture: Samoan participants in her study (namely, young Samoan women) were treated as native informants, from whom Mead extracted information for her own research purposes. While others have done a better job of analyzing the harmful and negative impact of the Western research gaze on Pacific Islander societies (Smith, 2012; Trask, 1993), I will add that within my own family, stories about Mead’s work contained clear warnings about the harm of indulging the curiosity of palagi (White) researchers. Yet as Samoan anthropologist Lisa Uperesa has pointed out (2010), “...Mead’s writing was part of a progressive, antiracist project...the body of
her work helped to denaturalize the existence of patriarchy and critique bourgeois heteronormativity, both important interventions,” (p. 283). All that to say, doing research in the Pacific comes with heavy baggage, carrying the weight of painful, racist, violent, and sometimes even liberatory encounters.

As a result of this existing critique/perspective of research and those conducting it, I tread carefully as a researcher. As a Samoan, with genealogical roots in American Samoa, I took up similar responsibilities that Smith articulated in Kaupapa Maori research framework. I join a growing group of Pacific scholars that has developed culturally appropriate research methods with, and for, Pacific Islander communities. These techniques informed all aspects of my methodology (data collection, analysis, and write-up). This was especially important for me, as an Indigenous Samoan woman, in feeling competent and confident as a scholar to pursue a study situated in the region that is my ancestral home.

Here were the methodological decisions I made to establish my research as an Indigenous research project. First, I positioned myself as an Indigenous Pacific Islander/Samoan woman in all interactions. As Smith points out, in doing so “...I am claiming a genealogical, cultural, and political set of experiences,” (Smith, p. 12). My lines of descent – familial and intellectual – and the sum of my experiences, as a woman, scholar, second generation Samoan, student activist, and community advocate are all bound up in this research project, in profound and intimate ways.

Second, I relied on qualitative methods that have been deployed by other Pasefika scholars, within Pacific communities. These methods include talanoa (informal conversation, talk) (Vaioleti, 2006) and faafaletui (formal conversation, dialogue) (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014), which have been engaged by Pacific Islander scholars to learn with Pacific Islander communities, relying on and centering native Pacific epistemologies.
Third, I honored culturally relevant and specific Pacific Indigenous protocols, reflecting on Smith’s comments:

“Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviors as an integral part of methodology. They are ‘factors’ to be built into research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood... ‘reporting back’ to the people and ‘sharing knowledge’...assume a principle of reciprocity and feedback.” (Pages 15-16)

The appropriate protocols within Pacific society can generally be known and acknowledged by anyone engaged within Pacific communities; but for me, carrying my genealogy and name, protocol becomes indispensable.

Finally, I foreground my research project by naming the values of fa’aaloalo (respect), reciprocity, and mafutaga or va (relationships/relationality), which are critical for many Pacific societies but carry special meaning and weight when employed by, and for, Indigenous people. I am responding to Smith’s observation on research ethics:

“...In Indigenous frameworks, relationships matter. Respectful, reciprocal, genuine relationships lie at the heart of community life and community development...the term ‘respect’ is consistently used by Indigenous peoples to underscore the significance of our relationships and humanity...respect is a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which I expressed through all aspects of social conduct.” (Smith, p. 124).
In the relevant sections, I provide greater detail on the protocol that I prioritized during the research process. The remainder of this chapter offers an overview of the methodology of this dissertation research project, guided by decolonizing and Pacific methodologies.

**Research Design**

For this project, I conducted a qualitative study to address the following research questions:

- How have institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigated accreditation?
- What is the accreditation saga communally embraced by educators for Pacific institutions which have successfully achieved accreditation? To answer this question, I engaged a conceptual framework I refer to as an “indigenized organizational saga” to explore accreditation in the Pacific region. The conceptual framework (drawn from Clark’s theory of organizational saga and Indigenous critical race theories) posits that to map out an organizational saga for a Pacific institution, I need to think about the following:
  
  - The external forces (such as U.S. colonization, imperialism, militarism, political relationships/treaties, policies, doctrines, funding streams, or initiatives that currently represent these forces) which shape the organization.
  
  - Elements of organizational culture (leadership, process, personnel, imagery, Indigenous attempts to decolonize education and transform their institutions) which shape how people within the organization do their work, or for my study, navigate accreditation.
  
  - Storytelling as a key source of knowledge for these institutions.

Then, I turned to methodology which would align with my conceptual framework and offer a culturally appropriate approach to the overall research process. I drew from talanoa research methodology (TRM; Vaioleti, 2006) as the primary strategy for my project.

Talanoa, a word with multiple meanings in Samoan (tell stories, communicate, talk, conversation), is “a mode of communication that is integral to the way in which many Pacific
peoples learn, relate to each other, narrate, and tell stories,” (Vaioleti, p. 193). Talanoa can be thought of as conversation, a talk, exchange of ideas. It can sometimes mean storytelling, or even chit chat. Almost always, talanoa is conducted face-to-face, in person. Vaioleti argues that in the context of research, talanoa “...requires researchers to partake deeply in the research experience rather than stand back and analyse. Talanoa, then, is subjective, mostly oral and collaborative, and...resistant to rigid, institutional, hegemonic control,” (Vaioleti, p. 24).

Like the decolonizing methodologies framework shared above, talanoa research methodology situates research ethics from a Pacific worldview to protect the integrity of the talanoa. These ethics, or protocols, are described by Vaioleti through Tongan cultural concepts such as:

- **Faka’apa’apa**: respect, humility, consideration. This ethic speaks to the way a researcher acts while participating in the talanoa, how they show up, the way they are dressed, and especially, being careful about how you act when you're in person.

- **Anga lelei**: generosity, tolerance, kindness, dignity. This ethic speaks to a researcher’s actions, and reactions, during a talanoa; making yourself available to help with whatever’s going on; and bringing a small gift as thanks to the participants.

- **Mateuteu**: well-prepared, hard-working, professional. This ethic speaks to how a researcher prepares for the talanoa, preparing research materials, knowing their participants’ social standings, being aware of any genealogical connections.

- **Poto he anga**: knowing what to do, doing it well. This speaks to the importance of accountability and follow-through, keeping confidentiality, inviting participants to contribute to research design, and making sure that any writing or publications that emerge from the talanoa do not shame or embarrass.
- **Ofa feunga**: showing compassion, empathy, love. This speaks to the responsibility of the researcher to refrain from affecting the world of the participants in a negative way, maintaining integrity.

More than any other feature, these cultural considerations serve to differentiate talanoa research methodology from other critical qualitative methods. Research conducted with Pacific participants, by Pacific researchers, can operate along unspoken norms and values which are by shades and degrees more formal than a meeting with friends or loved ones. Talanoa research methodology served as a good complement for my conceptual framework, because it provided a culturally appropriate approach to exploring Pacific organizations. The methodology prioritizes face-to-face storytelling, honoring the lived experiences of individuals, and emphasizes honesty and accountability to participants and the broader community. Vaioleti put this in plain terms: “Pacific research must advance Pacific peoples directly,” (Vaioleti, p. 31). I go over this in more detail in my positionality statement.

**Participants**

To solicit institutional participation in my study, I cast a wide net and outreached to all public institutions (seven in total) accredited by the Western Association for Schools and College located across the U.S. affiliated territories (American Samoa, Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam) and Freely Associated States (Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Republic of Palau). I emailed the office of the president at each institution using the publicly available contact information, providing details of my study, and requesting their support. I received an initial response from all but one institution, and in total, engaged from two institutions.

Upon confirming institutional participation, I worked with the President’s office to identify people most suitable for inclusion in the study. Inclusion criteria was primarily focused on the
following: 1) participation in the institution’s most recent accreditation reaffirmation; and 2) prior leadership capacity in accreditation efforts. After confirming the list of potential participants with the President of each institution, I used the provided means of contact (primarily emails) to solicit their participation (copies of IRB approved solicitation language provided in Appendix B).

In my recruitment email, I explained the purpose of the research project, and indicated the support of institutional leadership for my activity. Participants were directed to reply to the email indicating their interest. Once they got in touch, I provided them a copy of the IRB-approved informed consent form, and a copy of the questions I had developed. Then, I coordinated a meeting virtual meeting time for the talanoa session to take place.

**Data Collection**

To understand the accreditation saga at each institution, I held talanoa sessions to gather accreditation stories from participants. Talanoa sessions were conducted over Zoom in October-November 2020.8 I collected a total of 15 talanoa sessions, from two institutions.

Talanoa research methodology was critical in helping me understand/evaluate my conversations with participants, even though I was unable to follow through on one of the core strategies of talanoa, face-to-face conversation. However, to the best of my ability, and drawing from lessons learned not just as a researcher, but as a Samoan woman, I translated elements of talanoa methodology in my Zoom calls, in the following ways:

First, I began each talanoa session by telling the story of how I came to be interested in the topic and making the purpose of the talanoa clear. Invariably, I would provide details about my family and my own educational journey. I explained my brief time working in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at American Samoa Community College in 2015, and how that experience had shaped

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8 My initial plan was to travel to each institution and conduct data collection in person; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all the Pacific jurisdictions closed their borders.
my commitment to investigating issues of accreditation in the Pacific. Finally, I shared my intentions to return to each institution, present the results of my research project, and find ways to co-construct a tangible produce that would be of service to their institution and Pacific communities.

Additionally, I approached talanoa sessions not just as a researcher from Indiana University (although when it was relevant, I discussed that context), but drew increasingly upon my upbringing as a Samoan woman. I found myself dressing according in traditional Samoan formal clothing for my Zoom sessions, to present myself in a cultural way and signal my respect for cultural protocol. Because the sessions were over Zoom, my attire wasn’t really a key feature in the way my participants saw me; but it put me in a different frame of mind. Seated in my puletasi, with my face made up and hair adorned with a sei (flower), my mother’s lessons about protocol, showing respect, and knowing my genealogy were never far from my mind. For Samoan participants, I also spent time answering questions about my family and genealogy; this was relevant as my family is highly regarded for their contribution to K-12 education in American Samoa.

I began data collection in October 2020, seven months after defending my dissertation proposal and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, borders were closed to most Pacific islands, including the region within the scope of my research study. This led me to conduct talanoa sessions online, via Zoom. Thus, many elements of talanoa research methodology were beyond my ability, due to the talanoa sessions taking place virtually. Had I been able to conduct data collection in person, I would have offered to help in small ways within the office; I would have brought gifts of appreciation; and I might not have stayed so rigidly within an hour timeframe. Since I was on Zoom, I was careful with how much time I asked of my participants, communicating the hour timeframe at the beginning of our talanoa to set expectations. I sought nonverbal cues that participants were ready to conclude the talanoa. Finally, I always made space at the beginning of our time to go over
the informed consent forms (which had been shared prior to the Zoom call), answering any questions, and at the end, making sure they knew what to expect after the talanoa session ended.

The interview protocol I had approved by IU’s IRB office were designed to be semi-structured, meaning I had a general idea of the topics I hoped to cover, but with talanoa, there is much more of an emphasis on dialogue and flow. I would begin by asking each participant to share their experience with accreditation, and based on their response, I would ask them to expand on a topic, or share my reactions, or even simply consult my interview protocol and continue with the next question. Often, I never needed to consult the protocol because the talanoa was full of richness, laughter, or long stories that led to other stories. In fact, there was only one participant who seemed to expect me to stick to the interview protocol (which I picked up on and accommodated). Overall, while the structure and result of talanoa sessions may look indistinguishable from an interview, I would point out two major differences: 1) in the way I presented myself to participants (especially with Samoan participants), offering my ancestral and genealogical connections and spending the time to share about my work in education and 2) in the way I reflected with participants, giving verbal cues that this was a shared and collaborative process.

In Table 2, I provide information about my participants, including their pseudonyms, gender, ethnicity, age, and how long they have been at the institution.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Level of education</th>
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<td>CHamoru</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Samoan</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Document review.

To provide supplemental information about each institution, I consulted accreditation documents to confirm details about accreditation processes by participants. Federal law requires that accreditation documentation be available within one click of any institution’s home page, so I used that access to obtain relevant accreditation materials. I relied primarily on the institutional self-evaluation report (ISER) for information about the institutional accreditation sagas, and the ensuing back-and-forth communication between the institution and its accrediting agency. I returned to institutional accreditation materials after my talanoa sessions to create a timeline of accreditation events, and cross-reference portions of the ISER that came up during talanoa. I used documents primarily to prepare for talanoa sessions, maximizing my time with participants.

Data Analysis

As mentioned in my research design, I relied on talanoa research methodology (TRM) to gather stories related to accreditation. TRM prioritizes stories, storytelling, and sharing lived experiences, so in my data analysis, I focused on both the transcripts of my talanoa sessions with participants, and the video recordings of the sessions as well. In doing so, I sought to define elements of the story being told by multiple participants by listening closely to each of the talanoa sessions, writing memos, and transcribing the sessions using Otter.ai web-based software. I viewed the Zoom recording to document cultural interplays that occurred during the talanoa sessions, noticing laughter, silence, deep or reflective thinking, and body movements.
After transcribing the talanoa sessions, I employed both deductive and inductive coding to understand the elements related to the accreditation saga, relying on my conceptual framework (Indigenized organizational saga) for initial/a priori codes. This conceptual framework posits that an organizational saga for a Pacific institution may include elements such as:

- The external forces (such as U.S. colonization, imperialism, militarism, political relationships/treaties, policies, doctrines, funding streams, or initiatives that currently represent these forces) which shape the organization. I provided a broad overview of external forces shaping education in the Pacific region in chapters 1 and 2, and elaborate, when necessary, in chapter 4.

- Elements of organizational culture, such as leadership, process, personnel, imagery, Indigenous attempts to decolonize education and transform their institutions) which shape how people within the organization do their work, or for my study, navigate accreditation. Specifically, I explored these initial elements:
  - Leadership: Are there leaders associated with the saga? What is the role of leaders in advancing accreditation? What might be the Indigenous, cultural, or identity elements?
  - Process: What processes were vital for accreditation to successful conclude? Who drove the process? How did people characterize the process?
  - Personnel: Who are the people involved in the accreditation saga?
  - Imagery: What are the symbols, imagery, or sayings related to accreditation?
  - Indigenous culture, knowledge, and power: How is culture invoked or deployed as a characteristic of the saga, or within the elements above? How is Indigenous knowledge prioritized throughout the accreditation process?
Interestingly, several scholars point out that because of its emphasis on lived experiences and attempts to understand those experiences through the voices of participants, TRM shares some cultural and contextual characteristics with phenomenological research methods (Vaioleti, 2013). Thus, I relied on data analysis methods loosely similar to techniques used for phenomenological research. Working on an individual institution, I began by closely reading transcripts of people from that institution, noting significant statements, and establishing an initial set of codes, reconstructing meaning and restating ideas in my own words. My coding of transcripts yielded an initial 58 codes (see Table 3 and 4), which were eventually combined and revised as data analysis continued. While many of these initial codes are immediately aligned with the elements of my conceptual framework and coded as such, there were a few codes generated that were not anticipated. Also, while there were codes that were applicable to both institutions, there were also elements that were unique, which makes sense given the variation of context. I found ways to incorporate codes that were unanticipated or unique to the institution as important contextual information.

I grouped these codes into themes, guided by my conceptual framework and repeatedly asking myself the question, how is this code related to the organization's accreditation saga? Is it part of a process, or is it describing an attitude about accreditation, or is it describing cultural elements? I created categories to group codes based on the underlying concepts or issues being described, and then organized the categories into themes, creating an overarching umbrella for related categories. To conclude my analysis, I collated participants’ quotes for each theme, and wrote up findings. I did this separately for each institution, and then looked across both institutions for a comparative analysis.

During this process, I kept ample handwritten notes, and eventually moved from computer-based analysis to paper and pen, finding that it was easier for me to make connections and explore relationships with transcripts I could physically manipulate (Creswell, 2013). Finally, I organized
the themes, selected quotes that were most demonstrative to include in my write up, and drafted findings in the form of an organizational saga related to accreditation.

As you can see from Tables 3 and 4, *process* was a major feature shared in my talanoa sessions with participants. This overarching concept included several activities and features such as getting faculty buy-in for learning outcomes assessment; managing perceptions of the college; training opportunities, and community engagement. Participants revealed how they handled attitudes about accreditation, which I characterized as an overarching theme related to experience with accreditation, critiques of the accreditation process, and perceived barriers to assessment. This is a brief glimpse into my process as I worked to explore, and adequately understand, how my participants experienced accreditation, and how they chose to tell or represent the organization’s accreditation saga. I share more details about results of my coding process in the findings section for each institution.

**Quality Assurance and Trustworthiness**

Since my research project involves human subjects, I submitted details of the proposed study to Indiana University’s Institutional Review Board for review and approval. Data collection only began after this approval was acquired.
### Table 3: Codes and Themes (American Samoa Community College)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Communicating with public  
• Communicating with accreditor  
• Considerations for organizational structure  
• Integrated planning  
• Managing perceptions of the college  
• Training opportunities | Linear, step-by-step process  
External and internal focus | Process management |
| • Ambivalence about accreditation  
• Attitudes about assessment  
• Confusion about assessment  
• Compliance-driven attitude  
• Faculty feelings  
• Unfair comparison  
• Barriers to assessment  
• Experience with accreditation | Critiques of accreditation  
Getting buy-in | Attitudes about accreditation |
| • Setting boundaries against culture  
• Student-centered culture  
• Sustaining culture  
• Teamwork/collectivism  
• Indigenous serving  
• Culturally insensitive team visit | Culture is good/relevant  
Culture is not good/irrelevant | Navigating Samoan culture |
### Table 4: Codes and Themes (University of Guam)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Impact of COVID (6)</td>
<td>Widespread inclusion</td>
<td>Inclusive process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Communicating with public</td>
<td>Collaborative effort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Communicating with accreditor</td>
<td>Engaging staff and faculty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Integrated planning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teamwork/collectivism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Culturally responsive team visit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Organizational operations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Community engagement</td>
<td>Leaders’ commitment to indigenous culture</td>
<td>Indigenous leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pacific representation in accreditation</td>
<td>Unique campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Indigenous activism</td>
<td>Leaders’ ability to represent the Pacific</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Oversight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Governance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pacific serving institution</td>
<td>Serving the Pacific/the Pacific way</td>
<td>Embracing island wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Indigenous serving</td>
<td>Acknowledging Indigenous culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Mission of the college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Defining quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Community engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CHamoru culture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To ensure quality and trustworthiness of my findings, I employed several standard methods for qualitative research, such as triangulation of data sources and member checking with participants, to determine consistency of a finding (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007; Creswell, 2013). Participants shared that they were pleased with the accuracy of my transcriptions, and I received minor revisions from two participants. Second, I invited participants to review my draft of their institution’s accreditation saga for accuracy, completeness, and quality. Three University of Guam participants offered comments and context for their institutional profile, which I updated. One American Samoa Community College participant offered a brief reply thanking me for sharing. Finally, I asked two peer reviewers/debriefers, scholars with expertise on higher education issues in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific, to engage in virtual talanoa and talk story about my research project. In
our discussion, I provided an overview of the project, shared verbatim quotes, how I was making sense of the data, and elements I still found confusing or difficult to describe. Talking about those elements was extremely helpful, as it compelled me to organize my thoughts, and gauge from their response if what I was thinking made sense or needed more explanation. My peer reviewers asked for more clarification about one of my themes related to culture and made suggestions about how I could more clearly articulate Indigenous cultural influences in accreditation. I acknowledged their questions and suggestions, described how I would make changes based on their involvement, and thanked them profusely for their time.

In addition to these processes, I engaged in culturally relevant quality assurance, thinking about what validity means, based on Indigenous Pacific culture and principals. For my study, I adhered to a set of principles related to trustworthiness drawn from Kaupapa Maori research protocols (Smith, 2012), which include the following three interrelated elements:

- *Arohi ki te tangata (a respect for people)*: Respect, in the context of trustworthiness and quality assurance, means that the way I analyzed my evidence and data was driven by an attitude of curiosity, love, humility, and open heartedness. This meant that I was not searching for flaws or mistakes in the way people navigated accreditation; rather, I was joining them in a journey to better understand themselves as an organization, and that I respected their processes or ways of doing things. I demonstrated my respect for the people involved in my study in the way I facilitated and engaged in talanoa, not imposing myself or questions I had but rather, exploring topics that they brought up, freely offering my thoughts, perspectives, or a-ha moments, and respecting their time by sticking to the timeframe initially communicated (one hour). As previously mentioned, I also invited participants to review transcriptions of the talanoa and asking them to revise or remove anything they wanted.
• Kanohi kitea (the seen face, present yourself to people face to face): This element refers to the actions of the researcher. I knew that for my research to be judged trustworthy to the institution and the community it serves, I had to maintain the highest level of integrity and accountability, to demonstrate that I could personally be trusted to show up for my community. It was important that I showed up when it is appropriate, and make myself useful (not simply for research, but for whatever needs to be done – setting up chairs, washing dishes, serving plates). This is extremely relevant in Pacific Islander social settings, and is encompassed in a Samoan proverb, "o le mea taua o le tino," the important thing is to show up, to make your tino (body) available for service. I prioritized this element by offering to present my research, along with recommendations, to leadership of each institution. This is tricky to navigate as it is now influenced by my position with REL Pacific, however I am in conversation with my supervisors about how to incorporate this into my workload.

• Kaua e takahe a te mana o te tangata (do not trample over the mana of people). The concept of mana referenced in Kaupapa Maori may be useful as a directive to achieve trustworthiness of my research, in measuring how my findings treat the people and organizations. Does my project reduce thinking and feeling people into data, to be consumed, measured, or dissected? In what ways do I explicitly or implicitly fail to honor the relationship between myself and my participants? Have I given proper attention to the cultural protocols that are expected of me, as a daughter of my villages, families, and people? Applied to my research process, I was always conscious of formalities specific to my own culture to guide my communication, interaction, and relationship building with participants. Written communication always included greetings in relevant Pacific Indigenous languages. During talanoa sessions and in subsequent conversations, I made sure to share specific ways I could continue to support the institution. Again, while this is
complicated by my position in REL Pacific, I should be able to find ways to continue this as part of my work.

Throughout this research project, I remained deeply committed to decolonizing my methodology. In my opinion, to be trustworthy as a Pacific Islander, to do quality research, is to be in service of the islands: thus, I intended for my research findings to ultimately be of service to, and seek the trust of, these institutions and the people who serve them. Unfortunately, circumstances made it difficult to make this commitment actionable. As mentioned previously, the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to pursue in-person data collection and limited the kinds of data I intended to collect. I had initially conceived of this project as a critical ethnography and hoped to collect participant-observation notes, conduct field work at each institution, and collect physical copies of accreditation material. This would have allowed me to collect thick descriptions of the institution, accreditation activities, and hold deeper and more intimate conversations with participants. I could have also engaged more fully in TRM practices immediately, such as reciprocity, gift-giving, and engaging in community-building.

**Researcher Positionality**

As I indicated at the start of this chapter, I prioritized decolonizing methodologies as a primary lens through which to engage my dissertation project. This is a deliberate attempt to seed within this project the lifelong responsibility to my family, people, and the islands nourished since I was an undergraduate. Research is my activism; it is the culmination of skills I have honed over the last decade, coupled with loyalties to my family, genealogy, and the Indigenous people and cultures of the Pacific.

Thus, my identity, history, and sensibility as an Indigenous Samoan woman, my values, beliefs, epistemology, and ontology are completely and unapologetically woven into this project. I took up the position of an Indigenous anthropologist (Uperesa, 2010), and welcomed the nuances
and complexities that emerged as I navigated this project. Throughout the research process, I kept a journal to document the decisions I made during data collection and analysis and consulted with peer debriefers (other Indigenous scholars who are familiar with the U.S.-affiliated Pacific region) to assess my interpretations of the data.

Shortly after defending my dissertation proposal, I accepted a researcher position at McREL International, to support their Regional Education Laboratory (REL) contract with the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences. The REL program works in partnership to conduct applied research and trainings with a mission to support more evidence-based education systems. The REL Pacific serves the U.S. territories and COFA nations in the Pacific, and through my work I had the opportunity to meet with Presidents and staff for my target institutions. Thus, in my professional role, I had opportunities to solicit institutional support for my dissertation, using the preexisting relationships between my organization and these institutions, and occupying a role/position that mandates my ongoing support for and service to these institutions and the communities they serve. Accepting this position gave me some level of access and credibility and came with an in-built opportunity to serve in a capacity consistent with the tenets of decolonizing research methodologies. However, I also had to contend with the possibility that, as a federal contractor and essentially a representative of the U.S. Department of Education, I may be perceived in a negative way due to how people might view their islands’ political relationship with the United States. While this never came up during my time working on this project, it is never far from my mind. Nevertheless, my fervent desire was to find ways to make this research project relevant to the institutions and people of the Pacific, and I believe my work with REL Pacific has and will continue to make that a possibility.

**Limitations**
There are two limitations to this study that readers should keep in mind. First, this study includes two institutions, so findings are very specific and unique to the context and circumstances of those institutions and should not be generalized to all Pacific institutions. Second, there is a potential that participants did not fully disclose their experiences due to possible discomfort, or to protect their privacy, or to avoid highlighting some feature of the process or institution. Despite these limitations, this study provides important perspectives on the lived experiences of accreditation, and how institutions in a specific region navigate the process of attaining accreditation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the research methodology used to conduct this dissertation research project. I shared my commitment to decolonizing research and how that took place in each step of the process, and continued with information about my research design, institutional participation, and data collection process. Following that, I provided details for how I analyzed my data and the steps taken to ensure validity of my findings. Finally, I offered a positionality statement and outlined study limitations.

In the next chapter, I present the two institutions featured in this research study: American Samoa Community College, and the University of Guam. Using an Indigenous organizational framework, I link together the individual stories gathered in conversation with faculty and staff, and present how these two institutions navigated accreditation. While this process has been difficult, these sagas present the successful conclusion of many months and years of hard work by faculty, staff, and administrators to compile contents for their institutional self-evaluation report (ISER) and navigate the external evaluation team visit. The sagas presented here offer a small preview of that work, and features their words, perspectives, and the wisdom culminating from their collective experience.
Chapter 4: Findings

This research project focuses on institutional accreditation and attempts to answer this research question: How do institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigate accreditation? What is the accreditation saga communally embraced by educators for Pacific institutions that have successfully achieved accreditation? In this chapter, I present organizational sagas that capture how two institutions – American Samoa Community College, and the University of Guam – were able to successfully achieve accreditation. For each institution, I provide an overview of the jurisdiction and the institution, followed by relevant details of the institution's accreditation history. Then, I focus on the themes that were most important in their accreditation saga. In the second half of the chapter, I widen the lens and look across both institutions, to explore shared themes in more depth.

Part 1: American Samoa Community College

Introduction

American Samoa is an unincorporated, unorganized territory of the United States, and includes the eastern half of the Samoan archipelago (Tutuila, Manu’a, and Swains Islands). As a territory, American Samoa is eligible to receive funding from the U.S. government to support education and other social services. Most of the funding for the K-12 system come from the American Samoa government and consolidated federal grants. While the college also receives annual funds from the American Samoa government, much of its funding comes from federal financial aid, and most students qualify for Pell grants.

Western-style education was first introduced by Christian missionaries in the mid-19th century (Macpherson, Bedford, & Spoonley, 2000) and has left an indelible stamp on the structure and policy of schooling today. For example, although Samoan and English are both the official languages of American Samoa, English is the primary language of instruction from kindergarten
onward (Hunkin-Finau, 2006). This is paralleled by attitudes about schools and schooling within Samoan families, where school is regarded as the place to learn English, while home and church are where children are expected to learn Samoan language and culture (Reid, 1986). Nevertheless, despite over 100 years of colonization by the United States, Samoans remain deeply embedded in their culture – primarily due to the survival, and primacy, of the Samoan language.

Samoan culture is communal, reflected in social structures from family units, interconnected through genealogy to other families across the island and organized by a matai system which holds both cultural and political authority. Samoan children are taught their genealogy and how they are related to others in their community, and that they bear the burden/right/responsibility of their family’s reputation and pride. Samoan culture is both hierarchical and patriarchal, and positional leaders, or leaders who hold matai titles, hold a great deal of decision-making power. The vast majority of matai are male. Samoan society is also gerontocratic: elders are afforded enormous respect and hold power in the family, at church, and in the political system (University of Otago, 2011). Finally, Samoan society is predominantly Christian (a variety of Christian religions coexist comfortably, including Congregational Christian Church, Catholic churches, and Latter-Day Saints).

Taken together, these contexts result in formal, conservative professional environments, especially within educational institutions. Women commonly wear traditional puletasi to work, or dresses/skirts; pants are not the norm. In meetings, younger people, entry level staff, and especially younger, lower-level women know to sit in the background, serve food, or take notes. Older people, men with matai titles, or faifeau (ministers or religious leaders) are afforded the best seats, are served refreshments and meals, and once their opinion is given, it is rare for debate to continue. I offer these details to describe how important it is to understand the context of postsecondary education, the everyday life and work, that takes place in American Samoa.
American Samoa Community College

American Samoa Community College (ASCC) is a public, open admissions community college located in American Samoa, a U.S. territory in the South Pacific. Founded in 1970, the college was opened to provide teacher training as well as degree and certificate programs in liberal arts, vocational education, and general education to residents of the territory.

Located in the village of Mapusaga (nine miles west of Pago Pago), the college is situated in easy commuting distance for the more populous villages of the Western District (including Leone, Faleniu, Tafuna, and Nuuuli) (see Figure 2). According to the most recently available federal data, Fall 2018 enrollment at ASCC was 1,037 students, the majority (89%) of Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander descent. More than half (59%) of students is enrolled full-time, and the vast majority (91%) are Pell grant recipients (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.).

Overview of ASCC accreditation
Maintaining accreditation has been a major concern for the college since its inception (Samoa News, 2015; Beno, Moses, Rota & Takeuchi, 2006). Now in its 4th decade, ASCC has come to the brink of losing accreditation twice. This ongoing struggle has had far reaching consequences for the institution, influencing leadership, organizational culture and structure, policy, and procedure, how teachers teach, and students learn. It has touched every facet of organizational life.

The most recent accreditation cycle, which began in 2014, sheds light on some of the main issues affecting accreditation. To kick off the process, an institution-wide steering committee led by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness prepared the self-study report (over 300 pages long), which was submitted to the ACCJC in July 2014. Due to some confusion about revised accreditation standards as well as technical issues, several members of the external evaluation team were unable to review the report until their arrival in American Samoa on September 30, 2014, for the four-day visit. Nevertheless, the visiting team (comprised of senior level community college administrators from California, Hawaii, and the Federated States of Micronesia, selected by ACCJC commissioners for their relevant professional experience, conducted an extensive review of the report, ASCC policies and procedures, as well as interviews with a wide array of college stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, and Board members. The results of their investigation were submitted to the accrediting commission in an External Evaluation report that was cautiously optimistic, but ultimately focused on 10 recommendations for the college to improve to meet eligibility standards to renew accreditation. The most serious concerns were around institutional governance, unclear policies around conflict of interest for the Board of Directors, and inadequate evidence for data-driven decision making, echoing concerns expressed by ACCJC in its earlier analysis.

The ACCJC subsequently placed ASCC on show cause status in February 2015. Show cause is “...ordered when the Commission finds an institution to be in substantial noncompliance with ACCJC Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, or Commission policies,” (Accrediting Commission of Community and Junior Colleges, 2015). Federal regulations also required the
Commission to publish Public Disclosure Notices on its website, to inform the public for reasons of the sanction. The school was required to produce a Show Cause Report by October 15, 2015, and include how the institution had addressed all the recommendations offered by the visiting team.

After submitting this report, a visiting team returned to the College in November 2015 to follow up on the College's progress and evaluate whether progress had been made to address recommendations and meet the Standards. This report revealed that the College had fully addressed seven of the ten recommendations, that the other three recommendations had been substantially addressed, and the College was in full compliance with all but three of the 27 Standards cited across its original External Evaluation. The Commission deliberated, and finally moved the College from Show Cause to Warning in February 2016 – a less severe status, indicating that the institution has not met one or more standards. A follow-up report was requested by October 15, 2016, with evidence that the College had demonstrated compliance with all remaining standards.

The follow-up report included a detailed analysis of how the College had revised or implemented policies to comply with accreditation standards. A decision was made to include a wide range of institutional information to offer evidence of compliance. After reviewing the report, the ACCJC found that the College had resolved its deficiencies and demonstrated continued compliance with all Eligibility Requirements and Standards and removed ASCC from Warning status and reaffirm accreditation. This decision was confirmed in a letter to the college sent in February 2017. The letter reminded the college that a midterm report was due in Fall 2018.

This brief overview encompasses what amounts to over three years of intense institutional focus on accreditation. The college mobilized steering committees, working groups, and planning councils; convened community leaders and stakeholders; fought to maintain accountability to American Samoa by releasing public statements, granting interviews, and holding town halls; not to
mention the detailed work of faculty and administration in reviewing courses, learning outcomes, policies, procedures, and data sources. All this work was then distilled into three different reports prepared for its evaluators, each more detailed and lengthier than the last. After coming close to losing its accreditation, the College was able to pull through and eventually regain its current status as fully accredited.

**Process management**

The first and most dominant element of the accreditation saga shared by ASCC staff and faculty was the process they used to navigate accreditation (setting up and being involved in committees, compiling information, producing reports, and addressing questions/concerns). After sifting through my transcripts several times, I came to realize that this fixation on process might be due to two factors: first, the rigidity of the accreditation process itself, which consists of a standard set of events which are dictated to each institution of higher education by the accrediting agency; and second, culturally mediated understandings of doing things right. Samoan culture is oriented towards structure, protocol, and ceremony, with grave consequences if there is a breech. This focus on the accreditation process is articulated by one participant, who pointed out:

Now, the ACCJC, the Accrediting Commission of Community and Junior Colleges, their purview includes all Pacific Island community colleges as well as the state of Hawaii and California. **We understand that all processes defined by the commission are very final in terms of evaluating institutions**, expectations for institutions for accreditation, as well as...maintaining the integrity of institutional effectiveness, of a college's mission based on the premises of being accredited.

The process was described as linear, starting with selection of the accreditation steering committee. As previously mentioned, the college President appointed members of the steering committee to kick off activities, comprised of senior level leadership. The initial focus of the steering committee was on completion of the institutional self-evaluation report (ISER, or self-study). This report articulates how the institution is meeting the regional accreditor’s standards. For ACCJC, the standards are listed in Table 5:
Subcommittees were organized around each substandard (for example, 1.b – academic quality and institutional effectiveness), and chairs were selected based on their experience and seniority.

Committee members were provided with guiding documents (such as the self-study from the previous accreditation cycle and ACCJC resources) to support their work in gathering evidence for their assigned standard. The responsibility for writing the report was placed on the chair of each subcommittee member – for example, the chairperson of Standard 1a: Mission oversaw drafting the section of the report focused on that Standard and section. Drafts were given to the steering committee to edit and finalize, passed to the President, and ultimately shared with the Board of Higher Education for final approval. After this, the completed report was provided to the faculty and staff for review and comment. Once the final report had been passed through the college’s hierarchy, it would be returned to the President who made final changes and sent it to ACCJC.

Although participants agreed that the process was important, they also shared varying perspectives about that process. Many of them talked about their work on the steering committee, with some being able to focus and complete their work, while others experienced a more difficult process due to a lack of on boarding or mentorship. For example, one participant shared their
experience as a newly appointed steering committee member, and their difficulty in acclimating to accreditation:

Coming into a process that I didn’t really have any mentorship on accreditation. So, when I was doing a lot of, let’s say, the supporting role in terms of making reports and going about extracting the data that my previous director would, would try to do for the previous process that was in accreditation, so when we got sanction in 2015, you know, it was a hard hit. But at the same time, it provided kind of like a new challenge for me, for a new leader coming in. So, when I came in 2014, there were already processes in place. I was aware that accreditation is mandatory, it’s a process that we have to go through every, I believe, either six or seven years. So, I had a fair idea. And then we were given the booklet, containing the standards. But from my perspective, I did not really have much of an opportunity to be familiarized with every aspect of the process. So being fairly new, I had just come on board, I had the standard [I was assigned to], I was given a thick book, and then I was asked to meet all these timelines... And we kind of went off what already existed rather than really taking the process and the journey for what it is at that very time. Right? Because I came in, and I saw all the background information that are already compiled, research already done, and the writings that have already been done by other people, and it seemed easiest to adopt or just continue the implementation of the existing process. Looking back, I would have wanted to take things slower and make the process my own.

After the show-cause sanction, the accreditation steering committee was reconvened, to address the 14 recommendations made by the visiting team. Ten of the recommendations were focused on changes needed for the institution to meet ACCJC standards, while the remaining four recommendations addressed improvements to institutional effectiveness. Following a similar process as before, steering committee members, empowered to address recommendations for specific standards, selected committee members from across the campus community and were charged with drafting their separate sections. The steering committee then reviewed a draft of the entire report before submitting a final draft to the Board of Higher Education for approval.

Despite written descriptions of a broad-based process involving many campus partners, participants revealed that accreditation activities were limited to members of the steering committee and/or senior level leadership. For participants who were not at that level, the perception was that leadership made all the major decisions. For example, one shared that: “My take at the time was that not enough information was going down to the people who actually do the work. It was mainly in the upper structure that are making the decision and taking control of what’s
Another participant had a different perspective, relating that in their work chairing one of the subcommittees, they had to request that senior level leaders to be more involved. “I had asked a lot of the leadership, the higher ups, to be in this committee, because [a lot of the processes implemented] come from the top level, are controlled at the top level.” In their perspective, they could not adequately complete their part of the process because only the leaders knew the information that was necessary for her report.

Several steering committee members described accreditation as an exhausting process, leading to weeks of late or sometimes all-night work sessions. One participant shared their memories of the process:

I dread it when accreditation comes around, because of the long hours into the night, and all the paperwork, and stuff that we have to shuffle around and so forth. And then 2014 was probably the most horrible accreditation I’ve ever gone through. That’s when we went on show cause, after all that work, and I thought, oh, my God, I guess we’re still not getting it. We were pulling 24-hour shifts, so it was night and day, night and day, night and day. I’m not sure how the other institutions deal with it. But here, it’s a slow and painstaking process.

In this and other comments, it became evident that the process of accreditation at ASCC was difficult, strenuous, and laborious, particularly for steering committee members. It was explained later that this was the case because so much of the writing of the self-study report fell on committee chairs, who were themselves not totally confident in their writing ability.

**Addressing attitudes about accreditation**

Another important element I noticed during my talanoa sessions with ASCC participants was how they articulated the way accreditation was perceived by the college community, and how they managed those perceptions so that they could achieve accredited status. Across the board, participants described accreditation as having a negative connotation; and that much of their work was in communicating about accreditation in a way that was palatable, or made sense, or got people to buy in, or at the very least, got them to understand what it was.
Participants described much of their work revolving around explaining accreditation: what it was, why the institution was seeking accreditation, and why it should matter to them. For example, one participant shared that:

...Being a lead, you had to take care of not only the standard itself, but all these sub review committees, and then **if you have people in those committees that weren't familiar, weren't aware of the expectation, then you would spend another good chunk of your time trying to convince them to buy into it, that this process, and the things that we will be doing is very important, and that your contribution - because then a lot of the people, they didn’t really contribute valuable work, like they contribute by sitting there and, you know, giving and listening to what you were saying. But in terms of their role, and how they contribute in meaningful conversation and discussion, as well as the quality work that you need for the evidence, I don't think we had the time.**

Once there was awareness of accreditation, participants had to work on getting people to help. They described this especially in writing up the ISER self-study report, and all the responsibilities that entailed (participating in meetings, drafting sections of the report, working outside of the committee space.). For example, one participant shared:

I know it was always a struggle because **anything related to compliance for our people, it's a challenge.** It’s burdensome to participate in the meetings, the new information, trying to change. These changes, depending on how it’s presented, can be burdensome.

Another participant went into more detail about the resistance they encountered:

Well, our meetings were, when we first met, they gave us a schedule for meetings, it’s already prepared by the chair and co-chair. So, we have certain dates that we supposed to meet. And those dates are, I think, they’ve decided on the dates based on the schedule of the faculties and the courses so that everybody will be available to meet, especially faculties. So, they were scheduling their dates, meeting dates around Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1230 to two o’clock, because that’s the break. And we have in our instructional schedule where no courses are on. So, everybody should have a chance to come and meet. **But even then, I find out early on that not everybody wants to get involved. There are certain people who show up for a meeting, and there are quite a few people who won't come to a meeting at all, even though they are listed as members of the committee. They don't show up at all. And when they did show up, the attitude they had was like, what am I supposed to do? What is my role? Who am I to speak about this issue where it doesn't affect me at all? Where's my contribution going to go to? Is it going to make an effort to improve something or - the feeling that you're not going to be heard? It's very much heard throughout these meetings that we have.**
In this description, they point out how people expressed their attitudes about the accreditation process by not showing up; or if people showed up, in the way they responded to the process, often with frustration or resentment. Importantly, for many of them, they held an attitude indicating their belief that this was not work they were supposed to do, or that they were being forced to participate.

Relatedly, there was some resistance to participating as an author because the perception was that knowledge about processes was held by senior level staff. This was articulated by another participant:

You need to do your research when writing one B and trying to find out what's going on within those places. And I thought, you know, I think that's the problem. We do a lot of research here. People aren't open up, you know, they're not. They're not that open. And a lot of it's confusing. 'Why don't they (senior leaders) just tell us versus trying to dig it out of them? They know the process well, I think it's better for them to write it, since they're the ones following it. Because the rest of us, it's just a blur.' And so that's another thing I found so difficult was having you form a committee and they had to go and do investigation. If it's not already apparent to them. It's not a good process.

To address these attitudes, two participants articulated how they relied on their knowledge of Samoan culture to address accreditation with their staff. One participant commented:

...We need to tap into cultural resources to become a more effective organization. So, I guess what I'm talking about is, in our island, you can be a more effective manager, if you understand who your people are, you know, and 99% of them are going to be Samoan. How can you possibly effectively manage your department or your program, if you don't understand the hearts and minds of your people?

Another participant discussed how they employed cultural communication to get buy-in for accreditation activities:

Yeah, so I'm very passionate [about] bringing in our people, regardless of where their understanding is. And you know, Islanders, if you know how to deal with them verbally, [it's better]. And you must acknowledge the fact that, although they may be an administrative assistant or custodian at ASCC, we have to acknowledge their status also, in the cultural context. So, when you bring them in, you give them that [cultural] acknowledgement, then they feel welcome, they feel valued. So how I dealt with our people is, because I'm fluent in both languages, so that makes it easier, because right up front, I'll
say, 'Thinking about what's hard and what's difficult, right now would be the time to discuss it.' But if you try and [start with a broad overview], you know, 'Today's world is all about blah, blah, blah,' right off, it's a turnoff. So, my approach is understanding the kind of people they are, if they're stickler about the salutation, in our Pacific language, I do that right in the front, and then you give them that [acknowledgment]. So, it’s all about how you deliver that information, the simplicity of it, right? You bring in the eloquent way of portraying in our own language, as well as bringing in the standard will help them become part of this very difficult process, because it is a difficult process in terms of trying to understand every part of it.

Most of the participants described negative attitudes about accreditation held by staff and used their roles as leaders and members of the steering committee to address those attitudes, by explaining the process, or by relying on cultural means of communication. Reliance on Samoan culture is the third element of ASCC’s accreditation saga and is presented below.

**Navigating Samoan culture**

The third theme that characterized ASCC’s accreditation saga is how participants moved through accreditation by avoiding, or sometimes engaging, Samoan cultural protocol, values, or methods of communication. The way participants described Samoan culture was complex. There were subtle ways in which institutional agents made gestures to the Indigenous culture, and these overlap with the first two themes. As one of the few U.S. territories that did not experience violent or overtly assimilationist colonial policies, Samoan culture was simultaneously held at bay, and in high regard. I was able to trace this balance by analyzing how ASCC staff negotiated the role of culture, attitudes about culture by other members within the institution as well as the visiting team, and how they relied on culture to gain buy-in for accreditation processes.

**Negotiating the Role of Culture.** ASCC negotiated the role of the Indigenous Pacific culture as part of (or distinguishable from) accreditation processes. People across campus negotiated this in different ways. Several participants held a firm belief that the Indigenous culture had no place within institutional processes and tried to make that clear during the accreditation process and in their interpretation of the institution's mission. For example, one of the accreditation liaison officers offered this perspective:
We also have to set a boundary in this kind of organization, at the college level, that you have to be effective, and to make sure that you meet the mission of the college, you have to focus on: **that it's not about us, it's not about our culture, it's about the mission of the college** to make sure that we provide that quality instructional programs, and to our students, as well as the support, at the same time in any organization.

Another staff member juxtaposed the Indigenous culture with other aspects of social belonging, such as religion or workplace culture, or even individual personality traits, and suggested that the Indigenous culture was just one of many factors influencing the organization: “...a lot of things [are] affected by our beliefs or personalities, the way we grew up. While culture can come into play, I also think of religion that comes into play, and just the person's upbringing.”

**Negotiating Culture during Accreditation Visits.** One of the most revealing circumstances that brought to light the role of culture in accreditation took place before and during the external team visit which took place after submission of the ISER, in September 2014. First, institutional leaders had to come to an understanding about whether, and how, to conduct cultural ceremony and protocol during the external site visits. Notably, one of the institution's senior leaders suggested eliminating an important welcoming ceremony visit. This was due to the possibility that certain parts of the ceremony (involving gifts given to external team members) could be perceived as bribery or trying to influence the team. The leader's suggestion was met with incredulity by several participants, who had been working with faculty and students to prepare for the event:

You know, when they [visiting team] come here and they're trying to see how we do, it's very important that they follow the land protocol. This is us telling them, 'It's okay. You can walk ASCC grounds. And not to worry, nothing will happen to you.' Because it is us, the people, and the board saying, 'Welcome, now do [your evaluation]'. And it has nothing to do with whether we're trying to bribe them or not.

In this case, the participant expressed the importance of ceremony as a recognition of place, of the relationships held between visitors and hosts, a deeply meaningful gesture held in high regard by the indigenous people of the land. By suggesting that these ceremonies could be optional, the president elevated notions of compliance to Western standards related to bias or nepotism, casting
a questionable light on an indigenous process. Eventually, however, the leader relented and agreed the ceremony should move forward.

Events that took place during the external team's site visit in October 2014 loomed large in the memories of participants. During a final ceremonial presentation from the students, the chair of the external team stood and left the room, followed by the remaining members of the team. One of the senior leaders communicated shortly after that this took place as a way for the team to avoid possible misconduct by the students, who were again preparing to offer parting gifts. Despite that clarification, ASCC community members felt uneasy and embarrassed by the experience, and the incident had major consequences for how they perceived ACCJC. These actions made clear that, for the ACCJC visiting team, Western standards took priority over Indigenous cultural protocol, and that there was no place for culture in the accreditation process.

Cultural Values of Collectivism to Move Through Accreditation. Despite these events, the college continued to rely on cultural values to move through the accreditation process, as is evidenced by comments from participants about the aftermath of the show cause sanction. ACCJC requested a follow-up report after handing down the sanction ruling, requiring ASCC staff to work overtime to complete the report. Staff across the college emphasized the late hours and long meetings required to get that done; and yet, their willingness to do so, if it meant working towards the survival of the college. And they were clear that the work was only possible because they worked collectively, not as individuals. One participant commented:

...The most vivid memories I have [working on the show cause report] is spending the weekend on campus – eating, sleeping here on campus to get the report done. It's a sacrifice! I know it's against labor laws. **But when it comes to my passion, it's not so much for myself; I know, I can be selfish and say, 'Oh, I don't care, I can always find a job elsewhere.' It's not about that. It's that passion, and that you want it [for the college to succeed and maintain accreditation], because it's worth it for other people. So...there's so many times that I know that I should no longer part of it; I would go home, and my other half is looking at me and saying, 'Do you want me to pack your bag and bring it over?' It's a sacrifice. Everybody knows, if we look at [that level of work] objectively, it's very wrong, You can't, [or shouldn't], be staying up doing all-nighters at the campus. We
would hear people coming in the morning and finding it so funny to you see that we were still here. Those are some vivid memories!

In this case, the participant shares their reactions to the amount of work it took to respond to the accreditation concerns and help draft the report which would eventually support the conclusion of the accreditation saga. They point out how their motivation to continue working on the report reflected their personal investment in the collective work; knowing that their effort would benefit others in the college and the community. Their comments about labor laws and pulling all-night work sessions indicate that they understood that this level of work might not be ideal, and yet they set that consideration aside for the collective good of the college. All participants related a version of her story, revealing how important it was to come together on behalf of the institution, meet the requests of the accrediting agency, and ultimately achieve reaccreditation.

**Conclusion and reflection**

In total, it took ASCC almost three years to complete accreditation process: from July 29, 2014, when the revised ISER was submitted; to February 3, 2017, when ACCJC removed all sanctions from the institution and reaffirmed accreditation. However, the process continued almost immediately the following year, with a midterm report submitted in fall 2018, and approved by ACCJC in January 2019. Later in 2019, ASCC began preparing for its next comprehensive review (this year). The institution recently posted its ISER on August 2, 2021, as part of the accreditation renewal process. Participants report that recent shifts within the accrediting agency have led to positive interactions, such as a change in leadership, and assignment of a liaison from the agency to each institution for more regular communication. These shifts are expected to result in a more positive accreditation cycle coming up.
Part 2: University of Guam

Introduction

Guam is an unincorporated, organized territory of the United States, and was ceded to the United States at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898 (Sablan, 2016). Guam was one of the first Pacific Islands to be colonized by a European power, beginning in the 17th century. As a result of over 400 years of continuous colonization (by Spain, the United States, and briefly by Japan), the influence of imperialism and colonization on the Indigenous CHamoru⁹ population is pervasive. Yet Indigenous people are resilient, and CHamoru communities have rallied around culture and language preservation, influencing recent generations to pursue decolonization as a priority for Guam.

Indigenous CHamoru culture are founded on values such as inafamaloek, or harmony/order; respetu, or respect, especially for elders; mahmahlao, or shame, embarrassment, in reference to humility; chenchule, or reciprocity, as enacted through donations or offerings; chelu, or siblings, emphasizing relationality; and patgon, or child, referring to the responsibility of everyone towards child rearing (Sablan, 2016). Similar to Samoan society, CHamoru extended family networks are an important societal feature, and provide an important way for customs, traditions, and language to be passed on. Due to assimilation efforts of U.S. administration in Guam, the school systems emphasized American culture, Western values, and English language. This led to a dwindling population of heritage CHamoru speakers; however, in the past two decades there has been a concerted effort to revitalize the CHamoru language, especially at the University level.

University of Guam

⁹ Recent changes recommended by the CHamoru language commission in Guam have led to updated orthography, linking the CHamoru alphabet to the sounds of the island’s Indigenous language. However, the practice of spelling CHamoru (rather than Chamorro) is still circulating, and I may inadvertently refer to the previous spelling in this dissertation.
University of Guam (UoG) is a public, open admissions, four-year land-grant university located in Mangilao on the island of Guam. UoG was initially established as a two-year teacher’s college in 1952, with the goal of training teachers locally rather than importing teachers from the continental United States (Thompson, Sant Hartig, & Thurber, 2009). The institution received initial accreditation for three years as a junior college in 1959 by the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC, or WASC Senior), and eventually reaccredited as a university in 1968. It has been accredited by WASC Senior since 1959.

Overview of UoG accreditation

Institutional accreditation documents reveal that UoG has had an “eventful” accreditation history (University of Guam, 2015a). There have been two periods of time when the institution was placed on probation or show cause: in the mid-1980s, over issues of governance and institutional autonomy; and in 2000, for failing to meet WSCUC standards and a “climate of fear” among faculty and staff (University of Guam, 2015b). These two periods were readily acknowledged by participants, as important context for the institution’s accreditation history. In 2016, UoG reached a milestone in achieving renewal of its accredited status for eight years, the longest amount of time for renewal ever achieved by the institution. This marked the most recent accreditation cycle UoG’s most successful.

The overarching accreditation saga communally embraced by institutional participants at UoG is one of resounding success. The eight-year renewal of accreditation (the maximum amount of time available offered by WSCUC) indicates the degree of trust that the accreditor places in the institution’s ability to meet WSCUC standards. At UoG the process set up to navigate accreditation was championed by leaders who prioritized, and drew from, island wisdom. These intertwined, yet distinguishable elements undergird UoG’s successful negotiation of accreditation. Below, I share
details about each element and how, taken together, they form the foundation of UoG’s accreditation saga.

**Inclusive process**

The accreditation saga of UoG is rich with commentary about the process that was established by the ALO. What stood out for participants, and what’s emerged in the accreditation saga, is the process she put together, woven with cultural values, methods, and understandings. At the beginning of the accreditation cycle, faced with the task of preparing the institutional self-evaluation report, one participant reflected on how the steering committee came together:

My view was, it had been a while since our last review, and I didn’t know what had been done. But I sensed that there are a lot of gaps... I was nervous, and I needed all hands-on deck. So, I took a scan of who we had, and I knew that we had to have a lot of faculty, and a number of administrators, representatives from the Staff Council and the student government, on this journey. And for me, it was, the more transparency and the more engagement, the better the buy in, and the better the participation, and the better prepared the university would be, by the time we got to the site visit week.

The participant, a senior leader within the accreditation process, admitted their inexperience and using that as a jumping off point, gathered a team of faculty and administrators, staff and students, to join them for a more authentic evaluation of their institution. Sensing the need to engage all parties across the University’s governance structure (the Faculty Senate, the Administrative Council, and the Academic Officers Council), they established a broad-based steering committee which included representation from all internal institutional stakeholders. The steering committee was broken up into eight committees, each focused on one of the eight mandatory essays required for the institutional self-study. Each committee was co-chaired by a faculty member paired with an administrator, along with a template for report essays, corresponding prompts, and a timeline including meetings and draft deadlines. In doing so, they focused on and cultivated a collectivist environment, within which to foster a shared commitment to the process of accreditation, as well as a participatory process where everyone knew their part and understood the importance.
Their efforts were noted by other participants, who applauded their strategy and identified the cultural nature of a traditionally de-cultured process:

I [couldn’t help but realize that this process is] necessary in Island culture. It seems ridiculous in higher education, culture. But we needed that huge team to be able to get the buy in from everyone. And there weren’t elections to the team. People were appointed to their committees; it was all public. And there were all these opportunities [for people to disengage]. But it seems to me, we went through such a culturally appropriate process to a non-cultural inquiry, if you will.

Communication about the process was key for accreditation leaders. They sought widespread participation from across the campus community and did so by framing participation in cultural terms: “So the first semester, I [tried to get] everybody engaged. I even sought out the students! I said, ‘We're preparing for this big fiesta, so to speak, this big compliance fiesta, and we're all going to be, you know, coming together to prepare for it.” By gesturing to accreditation efforts as a “fiesta,” they called upon cultural understandings of a large, celebratory event, hoping to elevate attendance and participation in campus accreditation events.

Aside from the process guided by accreditation leaders, the process surrounding the self-study report came up several times in my talanoa with steering committee members. As previously mentioned, the steering committee, through eight subcommittees, drafted the mandatory eight essays which comprise the self-study report. After these eight essays were complete, they were given to one person to edit and craft into one coherent report, written in one voice.

**Indigenous leadership**

At UoG, the leaders associated with the accreditation saga are the former President and the Accreditation Liaison Officer. All participants acknowledge the leadership of the former UoG President for navigating the institution through its most recent accreditation. Much of his leadership was mediated by his personal experience with, and dedication to, the Indigenous CHamoru culture. He was well known for his service to the community and lauded for his
championship of the Indigenous language. He came to the position carrying a great deal of cultural and social capital and used that capital to shepherd the institution skillfully through the accreditation process. This was emphasized by one of the primary accreditation leaders:

You know, our previous president was an Indigenous activist, an Indigenous language expert. He had all sorts of political skills, so he could make that happen. Also, having someone in the community who has the stature and the world experience to be this big visionary thinker. We just happen to have a guy who was a former Congressman for the territory for ten years. And he got his bachelor's and his doctorate in Los Angeles...having someone with that breadth of global and mainland experiences while still being true to their culture, and being able to navigate those two different languages, sometimes literally, but usually just figuratively, those two different languages. That’s a tough, tough skill set.

This participant points to the President’s wide array of political experience and skills, coupled with his passion for the Indigenous culture, as a potent means for leading the institution through accreditation. And while his personal leadership style was branded with the social and cultural capital he brought to the position, he also insisted on emphasizing the Indigenous culture in more visible and sustainable ways across the institution. He championed Indigenous studies in the general education curriculum, and instituted policies to have institutional documents translated into the Indigenous culture. He elevated campus-community partnerships, especially with arts and humanities councils, so that the institution could provide more culture-based educational opportunities for students. In so many ways, this President demonstrated culture-based leadership in steering the institution through the accreditation process.

**Embracing island wisdom**

Culture was another major element of the accreditation saga. As explained earlier, culture manifested in other elements of the saga, including the leadership and process. Culture-based leadership approaches made an impact in how institutional agents remembered the accreditation process and the saga subsequently circulated. However, culture appeared in other ways as well, particularly in how institutional agents articulated and established a particular institutional identity.
Overall, the institution was able to maneuver around seemingly straightforward accreditation processes, to display itself and its progress advantageously. Many of the participants commented about a subtle strategy that institutional leaders used to obtain flexibility and more favorable considerations from the accrediting agency. The strategy involved understanding the logics within which the accrediting agency was operating and addressing their institutional identity using those logics. One participant described this aspect as follows:

So, the accreditation process, because it’s an assessment, institutional researchers always like to say they’re agnostic, right. So, the accreditation system tries to be agnostic. And I think that we’re lucky because we’re not under a more conservative or stringent accrediting agency. So [visiting team members and staff from the accrediting agency] are all open ended enough, and "find yourself" enough, that they understand our institution has gone through the "just tell us what to do" phase and that we’re coming to define their own identity, [especially as an organization serving particular cultural communities]. So, the institutional expression of identity, through a cultural framework works really well. In the WASC system, we’ve really been able to turn [particular policy environments] to our advantage.

In this quote, he underlines how important it is to understand the accrediting agency itself, as a group of people with sensibilities, experiences, and values. For UoG, he and other members of the steering committee were able to pick up on the agency’s focus on moving past a compliance mindset, and for institutions to view accreditation as an opportunity for self-evaluation. They used that language to their benefit and were able to craft a self-evaluation report that reflected what the agency wanted to see. And in doing so, they were able to articulate institutional values around culture, serving the Indigenous Pacific community, and make that an integral part of their institutional identity.

Conclusion and reflection

The accreditation saga of UoG concluded with successful and full reaccreditation. The next review takes place on June 28, 2024; however, the ALO has already begun the process of reestablishing the tempo of accreditation. Institutional agents shared that the strategic planning takes on a name drawn from the Indigenous language: Para Hulo’, or ‘Forever Upward’ (University
of Guam, n.d.) As part of this planning process, they are beginning to carefully outline the values that will undergird that framework. One of the senior leaders shared that the institution has embraced “island wisdom” as a strategic initiative, and that she anticipates this being seeded into all future discussions about the university. For example, one of the articulated goals is for the institution to be recognized as a research institution grounded in Island wisdom. This participant spoke candidly about how they, and others, are contentedly brainstorming how to conceptualize island wisdom:

How do you define Island wisdom? We have a sense of what it is because I think most islands have a sense of things, you know, one word cannot just be defined by a sentence of words. There’s a feeling and emotion tied to it. And sometimes words can’t even explain, right? Even a look, when you look at your elders, right, there’s a look, and we already know what that means. We know.

This comment offers insight into an exciting new direction being taken by institutional agents, who are taking stock of the values they wish to embed within institutional processes.

Overall, UoG was able to navigate accreditation with all five elements identified in my conceptual framework. It is easier to see the interaction of these elements with UoG: specifically, leadership of the institution developed a process which was centered on, and drew from, Indigenous Pacific culture. In the final section of this chapter, I offer a comparison of the two accreditation sagas to reflect on the areas of resonance and dissonance between the two institutions and how they successfully navigated accreditation.
Part 3: Comparative Findings

In the previous sections, I presented the accreditation sagas of two institutions: American Samoa Community College (ASCC) and the University of Guam (UoG). These sagas reveal the stories being told and circulated by institutional agents about how they navigated their most recent accreditation processes. In this chapter, I take a closer look at the accreditation sagas, considering my primary research question: how do these institutions navigate accreditation? What is the accreditation saga communally embraced by educators for Pacific institutions which have successfully achieved accreditation? In response to this question, I consider the two sagas in relation to each other, and then dive more deeply into my findings.

Culturally mediated strategies

The first strategy I discovered in how these two institutions navigated accreditation was in how they incorporated, or contend with, the Indigenous culture within accreditation activities. This is only relevant in recognizing the larger role that culture played within institutional identity. The overarching institutional identity of each contains markers that highlight its engagement with Indigenous culture: 1) each institution’s mission statement includes clear reference to sustaining island wisdom and cultural knowledge; 2) translation of the institution’s name into the Indigenous language form across all official documents; 3) translation of the vision and mission statement; and 4) imagery used on institutional websites that feature the material culture. All of these were evidenced by institutional documents and featured on the institutional websites. These strategies are reminiscent of Tribal Crit’s fourth tenet: Indigenous peoples have a desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification. It seems that, at the postsecondary level, these institutions are actualizing the desire of the Indigenous people to forge their self-identity, their cultural identity, in uncertain terms.
Adherence to the Indigenous culture translated into how each institution navigated the accreditation process. For example, within each accreditation saga, I uncovered how 

**culturally informed leadership** was important to the accreditation process at UoG. By culturally informed leadership, I refer to leaders, and leadership, who openly embraced Indigenous culture and language, and made it acceptable and desirable for others to do so. Recall that the President of UoG’s leadership was mediated by his personal experience with, and dedication to, the Indigenous Pasefika culture. He was well known for his service to the community and lauded for his championship of the Indigenous language. As mentioned earlier, participants had this to say about the President:

> Our previous president was an Indigenous activist, an Indigenous language expert. He had all sorts of political skills, so he could make that happen. Also, having someone in the community who has the stature and the world experience to be this big visionary thinker...having someone with that breadth of global and mainland experiences while still being true to their culture, and being able to navigate those two different languages, sometimes literally, but usually just figuratively, those two different languages.

Other steering committee members were clear about their leader's commitment to an inclusionary and participatory accreditation process, and linked that to an overarching commitment to collectivism, an important quality in the Indigenous context. A non-Indigenous faculty member commented:

> What really sticks out of my mind about the last visit, the WASC team was very impressed with how UoG had done our “Building a Quality Campus” program prioritization process, and how that went so smoothly. And I recall telling the team that it was because of the President, who constantly communicated about the process and constantly kept bringing the teams back for monthly meetings. And so, it was a very participatory process, there was a lot of faculty buy in, and everything went very smoothly from there.

This participatory process was built not just by the chief executive officer, but also other members of the staff. For example, the accreditation liaison officer at UoG readily acknowledged how much she valued engagement in the way set up her steering committee:

> “I took a scan of who we had, and I knew that we had to have a lot of faculty, and a number of administrators and, you know, representatives from the Staff Council and the student government, on that this journey. And for me, it was, the more transparency and the more
engagement, the better the buy in, and the better the participation, and the better prepared the university would be, by the time we got, you know, to the site visit week. And so, what happened from there was, but, you know, we were able to get as much of our current situation as we possibly could. We then had to, I then decided we needed to break up the group into committees. And each committee was based on each of the standards. And so, each committee had two co-chairs, a faculty member, and an administrator. And so, there was a reasoning behind that madness as well, because it sort of made you know, it brought accountability, it brought transparency, and it brought more engagement....and we were very transparent, and we were very inclusive.

This was true also at ASCC. One of the steering committee members discussed how she centered culture in her leadership, especially by relying on her knowledge of and familiarity with cultural conventions regarding salutation, acknowledgement of social status:

So how I dealt with our people is, because I'm fluent in both languages [English and Samoan], so that makes it easier, because right up front, I'll say (in Samoan), 'Thinking about what's hard and what's difficult, right now would be the time to discuss it.' But if you try and [start with a broad overview], you know, 'Today's world is all about standards, and we need to conform to those standards,' right away, that's a turnoff. **So, my approach is understanding the kind of people they are, if they're stickler about the salutation, in our Pacific language, I do that right in the front, and then you give them that [acknowledgment].** So, it's all about how you deliver that information, the simplicity of it, right? You bring in the eloquent way of portraying in our own language, as well as bringing in the standard will help them become part of this very difficult process, because it is a difficult process in terms of trying to understand every part of it.

Aside from culturally informed leadership, I also discovered how institutional agents navigated accreditation by relying on, and prioritizing, cultural processes. Beyond leadership's commitment to an inclusionary and collective process, efforts were made to engage in cultural protocol during the accreditation team site visit, particularly at ASCC. Cultural protocol included an important ceremony where visitors are greeted in language and presented with gifts and performances to thank them for their journey to the College. More importantly, the ceremony was a way of blessing their activities. Recall the comments made by one participant about the purpose of this ceremony:

You know, when they [visiting team] come here and they’re trying to see how we do, it’s very important that they follow the land protocol. This is us telling them, 'It's okay. You can walk ASCC grounds. And not to worry, nothing will happen to you.' Because it is us, the people, and the board saying, ‘Welcome, now do [your evaluation]’. And it has nothing to do with whether we're trying to bribe them or not.
I previously shared that there was some controversy within the campus about whether it was appropriate to include the ceremony as part of the accreditation visit. One steering committee member summarized the tone of the debate in these words:

Well, even the welcoming ceremony became controversial one point, because, you know, we would give them gifts and food after and is that unethical? Why have the ceremony? And I remember, the islander perspective was overwhelmingly, that’s not up to them, whether we have the welcoming ceremony. This is who we are, and we’re doing it: in fact, who would we be without it? And accreditation people were moved by that! They got to see for themselves how important our culture is. This wasn’t us trying to pull any wool over their eyes. No, this is who we are; it’s an authentic, not commercial, thing we’re doing. And it represents to us that, the campus was more of a village; it holds a cultural identity. So that ceremony was a way to acknowledge something universal in our local context, and declare that, this is the way we do this, this is who we are.

This ceremonial welcoming protocol is rooted in a larger cultural framework that acknowledges any traveling group of people. Prior to Western contact (and currently, although to a lesser extent), travel within islands and inter-island travel was imbued with social significance, and travelers were always greeted with respect, food, and a place to rest. We can see that the social significance of travel has been applied to the visiting accreditation teams, where they are brought into the cultural context and recognized in culturally significant ways, even though their visit is temporary. By being recognized in these ways, the college and its staff elevate their Indigenous culture as being just as important – if not more so – than the standard conventions of Western business culture, which dictate far more strict practices between the visiting team and the institution, to avoid any perception of bias or conflict of interest. However, this was met with some resistance, not only by people within the institution, but by the visiting team as well, which I will describe in more detail below.

Engaging a discourse of compliance

The second strategy I discovered in how these two institutions navigated accreditation was in relying on what I call a discourse of compliance. I use the word ‘discourse’ very carefully, to describe meaningful statements and texts, as well as the rules and structures that underpin these statements and texts (Waitt, 2005). By invoking discourse, I infer and lay bare the kinds of
knowledge or language that circulate (in this case, during accreditation), and what that knowledge reveals about the power dynamics between people and systems (in this case, between an institution and its accreditor). By ‘compliance,’ I refer to the ways that compliance is actualized on each campus (to conform to accreditation standards), and the more subtle ways that compliance is communicated, understood, or contested (as an attitude or culture about accreditation within which people operate). These strategies are reminiscent of Tribal Crit’s sixth tenet: educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation. I contend that the work to establish and maintain compliance to accreditation standards is part of a larger structure of relations, an older educational directive between the U.S. and its Pacific territories to elevate the quality of education, and by extension, the quality of students, graduates, and communities.

The discourse of compliance was legible in multiple ways: through compliance to learning outcomes standards, striving to look like mainland community colleges, and by underscoring data-driven decision making.

**Compliance to accreditation standards**

First, there was a consistent emphasis on compliance to accreditation standards. For example, institutional agents at ASCC emphasized compliance to ACCJC standards to highlight the quality of academic programs. One comment from an administrator highlights this perspective:

> Accreditation brings everyone together in terms of making sure the effectiveness of the mission is good. Through our ongoing program review, it keeps us in line, making sure that we’re in compliance, and in terms of planning. So how do we know how, if we’re experiencing all these challenges, what are we doing to improve it? Because that’s what it is. **It’s a benefit for colleges and institutions. [Compliance to standards] validates [the grades we give to students],** so I know that they do earn that grade, because they have achieved all these competencies.

This was a common thread especially among faculty, who were clear about the importance of ensuring that standards related to student learning outcomes were being addressed. Participants
shared that they wanted to ensure compliance with learning outcomes assessment so that transfer students could expect smooth transition to their four-year institutions, usually in Hawai‘i or the mainland U.S., or into the workforce:

To me, thinking about the standards, it's **about validating the grades that students receive from our instructors.** That is, if an A student goes out into the workforce, they're able to meet expectations, you know, at the highest level of proficiency. So, we have to think about that balance, between the grade that a student receives, and the overall outcomes that students gain. I can remember what a former president told me. He said, 'You know, we graduate a lot of our students, and then they go out there. I know that the private sector and agencies out there, say, you're producing all of these students, but they can't perform [in their jobs]. But they have a degree.’ So that stuck with me, because I can issue an A, but how do I know, when that student goes into the workforce, that they can perform at that level.

At UoG, the language around compliance to accreditation standards was used in a political and strategic way. For example, one of the steering committee members commented:

**Let me say that, um, where [accreditation] does work institutionally is when the institution needs something to point to, that's bigger than your government, or the tribal of Chiefs, wherever the real power is, even if it's no longer in structured government. You need to say, WASC will take this away from us.** Right? And that's really the only card you ever get to play, right? Like everything becomes, 'WASC will take everything away from us,' so it becomes useful in that regard. So, I believe...I forget the person who came up with the zones of proximal productivity, right. If you think accreditation is about raising the higher standard, which might work for Harvard, might work for Stanford. It doesn't work for us. But we use WASC to keep raising that lower bar which pushes up the upper bar. That's where I see it. Yeah, it's useful, those compliance checklists. And for that, we have Dee (Leon), she's the queen of our compliance checklist. And, you know, if I'm ever modifying a forum or working with faculty or something like a choice and compliance checklist, I'm like, okay, Dee, take it away. Because we need to say that we have to meet that box or WASC is going to take our degrees from us.

**Compliance to be like U.S. institutions**

There was a related emphasis on how accreditation helped to set the institution on par with other postsecondary institutions, especially in the continental United States. Underlying this emphasis is a perspective of U.S.-based institutions as the gold standard, against which the institution would be measured. One of the accreditation leaders at ASCC shared that this was an important point they would make with their faculty:
So, we have higher education standards that we have to comply with, in order for us to make sure that we meet these standards of accreditation... *it helped us to say that what we're doing is no different than other colleges. And that when students transfer [to other schools, they can] show that they're not wasting their time here...* So, you know, it tells the community, ‘No, it's not just any [institution] that can have a program. You've got to have that accreditation stamp that says, okay, you've met all the standards. And it doesn't matter where they go, students’ credits are accepted anywhere in the US. To me, it’s a good and positive thing to have that stamp of accreditation, because that tells [students] we're no different than any community college in the United States, because we're accredited. The only difference is probably [accrediting agency]. But you know, the standards are the same in higher education. As long as they’re in the United States, we can see, those courses are transferable. [Those institutions] recognize our degrees.

In this quote, they emphasize that the goal of compliance is to be on the same level as any other institution in the U.S. They point to articulation agreements between ASCC and four-year colleges in Hawaii and the continental U.S. as their primary concern; yet they also highlight that it is important for the institution to be indistinguishable from any other community college in the U.S. The implicit belief in their statement is that compliance is essential to communicate institutional quality and bring the institution on par with its peers.

**Compliance by being data-driven**

Another important facet of the discourse of compliance was a reliance on evidence, showing how institutional processes were data driven. Underlying this insistence on data and evidence is the need to maintain compliance to accreditation standards emphasizing data-driven decision making.

To broaden and expand ASCC’s ability to speak about these processes, the Institutional Effectiveness office instituted program evaluations to regularly capture how departments are making data-driven decisions. A staff member shared their experience supporting departmental evaluations:

That is another thing we've been talking about lately, was revamping how we do program review, because I had advised the Institutional Planning Executive Core Committee (IPECC), which oversees the program review process... And I told them that **the survey that we give out to collect data is just a data collection tool. When we get that back, program review must continue within the department.** And it also should include a lot of data collection. We’re here to help if they want, but they have to tell us what they want to collect, we can't tell them what they need, or [what to collect], or how that will help understand
what’s wrong. No, that has to come from within the program…. I’ve done the compilation for these reports. I have compiled the program reviews and survey results, and I’ve given them some, you know, summations of everything or summaries of all that.

In this description, they highlight that while data collection is occurring, through the program evaluation process, there is an important next step for programs, to review that data and make decisions about courses, curriculum, or activities based on that data. They articulate the role that the Institutional Effectiveness (IE) played but also point out that compliance to standards of data-driven decision-making rests at the department or program level, outside the purview of the IE office.

Another accreditation leader shared how institutional agents, such as Board members, were brought to understand the importance of compliance because of the show cause sanction:

...We learned the hard way, to tell you the truth...Previously, the board determined the priorities of the college. And there was no tie-in to data. So, there was a disconnect then. It was hard because it began at the very executive, or board level. From [the top] there was [little] knowledge of the importance of standards, the focus of accreditation, and how it will impact Title IV, the different type of funding, the rules and regulations. But I know when the college was hit with the sanction [due to the Commission’s decision that ASCC was in noncompliance with ACCJC eligibility requirements and standards], that opened everyone’s eyes, from the Board Chair on down. During the Board retreat, policies, annual goals, self-evaluation, and annual reporting were discussed. So, a lot of these things were a priority when we began to [have more] open accreditation discussions, being transparent about how it contributes to our own self-evaluation, on how we – not anyone else – were making changes.

This administrator saw that the sanction had created an important opportunity for the Board members to understand exactly how and why compliance to accreditation standards mattered; and furthermore, how they fit into the larger process, by setting the tone for the Board through oversight of executive leadership.

At UoG, there was an equally strong culture about being data-driven as the most important way to reveal institutional quality and adherence to accreditation standards. However, the conversation around data-driven decision making took a very different tone. UoG staff were more confident articulating the role of data and evidence in their practices and displayed a different level
of conversation with their accreditor about how to best meet the standards. For example, one participant shared the following comments about how they made sense of the WASC standards:

...The thing that I appreciate with WASC as, in as much as they have all the standards and criteria for review, whenever we pose a question to them [WASC], the response most times is, what makes sense to you? What works for you? What you notice is that the WASC institutions all kind of look alike. But really, they try as much as possible to say, 'It's your story, whatever you need to do to fulfill your mission and objectives. But do keep in mind, how do you know that the student is learning, it's up to you what you want to teach them, but make sure you have a way of measuring what they're learning or if they're obtaining that skill.' They don't dictate or prescribe how to determine benchmarks or anything like that, they leave that up to the institution. So that's how WASC articulates it: We don't begin to say that we are experts in this, but if you're going to say that your student is going to graduate, and this is what they will have learned, demonstrate how that was achieved. And if it wasn't achieved, what are you doing about it to try and get closer to that? You know, so that's where they kind of keep themselves at the end. And for sure, they'll provide guidance and examples if we ask for it, which is good, but they never prescribe.

In this comment, the participant expresses their understanding of accreditation standards, emphasizing that the standards can be open to interpretation by the institution, and compliance to evidence is where the accreditor will pay close attention. Institutions must be able to show their adherence to an evidence-based framework for decision making across all units of the institution, especially academic.

A faculty member and writer for the self-study report echoed the institutional researcher’s comments, discussing how UoG leadership were emphatic about evidence, and how he understood the importance of data-driven decision making vis-à-vis the self-study report:

A lot of this really came back to the importance of making evidence-based claims. I mean, it's not a rejection of scientific philosophy, you have to make claims and support them with evidence. That's the number one problem. And WASC can smell that out very easily if you're simply making claims. The leadership was very adamant about this point every single day during the accreditation time: 'If you make a claim, support it.' Well, once you get into that claim-and-support kind of writing, then you're in pretty good shape. It's just a matter of writing it up. Okay? Because then you're not making these wild claims, right. And then you can project towards the future. 'All right, we've done this. Here's the evidence. Therefore, I think we can get there in a few years, but it really comes down this or that.' To me, that's what assessment is, and it goes back to cultivating a culture of evidence, a culture of data.
This comment highlights how leadership continually acknowledged the importance of data-driven decision making, which led to an increase in the culture of data use to faculty.

Navigating between culture and compliance

The third strategy I discovered in how these two institutions navigated accreditation was in the way they navigated the tensions between culture and compliance. These tensions prompted two very different responses to accreditation, and two different accreditation sagas: one that positioned accreditation as being grounded in island wisdom (UoG), and one that was more compliance driven and focused on getting things done right (ASCC). The way each institution responded led to a very different set of outcomes: rewarded full accreditation for a maximum of eight years (UoG), and placed on show cause, resulting in biennial scrutiny from their accreditor (ASCC). Here, I explore how institutional agents were able to engage both culture and compliance in a complicated, sometimes messy, dance as they moved through the steps for reaccreditation. The seemingly simple exercise of accreditation is made meaningful, even powerful, when explored through a dialectical lens of complexity and even contradiction. I explore this in more detail below.

There is ample evidence from my study that, for the institutions featured here, accreditation is still viewed with some trepidation. Woven throughout the accreditation sagas, there is a perceptible tension between institutional pursuits of cultural relevance and compliance. Throughout my talanoa session, I could easily pick up on participant’s awareness of, and orientation towards, this tension. Part of it was due to the nature of accreditation itself: the language of standards, compliance, data-driven decision making, are all embedded in the guiding documents received by institutions from their accrediting agency. But layered within acceptance of the discourse of compliance was thoughtful questioning about the nature of this process, in the island context. This sentiment is expressed by one participant, from UoG:

I think that accreditation bodies kind of forced us into a cookie cutter approach. You know, all institutions have to look [a certain way]. And I think that there needs to be a cooperative approach to accreditation; we need to be co-creators of what accreditation standards and
benchmarks ought to look like for different types of institutions. That needs to be parallel to an existing body...I'm sure, in other islands, there's a cultural line, like you have masters of things that are not purely “academic” in the definition of higher education. But [people who hold] an important knowledge base for the island, you know, for the people, for its Indigenous history. And I don't think our minds go there, to build our accreditation self-study, to build our programs, it's almost like we're afraid that if we're too different, we're not going to fit. So that's how I think about accreditation: what we have, in our self-study reports, are tied to what the accreditation body is expecting. But it's not a true reflection of who we are. So, definitions are really a challenge; there has to be the sense of a definition, right, like a sense of what quality is, a sense of what integrity is. And the thing that we can measure and define more easily is impact. How has this helped the community in which the institution exists to grow? And can we measure that? Sure, we can measure it through the number of graduates from the program, we can measure it tied to what they do with their diplomas–but then we have to be careful there, right? Because success is not always tied to corporate level, high-paying job. Success could be, that students are educated to be responsible to, and give back to, their communities.

In this comment, the participant articulates her sense of discomfort with the mimetic nature of accreditation. In doing so, she turns briefly to considering alternative experts who coexist on the island, the cultural experts who hold knowledge related to the land, the people, and cultural customs.

Recall that UoG staff were also very candid about their ability to maneuver around seemingly straightforward accreditation processes, to display the institution and its progress advantageously. One executive staff member shared a strategy which involved understanding the logics within which the accrediting agency operated, and addressing their institutional identity using those logics:

So, the accreditation process, because it's an assessment, institutional researchers always like to say they're agnostic, right. So, the accreditation system tries to be agnostic. And I think that we're lucky because we're not under a more conservative or stringent accrediting agency. So [visiting team members and staff from the accrediting agency] are all open ended enough, and "find yourself" enough, that they understand our institution has gone through the "just tell us what to do" phase and that we're coming to define their own identity, [especially as an organization serving particular cultural communities]. So, the institutional expression of identity, through a cultural framework works really well. In the WASC system, we've really been able to turn [particular policy environments] to our advantage.

As previously emphasized, members of the steering committee were able to pick up on the agency's focus on moving past a compliance mindset, but also capitalize on the agency's implicit support for
cultural focus. By highlighting how their institution was both in compliance of accreditation while also elevating the Indigenous culture within the institution’s identity, UoG was able to successfully navigate the tensions between these seemingly opposing strategies. Indeed, the accreditation saga shared by UoG staff and faculty indicate that was exactly the case – by balancing these two strategies well, they were met with praise, acceptance, and most importantly, reaccreditation.

At ASCC, it is easy to discern the tension between culture and compliance, and how institutional agents navigated accreditation. This tension was both generated within the institution, as well as the ACCJC external evaluation team, which forcefully rejected cultural protocol that was deemed outside the scope of what was acceptable. Staff at the college were not surprised by the rejection, but one faculty member did try to explain why it was so important to maintain the cultural custom of ceremonial welcome, despite the controversy:

So, we really wanted people to understand, this is our culture. We honestly don't want our cultural activities to influence their work as accreditors – that would be unacceptable. But this is such an important part of who we are! We do this for any visitors, and it's meaningful for our students, for our community. So, from then on, we continued to have the welcoming ceremony every time there was an accreditation visit...we do the official welcoming, we also do the official farewell. And that's the other thing I argue with the administration, and I said, it's not American Community College, it’s American Samoa Community College. Sure, we're doing things the American way or whatever. But you also have to consider the fact that we are Pasefika and that’s important.

This faculty member describes her commitment to maintaining cultural traditions, despite concerns from the President that this could (and at first, did) lead to awkward situations (i.e., the visiting team walking out of the official farewell ceremony). In navigating the tension between culture and compliance, she described the institution’s choice to elevate culture, which resulted in negative consequences.

There was also an acknowledgement by several participants, about the difficulty in getting buy in from anyone outside of the accreditation steering committee, and the ensuing disconnect between the written report and actual institutional processes. This disconnect stemmed from an
approach to assessment steeped in compliance, in the mentality that accreditation is external to the everyday work of faculty or staff. One participant captured this disconnect quite eloquently:

So, as we know, the self-study is supposed to be written by the stakeholders. Right? At all levels, including support staff. The more you can have the stakeholders involved, the commission sees that is a good self-study. Now as we went through the process, sometimes the work would get dumped on one or two people. And so, to get it done, those individuals ended up carrying the load. But the worst thing that can happen is when the commission comes in and asks, who wrote this report? Or even worse when the boss becomes critical about what gets put in the report. And then the commission comes, and interviews staff, and people speak up, with all of their frustrations about the process.... Like I’ve said, it’s organization in conflict with itself, and it leaves a bad feeling. And then they wonder why people don’t want to participate! [It’s because] they aren’t seeing the benefit of their efforts; or worse, they see the report, and it may or may not reflect their reality. And, you know, on this island, we don’t have teacher unions. The negotiating power that way doesn’t happen here. So, it’s supposed to be empowering: Self-study should be empowering. Right. And a healthy accreditation process should be empowering, so the institution can improve, be honest with itself, and improve. But that doesn’t happen; instead, people don’t like it, and disengage. And then you start getting teachers who show up just to fill out the form, clock in and clock out. And it’s true of organizations in general, right. Maybe that’s part of what we’re talking about, is how do you get people to like their work and be motivated to do a good job? ASCC’s very first president used to talk about this. He would say, ‘People don’t come to work to do a bad job. They want to feel like they’re part of something.’ So that’s always the question: how do you bring about system-wide accountability, and how do you motivate your workforce to engage in that?

In this quote, the participant lays bare the complex organizational dynamics that influenced ASCC’s accreditation process. He points out how the organization had one process (in this case, only a handful of people end up working on the institutional self-evaluation report), but upon the visiting team’s arrival, found that this process did not fit an established ideal, and ultimately sanctioned the institution for failing to provide evidence for several accreditation standards. But he also points out that, because the institution does not value accreditation for the opportunity to self-assess, there is a gulf between institutional processes and prevailing critiques about that process. Yet the accreditation process wore on, fueled by senior level management who relied on the discourse of compliance to move through the timeline and navigate the accreditation process.
At the same time, however, there were those within the institution who did manage to negotiate the tension between culture and compliance quite well. Recall how one of my participants articulated her work to create buy-in for accreditation activities:

So, my approach is understanding the kind of people they are, if they’re stickler about the salutation, in our Samoan language, I do that right in the front, and then you give them that [acknowledgment]. So, it’s all about how you deliver that information, the simplicity of it, right? **You bring in the eloquent way of portraying in our own language, as well as bringing in the standard will help them become part of this very difficult process, because it is a difficult process in terms of trying to understand every part of it.**

In this quote, we can see the lengths taken by this person to bring her staff into an authentic conversation about data, and how she chose to employ cultural values and culturally appropriate means of communication to engage staff in dialogue about data. She understood that this would be the most effective way of perpetuating a culture of data use, recognizing that this would be a difficult process.

Unfortunately for ASCC, despite their efforts to negotiate accreditation through culture or compliance, they were initially unsuccessful in achieving accredited status. Their institution was sanctioned for violation of several standards, and while the visiting team report makes no mention of the welcome or concluding ceremonies or their walk-out, it is evident that the team’s visit to ASCC was not a resounding success. ASCC leadership attempted to elevate the Indigenous culture as part of the accreditation process, while deploying a discourse of compliance. The institution was sanctioned, and subsequently engaged in an annual cycle of accreditation reports and visits, for a period of seven years. Participants shared their frustration, the lessons they learned, and the way they had (or intended to) changed institutional processes, because of the sanction; but there remains a larger question about the role of culture in accreditation, that people felt differently about.
Navigating external factors

As I constructed and pondered the accreditation saga for each institution, it became important to think about how, if at all, external factors might have played a role in each saga. Two factors became apparent in my analysis: institution type, and accreditation agency. As a reminder, UoG is a four-year institution accredited by WASC Senior,\(^{10}\) while American Samoa Community College is a two-year institution, accredited by WASC ACCJC.\(^ {11}\)

**Institution Type.** American Samoa Community College is one of six community colleges in the region, which all seek accreditation from the same agency, ACCJC. Recall that the Pacific region was the subject of a white paper written by ACCJC commissioners in 2006, who were appalled at the constant rate of sanction received by Pacific institutions (Beno et al, 2006). The white paper detailed eight barriers making it difficult for these community colleges to achieve accreditation: 1) Geography as a barrier; 2) Evolving definitions of good practices that raise requirements for accreditation; 3) Inappropriate local government control or influence; 4) Institutional governance issues; 5) Inadequate development for institutional leaders and potential leaders; 6) Inadequate levels of public support; 7) Under-prepared entering students; and 8) Insufficient scale to permit effective and efficient operations. (Beno et al, p. 3).

In this white paper, community colleges in the Pacific region are painted in broad strokes with deficit-based commentary. This deficit perspective of community colleges carried over into the accreditation process, evidenced by participants from ASCC discussing how their institution, along

\(^{10}\) UoG holds the following characteristics according to IU’s Carnegie Classifications:
- Basic: Master’s College and Universities: Medium Programs
- Enrollment Profile: Very high undergraduate
- Undergraduate Instructional Program: professions plus arts & sciences, some graduate coexistence
- Graduate Instructional Program: Postbaccalaureate: Education-dominant, with Arts & Sciences
- Size and Setting: Four-year, medium, primarily nonresidential

\(^{11}\) ASCC holds the following characteristics according to IU’s Carnegie Classifications:
- Basic: Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges: Associate's Dominant
- Enrollment Profile: Exclusively undergraduate four-year
- Undergraduate Instructional Program: Baccalaureate/Associates Colleges
- Size and Setting: Four-year, very small, primarily nonresidential
with other Pacific institutions, have had issues with accreditation over the years. One participant pointed out how important accreditation is to building positive perceptions of the college, even prioritizing accreditation in external communications:

> We share through our website and through public publications that go to Samoa News on the status of accreditation. I think it’s important because if the community is aware that we are accredited by an external body, that is also accrediting all the community colleges on the West Coast like in California, **it just shows the type of college that we have, that the standard we have. It's an US-accredited college. And I think that's very important to share.** With the community to make sure that you know that degree, it’s going to be with you forever. And if you go anywhere, it’s acceptable and recognize in any US college, or even with our programs.

In this comment, we can see how accreditation is positioned as a signifier for institutional quality.

In contrast, UoG operates within a slightly different realm of possibility for Pacific institutions. As the only four-year public university in the U.S. Pacific territories, it holds natural distinction and institutional privilege compared to the community colleges serving the Pacific Islands. UoG leaders are using accreditation to articulate institutional goals to become a research-intensive institution serving the Pacific Islands and the northern Pacific rim. One institutional leader shared his perspective on this issue:

> I’ve been encouraging UoG to be thinking about how it’s, in a way, kind of a western Pacific analog to the University of the South Pacific, with its original campus in Fiji. So, they deal with 14 independent countries and, you know, scattered over an enormous region, at least as big as our region. And so, you know, I think it’s hard enough, running a university with just one government to deal with so imagine 14 governments today. So, we’re poised I think for a much better kind of collaboration among our institutions. And what I imagined for UoG moving into the future is it moves up the scale, we’re talking about a Doctor of Education, perhaps a doctor Business Administration, eventually PhDs in marine biology, environmental science, Indigenous Studies, those kinds of things. And so, I imagine that UoG will remain sole institution to offer the full range of bachelor’s degrees and that a range of masters and doctorates for the region. And I anticipate the possibility of joint degrees or dual degrees, there’s a distinction between those two, where people in Palau Community College or CM1 or NMC or so on would get degrees from both institutions, you know that there’d be much more of a kind of a system without the sense of UoG kind of taking it over, we just want to facilitate this kind of engagement. And I think that the pandemic and our thrust into all online education is really advanced our capacity, just even for thinking about the doing this. So, I think we might, you might see a lot of really interesting things come out of this.
In articulating this vision, he situates UoG as a growing, thriving competitor to four-year public universities in the U.S. states. It is important to recognize UoG’s ability to do this in the context of accreditation, because as UoG continues to gain distinction through the accreditation process, it will have greater access to boundary-spanning opportunities such as collaborations with federal government, the U.S. military, and countries in Asia and the Pacific Rim. The valences of opportunity are full of potential for UoG.

**Relationship with Accrediting Agency.** Another external factor to consider is how ASCC and UoG navigated the relationship with their accrediting agency. There are clear power dynamics that exist between any institution and the agency from which it seeks accreditation. With ASCC and its regional accreditor, ACCJC, there existed a tenuous relationship made difficult due to events mentioned previously, when visiting team members walked out of a cultural ceremony in 2014. This action made clear to ASCC that culturally relevant activities would be punished, and the story eventually circulated with other community colleges in the region as well. But there are other signs of disconnect between ASCC and ACCJC. For example, there are recurring references to one of the ACCJC commissioners, who’s described in the following ways:

“Oh, I met Commissioner X. And I thought they were really down to earth...they are not as scary as everybody says they are. But they were known to be person with the iron fist.”

“I tried to talk to them about the standards; I’m thinking that doesn’t apply. It doesn’t work for us. And we told that to Commissioner X in the past. But they just think they’re excuses. Yeah.”

“During the last accreditation visit, there was this one person, Commissioner X, who was portrayed as this evil person coming from off island, by our accreditation liaison officer.”

These comments are part of a larger narrative describing a previously difficult relationship between ASCC and its accreditor, ACCJC. However, more recently, the commission has established an institutional liaison who communicates regularly with the ALO and serves as a resource for the institution. It is hopeful that this practice will lead to a more positive relationship.
On the other hand, UoG had a completely different kind of interaction with its accreditor, WASC Senior. Visiting team members praised efforts by the institution to embed cultural values within the self-study, and the ALO was eventually nominated to serve as a commissioner for WASC Senior (now her current role). One of my participants commented:

We're so happy that our ALO became a commissioner with WASC and the representation that she makes for Pacific Islanders. So now, it's not just UoG's perspective, but Pacific Islanders perspective. We're very, very pleased about that. At the same time, she is our ALO. And so even though our next reaffirmation is not for another three years, she's already saying, okay, start putting it in the back of your mind, we need to start preparing for this. I'm like, oh my gosh. And it's because I think she, as a commissioner, she wants and - even if she wasn't a commissioner, she is always seeking for excellence. And so, what more if she's a commissioner, so you know, it's not like, 'Okay, hurray, we got the accreditation, now put it away for us for six years and then come back to it.' No, it doesn't work like that!

The ALO in question also shared her perspective on her new role, and the opportunities afforded to be able to advocate for the Pacific region:

You know, that's the beauty of the Pacific Island way, right, is that we know that when we see our brother, our sister hurting, you know, we immediately mobilize to support, we try and think about how we can help. There's this constant need to try to take care of each other, as opposed to this isolationist type of Western view. For me, that has a lot of value. Recently, I attended a conference for the Association of Public Land Grant universities, I spoke up because one of the plenary speakers was discussing the historically black colleges and how his book was focusing on the underserved populations. I offered a comment to all of the attendees, and told them, 'As you look at your data, and you wonder what's happening with your degree completion rates, even though you've been targeting support or wraparound services for your black students, you may wonder, 'We're doing all of this, how come it's kind of going down? What's happening?' I said, 'Bear in mind, when we think about migration of families and communities, there's a growing Pacific Island community that a lot of you may not be aware of, because it's not necessarily in your data set, you know, because it's so minuscule that you don't pay attention, and if you're not paying attention to that particular data set, and you wonder why after investing all these resources towards supporting that specialized black population, bear in mind that something maybe pulling the numbers down, and that could be your Pacific Islander underrepresented minority or subpopulation that nobody pays attention to. So, the Pacific Islanders get screwed (excuse my language). That was the message I pitched. I said, 'Pay attention and do not, because of ignorance, ignore other underrepresented student populations. Do not discount the fact that they exist, because in doing so, you may be unintentionally excluding them from something that they should have access to, because they represent that underserved population base.' So that's something that I think we need to pay attention to in the accreditation literature, and in national accreditation conversations, that needs to be brought up, you know, it's something that that's truly important. So that's what I feel about my role in the WASC as a Commissioner. And I truly feel that the more people we have from our areas, especially in the Pacific Islands, who understand accreditation, or who are engaged in knowing more and
more about the national level, and regional accreditation requirements, and who participate in the Commission or serve on visiting teams, the more of a voice that we can have.

In this comment, the ALO shares how she uses her voice and role as a commissioner to advocate on behalf of Pacific Islander communities during a national conference, and to try and change the conversation about how to support underrepresented populations. Specifically, she refers to the common institutional practice of racializing Pacific Islander students with a broader “Asian Pacific Islander” or “Asian American and Pacific Islander” group, without disaggregating data to understand the circumstances of Pacific Islander populations alone. Having the opportunity to serve as a commissioner has elevated her leadership within the WASC and brings her in contact with a larger network of collaboration and knowledge that she can bring back to her own institution to inform accreditation processes.

Overall, these two institutions have had to navigate very different relationships with their accrediting agency and did so using very different methods and strategies.

**Conclusion and reflection**

In this chapter, I introduced the accreditation sagas of the institutions which are featured in my study, American Samoa Community College, and the University of Guam. American Samoa’s accreditation saga, as related by eight institutional agents, consisted of leaders managing a process, addressing attitudes about accreditation, and navigating Samoan culture. University of Guam’s accreditation saga, as related by seven institutional agents, consisted of an inclusive process, Indigenous leaders, and a collective effort to embrace island wisdom. Following the accreditation sagas, I presented a comparison of the two sagas, looking at the strategies deployed by these institutions to navigate accreditation: by engaging (and sometimes disengaging from) their Indigenous culture; by relying on a discourse of compliance; and by navigating the tensions, and possibilities, produced by these two elements. In the next and final chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to my conceptual framework, as well as how they compare to existing literature on
accreditation processes. I close by addressing the significance of these findings to policy, research, and practice.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This concluding chapter begins with a summary of my findings. I discuss my findings in relation to current scholarship and knowledge related to accreditation. Following that, I explore the significance of my study for how we understand accreditation processes. I share the implications of my findings for research, policy, and practice, as well as some recommendations. To conclude this study as an Indigenous research project, I share thoughts about the possibilities for indigenizing accreditation. I conclude with a final reflection on the dissertation process.

Summary

U.S. accreditation is a process through which institutions engage in self-reflection, invite peer reviewers to explore institutional processes, and a quasi-governmental agency makes a final deliberation about the institution’s accredited status. The history and evolution of U.S. accreditation reveals its increasing emphasis on accountability and stringent definitions of outcomes assessment. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of a nationwide community of practice around assessment and accreditation has resulted in best practices which do not necessarily reflect the realities or resources of all institutions. As a result, accreditation has become a difficult and burdensome process for institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific jurisdictions, many of which have come close to losing their accredited status. Yet the problems of accreditation have been characterized in higher education literature as institutional problems, rather than problems inherent within the accreditation process itself. The purpose of this dissertation research project was to explore the experience of people working in Pacific institutions, specifically in working through difficult accreditation circumstances to ultimate attain reaccredited status.

In this dissertation, I explored the following research question: How have institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific navigated accreditation? My secondary question is, what is the accreditation saga communally embraced by educators for Pacific institutions which have successfully achieved accreditation? I began by reviewing the literature on accreditation, noting that existing literature is
replete with case studies and “how-to” manuals or guides. Navigating accreditation is a common process – happening all the time, across college and university campuses at any moment. Yet much of what we know is based on knowledge gleaned from institutions in the continental U.S. and in a state context. In comparison, we know very little about accreditation processes taking place for institutions located on the literal margin of the U.S. polity – taking place in U.S.-affiliated territories and nations holding Compacts of Free Association, located in the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles from the continent.

For this study, I relied on the concept of “organizational saga,” informed by Indigenous critical race theories, to inform a conceptual framework which I think of as an “indigenized organizational saga,” with a focus on accreditation. This framework draws upon, and is connected to, the larger field of organizational studies, through which dynamics within institutions are made visible. Because of the way I positioned my study, focused on a particular region with a collective political history with U.S. imperialism, I incorporated the work of several Indigenous scholars in education who theorize educational history and development in that context.

I relied on qualitative research methods to collect, organize, and display the accreditation sagas, as these methods focus on people’s perspectives, meanings, and multiple subjective views; situating research within participants’ context or setting; and involves an emergent and evolving design, rather than a tightly prefigured one (Creswell, 2013, p. 45). Most of all, qualitative research prioritizes the role of the researcher in shaping the study, which was important given my reliance on decolonizing my methodology and using Pacific research methods such as talanoa research methodology (Vaioleti 2013). Talanoa research methods share some similarities to narrative approaches to research, with more of a focus on culturally mediated dialogue.

I recruited institutional participation from all public institutions located in the U.S. Pacific territories and nations holding Compacts of Free Association with the U.S. Criterion for selecting
participants was based on if the institution goes through accreditation with WASC (either WASC Senior or ACCJC), and if at any point has received sanctions from WASC. Of the four institutions that participated, two are included in this study. I worked with each institution to identify participants who had been involved in accreditation activities.

Data collection was comprised of talanoa sessions (similar to interviews, but culturally relevant for research conducted with and for Pacific Islanders) with institutional staff and faculty identified by the President’s office of participating institutions. Talanoa sessions were conducted virtually using Zoom. I conducted data analyses by transcribing and cleaning the talanoa session using Otter.ai, and then uploading transcripts to Dedoose for data analysis. I read over each transcript several times, creating, and updating memos to capture my thinking. I then coded transcripts using a priori codes drawn from my conceptual framework as well as inductive coding.

To maximize trustworthiness of my findings, I conducted member checks with participants, sending them a copy of the accreditation saga as well as the transcript of our talanoa for feedback and confirmation. Participants accepted the transcripts with minimal revisions, giving me permission to move forward with my analysis. I also engaged the support of peer reviewers, scholars with experience with higher education issues in the Pacific as well as those familiar with accreditation processes. Their support was instrumental in clarifying my themes and adding more verbatim quotes. Finally, I employed culturally appropriate strategies to ensure that my findings were trustworthy in the context of Pacific Indigenous communities, including a commitment to present my findings to participating institutions and establishing opportunities to make the findings actionable to support ongoing and future accreditation efforts.

Despite steps taken to maximize trustworthiness, this study contains several limitations. First, it is an in-depth study of two institutions, and findings should not be generalized to all institutions in the Pacific region. Second, due to limitations related to COVID-19, data collection was
limited to resources available on the internet and talanoa sessions conducted via Zoom. Despite these limitations, I was able to uncover important revelations about how institutional agents navigate accreditation in the Pacific region.

The above procedures resulted in three overarching findings that illuminate how Pacific institutions navigate accreditation. To understand the accreditation saga embraced by educators for Pacific institutions which have successfully achieved accreditation, I first sought to establish if my conceptual framework of an “indigenized organizational saga” would be capable of capturing the stories being circulated by institutional agents; and if so, what was part of that saga. Through talanoa with my participants, I was able to trace, outline, and craft accreditation sagas, which reveal the actions taken by institutional agents to successfully achieve reaffirmation of accreditation for their institution, as well as the nuances within those actions.

After narrating the accreditation saga of two institutions, I offered comparative findings. Navigating accreditation in the Pacific jurisdictions is shown to be a complex process, one which is made possible by navigating, uplifting, and elevating the Indigenous culture through the accreditation process. Yet this process is sometimes deliberately emptied of cultural characteristics, and instead moved forward through a discourse of compliance to accreditation standards. These two institutions engaged in both culture and compliance, as well as the tensions between the two, which I identified and shared evidence about. Finally, I explored some of the external factors which also influence the accreditation process, such as institution type and the institution’s relationship with their accreditor.

Discussion

Accreditation is a high-profile topic for higher education researchers and scholars. In tracing the development of higher education, scholars have emphasized the impact regional accreditation has had on how U.S. institutions evolve (Brittingham, 2009). This study confirms
existing evidence of accreditation's continued relevance and impact on institutions of higher education. Beyond the obvious insurance of accreditation to confirm institutional eligibility for federal financial aid, this study highlights the role that accreditation plays as an engine promoting mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) through which norms, scripts, tendencies, and discourse spread from the mainstream (U.S. continental institutions) to the margins (institutions in the territories).

There is also a parallel body of research which sheds light on how institutional agents navigate accreditation (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Banta & Palomba, 2014). A large segment of this literature is focused on learning outcomes assessment, a major feature of the accreditation process (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018; Kinzie, 2020). Researchers, scholars, and practitioners eagerly share resources and best practices to support others in their work to secure or navigate accreditation or outcomes assessment as a major priority for their institutions (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Suskie, 2016). The Assessment Update journal, as an example, provides brief publications on various topics related to accreditation and assessment topics, to disseminate information and strategies quickly and regularly to the higher education assessment community. This study offers a new lens with which to explore institutional accreditation, focusing on storytelling and understanding the “accreditation saga” which gets circulated by institutional members. This current investigation contributes to research by expanding our understanding of how people understand, explain, think about, and remember accreditation processes, the sagas that circulate and become sedimented in the organization’s collective memory.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, the study confirms the utility of organizational saga as a useful framework for analyzing how institutions navigate accreditation. As an organizational framework used to understand how postsecondary institutions create and circulate stories about their development (Clark, 1972), organizational saga in this instance was used to understand the “accreditation saga” to understand the conditions, and the
organizational features that are require, for moving effectively towards successful accreditation. This conceptual framework, indigenized organizational saga, offered a roadmap for how to make sense of available accreditation data, as well as how to navigate talanoa with institutional agents from participating institutions. More research should be done utilizing organizational theories to understand accreditation processes, to build the small but growing literature in this area (Elliott & Goh, 2013; Morest, 2009), which primarily is focused on building organizational capacity to engage in continuous improvement or organizational learning.

Second, this study emphasizes the importance of tracing the impact of accreditation on postsecondary institutions, particularly minority serving institutions (Donahoo & Lee, 2008). Existing scholarship on historically black colleges and universities, as well as tribal colleges and universities, indicates that accreditation has presented difficulties for institutions that were created to serve black and indigenous communities (United Negro College Fund, 2019; Putman, 2001). This study confirms the nature of these difficulties for institutions born outside of the postsecondary mainstream, with a lens focused more squarely on institutions located on the literal margins of the U.S. empire. This study especially builds on concerns raised by scholars of tribal colleges and universities (Abelman, 2011), particularly by highlighting the difficulties faced by institutional agents struggling to conform to assessment and evaluation practices that are essentially imported. Future research should consider a wider regional lens to consider the impact of accreditation on Caribbean U.S. territories, as well as an increased focus on Tribal colleges and universities.

Third, my findings reveal how these two institutions attempt to prioritize and make central their commitment to the indigenous culture, albeit in different ways. This study adds to existing literature on the phenomenon of “indigenizing the academy” taking place across the world within indigenous-serving institutions (Cole, 2011; Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004). Institutionally, both UoG and ASCC have created academic spaces for indigenous studies programs, joining in the work of many indigenous educators to do the same at their institutions. Wilson (2004) articulates that work
to "carve a place for our own traditions as legitimate subjects of scholarly study, but on our own terms, (Wilson, 2004, p. 73; Goodyear-Kaʻōpua, 2013). Moreover, findings related to culturally informed leadership build on existing scholarship about how indigenous leaders work to transform their institutions into indigenous places of learning (Lipe, 2014). Similarly, findings relate to existing research on how Pacific Islander leaders rely on cultural values to lead organizations (Sims, 2018). While reliance on culture was not uniformly positive for both institutions, there are indications that embracing the indigenous culture as a core element of institutional identity can be an asset in how institutions navigate accreditation. Additional inquiries that explore the role of culture in accreditation could potentially extend the use of storytelling or talanoa as a methodology, to collect stories from across the campus.

Fourth, findings confirm the existence and persistence of compliance culture. Results confirm that in explicit and implicit ways, accreditation is viewed less as an opportunity for self-assessment, and more as a barrier to the work of educating students. This point has been well articulated by many scholars in assessment and accreditation, who have collectively insisted on a paradigm shift where attitudes about accreditation move beyond compliance, and integrated the language of improvement instead (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018; Wolff, 2009; Wright, 2002). These attitudes towards accreditation can accumulate and make it difficult to shift the culture so that self-assessment becomes an embedded, continuous process (Wright, 2002). My findings extend what we know about existing strategies to create buy in, revealing how elements such as culturally relevant communication, a broad-based participatory process, were useful in helping create buy-in within the campus community.

Finally, my findings highlight the tensions that arise for institutions trying to prioritize indigenous culture while also remaining in compliance to accreditation standards. The two institutions took different paths in navigating accreditation, and were either rewarded, or sanctioned, for those choices by their accrediting agency. This tension between compliance and
culture has been addressed to some extent by scholars examining the indigenous education movement (Cole, 2011; Jacob, Lee, Wehrheim, Gokbel, Dumba, Lu, & Yin, 2013). Jacob and colleagues described the creation, and impact, of the World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium (WINHEC), founded in 2002 by a group of Indigenous educators and leaders who desired an accreditation body which would center Indigenous education priorities (Barnhardt, 2009; Jacob et al, 2013). WINHEC’s primary goal was to create an accreditation entity that would focus on Indigenous education programs and institutions based on common criteria or principles that reflect Indigenous values and culture. WINHEC accreditation coexists alongside existing accreditation structures and provides an extra layer of assurance for institutions which seek to highlight their adherence to Indigenous values and contributions to the social, political, and economic advancement of Indigenous people. Despite the advantages WINHEC provides, currently none of the institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific territories or COFA nations participate in WINHEC accreditation. This may be due to an overarching policy environment which ties external or federal funding to the results of accreditation, and limits how institutional leaders view the practicality of participation in WINHEC accreditation (Cole, 2011). More needs to be understood about how participants in accreditation view the purpose, impact, audience, and possibilities of accreditation activities. Future studies should focus on gathering the stories and perspectives of the Indigenous community, to understand how they perceive the institution’s contributions to Indigenous people.

**Implications**

The findings of this study have significant implications for research, policy, and practice as it relates to advancing knowledge about institutions of higher education in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific, and actions that can be taken to ease the burden of accreditation for these institutions. First, I suggest future directions for research that will advance our understanding of Pacific institutions and how they navigate accreditation. Second, I offer a set of recommendations related to
accreditation policies, specifically at the federal level and those maintained by regional accrediting agencies. Finally, I present a set of recommendations for practitioners in the Pacific region who are, or will be, engaged in accreditation activities.

**Research.** While this study offers several important insights for policy and practice, there are many opportunities to advance knowledge about Pacific institutions, especially based on the findings from this study. To better understand how institutions navigate accreditation in the Pacific region, further inquiries should focus on other Pacific jurisdictions, such as institutions in the Freely Associated States; or, in other territorial jurisdictions, such as U.S.-affiliated islands in the Caribbean (i.e., Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands). There may be important connections for how institutions on the margins of the U.S. experience the accreditation process.

Additionally, exploring the perspectives of people from the accrediting agencies (for example, visiting team members who participate in accreditation as representatives from the agencies) would offer valuable insight on their influence and experience in the accreditation process. Inasmuch as the focus of this dissertation was on the accreditation saga of people within an institution, there is potential to understand different points of view, especially from those who held positions of power within the accreditation process. For the people who regularly review accreditation paperwork for institutions in the Pacific region, it might be useful to understand their experiences with this process, and how their experiences shape the way they communicate with institutional agents or more importantly, the decisions they make about the institutions.

Expanding beyond the Pacific region, this study may inform future research on the accreditation experiences and sagas of institutions in the U.S. that serve other Indigenous communities (for example, Tribal colleges). Since storytelling is such an important shared element of Indigenous communities on the continent as well as in the islands, collecting accreditation sagas might be an appropriate and culturally congruent research tool for future Indigenous scholars to
use. Future studies can use the framework of accreditation saga to understand how institutions navigate accreditation in different cultural or geographic contexts, such as HBCUs, TCUs, the U.S.-affiliated Caribbean, or even international institutions which seek U.S. accreditation.

**Policy.** Accreditation is an inherently policy-oriented activity, and there are ongoing and evolving policies that this dissertation can inform. Federal policies related to accreditation have been in constant flux, particularly during former President Donald J. Trump’s administration. New accreditation policies around distance education, changing parameters around eligibility for federal financial aid, and relaxing rules around credit transfer have, to some extent, reshaped federal oversight of accreditation (Inside Higher Ed, 2019). Given the ongoing relevance of community colleges and open-access institutions as providers of postsecondary education for the American populace, it is imperative that policies related to accreditation of these institutions are shaped by local needs as well as national interests. For example, while national interests may dictate an increased focus on online education (particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring influence on instructional delivery), this must be tempered with a firm understanding of local or regional contexts and needs. The drive towards online education is unsustainable in many of the Pacific jurisdictions, where internet coverage remains spotty and access to technology limited. At the federal level, policy makers who represent their communities must remain vigilant about federal-level policies that may negatively influence their specific region.

Second, accreditation agencies must ensure that the policies informing accreditation activities are relevant to the context of each institution, particularly if these institutions exist within an Indigenous culture. This is especially salient for the accrediting agencies serving the Pacific jurisdictions, which hold complicated political relationships with the U.S. Institutions in the Pacific jurisdictions serve Indigenous Pacific communities, an important cultural and social context which has not yet been properly acknowledged by the Western Association for Schools and Colleges (WASC). Policies which inform interactions with educators and communities in these regions
should reflect cultural competence and respect for Indigenous populations. For example, accredit ing agencies should ensure that visiting teams are culturally competent and capable of understanding the complex sociohistorical and political contexts within which these institutions have evolved. Several scholars and organizations have made this request (for example UNCF, 2019; AIHEC, n.d.), given the unfortunate experiences of minority-serving institutions with accreditation in the past. This study reinforces and echoes the call for accreditation policies which promote respect for Indigenous communities and protocols.

**Practice.** Finally, the findings of this study have important implications for the practice of accreditation at institutions of higher education. Specifically, I think about how to *indigenize* accreditation, with a focus on U.S. regional accreditation (noting that there have been decades of efforts by Indigenous leaders to indigenize accreditation by creating WINHEC, principally through creation of WINHEC accreditation). As mentioned in Chapter 1, accreditation is a cyclical process, consisting of the self-study, peer review, and final adjudication by the accrediting agency. I will propose practical implications within that framework.

First, there are practical implications for the self-study process. As revealed by my study, “theming” accreditation can be valuable for an institution to conduct a successful and comprehensive self-study process. For example, UoG’s usage of the Building a Quality Campus framework made the self-study process much simpler for writers and editors and gave the self-study report coherence. For institutions serving Indigenous communities, it may be valuable to articulate such a theme through widely known cultural touchstones, proverbs, or stories. This can lend cultural significance to the self-study process, imbuing assessment activities with emotional and moral nuance that may render engagement more palatable or even desirable.

Related to the self-study process, another way this research project might inform the practice of accreditation is to inform how to engage institutional community members.
Accreditation leaders should take stock of the campus culture and consider how to create and sustain buy-in using culturally relevant communication strategies. My study reveals the difficulty in relying solely on compliance as a primary driver to motivate engagement in assessment activities. Instead, accreditation leaders found success in translating cultural values into the way they communicated about accreditation. Going forward, leaders should consider opportunities to Indigenize accreditation process by embedding cultural protocol, communication, and approaches. Practically speaking, this can look like translating materials into the Indigenous language; observing traditional cultural protocol in meetings or activities; or finding fun activities that incentivize participation (such as Bingo or Charades). Gaming accreditation, making it fun for staff and faculty, may be an innovative way to ignite interest.

Third, practitioners should engage in, or create opportunities to network with their counterparts at other institutions. Opportunities for communities of practice are common for institutions in the continental U.S., but there is untapped potential for partnership and collaboration in regions such as the Pacific. Accreditation leaders at ASCC expressed limited involvement in assessment organizations and limited communication with other institutions, while UoG has invested in cross collaboration within the Micronesian region. Opportunities exist through the Pacific Postsecondary Education Council, which has met more regularly during the COVID-19 pandemic and has served as a useful space for leaders to gather and share strategies.

Relatedly, another advantage for networking with other institutions through the PPEC is the opportunity to engage in collective advocacy around accreditation, particularly since most institutions in the Pacific work with ACCJC. The PPEC might create a document similar to the American Indian Higher Education Council’s report *Distinctive and Connected: Tribal Colleges and Universities and Higher Learning Commission Accreditation—Considerations for HLC Peer Reviewers* was created to provide important context for peer review teams, such as a brief history of the tribal colleges, cultural protocol and communication styles, and relevant data points. A report of this kind
might have prevented the unfortunate events that took place at ASCC in 2015, when the ACCJC review team walked out of cultural activities.

Additionally, this study has important implications for an institution’s working relationship with their accreditor. There is no question that recent leadership changes with ACCJC have resulted in a more positive relationship with ASCC; and for UoG, inclusion of their Accreditation Liaison Officer as a Commissioner for WASC Senior has also been received positively. WASC, and other regional accrediting agencies, may find the results of this research study useful to inform onboarding or orientation activities for peer reviewers to act in culturally appropriate ways, especially reviewers who might be new to Indigenous communities or cultures. There is also an opportunity for Indigenous serving institutions to proactively communicate Indigenous culture and protocol, as mentioned previously through the creation of a collaborative report which could be distributed to peer reviewers.

Finally, my findings have implications for how accreditation agencies (especially those which work with Indigenous-serving institutions) communicate with, work with, and serve institutions. Prevailing models of the regional accreditation process (self-study, external review, and recommendations from the accrediting body) could be improved by centering the perspectives and practices of WINHEC accreditation. WINHEC prioritizes how an institution of higher education serves Indigenous communities in how Indigenous values and philosophies are framed and how Indigenous culture, languages, practices, and worldviews are integrated into programming. WINHEC accreditation includes inclusion of Indigenous elders as external reviewers and greater reliance on community engagement and public comment: steps meant to merit confidence by Indigenous communities being served by the institution. Many of these elements could be embraced by regional accrediting agencies such as WASC, signaling to Indigenous communities that accrediting agencies respect and honor Indigenous values and epistemologies.
Conclusion

In 2004, Indigenous scholars gathered to reflect on their work to indigenize the academy by transforming scholarship and empowering communities (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004). They articulated that a commitment to indigenizing the academy must involve understanding the lasting impacts of U.S. colonial education systems and rooting out seemingly value-free processes such as promotion and tenure, publishing, or teaching. I argue that accreditation – the system as well as the process – is often depicted as being value-free, when in fact it exists to promote and propagate certain practices, norms, and language. To indigenize the academy, it is also necessary to discuss and prioritize indigenizing accreditation – to think openly about what institutional self-assessment, Indigenous evaluation, could look like. This study was my first step in having that discussion; it was my way of taking stock of the accreditation issue, and “talking back” to accreditation agencies, how the Pacific is depicted in the literature, and mapping out the lived experience of accreditation in the Pacific.

Yet I come back to this question: Is there a way to bridge institutional commitments to indigenizing the academy, with efforts to articulate and measure institutional quality? This study suggests that, in the Pacific, institutional agents are slowly coming to understand how to strike that balance. By documenting their accreditation sagas, we can better understand how institutions in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific successfully navigate accreditation and do so in a way that is aligned with their mission, core values, and responsibility to Indigenous Pacific communities. This requires tracing the enduring influence of the U.S. imperialism, which has so fundamentally impacted higher education in the Pacific; a more nuanced approach to understand the interplay of organizational and Indigenous cultures; and a more deliberate focus on collecting stories, through talanoa or other research methods.
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Appendix A: Institutional Recruitment Email

Subject line: Accreditation in the Pacific: Invitation for >name< to participate in research study

Text of email:

>in language greeting< >name<

My name is Natasha Saelua, and I am doctoral candidate at Indiana University. I am conducting my dissertation research on accreditation of colleges and universities in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific territories (American Samoa, CNMI, Guam) and COFA nations (FSM, Marshall Islands, Palau). Through this project, I hope to understand how accreditation has changed your college/university, and also the experiences of faculty and staff who participated in accreditation activities. As you may know, accreditation has been a challenging process for some of the Pacific institutions, and it is my hope that through this study, we can find out why it's challenging, if there are similarities between these campuses, and how we can work together to strengthen education for our people.

You are receiving this email because your institution is one of the selected case study sites. I would like to invite >institution< to participate as one of the featured institutions. Your involvement would contribute to expanding our knowledge and understanding of higher education in the Pacific Islands. All findings and data from my study will be presented to your institution, as a way to support future accreditation efforts.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Natasha Saelua at: nsaelua@indiana.edu or by phone (303) 210-5008. I am happy to share more about myself (background, professional experiences, and personal history) and any other information you'd like.

Sincerely,

Natasha Saelua
Doctoral Candidate, Indiana University
Subject line: Share your perspective on accreditation at >institution<

Dear educators,

My name is Natasha Saelua, and I am doctoral candidate at Indiana University. I am conducting my dissertation research on accreditation of colleges and universities in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific territories (American Samoa, CNMI, Guam) and COFA nations (FSM, Marshall Islands, Palau). Through this project, I hope to understand how accreditation has changed your college/university, and also your experiences participating in accreditation activities. As you may know, accreditation has been a challenging process for some of the Pacific institutions, and it is my hope that through this study, we can find out why it’s challenging, if there are similarities between these campuses, and how we can work together to strengthen education for our people.

You are receiving this email because of your involvement (state nature of involvement – participation in steering committee; helped co-author self-study; etc.) with the most recent accreditation process. As such, you are eligible to participate in this study. If you are selected to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one individual interview (in person or via video chat), which will last approximately 1.5-2 hours. Additionally, you will be asked to fill out a demographic survey, which will only take 5-10 minutes of your time. There will be no compensation for your participation.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Natasha Saelua at: nsaelua@indiana.edu or by phone (303) 210-5008.

Sincerely,

Natasha Saelua

Doctoral Candidate, Indiana University
Appendix C: Demographic Form

Navigating Accreditation: A Case Study of Institutional Assessment in the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific

Participant Information Form

All information on this form will be considered confidential, and the form itself will be stored in a secure location.

Preferred Pseudonym
Participant Name
Email

Affiliation to INSTITUTION (circle all that apply)

Faculty Staff Student Alumni Public official

If you are a current university student, how many semesters have you attended?

If you are a current public official, what branch/ministry do you serve/work for?

Would you like a copy of the research findings? (Highlight response) Yes No

What is your age?

Where is your place of birth (Territory/Jurisdiction or City/State)?

Please indicate your race (circle all that apply):

- Pacific Islander
- Asian or Asian American
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Hispanic or Latino
- Multiracial/Mixed race
- White

Please list all ethnic background with which you identify (e.g., Chamorro, Chuukese, Native Hawaiian, Palauan, Samoan):
Please indicate your gender (e.g., man, woman, transgender):

What is your highest educational attainment level?

Doctoral Degree (Ed.D., Ph.D.)
  o  Professional Degree (J.D., M.D.)
  o  Master’s Degree
  o  Bachelor’s Degree
  o  Associates Degree/ Certificate
  o  Some College
  o  High School Diploma, GED, or equivalent
  o  Some High School
  o  Other
Appendix D: Informed Consent

INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH
Navigating Accreditation: A Case Study of Institutional Assessment in the U.S.
Affiliated Pacific

About this research
You are being asked to participate in a research study. Scientists do research to answer important questions which might help change or improve the way we do things in the future.

This form will give you information about the study to help you decide whether you want to participate. Please read this form, and ask any questions you have, before agreeing to be in the study.

Taking part in this study is voluntary.

You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with >institution< [e.g., American Samoa Community College/Guam Community College/Northern Marianas College, etc].

This research is intended for individual 18 years of age or older. If you are under age 18, do not complete the survey.

Why is this study being done?
The purpose of this study is to learn about the accreditation process at your institution, gather perspectives of people who went through that process, and what you have learned about assessment and evaluation here.

You were selected as a possible participant because of your past participation as a previous member of the accreditation steering committee at >institution<, or as a member of the external evaluation team for >institution< during the >year< accreditation cycle.

The study is being conducted by Natasha Saelua, a doctoral candidate in Higher Education at Indiana University. It is currently not funded by an organization or sponsor.

What will happen during the study?
If you agree to be in the study, you will participate in the following activities:

Fill out a demographic survey (5-10 minutes)

Participate in one 1.5-2-hour long interview which will be audiotaped

What are the risks and benefits of taking part in this study?
The risks of participating in this research are minimal and may include recollection of memories or experiences which may be uncomfortable. We don’t expect you to receive any benefit from taking part in this study, but we hope to learn things which will help scientists in the future.

**How will my information be protected?**

All research includes at least a small risk of loss of confidentiality. Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Your identity will be held in confidence in reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Recordings from interviews will be accessible only by the researcher to inform this study and will be destroyed by January 1, 2022.

Organizations that may inspect and/or copy your research records for quality assurance and data analysis include groups such as the study investigator and his/her research associates, the Indiana University Institutional Review Board or its designees, the study sponsor, and any state or federal agencies who may need to access your research records (as allowed by law).

**Will I be paid for participation?**

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Who should I call with questions or problems?

For questions about the study, contact the researcher, Natasha Saelua at (303) 210-5008 or by email at nsaelua@indiana.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant or to discuss problems, complaints, or concerns about a research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, please contact the IU Human Subjects Office at 800-696-2949 or at irb@iu.edu.
Appendix E: Interview Protocol
Sample Interview Protocol for Institutional Participants

Opening

- Thank you for your time, I really appreciate it.
- My dissertation looks at your institution and accreditation
- Review informed consent guidelines, ask for permission to record interview.

Topics for interview

1. Concrete Case Study
   a. Tell me about the accreditation process at the >institution<
2. Experiences
   a. What are your most vivid memories of the accreditation process?
   b. ...of the external evaluation visit?
3. Principles and Ideas
   a. Why is accreditation important?
   b. How does accreditation help your institution achieve its mission?
4. Follow up
5. Closing
   a. Thank you so much for your participation
   b. I will follow up with next steps; give you an opportunity to review your transcripts
   c. Also, will send a copy of the signed informed consent for your records
   d. Any final questions for me?
Curriculum Vitae

NATASHA AUTASI SAEUA
Email: nsaelua@mcrel.org

EDUCATION AND DEGREES

Ph.D. Higher Education (November 2021)
Dissertation title: Navigating Accreditation in the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific
Minor: Inquiry Methodology

M.A. Asian American Studies
University of California, Los Angeles

B.A. History & Political Science
University of California, Los Angeles

MANUSCRIPTS AND PUBLICATIONS


**PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

June 2020 – current  
Researcher  
REL Pacific  
McREL International  
*Provide research, training, and technical support to educators in K-12 and postsecondary levels for the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Pacific region.*

2019-2020  
Graduate Research Assistant  
Faculty Affairs, Professional Development, Diversity  
IU School of Medicine  
*Support day-to-day research and evaluation projects to support institutional research on the experiences of faculty at the largest school of medicine in the nation.*

2018-2020  
Researcher  
Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC)  
Los Angeles, CA  
*Advance EPIC's efforts to build knowledge for and about the NHPI community by leading key projects and building partnerships with academic institutions. Conduct research to inform advocacy campaigns; lead research projects connected to 2020 Census planning and advocacy.*

2016-2020  
Assistant Director of Reporting and Analysis  
National Institute for Transformation and Equity (NITE)  
Center for Postsecondary Research  
Indiana University - Bloomington  
*Bloomington, IN  
Produce reports for institutions participating in the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) surveys. Develop and participate in projects related to culturally relevant and responsive practices to engage undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. Examine the impact of campus environments on academic outcomes and sense of belonging for diverse student populations.*

2015-2017  
Research Project Associate  
National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE)  
Center for Postsecondary Research  
Indiana University - Bloomington  
*Bloomington, IN  
Manage project logistics, activities and timelines related to codebooks for all engagement surveys. Assist in various stages of report production and data*
management. Data collection and analysis, survey development, and testing. Present data analyses at professional meetings and conferences.

2014-2015  Reviewer
Asian Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF) &
Gates Millennium Scholars Program (GMS)
Washington D.C.
Read, review and rate Asian American and Pacific Islander student applications for the Gates Millennium Scholarship.

2013-2015  Graduate Research Assistant
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver
Denver, CO

2011-2013  Associate Director
Community Programs Office
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
Los Angeles, CA
Conducted internal program evaluation for department which houses student-initiated, student-run community service, outreach, and retention projects. Supervised a team of four advisors and 12 project directors. Managed service-learning leadership internship.

2010  Facilitator
OCA APIA-U Undergraduate Leadership Development Program
University of Hawaii, Hilo
Hilo, HI
Two-day leadership training program designed for Asian American and Pacific Islander undergraduates.

2009-2011  Advisor
Student Initiated Outreach Center
Community Programs Office
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)
Los Angeles, CA
Advise Student Initiated Access Committee, a funding and oversight board that allocates program support to seven student-initiated outreach projects targeting underrepresented communities in Southern California. Served as student affairs administrative representative. Supervised seven full-time staff.

2007-2009  Senior Sales Coordinator
Citysearch.com
Los Angeles, CA
Data entry and sales analysis for national internet advertising agency. Provided support to internal and external clients, communicated with national team of coordinators and site support.
2004-2007  
Program Coordinator  
Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc.  
Los Angeles, CA  
*Provided programmatic, logistical, and on-site support for community and corporate leadership development program for national nonprofit organization.*

2004-2004  
Project Director  
Pacific Islander Education and Retention  
Community Programs Office  
University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)  
Los Angeles, CA  
*Coordinated daily activities for culturally relevant outreach project, including tutoring, mentorship, workshops, and college field trips*

**PANELS AND PRESENTATIONS**

February 2020  
**Saelua, N.** Featured speaker at Resistance and Resilience: Envisioning Radical Futures in Challenging Times Asian American Studies symposium, at Indiana University. Bloomington, IN.

April 2019  

March 2019  
**Saelua, N. & Auelua, R.** Why Are the PIs Always Sitting Together? Session presented at 2019 NASPA Annual Conference. Los Angeles, CA.

November 2018  
**Saelua, N.** Saili le atamai: Decolonization and Pasifika knowledge. Webinar presented on behalf of Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC).

April 2018  

March 2018  

November 2017  

November 2017  

March 2017  Brckalorenz, A., **Saelua, N.**, & Kinzie, J. Indigenous and Pacific Islander Students and Faculty in Higher Education. Poster presented at AAC&U Diversity, Learning and Student Success Annual Conference. Jacksonville, FL.


November 2016  **Saelua, N.** & Hannibal, J. Indigenizing Accreditation for Pacific Higher Education. Paper presented at the 2016 Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference. Columbus, OH.

March 2016  Museus, S., **Saelua, N.**, & Chang, T.H. Moving Beyond Climate in Assessing Campus Environments: (Re)Focusing on What Works. Session presented at 2016 NASPA Annual Conference. Indianapolis, IN.


November 2015  Museus, S. & **Saelua, N.** Exploring the power and potential of community-based research to address educational inequality. Panelist for topical paper session at the 2015 Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference. Denver, CO.


April 2015  **Saelua, N.** Panelist for New Scholars, New Ideas and New Directions from the Pacific: American Educational Research Association Indigenous People of the Pacific (IPP) Special Interest Group Business Meeting – Conversations about Justice, Education Research, and Indigenous People.


2014  **Saelua, N.** Pacific Islanders and Education. Presentation at the 2014 University of Denver Diversity Summit on Inclusive Excellence. Denver, CO.

2014  Museus, S., Yi, V., & **Saelua, N.** Transforming campus environments to maximize success among diverse students. Presentation at the 2014 Tri-Institutional Higher Education Diversity Summit. Denver, CO.

2013  **Saelua, N.** & Vaughn, K. Weaving a network of support for Pacific Islander college students. Presentation at the 2013 Asian Pacific Islander American Scholarship Forum (APIASF) Higher Education Summit. Washington, D.C.


**COMMUNITY AND INSTITUTIONAL SERVICE**

2019- March 2021  Research and Scholarship Co-Chair
Asian Pacific Islander Knowledge Community
NASPA

2019-2020  Member, Asian American Studies Graduate Advisory Board
Indiana University

2017  IU Higher Education and Student Affairs program
Admissions Welcome Committee

2016  IU Student Personnel Association Journal
Reviewer
2009-2018 Founding board member, Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC). Los Angeles, CA

2011-2013 Education Committee Chair, California Asian Pacific Islander Policy Summit. Sacramento, CA.

2012 Co-coordinator, National Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Policy Convening. Washington, D.C.

2009-2011 External Advisory Board member, Santa Monica College Asian American Pacific Islander Access project (AANAPISI). Los Angeles, CA.


**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

2019 Walton, A., Saelua, N. *Special Mission Colleges* (Indiana University) Graduate level seminar exploring the growth, development, and current issues of special mission colleges including single sex, religious, and minority-serving institutions.

2018 **N. Saelua**

Visiting Lecturer (University of Denver)

Topic: Culturally Engaging Campus Environments: Theoretical Framework and Application

Invited by: Dr. Michele Tyson

Master's level course on organizational theory in higher education

2017 Museus, S, **Saelua, N.** & Silberstein, S. *Organizations and Administration in Higher Education* (Indiana University). A doctoral level course introducing theories and concepts related to higher education organizations, with an emphasis on diversity and equity efforts

2017 **N. Saelua**

Visiting Lecturer (Indiana State University)

Topic: Indigenous Pacific Islander Students in Higher Education

Invited by: Dr. Jasmine Haywood

Master's level course on student development theories in higher education

2016 **N. Saelua**

Visiting Lecturer (Indiana University)

Topic: Student Activism

Invited by: Dr. Sarah Hurtado and Dr. Polly Graham

Undergraduate level course on diversity and student activism

2010 Ali, A, **Saelua, N.** & Iniguez, E. *Education and Social Change: A Conscious Effort in the Community* (UCLA). An undergraduate course focused on service-learning projects serving underrepresented communities in Southern California. The course provided a
theoretical framework for the projects, grounded in national and international people power and decolonizing movements.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

2013-Present  American Educational Research Association (AERA)
Special interest groups: Indigenous People of the Pacific (IPP); Research on the Education of Asian Pacific Americans (REAPA)

2013-Present  Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)

2011-2020  National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)

2018-2020  Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA)

2020-Present  Hawaii-Pacific Evaluation Association (HPEA)