Assessment in Practice: A Mixed Model Study of the Representations of Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Competencies in the Position Descriptions of Student Affairs and Services Professionals in the Province of Ontario

by

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A growing body of literature supports the emergence of assessment, evaluation and research (AER) as activities of increasing significance in the work of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) professionals. However, despite increases in the prevalence and depth of AER activities, there remains a lack of understanding of the AER competencies expected of SAS professionals, and their contingent AER professional responsibilities. Using the Student Affairs and Services Professional Competency Model developed by the Canadian Association of College and University Student Affairs and Services (CACUSS) as a framework, this study explores the extent to which AER competencies and responsibilities are represented in the position descriptions of SAS professionals in Ontario post-secondary institutions, and the factors that influence their representation.

This study adopts a mixed model, sequential, explanatory, approach. A content analysis of a sample of 311 SAS position descriptions from Ontario colleges and universities was conducted. The results of the content analysis were then used to inform a
series of 12 interviews of purposively selected Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) from participating institutions.

Although the overall representation of AER competencies in position descriptions was found to be quite high, the content analysis revealed significant inconsistencies in the representation of AER qualifications and responsibilities within position descriptions, and only a modest degree of alignment with the CACUSS Strategic Planning, Research, and Assessment competency domain. Interviews with SSAOs revealed largely positive attitudes towards AER, and a commitment to evidence-informed practice. However, these values were tempered by administrative realities and resource constraints. The findings of this study suggest that although the overall prevalence of AER competencies in SAS PDs is reasonably high, the actual level of AER activity and the AER skills and knowledge of Ontario SAS professionals may still be quite low. The findings further suggest that the current discourse regarding AER competencies in SAS literature and across the profession may be out of alignment with the ways in which AER is enacted in SAS divisions in Ontario colleges and universities.
Acknowledgments

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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ACPA</strong></td>
<td>College Student Educators International&lt;br&gt;ACPA traces its beginnings to the National Association of Appointment Secretaries (NAAS). In 1929 the name was changed to the National Association of Personnel and Placement Officers (NAPPO), and in 1931 the name American College Personnel Association (ACPA) was adopted. In 2007, ACPA adopted the tagline “College Student Educators International” to better reflect the educational and international initiatives that have become increasingly important parts of its mission (ACPA, 2018).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>AER</strong></td>
<td>Assessment, Evaluation, and Research</td>
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<td><strong>ASK</strong></td>
<td>Assessment Skills and Knowledge&lt;br&gt;The areas of assessment skills and knowledge needed by SAS professionals in all functional areas as articulated in the ACPA ASK Standards (2006).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CAAT</strong></td>
<td>College of Applied Arts and Technology&lt;br&gt;Publicly funded colleges in the Province of Ontario intended to offer comprehensive, career-oriented, post-secondary education and training to assist students in finding and keeping employment, meet the needs of employers and the changing work environment, and support the economic and social development of their local and diverse communities (Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CACUSS</strong></td>
<td>Canadian Association of College and University Student Services&lt;br&gt;The professional association representing and serving individuals who work in Canadian post-secondary institutions in Student Affairs and Services (CACUSS, 2018).</td>
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**CAS**  
Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education  
A consortium of professional associations in higher education that promotes the use of its professional standards for the development of assessment and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services (CAS, 2018).

**COU**  
Council of Ontario Universities  
A membership organization consisting of Ontario's 20 publicly assisted universities and one associate member. The COU is a forum for Ontario's universities to collaborate and advocate in support of shared interests (COU, 2018a).

**CQAAP**  
College Quality Assurance Audit Process  
An institutional level process that involves the regular and cyclical review of each Ontario college's quality assurance mechanisms (OCQAS, 2018a).

**GTA**  
Greater Toronto Area  
The central city of Toronto and the four regional municipalities that surround it: Durham, Halton, Peel, and York.

**HEQCO**  
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario  
An agency of the Government of Ontario intended to evaluate the post-secondary education system in Ontario and provide recommendations to the MTCU in an effort to enhance quality, access, and accountability across the sector (HEQCO, 2018).

**HIPs**  
High Impact Practices  
Activities identified through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as being positively correlated with student learning and retention (e.g., participation in a learning community, service-learning, study abroad) (NSSE, 2018b).
**HR**  
**Human Resources**  
Describes both the people who work for an organization and the department responsible for managing resources related to employees. Human Resource management typically involves responsibilities related to recruitment and staffing, compensation and benefits, training and learning, labour and employee relations, and organizational development (HumanResourcesEDU, 2018).

**ITAL**  
**Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning**  
A designation for Ontario colleges created by the Provincial government in 2003. ITALS offer larger numbers of applied degrees, increased flexibility in programming, an increased emphasis on industry and specialized sectoral support for new programs, and an increased involvement in applied research (MTCU, 2003).

**JFS**  
**Job Fact Sheet**  
The JFS questionnaire is used in all Ontario colleges to gather information for job evaluation processes.

**KPIs**  
**Key Performance Indicator**  
Since 1998, Ontario colleges have been mandated by the provincial government to collect and report performance data in five areas: graduate satisfaction, student satisfaction, employer satisfaction, employment rate, and graduation rate (Colleges Ontario, 2008b).

**MAESD**  
**Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development**  
The name of the Ministry responsible for oversight of post-secondary education in the Province of Ontario from June 2016 to June 2018.
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<tr>
<th><strong>MTCU</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities</strong></th>
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| Ministry responsible for policy directions for universities and colleges in the Province of Ontario, the authorization to grant degrees, distribution of provincial funds to post-secondary institutions, providing financial assistance to students, registering private career colleges, and operating Employment Ontario. (Ontario Government, 2018). The name of the Ministry was changed to MAESD in June 2016 and reverted back to MTCU in June 2018.

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<tr>
<th><strong>MYAA</strong></th>
<th><strong>Multi-Year Accountability Agreements</strong></th>
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| Introduced in 2006 by the government of Ontario, the MYAA are intended to capture progress in strategic system-wide performance indicators. All Ontario post-secondary institutions report on the principles of access, quality, and accountability (MTCU, 2015).

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<th><strong>NASPA</strong></th>
<th><strong>Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education</strong></th>
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| NASPA is the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession. The organization was named the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in 1951. The name of the organization was subsequently changed to Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education, but the acronym remains the same (NASPA, 2018).

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<th><strong>NSSE</strong></th>
<th><strong>National Survey of Student Engagement</strong></th>
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| Through its student survey, *The College Student Report*, NSSE collects information from first-year and senior-year undergraduate students about their university experience. Participating institutions have the opportunity to compare their students’ responses to a comparison group on ten Engagement Indicators, six HIPs, and all individual survey questions (NSSE, 2018a).
**OCAV**  
**Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents**
An affiliate of the COU. OCAV provides leadership on matters related to educational excellence, the advancement of academic quality, and major policy issues affecting the academic operations of Ontario universities (COU, 2017b).

**OCSES**  
**Ontario College Student Engagement Survey**
Provides the proportion of public college students satisfied with their learning experience, the relevance of their learning experience to future employment, and their overall satisfaction with college services, resources, and facilities (Ontario Government, 2016).

**OCQAS**  
**Ontario College Quality Assurance Service**
Delivers credential validation and quality assurance processes for the public college system in the province of Ontario (OCQAS, 2018b).

**OCSA**  
**Ontario Committee on Student Affairs**
A sub-committee of OCAV. OCSA consists of the senior administrator at each Ontario university with responsibility for student issues, the student experience, and the majority of services and programs designed to serve and support students at the institution (COU, 2017a).

**OQF**  
**Ontario Qualifications Framework**
The OCF includes all secular post-secondary certificate, diploma, and degree programs offered under the auspices of the Province of Ontario, including apprenticeship certificates, the qualifications awarded by private career colleges, the qualifications awarded by public colleges, and degrees offered by public universities and institutions authorized to award degrees by a consent of the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities of Ontario (MTCU, 2009).
Position Description
Internal documents that describe the qualifications required to be considered for a specific job and the responsibilities required to perform the role.

Position Description Form
A descriptive list of functions, tasks, responsibilities, working conditions, skills, and knowledge needed for a particular job. PDFs are required for all full-time support staff OPSEU bargaining unit positions in the CAATs. (OPSEU, 2009).

Post-secondary Education Quality Assurance Board
An arms-length advisory agency that makes recommendations to the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities of Ontario on applications for ministerial consent under the terms of the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000 (PEQAB, 2009).

Post-secondary Education
Education beyond high school. PSE includes apprenticeship or trades certificates or diplomas, college, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma, university certificates or diplomas below bachelor’s level, and university degrees (Statistics Canada, 2010).

Student Affairs and Services
The administrative units within post-secondary institutions that offer co-curricular programming and support in an effort to facilitate students’ growth, development, and success (Sullivan, 2010).

Strategic Mandate Agreement
Each of the publicly funded colleges and universities in the province of Ontario has an agreement with the Province highlighting institutional priorities (MTCU, 2017).
**SPRA**  
**Strategic Planning, Research, and Assessment**  
Strategic Planning, Research, and Assessment competency domain of the CACUSS *Student Affairs and Services Competency Model*.

**SSAO**  
**Senior Student Affairs Officer**  
The administrative leader of the division of Student Affairs and Services (MacKinnon, 2004).

**SSE**  
**Survey of Student Engagement**  
All surveys of student engagement conducted by the Center for Post-secondary Research at Indiana University, Bloomington. These include the National Survey of Student Engagement, Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement, Law School Survey of Student Engagement, and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (Center for Post-secondary Research, 2018).
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In recent decades assessment, evaluation, and research (AER) have emerged as activities of increasing significance in the work of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) professionals (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Herdlein, Riefler & Mrowka, 2013; Love & Estanek, 2004; Schuh, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). However, despite increases in the prevalence and depth of AER activities, there remains a lack of understanding as to the AER competencies expected of SAS administrators (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010) and their contingent AER professional responsibilities. While professional organizations such as College Student Educators International (ACPA), Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA), and the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) have provided guidance by way of the Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards (ACPA, 2006), ACPA and NASPA Professional Competencies Rubric (2016), and Strategic Planning, Research, and Assessment (SPRA) Competencies (Fernandez, Fitzgerald, Hambler & Mason, 2016), there is a lack of evidence as to how Canadian post-secondary institutions have adopted these criteria, and the extent to which these criteria are reflected in the qualifications and professional responsibilities outlined in the position descriptions (PDs) of SAS roles.

Previous research has explored the representation of AER competencies and skills in SAS job postings (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010); however, Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) did not examine full PDs or incorporate the voices of participants through a qualitative component to understand the rationales for the ways in which AER skills, knowledge, and
responsibilities are, or are not, represented in PDs. In addition, Hoffman and Bresciani’s (2010) research was conducted in the United States through a large online clearinghouse for SAS positions. No such central clearinghouse exists in Canada and it is unclear if the findings of their study would translate to the Canadian context.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to investigate the ways in which skills, experience, and duties related to AER are represented in the PDs of SAS positions at Ontario colleges and universities. Using an explanatory, mixed model design, the first phase of the study involved a content analysis of a sample of PDs. The results were further investigated through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews in the second phase.

In the first phase of the study, a sample of SAS PDs was collected from post-secondary institutions across the province of Ontario. A content analysis was conducted to determine the prevalence of AER competencies in SAS PDs and the alignment of these AER competencies with the CACUSS SPRA competency domain. The presence of SPRA competencies was compared across PDs by functional area, educational requirement, professional level, and institution type. Any AER-related statements within the PDs not reflected in the SPRA competencies were also categorized.

The second, qualitative phase, was conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative results in an effort to provide further explanation. This phase was intended to explore factors contributing to senior leaders’ decisions regarding the representation of skills and duties related to AER in SAS PDs.
Research Questions

This study focuses on one primary question:

To what extent are AER competencies and responsibilities represented in the PDs of SAS professionals at Ontario post-secondary institutions, and what factors influence their representation?

This question is supported by three related sub-questions:

1. Are there differences in the AER competencies and responsibilities reflected in SAS PDs by institution type, institution size, functional area, educational requirements, or professional level?

2. To what extent are the AER competencies and responsibilities represented in the PDs of SAS positions aligned with the CACUSS SPRA competencies?

3. What factors contribute to senior leaders’ decisions regarding the representation of AER competencies in SAS position descriptions?

With regard to the design of this mixed model study, the first two sub-questions were posed to focus the first phase of the research, in which data were gathered through an analysis of SAS PDs from Ontario post-secondary institutions. This was followed by a qualitative phase designed to add depth. During the second phase, interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) from participating institutions. Upon the completion of phases one and two, the data were integrated to address the primary research question.

This study is grounded in a pragmatic worldview and was motivated by a desire to explore, and perhaps influence, the ways in which skills, experience, and duties related to AER are represented in the PDs of SAS positions at Ontario colleges and universities. This
research is intended to be directly applicable to SAS professionals at Canadian post-secondary institutions.

**Situating the Researcher**

As a mixed model study, the mixing of research methods occurs at all stages of the research process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In the case of the present study, qualitative methods were applied in both Phase I and Phase II. Although, as Steedman (1991) notes “knowledge can never be separated from the knower” (p. 53), this is particularly true in qualitative research which is socially constructed and situated in the researcher’s use of varied interpretive lenses (Patnaik, 2013). As such, it is critical that researchers develop an understanding of their own attitudes, values, and biases in an effort to gain deeper insight into the research and to ensure that the focus remains on the research and its participants (Patnaik, 2013).

I come to this study as a SAS professional who has been working in the field for 17 years in a variety of roles at four different institutions in the Province of Ontario. Like many SAS professionals, I began my career in Residence Life. It was also during these early years of my career that I completed my Master’s degree in Higher Education on a part-time basis. After five years as a Residence Life professional I moved on to several different roles in the areas of first year experience, student engagement, and assessment, eventually assuming positions as the Assistant Director of the Office of Student Life at the University of Toronto and the Director, Student Experience at George Brown College. In my current role I serve as the Dean of Students for University College in the University of Toronto where I am responsible for overseeing all aspects of the co-curricular life of the College. I have pursed my PhD on a part-time basis while continuing to work as a full-time SAS professional.
My interest in AER derives from my experience as a SAS assessment professional. In 2009 I was hired as the Manager of Assessment for the Office of Student Life at the University of Toronto. This was the first such position at the University and one of the first of its kind in Canada. In this position I was responsible for the development and implementation of a co-curricular learning outcomes and assessment framework for all units within the Division of Student Life, establishing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the Division of Student Life, coordinating AER projects across the Division, coordinating the administration of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in collaboration with Institutional Research, and serving as a resource on AER to other staff in the Division. Since that time, I have regularly presented on the topic of AER in SAS at professional conferences, training institutes, and other professional development events within the field – including being commissioned by the Student Affairs and Services Association (SASA), a former sub-group of CACUSS, to co-develop and present a workshop on AER in SAS at institutions across Canada.

These experiences have provided me with a perhaps somewhat unique insight into the evolution of AER in SAS in Canada as I have witnessed first-hand the tremendous increase in attention to this topic. I have great respect for my SAS colleagues and for the work that has been done around AER. However, my experience in this area has also left me with questions about the purpose of AER in SAS, the quality of the AER that is conducted, and the degree to which the scholarly and professional discourse surrounding AER in SAS in Canada is aligned with practice. Like all SAS professionals, I am committed to continually seeking out opportunities to better serve, support, and engage students. As such, I am interested in exploring the degree to which our current approaches to AER in SAS in Canada are supporting this goal.
In addition to my professional background, I acknowledge that I bring my personal history, attitudes, values, and biases to this research. As a White, cisgender, woman who is a settler on this land, I am privileged in many respects by society and in the field of SAS. Although I have attempted to sensitize myself to methodological issues of power and representation, I acknowledge that my positionality, life experiences, and theoretical orientations serve as a lens through which I engage in research. It is my hope that these reflections serve to facilitate readers’ understanding of the perspectives that led to the design of this research as well as the analyses and findings that follow.

**Significance of the Study**

It is only in the last 70 years that SAS has become a recognized functional area in Canadian post-secondary institutions, and it is even more recently that SAS professionals in Canada have begun an earnest drive towards the professionalization of the field. In many ways SAS in Canadian higher education remains an emerging profession and the evolving emphasis on AER in the field can be understood as one of the core elements of this development.

However, the drive towards the professionalization of SAS and the increasing focus on AER must also be considered in the context of the broader post-secondary education sector’s process of neoliberalisation and the increasing focus on economic competitiveness, educational quality, and accountability (Giroux 2002, 2014; Marginson & Rhodes, 2002, Olssen & Peters, 2005). The emergence of student engagement as a major focus of research in higher education has been linked to rising participation rates and increasing marketization in higher education (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Governments have become increasingly concerned about graduation rates and student achievement as a

Within the Province of Ontario, the influence of increasing managerialism can be seen in the differentiation process launched by the government in 2013 and enacted through the establishment of Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) between the Province and each of its publicly funded colleges and universities. The second SMAs, which came into effect on April 1, 2017 and will end on March 31, 2020, include a requirement for institutions to report on several metrics specific to student experience. Although metrics associated with the differentiation components of the SMAs are not currently tied to provincial funding, the Ontario government has expressed its intention to do so in the third set of SMAs which will come into effect on April 1, 2020 (MTCU, 2015). This will mark the first time in the Province of Ontario that provincial operating grants will be tied, in part, to metrics related to the student experience, and by extension the work of SAS professionals.

In the context of an increasing focus on accountability across the public sector, the focus on AER as activities of increasing significance has emerged within the SAS literature and in the work of SAS professionals (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Herdlein et al., 2013; Love & Estanek, 2004; Schuh, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In a meta-analysis of literature related to SAS professional competencies from 1995 to 2012, Herdlein et al. (2013) noted an important shift in the SAS literature from an emphasis on counselling and human facilitation towards assessment, management, leadership, and supervision – with AER having become the most frequently mentioned skills within the SAS literature. However, though there have been relatively few studies exploring AER in Canadian SAS, findings of those that have been undertaken suggest that many SAS divisions may remain in the early
stages of AER and raise questions about the value placed on AER skills and knowledge (Browne, Speed & Walker, 2015; Lane, 1998; Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011).

The degree to which the focus on AER within the SAS literature has been operationalized in Canadian SAS remains unclear as do the factors that contribute to SSAOs’ decisions in this regard.

Position descriptions (PDs) have been chosen as the focus of this study as these documents codify the work of SAS professionals. In highly unionized environments, like most post-secondary institutions in Ontario, PDs play critical roles in communicating expected responsibilities, establishing hiring requirements, assigning professional levels, and determining remuneration. As such, an examination of PDs has the potential to offer unique insights into the degree to which the focus on AER seen in the SAS literature has permeated the documents that officially describe the professional responsibilities of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities.

This study seeks to contribute to the scholarship of SAS in Canada by offering insight into the extent to which the focus on AER within the SAS literature has been operationalized in Ontario post-secondary institutions as evidenced by the level of representation of AER competencies in the PDs of SAS positions. As there has been relatively little research into AER or the use of professional competencies in SAS in Canada, it is hoped that this study will contribute to an emerging body of literature related to the field of SAS in Canada. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will be relevant to the work of SAS professionals by informing professional development planning, the review and development of SAS PDs, and the evaluation of the CACUSS SPRA competencies.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

This chapter will provide a review of the relevant literature, including theoretical literature and empirical research. The first section provides an overview of the post-secondary education system in Ontario, followed by a discussion of the field of SAS in higher education today, with a specific focus on research illuminating factors contributing to student learning and development as well as student success more broadly. It is proposed that this now rich body of literature has exposed the interconnected nature of the curricular and co-curricular student experience and lends support to a movement of SAS professionals viewing themselves as educators.

The second section of this literature review provides an overview of accountability and quality assessment measures in Ontario post-secondary education and AER in SAS. This includes a discussion of the state of AER-related activities in Canadian SAS. It is proposed that the emerging focus on AER in SAS is connected to an emphasis on evidence-informed practice stemming from internal and external calls for accountability.

The third section offers a review of the on-going professionalization of the field of SAS in Canada. This section also includes a review of the establishment of professional competency models in the United States and Canada and their connection to the drive for professionalization of the field.
The fourth section includes a review of existing research related to the representation of professional competencies in PDs. While there are relatively few examples of this type of study in the SAS literature, such research has been undertaken in other areas of the public sector – most notably in health-related fields. The purpose of this section is to highlight aspects of studies from other disciplines that may be relevant to the present study, as well as to identify potential gaps in the SAS literature which the results of this study may help to address.

Finally, the literature review will conclude with the presentation of a conceptual framework for this study which draws on the development of the field of SAS at the professional level as well as institutional-level factors that contribute to the representations of professional competencies and responsibilities in SAS PDs.

**Overview of the Post-secondary Education System in Ontario**

The Constitution of Canada confers each Province responsibility for education at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels. Within the Province of Ontario, the post-secondary education system includes both public and private institutions. Public colleges and universities receive a significant portion of their funding from the provincial government in the form of operating and special purpose grants. This study includes only public colleges and universities that receive provincial funding.

**The University System in Ontario.** Within the Province of Ontario there are 20 publicly funded universities which offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees, as well as continuing education programs, diplomas, and certificates.¹ Provincial funding of universities is related to the nominal operating costs which are reflected in an enrolment-

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¹ The Royal Military College of Canada (RMCC) is not included in this number as it is funded by the federal government of Canada.
based funding formula built upon “basic income units” (BIUs) that are weighted according to academic program and supplemented by a series of grants that support enrolment growth, performance funding, and specific policy objectives. In 2016-17, 37.8% of total operating revenue across the Ontario university sector came from provincial grants (COU, 2018c).

All publicly funded universities in Ontario are members of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). The mission of the COU is to “promote cooperation among the provincially assisted universities of Ontario, and between them and the Government of the Province, and, generally, to work for the improvement of higher education for the people of Ontario” (COU, 2012, para. 3). The membership of the COU comprises the executive heads of the provincially assisted universities in the Province as well as senior academics appointed by the academic senate, or equivalent senior academic body, of each institution (COU, 2012). In addition to the Council and its standing committees, there are a significant number of affiliate bodies associated with the COU. “Affiliates are organized groups of university professionals who discuss sector-wide issues, address challenges and propose solutions, and share best practices” (COU, 2018b, para. 1). Of particular relevance to this study is the Ontario Committee on Student Affairs (OCSA), a sub-committee of the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV), an affiliate of the COU. The membership of OCSA consists of the senior administrator from each Ontario university who holds responsibility for “student issues, the student experience and the majority of services and programs designed to serve and support students at the institution” (COU, 2017a, para. 1).

**The College System in Ontario.** Within the Province of Ontario there are 24 publicly funded colleges, known as Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs),
which include five Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning (ITALs) and two French-language colleges (Colleges Ontario, 2018b).

The colleges were established in the 1960s following an announcement by the Minister of Education, the Honourable William G. Davis, of the government’s intention to create a system of post-secondary education that was different from the universities (Skolnik, 2004). Although the emphasis of each college was expected to vary according to local needs, in general, the addition of the colleges to the education system was intended to provide career focused educational opportunities for all, with the following three major responsibilities:

1. Provide courses of types and levels beyond, or not suited to, the secondary school setting;
2. Meet the needs of graduates from any secondary school program, apart from those wishing to attend university; and
3. Meet the educational needs of adults and out-of-school youth, whether or not they were secondary school graduates (Ontario Department of Education, 1967, p.13).

In addition to the major responsibilities, the CAATs were also to be based on four principles:

1. They must embrace total education, vocational and avocational, regardless of formal entrance qualifications, with provision for complete vertical and horizontal mobility;
2. They must develop curricula that meet the combined cultural aspirations and occupational needs of the student;
3. They must operate in the closest possible cooperation with business and industry, and with the social and public agencies, including education, to ensure that curricula are at all times abreast, if not in advance of the changing requirements of a technological society; and
4. They must be dedicated to progress, through constant research, not only in curricula but in pedagogical technique and in administration (Ontario Department of Education, 1967, p. 32).

In 2000, the Government of Ontario passed the *Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act*, which gave colleges the opportunity to award baccalaureate degrees in applied areas of study. This was followed by the *College of Applied Arts and Technology Act* in 2002, which provided colleges with more autonomy and responsibility for programs of instruction and led to the development of self-regulatory mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement (Colleges Ontario, 2008b).

The funding formula for colleges is similar to that for universities. In 2016-17 43.8% of total revenue across the Ontario college sector came from provincial grants (Colleges Ontario, 2018b).

All Ontario colleges are members of Colleges Ontario, the advocacy organization for the province’s 24 CAATs which provides advocacy and communications, research and policy development, information coordination, and professional development across the college sector (Colleges Ontario, 2018c). The General Assembly of Colleges Ontario consists of the Board Chairs and Presidents from each of the CAATs and has responsibility for setting the strategic direction for the organization. In addition to the General Assembly, there are also several standing committees, including the Coordinating Committee of Vice-
President, Students composed of the Vice-President, Students, or equivalent, from each of the 24 colleges (Colleges Ontario, 2018a).

**Student Affairs and Services in Higher Education**

SAS refers to the administrative units within post-secondary institutions that offer co-curricular programming and support in an effort to facilitate students’ growth, development, and success (Seifert et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2010). Although there is variation across institutions, SAS divisions tend to include: New Student Orientation, Student Leadership Programs, Community Development, Counselling Services, Health Services, Academic Skills Support, Accessibility Services, Career Services, and Services for Diverse Students (Seifert et al., 2011).

In 1989 CACUSS published the *Mission of Student Services*:

> The primary purpose of Student Services is to develop programs and provide services which support and promote student-centered education. Student Services professionals have expertise in assessing and identifying the factors which can enhance the development of students. Student Services personnel act as informed partners in the shared tasks of shaping and maintaining a campus community where students can learn inside and outside the classroom (CACUSS, 1989, p. 2).

Although more than 25 years have passed since this mission statement was developed, in many ways it remains an accurate representation of the role of SAS professionals today. At the same time, leaders in the field would agree that the field has grown significantly during this period (Fisher, 2011; Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010).

The expansion of access to post-secondary education has been a priority across the country, opening access to higher education to welcome a broad cross-section of the population. Amidst a rapidly diversifying student population, coupled with an enhanced
focus on co-curricular learning, and increasing calls for accountability across the public sector, SAS divisions have evolved to meet the needs of today’s diverse learners.

**Co-Curricular Student Learning.** Across higher education there has been an increasing awareness that the traditional division between the curricular and co-curricular aspects of the student experience is ineffective. A significant body of literature has emerged supporting a more holistic view of the student experience in which the entire campus community collaborates to support student learning, engagement, and success (for example, see Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert & Pascarella, 2006; Dungy & Gordon, 2011; Keeling, 2004). SAS professionals are increasingly being called upon to view themselves as educators and move away from more traditional modes of service delivery to those that focus on student support and engagement (ACPA, 1994; Keeling, 2004).

The 1994 publication of *The Student Learning Imperative* by ACPA marked a pivotal moment in the field of SAS. The document emphasized the role of SAS professionals as educators with responsibility for the facilitation of student learning and development and called on SAS units to work collaboratively with students, faculty, administrators, and other campus partners to achieve these goals. *The Student Learning Imperative* identified the following five characteristics of a learning-oriented SAS division:

1. The student affairs division mission complements the institution’s mission, with the enhancement of student learning and personal development being the primary goal of student affairs programs and services;

2. Resources are allocated to encourage student learning and personal development;

3. Student affairs professionals collaborate with other institutional agents and agencies to promote student learning and personal development;
4. The division of student affairs includes staff who are experts on students, their environments, and teaching and learning processes; and

5. Student affairs policies and programs are based on promising practices from the research on student learning and institution-specific assessment data (ACPA, 1994, pp. 119-121).

Following the publication of *The Student Learning Imperative*, in 1996 ACPA and NASPA partnered to produce *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs*, outlining ten principles that support effective learning and collaboration. In 1998 the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), ACPA and NASPA published *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning* which established criteria for effective collaboration between academic and student affairs with the intention of deepening student learning.

In 2004, a decade after the publication of *The Student Learning Imperative*, ACPA and NASPA published *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus Wide Focus on the Student Experience* (Keeling, 2004). *Learning Reconsidered* expanded on many of the documents that preceded it and marked another pivotal moment in the development of the field of SAS as it encouraged SAS professionals to view learning as an integrative and transformative act and called for a focus on the assessment of student learning (Banta & Palombara, 2015; Dungy & Gordon, 2011).

The writers of *Learning Reconsidered* proposed seven broad learning outcomes for higher education: cognitive complexity; knowledge acquisition, integration and application; humanitarianism; civic engagement; interpersonal and intrapersonal competence; practical competence; and persistence and academic achievement (Keeling, 2004). SAS professionals were encouraged to work in collaboration with faculty to
achieve these goals. The authors argued for increased assessment of SAS programs and an emphasis on the assessment of student learning rather than student satisfaction. The publication of *Learning Reconsidered* inspired many SAS professionals to identify as educators and heralded the focus on the development and assessment of co-curricular learning that continues today.

As a follow-up to *Learning Reconsidered*, ACPA and NASPA published *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006), which offered practical strategies for implementing the integrated approach to student learning presented in the earlier document. Drawing on *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2*, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) revised its recommended outcomes for learning and development to reflect the domains outlined in the documents (Banta & Palomba, 2015).

Today, the focus on co-curricular learning has permeated the field of SAS, and the ability to develop and assess student learning is considered a core competency for SAS professionals (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; Fernandez et al., 2016). SAS units are aligning their formal and informal organizational structures in ways that intentionally support student learning.

**Student Success and Engagement.** Concurrent with the focus on co-curricular learning, there has been increasing attention on fostering “student success” across post-secondary institutions, a move that has also had significant implications for SAS as a profession. Broadly defined, “student success” encompasses academic achievement, engagement in educationally effective activities, acquisition of twenty-first century knowledge, skills and competencies, and persistence (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007). While supporting student success must be a shared responsibility across a campus, helping students to achieve their personal and educational goals is clearly aligned
with the history and mission of SAS as a profession, making student success central to the work of SAS professionals.

Numerous factors can influence a student’s success in college or university, many of which are outside the control of SAS professionals. However, studies have shown that students who engage in educationally purposeful activities that are linked with the desired outcomes of a post-secondary education are more likely to benefit from their college or university experience (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 2001, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, student engagement has been shown to have compensatory effects for students who start post-secondary education with disadvantages (Cruce et al., 2006; Kuh, 2008; Kuh et al., 2007). SAS professionals can – and are increasingly expected to – play a role in creating these opportunities for students and facilitating students’ connection to educationally purposeful activities.

Based on studies of data collected through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Kuh (2008) has identified several “high impact practices” (HIPs) that have positive associations with student engagement and retention. All of the HIPs demand significant time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback. Examples of HIPs include: facilitated learning communities, study abroad opportunities, service-learning experiences, working with a faculty member on a research project, internships or field placements, and a culminating senior experience (Kuh, 2008).

The research grounding the HIPs is consistent with the work of numerous other researchers. Astin (1993) has found that one of the most important factors affecting students’ learning is the degree to which they are involved in the life of the campus.
Spending time on tasks related to learning and engaging with peers is positively and strongly correlated with students’ satisfaction with their post-secondary experience (Astin, 1993). While involvement is important for student learning and retention, it is not simply the degree of involvement that matters, but the way in which it facilitates academic and social membership, leading to a sense of belonging (Harris, 2006; Hausmann, Schofield & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richard, Morrow & Salmone, 2002/2003; Schlossberg, 1989; Strayhorn, 2012).

Based on a study of U.S. colleges and universities with better-than-predicted graduation rates and NSSE scores, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005) found that high performing institutions have a culture of collaboration and highly skilled SAS staff who share operating philosophies that are aligned with the mission of their institution. As a result of these findings, Kuh (2008) identified seven sets of activities that SAS professionals can emphasize to foster high levels of student success:

1. Feature student success in the division of student affairs’ mission and as an institutional priority;
2. Teach new students how to make good use of institutional resources.
3. If a program or practice works, make it widely available;
4. Establish and monitor early warning systems and safety nets to support students when they need help;
5. Help faculty create a sense of community in the classroom;
6. Focus assessment and improvements on what matters to student success; and
7. Reculture the student affairs division.

Kuh’s (2008) recommendations are consistent with the work of Tinto (2012) who also recommends the establishment of early warning systems, investing in faculty
development, and aligning assessment efforts with factors related to student persistence and progression.

**Critiques of Student Success and Engagement Literature.** Writing about student engagement in urban schools in the K-12 sector, McMahon and Portelli (2012) note that “it is self-evident that no one wants to argue against student engagement” (p. 3). However, they go on to remind readers that different conceptions of success determine how student engagement is viewed along with the actions that go with it (McMahon & Portelli, 2012). The student success and engagement literature discussed thus far in this chapter can be characterized as the dominant or mainstream discourse in the field, but it is important to note that there is an extensive body of work that offers multiple understandings of student engagement and critiques of the dominant discourse (for examples, see Harper & Quaye, 2009; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Trowler, 2015; Zepke, 2017). These critiques suggest that the dominant approach to student engagement limits new thinking about engagement and critics argue for the questioning of accepted norms, expansion of student agency through learning democracy, and the development of practices that transcend the neo-liberal mainstream (Zepke, 2017). Rather than seeking a single definition of engagement, Krause and Coates (2008) suggest that it should be viewed as a lens through which we can discover diverse pathways to quality teaching and learning, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Critics of some of the most commonly cited definitions of student engagement suggest that these definitions tend to be generic, and blind to individual, cultural, discipline, and historical differences, and that much of the research on student success tends to be homogenous and de-racialized (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Harper, Smith & Davis, 2018; Ozaki & Hornak, 2014; Pidgeon, 2009; Zepke, 2017). When studies have sought to
investigate the success of racialized students they are often grounded in a deficit model, attributing achievement gaps to students’ under-preparedness, disengagement, or stereotype threats and microaggressions without a critical analysis of campus contexts or institutional structures and policies that may undermine the achievement of racialized students (Harper et al., 2018).

Harper and Quaye (2009) argue that students are placed at risk of failure when educators neglect to customize engagement efforts that connect them to the campus. This criticism also appears regularly in literature regarding the success of Indigenous students. Pidgeon (2009) asserts that models of Aboriginal student success must accommodate the diversity of Indigenous epistemologies, cultures and languages, and seek to holistically address the inter-connectedness of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual realms, in concert with the inter-relationships of the individual, family, and community. Similarly, Ozaki and Hornak (2014) suggest that effective SAS practice that fosters diverse student success requires a departure from traditional understandings of the field, and for SAS professionals to embody principles of social justice to address inequalities through education.

When considering the literature related to student engagement and success, it is important to note that student engagement is embedded in the dominant culture and shaped by politics (Zepke, 2017). In higher education today, neo-liberalism has raised the profile of student engagement because of its alignment with demands for practical knowledge, performativity, and accountability (Zepke, 2015). Zepke (2015) argues that the result of this alignment is an approach to student engagement that is focused on preparing students for employment in a capitalist economy rather than preparing them to be thoughtful, critical, compassionate, and engaged citizens. When students refuse to
conform or learn within these boundaries, they enter what Trowler (2015) has termed “oppositional” or “negative” engagement (p. 304). While expected norms for co-curricular student engagement might include serving as a student representative on a university committee or acting as a peer mentor, oppositional engagement could include protesting an institutional policy. Such critiques suggest a need for SAS professionals to be mindful of their assumptions regarding what constitutes “engagement” and the students who may be excluded by the dominant discourse within the profession.

In addition to concerns regarding the lack of representation of diverse experiences in the definition of student engagement and its connection to the rise of neo-liberalism in higher education, there have also been critiques of the methodology employed in studies of student engagement. Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017) argue that many student engagement studies present a particular practice as a “panacea to improving student engagement” (p. 9) or make broad inferences about developmental gains without sufficient evidence. Further methodological critiques include the conflation of student satisfaction with student engagement (Evans, Muijs & Tomlinson, 2015) and a lack of acknowledgement of the potential effects of institutional funding of student engagement research which may add pressure on researchers to ensure that findings align with the expectations of funders (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017).

Although SAS professionals must be mindful of the critiques of the dominant discourse within the student engagement literature, this research has profoundly influenced the work of SAS professionals in Canada, with the impact visible on campuses across the country. In addition, even critics of the mainstream student engagement literature note that the construct of student engagement does offer insight into effective practice in teaching and learning and meets the requirements of governments that fund
post-secondary education (Zepke, 2017). SAS professionals, and the students they work with, would be well served by an integration of diverse perspectives on the construct of student engagement, particularly in light of the degree to which student engagement has become aligned with accountability measures at institutional and governmental levels. The following section will provide a review of current accountability and quality assessment practices within Ontario’s post-secondary education sector and the rise of student engagement as a quality indicator in the Province.

**Accountability and Quality Assessment in Ontario’s Post-secondary Education Sector**

Within the province of Ontario there are several quality assurance measures in place across the post-secondary education sector; however, the majority of these measures are primarily focused on the quality assurance of academic programs.

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council) was established by the COU in 2010 to oversee quality assurance processes for all levels of programs in the provinces’ publicly assisted universities (OCAV, 2016). The mandate of the Quality Council is:

- to guide Ontario’s publicly assisted universities in the on-going quality assurance of their academic programs;
- to review and approve proposals for new graduate and undergraduate programs;
- to ensure through regular audits that Ontario’s publicly assisted universities comply with quality assurance guidelines, policies and regulations for graduate and undergraduate programs;
• to communicate final decisions to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development;
• to review and revise, from time to time for future application, the Council of Ontario Universities’ quality assurance protocols in light of its own experiences and developments in the field of quality assurance;
• to liaise with other quality assurance agencies, both provincially and elsewhere; and
• to undergo regular independent review and audit at intervals of no longer than eight years (OCAV, 2016, p. 36).

The role of the Quality Council is connected to the Quality Assurance Framework developed by the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV). The Quality Assurance Framework was designed to facilitate the quality assurance of all graduate and undergraduate programs offered by Ontario universities (OCAV, 2016). The Quality Assurance Framework includes protocols for the approval of new for-credit programs at the undergraduate or graduate level and major modifications to existing programs, as well as the process for the cyclical review of existing programs and an audit process to examine institutional compliance with the Quality Assurance Framework (OCAV, 2016). It is important to note that the Quality Assurance Framework acknowledges that “academic standards, quality assurance, and program improvement are, in the first instance, the responsibility of universities themselves” (OCAV, 2016, p. 2).

The Quality Assurance Framework does not apply to degree programs offered by Ontario colleges, except when the program is offered in partnership with a university. All baccalaureate degrees offered by Ontario CAATs are quality assured by the Post-Secondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), after being referred by the
Minister of Training Colleges and Universities (PEQAB, 2018). Similar to university undergraduate degrees, the quality standards for college baccalaureate degrees are dictated by section 11 of the *Ontario Qualification Framework* (OQF). Each degree program is initially assessed and then re-assessed on a five to seven year cycle (PEQAB, 2018). PEQAB also reviews applications to offer degree programs from new and existing private Ontario degree-granting institutions, out-of-province institutions, and all others not authorized to award degrees by an Ontario statute (PEQAB, 2018).

While baccalaureate degrees offered by Ontario CAATs are quality assured by PEQAB, all other for-credit programs offered by the colleges are assured by the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS). Following the introduction of the *College of Applied Arts and Technology Act* in 2002, OCQAS was established in 2005 in an effort to provide efficient tools to ensure specific quality and consistency standards are met by the CAATs (OCQAS, 2017). OCQAS is responsible for assuring quality at the program level through the Credential Validation Service (CVS) and at the institutional level through the College Quality Assurance Audit Process (CQAAP) (OCQAS, 2017). Although the primary focus of these quality assurance processes is academic program quality, the evaluation criteria for the CQAAP process do include reviewing academic support and student advising services and the provision of student services such as tutoring, financial and academic advising, and co-curricular activities (OCQAS, 2016).

**Student Engagement as a Quality Measure in Ontario.** As interest in measuring educational quality in Ontario’s post-secondary education sector has increased generally, so too has the focus on understanding and improving the overall student experience in higher education in the Province. Traditionally, quality indicators focused on input measures such as class size and student-faculty ration, and output measures such as
retention, graduation, and employment rates. However, in 2009 the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), an independent agency funded by the Ontario government with the mandate of ensuring continued improvement of the post-secondary education sector through on-going monitoring, reporting, and research (HEQCO, 2018), released their Second Annual Review and Research Plan, which argued for the use of “value-added” measures of quality.

Although the HEQCO report supported the use of value-added measures, in practice such measures proved to be expensive and difficult to produce, leading the sector to turn to learning process measures as quality indicators (Zhao, 2011). In this process student engagement began to receive significant attention as a learning process measure and a quality indicator. As a result, Ontario universities agreed to collaborate with the Provincial government to include the administration of NSSE on a three-year cycle to every first and fourth year student at Ontario universities as a quality indicator in the Multi-Year Accountability Agreement Frameworks (MYAA). The CAATs were required to use the Ontario College Student Engagement Survey (OCSES) (Zhao, 2011). The OCSES was subsequently replaced with the KPI+ (Key Performance Indicators) survey.

HEQCO undertook a series of studies to explore the validity and reliability of the survey in the Ontario context, the degree to which NSSE results can be used to inform institutional planning, and the extent to which survey results can be used for accountability purposes to monitor individual institutional performance or address sector level issues. Results of these studies suggest that while student engagement measures are positively correlated with outcome measures, the detection power of NSSE is not strong enough to capture changes imposed by small scale interventions (Conway, 2010). In addition, longitudinal surveys and data linking are needed to gain a deeper understanding
of student engagement and appropriate survey tools and research methodologies are needed in the process of engagement intervention implementation and assessment (Conway, Zhao & Montgomery, 2011). Recommendations stemming from these studies included suggestions that institutions use a combination of appropriate survey tools in the process of assessing the effectiveness of small-scale interventions, enable data linking between survey responses and administrative data, and follow the process of implementation-assessment-retesting when implementing engagement interventions (Zhao, 2011). To the Provincial government it was recommended that they mandate on-going data collection on student engagement measures and incorporate actual versus predicted NSSE benchmark scores in the MYAA framework (Zhao, 2011).

Today, NSSE is the primary means by which universities report on student engagement to the Ontario government, while the CAATs report the results of the student satisfaction survey as part of the KPI+ process. Although the majority of NSSE questions and KPI+ measures are related to academic programs and the in-class experiences of students, co-curricular involvement and student support are addressed, making them relevant to the work of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities. This is particularly true in the context of the on-going differentiation process in the Province of Ontario.

**Differentiation in Post-Secondary Education in the Province of Ontario.** In November 2013 the Provincial government released *Ontario’s Differentiation Policy Framework for Post-secondary Education* which set institutional differentiation as the foundation for broader post-secondary system transformation through the public articulation of government expectations and aligning the mandates of Ontario colleges and
universities with government priorities (MTCU, 2013). The goals of the Differentiation Framework were to:

1. Support student success and access to a high-quality Ontario post-secondary education;
2. Improve global competitiveness of Ontario's post-secondary education system;
3. Build on and help focus the well-established strengths of Ontario colleges and universities while avoiding unnecessary duplication; and

The Differentiation Framework consists of six components: (1) Jobs, Innovation, and Economic Development; (2) Teaching and Learning; (3) Student Population; (4) Research and Graduation; (5) Program Offerings; and (6) Institutional Collaboration to Support Student Mobility (MTCU, 2013). In addition to the six components of differentiation, the Differentiation Framework also includes two key directions that help to support the differentiation process: (1) Strategic Enrolment; and (2) Financial Sustainability (MTCU, 2013). Metrics are attached to each of the components of differentiation and key directions and include both institution-specific metrics and system-wide metrics (MTCU, 2013). Of particular relevance to SAS professionals are metrics associated with the Teaching and Learning and Student Population components of differentiation. Within the Teaching and Learning component, metrics include NSSE results and student satisfaction survey results, as well as graduation and retention rates, and up to three additional metrics selected by the institution (MTCU, 2013). Within the Student Population component, metrics include numbers and proportions of Aboriginal, francophone, and international students, as well as students with disabilities and students
who are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education (MTCU, 2013). Again, institutions may also add up to three additional metrics of their choosing.

The Differentiation Framework has been enacted through the establishment of Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) between the Province and each of the colleges and universities. The SMAs are intended to allow institutions to “articulate their unique mandates, strengths, and aspirations” and to “outline the relationship between the ministry and the institutions, and how each institution’s mission and activities align with Ontario’s vision for post-secondary education” as articulated by the Differentiation Framework (MTCU, 2013, p. 17). The intention behind the SMA process is for the Ministry to align its policy, process, and funding levers with the Differentiation Framework and the SMAs over time (MTCU, 2013).

The second round of SMAs came into effect on April 1, 2017 and include more specific system-wide metrics and targets than the first SMAs. With regard to student experience specifically, all universities must report on the proportion of fourth year students with two or more HIPs from NSSE, year one to year two retention from the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, and the proportion of operating funds spent on student services as reported in the Council of University Financial Officers data (MTCU, 2017). Universities may also include up to three institution-specific metrics of their choosing related to the student experience. Examples of institution-specific student experience metrics include: percentage of students using the institution’s Co-Curricular Record, undergraduate senior year student satisfaction, and percentage of students who used at least one Career Development Centre service (MTCU, 2017). All colleges must report their average overall student satisfaction ratings as well as ratings of student satisfaction with services and student satisfaction with facilities as reported on the college
student satisfaction survey. Colleges may also include institution-specific metrics in their SMAs. Examples of institution-specific student experience metrics from college SMAs include: student persistence from term one to term two, number of validated Co-Curricular Record activities, and participation rate in leadership programming for students (MTCU, 2017). Although metrics associated with the differentiation components included in the SMAs are not currently tied to provincial funding, the Ontario government has expressed its intention to do so in the next iteration of SMAs (MTCU, 2015). This will mean that for the first time in the Province of Ontario, provincial operating grants will be tied, in part, to metrics related to the student experience, and by extension, the work of SAS professionals.

Concurrent with the rise of accountability measures in Ontario, and in the post-secondary education sector more broadly, there has been an increasing focus on AER as professional competencies of SAS professionals and expectations of SAS positions. The following section will offer a review of evolution of AER in the field of SAS.

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research in the Field of Student Affairs and Services

In the past two decades AER have emerged as activities of increasing significance in the work of SAS professionals (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Herdlein et al., 2013; Love & Estanek, 2004; Schuh, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). A variety of factors such as external calls for accountability and internal commitments to fostering student learning and development have fuelled interest in AER in SAS divisions across North America. In the midst of this rapid increase in calls for AER, a significant body of literature related to the topic has emerged.

Starting with the founding of the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in 1979 and the first CAS publication in 1986, which argued for self-assessment, SAS
professionals have increasingly recognized the importance and values of assessment (Barham & Dean, 2013).

In the United States, the publication of *The Student Learning Imperative* (ACPA, 1994) called upon SAS professionals to put student learning at the centre of their work. As a result, the topic of assessment, particularly the assessment of student learning outcomes, has been increasing in prominence within the field of SAS (Love & Estenek, 2004; Love & Yousey, 2001).

With the increasing time and resources devoted to AER, questions have naturally arisen as to why SAS professionals are prioritizing these activities. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) identify several specific reasons for conducting AER, including internal motivations such as determining resource allocation, informing strategic planning decisions, and improving program quality. In addition, studies have demonstrated that AER have become important elements of SAS practice in those post-secondary institutions that have been most successful in achieving their educational goals for students (Kuh et al. 2005; Schuh, 2009). External motivators for conducting assessment include accreditation, accountability to funding sources, accountability to constituencies, and political pressure (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

**Defining Assessment, Evaluation, and Research in Student Affairs and Services.** One issue that remains central to the evolution of assessment in SAS is the definition of terms. The term “assessment” has been the source of some debate among student affairs scholars and practitioners. In particular, there have been differing opinions on distinctions drawn between “assessment,” “evaluation,” and “research,” with these terms often used loosely or interchangeably (Barham & Dean, 2013).
There are many definitions of assessment and evaluation in the literature (Astin, 1991; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), with no consensus among scholars (Upcraft, 2003.). Upcraft and Schuh (1996) define assessment as “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes [emphasis added] institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (p. 18). They define evaluation as “any effort to use assessment evidence to improve [emphasis added] institutional, department, division, or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p.19).

However, the field of assessment in SAS has been evolving rapidly and the way in which terms are used in the literature is changing. Upcraft and Schuh’s (1996) definitions have been criticized for implying that assessment does not require action beyond collecting and understanding the data (Bresciani, Zelna & Anderson, 2004; Huba & Freed, 2000; Love & Estanek, 2004; Suskie, 2009). Based on this critique, Love and Estanek (2004) define assessment as “on-going efforts to gather, analyze and interpret evidence which describes individual, programmatic, or institutional effectiveness and using that evidence to improve practice” (p.85).

One of the ways in which assessment is often distinguished from evaluation in SAS is through a focus on student learning. Suskie (2009) asserts that the term “assessment” refers specifically to the assessment of student learning, and she is not alone in this perspective. Numerous authors reference the assessment of student learning and developmental outcomes as a distinguishing feature of assessment (Bresciani et al., 2004; Erwin, 1991; Huba & Freed, 2000; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008).

Within the profession, SAS units have emphasized holistic student development, co-curricular programming and student satisfaction for many years. However, the release of The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs (ACPA, 1994) is widely
considered to be a pivotal moment in the field, calling directly on SAS professionals to link learning outcomes to their more traditional activities (Bresciani et al., 2004). In many ways the emphasis on the measurement of student learning as a defining element of assessment emerged as a means of demonstrating the value of SAS in supporting the institutional mission through engaging students in co-curricular learning. At the same time, the intention was to assist SAS professionals to view their work as learning-oriented and strengthen their relationships with the academic life of the institution (Bresciani et al., 2004).

Prior to this evolution, SAS professionals had traditionally tended to focus on measures of student satisfaction, primarily using anecdotal methods and indirect sources. Researchers such as Keeling et al. (2008) have attempted to draw boundaries between what they refer to as “process outcomes” versus “learning outcomes.” Process outcomes are related to items such as participation numbers and student satisfaction, whereas learning outcomes focus on what a student should be able to do, know, or value as a result of participating in a program or service (Keeling et al., 2008). Within SAS a discourse has emerged that suggests one “evaluates” process outcomes and “assesses” learning outcomes.

**Relationship between assessment and evaluation in Student Affairs and Services.** In recent years the understanding of evaluation in the field of SAS has evolved and there is an increasing focus in the literature on just two broad areas: assessment and research (Barham & Dean, 2013). However, practitioners and scholars have yet to reconcile the extensive body of literature related to program evaluation that is widely referenced across other disciplines with the definition(s) of assessment and evaluation most commonly applied within SAS.
Evaluation emerged in the 1960’s as a distinct field of practice – in many ways straddling the worlds of scholars and practitioners. Michael Scriven (1991), who is widely considered the father of modern evaluation, suggested that evaluation is undertaken to identify and apply defensible criteria to determine worth, merit, or quality. Early emphasis on educational improvements, resource allocation and societal change programs laid the foundation for the establishment of several subdisciplines within the field, including logic, ethics, performance, program, and policy (Roy, Hobson & Coryn, 2012). Today, the language of “evaluation” spans numerous disciplines, including healthcare, education, social services, and international development.

A closer examination of the subdiscipline of program evaluation suggests significant parallels with activities that generally fall under the heading of “assessment” in SAS. Spaulding (2014) defines program evaluation as an examination of a program to determine its worth and make recommendations for programmatic refinement and success. This description is consistent with definitions of assessment in SAS proposed by Astin and Antonio (2012), Banta (2002), Banta and Palomba (2015), Ewell (2002), Love and Estanek (2004), and others. However, despite these parallels, it is relatively rare that literature from the field of evaluation is cited in discussions of assessment in SAS.

One example where the field of evaluation was referenced is the work of Love and Estanek (2004) who drew on a text by Worthen, Sanders, and Fitzpatrick (1997) to define evaluation as “efforts to gather, analyze and interpret evidence to determine an evaluation focus (for example, student learning, administrative practice), quality, utility, effectiveness, or significance in relation to stated criteria or other standards and, in cases where the object falls short, use that evidence to help the evaluation object reach an adequate level of performance” (p. 86). The key difference between Love and Estanek’s (2004) definitions of
assessment and evaluation is that assessment seeks to determine the efficacy of a practice and evaluation focuses on whether the practice is effective enough. However, one has to wonder if there is actually a difference between these two activities in practice? It could be argued that SAS professionals are rarely in the position to determine the efficacy of a program or service without having a functional responsibility to consider whether it is effective enough.

Banta and Palomba (2015) have taken a more integrative approach to defining assessment in SAS, which acknowledges connections to the field of evaluation. Drawing on their earlier work, they present evaluation as a construct within the assessment process rather than a stand-alone component, asserting that the term “assessment” in higher education has come to encompass the entire process of evaluating institutional effectiveness (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Palomba & Banta, 1999). Banta and Palomba (2015) submit the following definition: “Assessment is the process of providing credible evidence of resources, implementation actions, and outcomes undertaken for the purpose of improving effectiveness of instruction, programs, and services in higher education” (p. 2).

While Banta and Palomba (2015) and others have come to present evaluation as a component of assessment – the literature related to evaluation often presents the reverse perspective, describing the assessment of the learning outcomes of a program as a component of a larger program evaluation (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011; Spaulding, 2014).

While debate around the definition of terms is on-going, the term “assessment” has established itself as predominant within the SAS discourse. However, SAS professionals must be aware of approaches to program evaluation and relevant standards in related
fields. As a profession, there is an opportunity for SAS professionals to expand the horizons of their approach to assessment and incorporate program evaluation literature from other disciplines into the discourse. For the purposes of this study, Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) has been used to encompass the broad array of responsibilities carried out by SAS professionals and facilitate understanding across sectors where the term “assessment” may be understood in different ways.

**Assessment, Evaluation, and Research in the Canadian Context.** The evolution of AER in Canadian SAS is tightly connected with the professionalization of the field. In 2011 CACUSS engaged in an “identity project” designed to label and situate the work done by SAS professionals across the country, identify contributions to higher education and society, and redefine the organization. In a paper prepared as part of the identity project entitled “*Leaders in Learning: Student Affairs in Canada in the 21st Century & Implications for the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services,*” assessment and evidence-based planning were identified as emerging issues in Canadian SAS (Fisher, 2011). According to Fisher (2011), accountability for SAS professionals is two-fold. Within the institutional administration and governance context, resources to support students must be justified. However, SAS divisions are also often directly accountable to students, sometimes formally, through a council or budget process that requires their support. In addition, Fisher (2011) asserts that within the professional community there is a self-imposed drive toward providing evidence of the impact of the work of SAS staff. Fisher (2011) contends that assessment is slowly being built into the daily work of SAS practitioners, forming the basis for decision-making that is less anecdotal and instinctual and more evidence-based.
Consistent with the report of the CACUSS identity project, Lane (1998) found very positive attitudes related to assessment among the leadership of SAS divisions and departments at Canadian Universities, but that assessment practices themselves were relatively introductory and unsophisticated. More than a decade later, Tang (2014) found that SAS professionals were under increasing pressure to demonstrate program effectiveness and outcomes and were in the early stages of measuring quality. Similarly, Seifert et al. (2011) found that many SAS divisions were still in the beginning stages of collecting, analyzing, and using assessment evidence to demonstrate the ways in which they are contributing to broader institutional goals. In a 2015 study of SSAOs at Canadian universities, Browne et al. found that SSAOs place significantly less importance on AER than they do on more traditional skills such as leadership and communication.

These studies reveal a simmering tension between literature related to evidence-based practice in SAS and the current practice at Canadian institutions. Although the focus on AER skills has been growing within the SAS literature (Herdlein et al., 2013), barriers to AER identified 20 years ago seem to persist and Canadian SAS professionals appear to be continuing to prioritize more traditional skills and knowledge. What remains unclear is what progress, if any, has been made to operationalize the values espoused in the SAS literature and among SAS professionals with regard to AER in practice, and the factors that are influencing the decisions of today’s senior SAS leaders on this topic.

**Critiques of the AER Movement in Student Affairs and Services.** In parallel with the mainstream literature on student engagement and success, a dominant discourse has emerged related to AER in SAS which tends to position AER activities as unquestionably worthwhile endeavours. Rather than offering critiques of the AER movement, many of the most commonly cited works related to AER in SAS tend to instead address “barriers” or
“challenges” that may be faced by SAS professionals in their quest to engage in AER (for examples, see Banta & Palomba, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2002, 2006; Bresciani et al., 2004; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). As an example, Bresciani, Moore Gardner, & Hickmott (2009) explored several decades of literature on challenges in SAS AER and identified eight common barriers, including a lack of time, resources, knowledge and skills, coordination of complex institutional processes, lack of conceptual frameworks, obstacles to collaboration with faculty, lack of trust, and the need to manage expectations.

However, there are critiques of the AER movement in higher education, and SAS specifically, that move beyond an exploration of barriers that may hinder the AER activities of SAS professionals and raise important questions about the purpose of AER and its effectiveness. These critiques tend to focus on three key areas of concern: (1) the role of neoliberalism in the drive for accountability; (2) the lack of emphasis on epistemological frameworks in SAS assessment; and (3) the validity and reliability of AER activities.

**AER as a function of the increasing marketization of higher education.** Western universities have been involved in processes of neoliberalisation related to the increasing focus on economic competitiveness, educational quality, and accountability (Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Marginson & Rhodes, 2002). As discussed earlier in the chapter, the emergence of student engagement as a major focus of research within higher education has been linked to rising participation rates and increasing marketization in the post-secondary education sector (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Governments have become increasingly concerned about graduation rates and student achievement as a means of demonstrating the value of public funding, resulting in increased demands on institutions to engage in AER and report relevant data (Clouder & Hughes, 2012; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017).
Much of the AER associated with student engagement attempts to connect outcome-based measures of student achievement such as retention, graduation, and employment with a range of curricular and co-curricular interventions (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017). NSSE, the most widely used measure of student engagement in North America, had 725 institutions participate in 2017 and more than 1600 institutions have participated since 2000 (NSSE, 2018). As Olivas (2011) notes, the Center for Post-secondary Research at Indiana University, which houses the Surveys of Student Engagement (SSE), has now developed 11 such surveys in a process he describes as “entrepreneurial” (p. 2). Indeed, many of these SSEs have had considerable market success as post-secondary institutions are increasingly being held accountable for student engagement as a performance indicator.

NSSE has led to countless institutional level initiatives designed to identify and support “at risk” students and generally enhance the overall student experience (Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2012). SAS professionals, like many other staff and faculty, find themselves in the position of actively negotiating their work to accommodate increasing demands for measurement and accountability (Phelps-Ward, Kenney & Howard, 2017). While there may be some variation across institutions, the sustainability of SAS units or specific programs and services is often directly related to their individual worth and economic viability (Giroux, 2002). Phelps-Ward et al. (2017) argue that many of the neoliberal economic policies that have manifested in SAS AER practices lead to standardization, homogenization, and ultimately to the neglect of outliers, the discounting of variance, and erasure of particularities embedded in student experience data.
Lack of emphasis on epistemological frameworks in SAS assessment. As SAS professionals find themselves responding to increasing demands for evidence, critics suggest that positivism has become the unquestioned epistemological default because it is most clearly aligned with the neoliberal university (Phelps-Ward et al., 2017). Despite innumerable texts, articles, and instructional guides related to AER in SAS (for example, see Banta & Palomba, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Schuh, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) there has been relatively little attention paid to the range of epistemological perspectives and methods aside from the dominant post-positivist narrative (Newhart, 2015). Phelps-Ward et al. (2017) suggest that the lack of emphasis on epistemological frameworks has limited SAS professionals’ engagement with modes of critical inquiry that resist oppressive structures in higher education, disrupt and dismantle colonized thinking, and advance equity. Critical frameworks tend to be less common in SAS assessment and inquiry, but critics argue that these frameworks are vital to the exploration of the experiences of marginalized students and inequalities in post-secondary education (Dowd & Bensimon, 2014; Newhart, 2015; Phelps-Ward et al., 2017; Rios-Aguilar, 2014; Wells & Stage, 2015).

Questioning the validity and reliability of AER in SAS. In concert with concern over the lack of epistemological diversity in SAS AER, questions have arisen about the validity of many AER studies with regard to marginalized students, particularly Black and Indigenous students. Harper et al. (2018) note the low levels of representation of Black and Indigenous people, both in institutional research offices and at senior leadership levels in post-secondary institutions. This lack of representation leaves decisions about what questions are worthy of pursuit, how questions are framed, which data are valid, and how data are presented primarily in the power of White settlers, leading to one-sided
ways of knowing that preclude complex insights into systemic racial inequities (Harper et al., 2018).

In addition to concerns about the heterogenous nature of AER activities, Porter (2009) raises questions about the validity and reliability of post-secondary student surveys even more broadly, arguing:

Our field requires ambitious research programs to re-establish the foundation of quantitative research on students. Our surveys lack validity because (a) they assume that college students can easily report information about their behaviours and attitudes, when standard modeling of human cognition and survey response clearly suggest they cannot, (b) existing research using college students suggests they have problems correctly answering even simple questions about factual information, and (c) much of the evidence that higher education scholars cite as evidence of validity and reliability actually demonstrates the opposite (pp. 45-46).

Although Porter primarily addresses large scale, multi-institutional student surveys such as NSSE and those administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) in the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, institutional level AER often follows very similar approaches to data collection. Using the Province of Ontario as an example, with a strong governmental focus on engagement measures such as NSSE, there is an incentive for institutions to engage in AER that attempts to determine the impacts of local interventions on student engagement, and by extension, potential NSSE results. As noted earlier in the chapter, HEQCO has recommended that institutions use a combination of appropriate survey tools in the process of assessing the effectiveness of small-scale interventions between survey cycles for NSSE and the College Student Satisfaction Survey and follow the process of implementation-assessment-retesting when
implementing engagement interventions (Zhao, 2011). Within the existing literature related to SAS AER at the divisional, departmental, or program-level, there does not appear to be a significant focus on the impacts of marketization or how SAS professionals may address epistemological questions or concerns related to validity in their work.

**Professionalization of the Field of Student Affairs and Services in Canada**

SAS divisions have experienced a dramatic evolution over the past 30 years. The emerging body of research illuminating the relationships between involvement, engagement, and success has re-shaped the approach to supporting students, while changing student demographics, external demands for accountability, and SAS professionals’ internal commitments to improvement have driven an increased focus on assessment, evaluation, and the provision of specialized services. These forces have combined to influence the evolving organizational structures of SAS divisions across Canada, heralding a move towards increasingly specialized services and a professionalization of the field.

It is only in the last seventy years that SAS has become a recognized functional area in Canadian post-secondary education. The early period of Canadian SAS tended to focus on protective measures and humanistic process (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010). However, from the mid-twentieth century to the early 1970’s the field moved into a second phase, focusing on applications of professional methods and on associations (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010). During this time period, five separate professional organizations relevant to the delivery of student services at Canadian institutions were established, signalling a movement towards professionalization of student services (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010). Today, CACUSS remains the primary national organization for SAS professionals in Canada. CACUSS has played an important role in promoting a more systematic approach to the
work and fostering an understanding of the underlying principles and values (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010).

According to Hardy Cox and Strange (2010), in recent years several factors – some within and some external to the field – have contributed to a push for development. However, the discussion related to the issue of professionalization within CACUSS has tended to focus on professional preparation and competency, rather than a strict adherence to standards of practice (Fisher, 2011). An increased understanding of the complexities of student development, the need for greater responsiveness to students, demands for accountability, and the desire for higher standards of professional preparation have led to the creation of additional professional networks, assessment initiatives, and graduate level preparation programs for student service professionals (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010).

In light of the significant developments in the field of SAS in Canada, it is important to consider these changes in the context of the extant literature on professions, management, and organizations.

The study of professions has traditionally focused on two primary areas of inquiry: (1) the study of professions as occupations, with a focus on professional work, labour markets, and inequalities; and (2) the study of professions as a component of social order and social regulation (Sciulli, 2005). However, across the literature, there are wide ranging perspectives on the definition of professions (Adams, 2010; Evetts, 2006, 2011; Sciulli, 2005). Despite these variations, four central characteristics of professions emerge: (i) expert knowledge; (ii) technical autonomy; (iii) a normative orientation towards service to others; (iv) high status income and other rewards (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011).
Expert knowledge is considered the core requirement of professions (Abott, 1988; Goode, 1961; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). As SAS has moved towards an increasing focus on graduate level preparation and on-going professional development, there is a greater appreciation of SAS as an area of expertise. Further evidence of this evolution is the development of Student Services streams as areas of specialization in Canadian Higher Education programs, something which has been relatively commonplace in the United States for several decades.

Within the profession, SAS professionals exhibit a normative orientation towards the service of others – specifically post-secondary students. Goode (1961) suggests that there are two aspects to the concept of a service orientation: (1) a professional puts the client’s interest above their own; and (2) the existence of a community that establishes and enforces ethical norms through processes of socialization and social control. The body of literature related to student success and engagement described earlier in this literature review suggests that, as a profession, SAS practitioners are committed to placing the interest of their clients (i.e., students) above their own. This is also consistent with the findings of Robinson’s (2011) study of the values of Canadian SAS professionals.

Professional organizations such as CACUSS act as a community, establishing norms implicitly through socialization, and explicitly through the establishment of professional competencies.

SAS professionals have varying degrees of technical autonomy, with inconsistent levels having been achieved across the profession. Friedson (2001) suggests that technical autonomy exists on two levels: (1) individual professionals are able to control their own work; and (2) professional organizations regulate their members without outside interference. For most SAS professionals, the institution controls their work and, while
CACUSS is a professional organization, it does not currently act as a regulatory body. It is also debatable whether SAS practitioners have the high social status, income, and other rewards associated with a profession, with the general public largely unaware of the existence of the field, and salaries often regulated by collective agreements and provincial guidelines.

Although perhaps still in the midst of a journey of professionalization in Canada, the field of SAS, and professional organizations such as CACUSS, have driven this process through the establishment of professional competencies for the field, the provision of ongoing professional development, and increasing advocacy on behalf of the membership.

**Student Affairs and Services Professional Competencies**

According to Young and Janosik (2007), “professional preparation is one of the hallmarks of any profession” (p. 342). Amidst the increasing focus on the professionalization of the field of SAS, debates have emerged regarding the preparation of new professionals, competencies required for successful practice, and professional development.

In the United States, SAS professionals generally complete a graduate professional program and an assistantship before entering the profession. Waple (2006) identified three major categories of higher education graduate programs in existence in the U.S.: (1) counselling focused; (2) higher education theory and student development focused; and (3) those that focus on the development of selected skills and competencies. In an effort to establish a level of consistency in professional preparation, CAS (2015) developed a set of guidelines and minimum standards for Master’s level SAS professional preparation programs. However, Herdlein et al. (2013) assert that different learning outcomes across
programs have led to inconsistencies in the knowledge, skills and dispositions among entry-level professionals.

In recent years several studies have explored the competencies necessary for success as an SAS professional. In an effort to address inconsistencies in the results of research studies on this topic and to investigate the possibility of achieving consensus on this issue, Herdlein et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of literature related to SAS competencies from 1995 to 2012. The study found that the most frequently mentioned knowledge characteristics desired of SAS professionals were multi-cultural and diversity issues (Herdlein et al., 2013). Student development theory, legal issues, research and assessment, budget and finance, and ethics were also identified as critical areas, and the majority of articles indicated that a combination of knowledge sets was important (Herdlein et al., 2013). With regard to skills, the study found that the most frequently mentioned were research, assessment, and evaluation, followed closely by communication, administration and management, supervision, leadership, and writing effectiveness (Herdlein et al., 2013). The researchers note an important shift within the literature from an emphasis on counselling and human facilitation towards assessment, management, leadership, and supervision. In 2000, Lovell and Kosten conducted a meta-analysis of SAS competencies identified in the literature from 1967 to 1995. At that time human facilitation skills were noted as appearing in 83% of articles. However, in 2013 Herdlein et al. found that counselling/human facilitation was no longer listed as a desirable skill and it did not rank in the top seven knowledge sets. At the same time, administrative responsibilities such as strategic planning, budgeting/finance, legal/ethical issues, and campus organization, which were not specifically identified in the literature prior to 1995, have emerged as critical topics (Herdlein et al., 2013).
In 2010, ACPA and NASPA collaborated to develop a set of common areas of professional competency for SAS practitioners. Through the work of a Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards, the two organizations proposed a framework consisting of 10 competency areas: Advising and Helping; Assessment, Evaluation and Research; Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; Ethical Professional Practice; History, Philosophy and Values; Human and Organizational Resources; Law, Policy and Governance; Leadership; Personal Foundations; and Student Learning and Development. The Competencies were reviewed in 2015 and the result was the re-naming of two competency areas, the addition of one new area, and the combining of two areas. The Equity, Diversity and Inclusion area was renamed Social Justice and Inclusion, and the name of the Advising and Helping competency area was changed to Advising and Supporting. Technology was added as a new competency area, and Ethical Professional Practice and Personal Foundations were combined to form a single competency area: Personal and Ethical Foundations.

Each of the 10 ACPA and NASPA (2015) professional competency areas describes essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of SAS professionals, regardless of functional area or specialization within the field. Discrete outcome statements for each competency area are categorized as foundational, intermediate, or advanced. Progressive development moves from foundational knowledge to increased capacity for critique and synthesis, building on the work of prior levels (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). However, advancement in rank should not be considered a guarantee of higher order proficiency.

While there is a distinct central idea that differentiates each of the 10 competency areas, there is also significant intersection among the outcomes associated with the various areas. As SAS professionals move from foundational outcomes to advanced, there
is an increased number of outcomes that intersect with other competency areas, reflecting higher order synthesis and complexity (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

In 2016 ACPA and NASPA developed a set of rubrics adapted from the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* as a tool for assessing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of SAS professionals across foundational, intermediate, and advanced levels of experience. While the rubrics may be used in a variety of contexts, ACPA and NASPA (2016) specifically identify graduate program coordinators, graduate students, supervisors and hiring managers, professional development coordinators, faculty, and professional organizations as potential audiences. With regard to supervisors and hiring managers, ACPA and NASPA (2016) suggest that the rubrics can be used to identify the desired knowledge, skills, and dispositions for PDs, during annual performance planning and review processes, or as self-assessment tools for staff members to assess their own level of competence.

**Professional Competencies in the Canadian Context.** It is important to note that ACPA and NASPA (2015) identify the primary audience for their Professional Competencies as SAS professionals in the United States, and much of the research related to SAS competencies and professional preparation has also been U.S.-based. In part, this is due to a different history of SAS in Canada and the evolving nature of the field.

Within the Canadian context, SAS has largely been a baccalaureate profession, with many practitioners entering the field directly from undergraduate leadership positions (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010; Seifert & Billing, 2010; Sullivan, 2010). In addition, senior level positions in SAS are often held by faculty members who have transferred from a wide array of disciplinary areas to assume a position within the institutional leadership (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010; Sullivan, 2010).
According to Sullivan (2010), many SAS divisions have attempted to address this issue by shaping their organizational structures to develop their own broadly prepared staff through sponsored institutes, internships, internal secondments, and educational leave programs. However, Hardy Cox and Strange (2010) contend that this level of preparation may no longer be sufficient to address forthcoming challenges for higher education in Canada.

While individual institutions have taken steps to address their own needs, in 2016 CACUSS published the *CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Competency Model* in an effort to identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of Canadian SAS professionals, and support professional development planning (Fernandez et al., 2016). Drawing heavily on the ACPA and NASPA (2015) professional competencies, the CACUSS competency model includes 11 competency areas: Communication; Emotional and Personal Intelligence; Intercultural; Indigenous Cultural Awareness; Post-secondary Acumen; Equity, Diversity and Inclusion; Leadership, Management and Administration; Strategic Planning, Research and Assessment; Student Advising, Support and Advocacy; Student Learning and Development; and Technology and Digital Engagement. Each of the competency areas includes three levels of skill and knowledge – core, intermediate, and advanced – with each level building on the one preceding (Fernandez et al., 2016). The CACUSS competency model does not directly address the skills and experience required for SSAO positions, as these roles may require mastery of competencies beyond the advanced level in addition to significant experience in the field (Fernandez et al., 2016).

Unlike the ACPA and NASPA (2015) professional competencies, the CACUSS competency model does not directly identify hiring managers and supervisors as an audience for the competencies for use in identifying the desired knowledge, skills, and
dispositions for PDs. Rather, the model focuses heavily on professional development. However, six of the eleven competency areas are adapted directly from the ACPA and NASPA (2015) professional competencies and the authors of the CACUSS Model specifically reference the Human Resources Professional Association of Canada’s definitions of the terms “competency” and “competency model.” Specifically, “a competency is a cluster of related knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics that are related to the performance of a significant aspect of the practice of a profession” and “a competency model is a collection of competencies that are relevant to the performance in a particular job, job family, or functional area” (Human Resources Professionals Association, 2014, p.4). These statements suggest an intended relationship between the CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Professional Competency Model and the Human Resources functions of SAS divisions.

**Contextualizing Student Affairs and Services Professional Competencies in the Educational and Political Discourse.** Although the introduction of professional competency models in SAS is relatively recent, competency-based training in both educational and corporate settings is not a new phenomenon. The use of competencies in hiring processes, assessing performance, and fostering performance excellence was popularized through the work of McCleland (1973), Boyatzis (1982), Spencer and Spencer (1983), and others. Professional competencies have been used to assess performance and inform professional development, as well as to guide the curriculum of professional preparation programs in both vocational and higher education settings.

Competency-based movements have been growing across educational systems, as well as higher education specifically, for several decades amidst questions related to the value of college and university degrees and critiques of public spending (Avriam, 2010;
Giroux, 2014). Simons and Olssen (2010) suggest that competency-based education and training has gained traction due to a guiding assumption that “everything that is valuable (for education and society) can be expressed in the language of competencies, and that competencies express all that is valuable” (p. 85). It is in this context that professional organizations such as ACPA, NASPA, and CACUSS have sought to establish professional competency models for their organizations. Given that SAS divisions are situated within larger institutional and governmental contexts, the establishment of professional competencies can be viewed as a natural response to larger systemic pressures across higher education (Eaton, 2016).

Although the establishment of SAS professional competencies may have been in some sense inevitable in the current higher education context, questions have arisen about the purpose(s) they serve for the profession and the implications of their use for the work of SAS professionals.

According to Sanchez and Levine (2009), the primary purpose of professional competency models is to strategically align behavioural themes that are expected and rewarded across all jobs in an organization. Others have suggested that competency models encourage positive employee outcomes by outlining the behaviours required for effective performance (Campion, Fink, Ruggeberg, Carr, Phillips, & Odman, 2011). However, these assertions must be examined in the context of increased managerialism and marketization in higher education. In a study of the professional standards of three distinct professions, Nerland and Karseth (2015) found that traditional notions of professionalism have been supplemented, and in some cases replaced, by a more scientific logic related to professional standards that alters previously established rules and norms. Eaton (2016) argues that there is additional dialogue needed about the limitations and
possibilities of professional competencies in SAS in order to reduce the risk of the over application of competencies and a reduction in the complexity of the work of SAS professionals.

One of the critiques related to workplace professional competencies has been a lack of specificity of the concept of competencies themselves and the use of this vague concept to advocate large-scale reform (van der Klink & Boon, 2002). Concerns have been raised about the feasibility of observing, monitoring, and rewarding workplace competencies (Garrick, 1998). Within SAS specifically, questions have arisen about the potential for reductionist tendencies stemming from the use of professional competency models in professional development planning (Eaton, 2016).

Garrick (1998) advocates for a more holistic approach that reduces the outcome-based nature of many workplace competency-based systems and integrates the analysis of knowledge, skills, and values in the context of performance. van der Klink and Boon (2002) suggest that it may in fact be impossible to establish a generic definition of competence for a given profession, but rather competencies must comprise a combination of skills, knowledge, and attitudes. These suggestions are particularly important when considering the degree to which professional competency models have the potential to reinforce structures of power, privilege, and hegemonic notions related to the value of particular skills or knowledge. Eaton (2016) suggests that SAS professionals must consider what issues of power are evident in SAS competencies, whose knowledge is most valued, and the potential consequences of certain skill sets, or epistemologies, not being included as stand-alone competencies. Similarly, the efficacy of professional competencies such as the CAS standards and the ACPA and NASPA Professional Competency Model have been called into question specifically as they relate to the preparation and work of SAS
professionals in community colleges (Hornack, 2014; Latz, Ozaki, Royer, & Hornak, 2018; Munsch & Cortez, 2014).

**Additional Considerations in the Development and Implementation of Professional Competency Models.** It is important that SAS professionals consider concerns regarding the rise of managerialism, and the possible reductionist effects of professional competencies. However, in light of the current market forces at play in higher education, and the increasing emphasis on professional competencies in the profession, SAS professionals may also benefit from an understanding of various approaches to competency modelling. Mansfield (1996) identified three primary approaches, the “single-job” approach, the “one-size-fits-all” approach, and the “multiple-job” approach. The “single-job” approach is, as the name implies, an approach to developing competencies for individual positions (Mansfield, 1996). The “one-size-fits-all” approach defines one set of competencies for a broad range of positions (Mansfield, 1996). Finally, the “multiple-job” approach identifies a common set of building block competencies, allows for customization, and defines levels of competence (Mansfield, 1996). Mansfield (1996) suggests that the “multiple-job” approach aligns well with workplace trends as it is more cost-effective than the “single-job” approach and more flexible than the “one-size-fits-all” approach. When the CACUSS and ACPA and NASPA competency models are considered in relation to these approaches they appear to be most closely aligned with the “multiple-job” approach. Similar to the “multiple-job” approach, the CACUSS and ACPA and NASPA models define competency levels as being core, intermediate, or advanced and describe a common set of building block competencies within each of the competency domains. Hiring managers would also have the option of customizing PDs using specific competencies.
Finally, as professional competency models rise to prominence in SAS, we must consider the perceptions of staff who engage with these competencies. Redmond (2013) found that employee perceptions of competency models were directly and positively related to work effort, work quality, organizational citizenship behaviour, employability orientation, and employability activities. The results of this study suggest that, in order for a competency model to be effective, employees must believe that the model is "both strategically and personally relevant, and that they are fairly rewarded for displaying the behaviours outlined in the competency model" (Redmond, 2013, p. 783). Redmond (2013) did not find a relationship between employee perceptions of competency models and work quality, nor did a similar study by Dysvik, Kuvaas and Buch (2010).

Although the introduction of professional competency models in SAS offers an opportunity to link theory to practice and establish a framework for professional skills, knowledge, and dispositions across the field, we must also be mindful of the critiques of these models. The literature suggests that the purpose of a competency framework must be clear, and the effectiveness is closely tied to perceptions of the model.

**Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Competencies.** Despite the tensions noted earlier in the chapter related to increasing calls for accountability in higher education and the emergence of professional competency models, the prominence of AER within SAS has increased steadily along with an emphasis on identifying professional competencies in this area. As such, greater attention has been placed on the development of the AER skills and knowledge of SAS practitioners, and the establishment of guidelines with respect to expected levels of proficiency in these areas. In their meta-analysis of literature related to SAS competencies from 1995 to 2012, Herdlein et al. (2013) found that the focus on AER both as an area of knowledge and as an important skill set had
increased dramatically in the time since the previous meta-analysis was conducted by Lovell and Kosten (2000).

In the United States, professional preparation programs have included courses on assessment principles. Professional organizations have also established assessment-specific institutes and drafted philosophical documents to guide practitioners. In addition, several assessment-related organizations have been established, including the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (the Alliance), the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE), and Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL).

In 2006 the ACPA Commission on Assessment and Evaluation developed the Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards (ASK Standards) (ACPA, 2006). The ASK Standards were intended to articulate the areas of content knowledge and skill required by SAS professionals to perform their duties (ACPA, 2006). The ASK Standards have been recognized for their curricular framework which has served as a guide for the creation of an assessment compendium (Barham & Dean, 2013).

The thirteen content areas included in the ASK Standards (ACPA, 2006) are: (1) Assessment Design; (2) Articulating Learning and Development Outcomes; (3) Selection of Data Collection and Management Methods; (4) Assessment Instruments; (5) Surveys Used for Assessment Purposes; (6) Interviews and Focus Groups Used for Assessment Purposes; (7) Analysis; (8) Benchmarking; (9) Program Review and Evaluation; (10) Assessment Ethics; (11) Effective Reporting and Use of Results; (12) Politics of Assessment; and (13) Assessment Education. Each of the content areas includes several assessment-specific skills for practitioners.
Although the ASK Standards are intended to identify the skills and knowledge necessary for SAS professionals to engage in AER, they are not proficiency standards and do not identify the level of proficiency in each area required by SAS practitioners. In 2007, ACPA developed the ASK Standards Needs Assessment as a tool for SAS professionals to self-assess their level of proficiency in each of the content areas and identify areas for professional development. The tool provides a useful framework for self-assessment; however, it assumes a high level of familiarity with the ASK Standards themselves and there is no formalized process for the organization to collect and analyze membership data.

The ASK Standards were not intended as proficiency standards, and in 2015 ACPA and NASPA moved forward with the development of an Assessment, Evaluation and Research (AER) competency area as part of their *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators*. The AER competencies focus on SAS professionals’ ability to design, conduct, critique and make use of various methodologies and the results obtained from them, utilize AER processes and results to inform practice, and influence the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses in higher education (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). With the publication of the *ACPA and NASPA Professional Competencies Rubrics*, the AER competency area was further refined to categorize each of the AER competencies into five broader groupings: Terms and Concepts; Values/Ethics/Politics; AER Design; Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis; and Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results.

**Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Competencies in the Canadian Context.**

Within the Canadian PSE sector, the focus on outcomes assessment has challenged SAS divisions to assume a leadership role in the implementation of such activities – a mandate
that is increasingly linked to provincial/territorial funding and competitive rankings (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010). As a result, increasing levels of AER expertise are being required of SAS professionals.

Despite increasing numbers of Canadian SAS professionals pursuing graduate studies, many SAS professionals continue to rely on professional development opportunities offered through professional organizations, such as CACUSS, for support in the development of AER skills and knowledge. The *CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Competency Model* includes Strategic Planning, Research and Assessment (SPRA) as a competency area. Adapted from the AER competency area in the *ACPA and NASPA Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Educators* document, the CACUSS SPRA competencies are categorized by those that are “core,” “intermediate,” and “advanced.” Although there are fewer competencies included in the CACUSS SPRA competency area than the ACPA and NASPA (2015) AER competency area, the two documents are very clearly aligned. What remains unclear is the degree to which the CACUSS SPRA competencies are represented in the qualifications and responsibilities described in the position descriptions of SAS professionals at Canadian post-secondary institutions or in the daily “lived” responsibilities of these staff.

**Professional Competencies and Position Descriptions**

Within the field of SAS there have been a relatively small number of studies exploring the professional competencies reflected in PDs of SAS professionals. However, research investigating the congruence between PDs and professional standards or competencies has been conducted in several other areas of the public sector, with health-related professions in particular the focus of numerous studies.
Position Descriptions provide an overview of an individual job and define the organization's expectations of an employee that holds the position (Polivka & Chaudry, 2014). PDs may be used for a variety of purposes, including hiring, performance assessment, informing professional development planning, job evaluation, and differentiating roles within an organization. It is important to note that PDs are not neutral documents. To varying degrees, PDs represent the interests of a variety of stakeholders within an institution, including managers, employees, unions, professional organizations, government, and in a post-secondary institution, hopefully students. Although individual PDs may be narrowly focused, as a collective, they reflect the culture, priorities, and changes within an organization (Keith, Smith & Taylor, 2017). Keith et al. (2017) assert that within rapidly changing work environments, PDs are essential tools for intentionally structuring change, reorganizing responsibilities, and articulating competencies. However, when interpreting PDs we must be mindful of whose voices are, or are not, represented and why.

In a study of the PDs of nursing directors and supervisors in health departments across the state of Ohio, Polivka, Chaudry and Jones (2014) found that PDs did not reflect compliance with professional mandates for the practice of public health nursing. This is consistent with the findings of Issel, Ashley, Kirk and Bekemeier (2012) who found that the American Nurses’ Association (ANA) Public Health Nursing Scope and Standards were unevenly integrated into the PDs of nurses working in local health departments in Illinois and Washington. A separate study of the competencies needed for health librarians in Ireland by Lawton and Burns (2014) found a higher level of compliance, with nine of the ten competencies identified from the literature and the library associations’ policies represented in a sample of job postings. Taking a different approach, Oestenstad, Maples
and McCullum-Hill (2008) surveyed Environmental Health Practitioners in the state of Alabama to assess the degree to which their daily activities were congruent with the 14 Core Competencies of Alabama Environmental Health Practitioners. All of the participants indicated that they felt as though their abilities were “OK” to “pretty good,” however, substantial variation occurred in the level of practice of essential services (Oestenstad et al., 2008).

Within the field of SAS, Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) specifically explored the prevalence and nature of learning assessment competencies and skills in SAS job postings. The study found no differences in the required assessment-related skills or job duties between public and private institutions or institutions of various size (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010). However, the findings did suggest significant differences in the job duties and AER skills required among various functional areas, and among jobs with varying educational requirements. The functional areas that required AER skills at the highest rates were Multicultural Services, New Student Programs, and Student Activities (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010). Residence Life was the functional area with the lowest rate of requirement for AER skills (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010). Positions that required AER job skills or duties were associated with higher levels of professional experience and education (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010).

In a follow-up to their 2010 study, Hoffman and Bresciani (2012) conducted a broader investigation of the professional competencies listed in SAS job postings. In the first phase of the study the authors conducted a qualitative analysis of job postings advertised through *The Placement Exchange* in 2008. *The Placement Exchange* is a partnership between several SAS professional organizations; it holds a placement conference before the annual NASPA conference and offers a centralized online SAS job
board. The research team coded each of the job postings and ultimately identified 21 competencies. The competencies identified were aligned well with the ACPA and NASPA (2010) Professional Competency Areas (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2012). In the second, quantitative phase, of their study, Hoffman and Bresciani (2012) compared the frequencies within and between various functional areas. This research revealed statistical differences between major functional areas and requirements for educational and work experience (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2012). As a functional area, AER was found to require some of the highest levels of education, along with Leadership, Budgeting and Financial Management, and Collaboration with Faculty (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2012).

The work of Hoffman and Bresciani (2010, 2012) provides valuable insight into the ways in which professional competencies have been represented in the job postings for SAS positions. However, unlike many of the health-related studies described earlier, their research did not connect directly to professional competencies and it did not include full PDs. The use of job postings rather than full PDs is a limitation as these documents are much shorter and generally do not include a complete listing of the responsibilities of a position. It is generally the full PD that is used for job evaluation purposes and as a guide in the case of performance evaluation or performance management. In addition, The Placement Exchange is a U.S.-based resource, so it is unlikely that many positions based at Canadian institutions were included in the study, if any at all. A review of the literature related to the alignment between SAS position descriptions and SAS professional competencies suggests that this topic has not previously been explored in Canada.

**Conceptual Framework**

As a means of understanding the representations of AER competencies in SAS PDs, the degree to which the AER qualifications and responsibilities represented in the PDs of
SAS professionals are aligned with professional competencies, and the factors that influence SSAOs' decisions regarding these representations, the conceptual framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

The framework consists of four interconnected spheres that represent the interconnected relationships between developments within the SAS professional domain, institutional domain, SAS position descriptions, and the lived experiences of the SAS professionals who fulfill these roles.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework. Factors influencing the representations of competencies and responsibilities in SAS position descriptions.
The professional domain represents developments in the field of SAS connected to the professionalization of the field. The work of SAS professionals in Canada has been defined by the work of Hardy Cox and Strange (2010), Fisher (2011), Seifert et al. (2011), and others, as well as by CACUSS as a professional organization. CACUSS also serves as a means by which SAS professionals are able to identify themselves as members of the profession, as do various institution-level initiatives. The roles of SAS members are enacted through professional competencies established by CACUSS and other professional organizations, as well as institutional and provincial mandates. SAS divisions are supported by the structural and cultural systems in place within the institution, at the provincial level, and across the broader society (e.g., collective agreements, institutional missions, strategic mandate agreements). As SAS has moved towards an increasing focus on graduate-level preparation and on-going professional development, there is a greater appreciation of SAS as an area of expertise. In addition, there is strong evidence that the SAS profession values a service orientation, specifically service to post-secondary students.

Within the professional domain there are two bullet points representing professional organizations and professional competencies. These bullets are included to emphasize the relationship between the development of SAS as a profession and the establishment of professional competency models. These competency models are grounded in the foundational literature of the field as well as extensive consultation processes with practicing SAS professionals. The ACPA and NASPA (2015) Professional Competencies were developed through the work of a joint task force that brought together representatives from across both professional organizations. In the case of the CACUSS Professional Competency Model, six of the eleven competency areas are adapted directly
from the ACPA and NASPA (2015) Professional Competencies (Fernandez et. al, 2016). In addition, the authors engaged in a broad consultation process which involved meeting with SAS professionals from across Canada (Fernandez et al., 2016).

The institutional domain represents factors unique to an institution that may influence PDs, such as organizational structures, collective agreements, institutional mission, and divisional priorities. The professional domain and the institutional domain overlap, representing the interdependent nature of these two domains. Much of the research that has shaped professional organizations, conceptions of best practice, and professional competencies has been conducted at the institutional level. Rather than a unidirectional, causal relationship, these two levels are interconnected spheres of activity.

The centre of the framework where the professional domain and the institutional domain intersect speaks directly to the purpose of this study: to explore the representations of competencies and responsibilities in SAS PDs and the degree to which they are aligned with professional competencies.

The professional domain and institutional domain combine with the written PD to influence the lived experience of SAS professionals who hold these positions. Although the lived experience of these staff is outside the scope of this study, these experiences influence literature on SAS in Canada, professional competency models, institutional factors, and PDs. This relationship is indicated by the dark sphere representing the lived experiences of SAS staff that intersects with all aspects of the framework.

Finally, the domains are embedded in the larger global, national, and local contexts of neoliberalisation, increasing managerialism, marketization, and calls for greater accountability in higher education and the broader public sector.
Overall, this conceptual framework is intended to provide a structure through which we can understand the ways in which the professional qualifications and responsibilities of SAS professionals at Canadian post-secondary institutions are represented in PDs, the degree to which they are aligned with professional competencies, and the factors that influence senior leaders’ decisions regarding the representation of qualifications and responsibilities. This study focuses specifically on the representations of AER competencies. However, the conceptual framework is applicable to a variety of competency areas.
Chapter 3
Methods

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research design used in this study and begins with a general review of the mixed methods paradigm. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the overall research design and the procedures followed in Phases I and II of the study with regard to sampling, data collection, and analysis. Methodological assumptions and ethical considerations are also discussed.

The Mixed Methods Paradigm

The definition of mixed methods research has evolved considerably over time to incorporate elements of methods, research processes, philosophy, and research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). While early definitions sought to separate methods and philosophy, there has been a shift in the literature to a methodological orientation focusing on mixing in all phases of the research process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). This evolution has led to a view of mixed methods research as a methodology that spans worldviews to inferences and includes a combination of qualitative and quantitative research (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) advocate for a definition of mixed methods that incorporates many diverse viewpoints. Specifically, the mixed methods researcher should:

1. Collect and analyze persuasively and rigorously both qualitative and quantitative data (based on research questions);
2. Mix (or integrate or link) the two forms of data concurrently by combining them (or merging them), sequentially by having one build upon the other, or embedding one within the other;
3. Give priority to one or both forms of data (in terms of what the research emphasizes);

4. Use these procedures in a single study or in multiple phases of a program of study;

5. Frame the procedures within philosophical worldviews and theoretical lenses; and

6. Combine the procedures into specific research designs that direct the plan for conducting the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

There are several advantages to the use of mixed methods approaches, including: providing strengths that offset the weaknesses of both quantitative and qualitative research; offering more evidence for studying a research problem than either quantitative or qualitative research alone; answering questions that may not be able to be answered by either quantitative or qualitative research alone; bridging a sometimes adversarial divide among quantitative and qualitative researchers; encouraging the use of multiple worldviews; and offering a “practical” approach to research in which the researcher is free to use all possible methods to address a problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). At the same time, challenges remain with ensuring mixed methods researchers have the required quantitative and qualitative skills, addressing the additional time and resources associated with mixed methods research, and convincing others of the value of mixed methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

As mixed methods research has developed over time, there have been several debates that have shaped this evolution. One of the primary discussions within the literature has been related to the philosophical foundations of mixed methods research. Early researchers believed that quantitative and qualitative research were grounded in
different worldviews that could not be reconciled (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). However, over time these concerns have diminished and there has been a growing acceptance of the blending of paradigms within a study (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), albeit with varied approaches to incorporating them.

There are numerous references throughout the mixed-methods literature promoting the sole use of pragmatism as a paradigm that accommodates both qualitative and quantitative methods while rejecting the incompatibility thesis (Creswell, 2011; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011). Advocates for pragmatism in mixed methods research suggest several benefits to the paradigm: (1) rejection of the need to force a choice between contradicting epistemologies; (2) emphasis on research questions rather than the method or paradigm; and (3) an inquiry process based on problem solving, action, and a commitment to democratic values (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014).

The other approach to the paradigmatic concern associated with mixed methods studies is to view paradigms as a choice that relates to the researcher’s worldview and can vary accordingly (Creswell, 2011). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) advocate for the linking of paradigms to research designs, with different paradigms related to different phases of a study.

While there are varying approaches to addressing paradigmatic concerns associated with mixed methods research, this study is grounded in a pragmatic worldview. Pragmatism has a practical orientation which allows for varying ideas, diverse approaches, and the valuing of both objective and subjective knowledge (Creswell, 2014). This study was motivated by a desire to explore, and perhaps influence, the ways in which skills, experience, and duties related to AER are represented in the PDs of SAS positions at
Ontario colleges and universities. This research is intended to be directly applicable to SAS professionals and Canadian post-secondary institutions. As such, it is well aligned with a pragmatic worldview.

Another question associated with mixed methods research relates to the issue of what mixing occurs and how this should be identified. The three terms most commonly associated with the different approaches to mixed methods research are: (1) multimethod; (2) mixed methods; and (3) mixed model (Jones et al., 2014).

Multimethod refers to research that uses two or more methods from the same qualitative or quantitative paradigm and there is generally very little mixing of research paradigms (Creswell, 2011). The term mixed methods includes studies that include both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in either a parallel or sequential manner (Jones et al., 2014). According to Creswell (2014), the mixed methods researcher must: determine whether data will be collected concurrently or sequentially; decide whether greater importance will be placed on the data collection and analysis of the quantitative or qualitative data or if equal importance will be given to both; determine the point at which the data will be integrated or merged; and decide whether the theoretical perspective will be implicit or explicit. Finally, mixed model refers to studies that have significant mixing of the paradigms, with mixing occurring at all stages of the research process (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

This study aligns with Tashakkori and Teddlie’s (1998) definition of a sequential mixed model design. A detailed description of the research design follows.
Research Design

This mixed model study investigates the ways in which AER competencies and responsibilities are represented in the PDs of SAS professionals at Canadian post-secondary institutions. A sequential explanatory mixed model design was used in this research, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. Phase I of the study began with a content analysis of a sample of PDs from SAS divisions at post-secondary institutions across the Province of Ontario, which informed the direction of a secondary qualitative component. Emphasis has been placed on the initial substantial content analysis, with a smaller focus on the qualitative follow-up.

The goal of Phase I was to investigate the extent to which the PDs of SAS professionals in Ontario post-secondary institutions incorporate CACUSS SPRA competencies. The plan for the qualitative phase of the study was to provide greater understanding of any initial findings by purposefully sampling a number of SAS professionals in senior roles from institutions that participated in the earlier phase. While Phase I has been given priority, the qualitative phase fulfills an important role supporting or triangulating data from the earlier phase, as well as providing complementarity, which Cameron (2009) defines as one dominant method type being enhanced or clarified by results from a less dominant phase.

The overall design of the study followed the steps for an explanatory design outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2011): (1) Collect the quantitative data; (2) Analyze the quantitative data using analytic approaches best suited to the quantitative research question; (3) Design the qualitative phase based on the quantitative results; (4) Collect the qualitative data; (5) Analyze the qualitative data using analytic approaches best suited to the qualitative and mixed methods research questions; and (6) Interpret how the
connected results answer the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods questions. However, as a mixed model design, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in Phase I. The results of the quantitative and qualitative content analyses were used to design Phase II. A detailed description of the procedures that were employed for the first five steps are described in greater detail below.

**Phase 1: Content Analysis**

This section will discuss the first phase of the study, beginning with a discussion of the content analysis procedures, including sampling procedures and data analysis.

**Content Analysis.** Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts in their use” (p. 18). Analytical constructs, which may be derived from (1) existing theories or practices; (2) the experience or knowledge of experts; and (3) previous research, are used to evaluate the text and respond the research questions (Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis can be applied in both quantitative and qualitative studies; however, the specific method may vary.

To determine whether data are suitable for content analysis, White and Marsh (2006) suggest two considerations. The first is whether the data provide useful evidence for testing hypotheses or answering research questions. The second is whether the data communicate a message from sender to receiver. Should the data prove suitable, researchers must determine whether an inductive or deductive approach is most appropriate, or whether it might be useful to apply both (Berg, 1998). An inductive approach explores the text without pre-conceived notions or categories and researchers note key words and themes (Berg, 1998). Researchers employing a deductive approach begin with predetermined key words or categories and code the data using these variables
Berg (1998). Berg (1998) suggests that inductive and deductive approaches are not mutually exclusive, and in fact, many quantitative content analyses can be strengthened by the inclusion of a qualitative component. The final methodological question that must be addressed is whether the study will address the manifest or latent content of the text (Berg, 1998). Manifest content is examined using coding and key word searches, and is often quantifiable, while latent content is more complex and requires the researcher to develop constructs and explore the deeper meanings of the text (Berg, 1998).

In the case of the present study, the research question relates directly to the representation of professional competencies within PDs, thereby making the text of the PDs uniquely relevant to responding to the research question. The PDs also communicate. These documents are used to recruit staff, outline expectations for performance, guide performance management processes, and determine professional level and salary ranges. These documents communicate messages to SAS staff, their managers, Human Resources offices, and even students.

This study employed both inductive and deductive approaches to the content analysis of the PDs and focused on the manifest content of these documents. Krippendorff's (2004) components of content analysis were used as a guide for the research design: unitizing, sampling, recording/coding, reducing, inferring, and narrating. The first four components of the content analysis process are discussed in greater detail below. Inferences and narration will be presented in Chapter five.

**Unitizing.** Krippendorff (2004) defines unitizing as “the systematic distinguishing of segments of text...that are of interest to an analysis” (p. 83). There are several methods by which units may be identified, however, this study employed categorical distinctions to define units. Categorical distinctions identify units based on their membership in a class or
category; they are often referred to as any character string that refers to a particular object, event, person, act, or idea (Krippendorf, 2004). In the present study, AER competencies and specifically the CACUSS SPRA competencies were identified as the primary categories. Additional variables related to the representation of AER competencies and responsibilities in SAS position descriptions at post-secondary institutions in the Province of Ontario were also explored. These other variables included: institution type; institution size; professional level (entry-level, mid-level, senior-level); years of experience required; education level required; and functional area where the PD is located.

**Participants and Sampling.** Krippendorff (2004) argues that traditional statistical sampling theory does not fully align with the sampling problems encountered in content analysis. Specifically, the following assumptions prevent the full application of sampling theory to texts:

1. In sampling theory, the sampling units are individuals that are independent and can be counted individually, whereas texts may be unitized and conceptualized in various ways;
2. In sampling theory, the units sampled are the units counted, whereas content analysts may seek to obtain a sample of texts, but answer their research question by counting words, sentences or references, and interpreting text;
3. In sampling theory, all sampled individuals are considered equally informative due to their membership in the population of interest. However, texts are not generated to be analyzed and often have varying levels of relevance to a research question;
4. In sampling theory, a sample should have the same distributional properties as the population it is drawn from. However, content analysis must consider the population of answers to a research question as well as the population of texts that contain the answer to that question (Krippendorff, 2004).

The sampling plan for this study was guided by the research questions and employed both relevance and stratified sampling techniques.

Relevance sampling is intended to collect textual units that contribute to answering a research question (Krippendorff, 2004). Following a conceptual hierarchy and systematically lowering the number of units required for analysis, the researcher limits the population of relevant texts to a manageable size, at which point they may choose to apply other sampling techniques (Krippendorff, 2004). Through relevance sampling, the population of relevant texts for this study was limited to PDs from SAS divisions at colleges and universities across the Province of Ontario that fell under one of the following units as described by Seifert et al. (2011) and Hardy Cox and Strange (2010): First Year Experience and Student Engagement, Counseling Services, Health Services, Accessibility Services, Career Services, Academic Skills Services, and Services for Diverse Students. In addition, PDs that fell under Residence Life were also included in the population, as well as PDs dedicated to Assessment, where these positions fell within an institution’s SAS portfolio.

Once the population of PDs was limited through relevance sampling, stratified sampling techniques were utilized in an effort to capture sub-populations existing within functional areas, specifically variations in professional level.

The sampling procedure began with invitations to participate in the study being sent to the SSAOs of each provincially-funded English-speaking college and university in the Province of Ontario (See Appendix A). For universities, the SSAOs were determined
based on the membership of the Ontario Committee on Student Affairs (OCSA), a committee of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). For colleges, the SSAOs were determined based on the membership of the Coordinating Committee of VP’s Students, a committee of Colleges Ontario. Where an institution had multiple representatives on these committees, they were each contacted. Recognizing that many SSAOs may not have sufficient time to personally participate in this research, each SSAO was asked to consent to their institution's participation in the research and to identify a staff person who was able to act as a point of contact. Participating institutions were offered two options for providing a sample of PDs. The first option was to provide one randomly selected example PD at the entry, mid, and senior-level for each of the eight functional areas that are represented within the portfolio of the SSAO at their institution based on a sampling guide that was provided (See Appendix B). The second option was to provide all PDs for each of the functional areas with the researcher making the appropriate selections.

Of the 42 institutions invited to participate, 26 accepted the invitation, 13 colleges and 13 universities. The majority of institutions chose to provide their own sample of PDs. In cases where an institution requested that the researcher select the sample, or an institution provided more PDs than required, the PDs were sorted into functional areas based on the descriptions provided by Seifert et al. (2011) and Hardy Cox and Strange (2010). The PDs were then further sorted into professional levels (entry, mid, senior) based on level of responsibility, supervisory responsibilities, and years of experience. In cases where more than one PD remained in a professional level within a functional area, the remaining PDs were numbered, and a random number generator was used to select the PD to be included in the study.
A total of 311 PDs were ultimately included in the sample. The number of PDs included from individual institutions ranged from three to 27. The mean number of PDs collected was 13.34. The median number of PDs collected from institutions was 13, and the mode was 10.

**Recording/coding.** Following the conclusion of the data collection process, the recording process began with the coding of all collected PDs based on institution type, institution location, institution size, professional level, level of education required, and date that the PD was last updated. This was followed by a preliminary coding of PDs based on the presence or absence of AER competencies represented in the qualifications and responsibilities sections of the text.

Following this initial phase, each PD was re-examined using the competency domains of the *CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Professional Competency Model* as coding categories. Each PD was coded based on the presence or absence of each competency domain, but not the emphasis placed on each domain or the competency level (i.e., core, intermediate, senior).

To facilitate the investigation of sub-question two, all PDs that contained AER competencies were re-examined in an effort to develop a deeper understanding of the degree of alignment between the AER competencies that appeared in the PDs and the CACUSS Competency model. A rubric was developed to facilitate this process.

**Rubric design.** The use of a rubric allowed for a broad investigation of the extent to which the PDs of SAS professionals in Ontario post-secondary institutions incorporate CACUSS SPRA competencies. The rubric employed in this study was anchored by the 34 SPRA competencies represented in the *CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Professional*
*Competency Model* and utilized the existing structure provided by the ACPA and NASPA (2016) *Professional Competencies Rubric.*

The ACPA and NASPA (2016) *Professional Competencies Rubric* categorizes each of the AER competencies into one of five domains: Terms and Concepts; Values/Ethics/Politics; AER Design; Methodology, Data Collection and Data Analysis; Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results. While CACUSS has not created professional competency rubrics for the organizations competency model, the CACUSS SPRA competencies are adapted from the ACPA and NASPA (2015) AER competencies (Fernandez et al., 2016). Table 1 organizes the CACUSS SPRA competencies using the ACPA and NASPA (2016) AER Competency Rubric.

Using the rubric in Table 1, each AER competency appearing in a PD was coded based on its alignment with one of the five SPRA competency domains. Any statements included in a PD that did not reflect a CACUSS SPRA competency were grouped separately. Following this process, the statements in each of the SPRA competency domains as well as the ‘other’ category were coded based on the competency level identified in the rubric (core, intermediate, senior).

**Reducing.** Reducing is the term used by Krippendorff (2004) to describe data analysis techniques employed to summarize or simplify coded data. In this study, the process focused on the following three areas: the overall prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities, variations in AER responsibilities or qualifications due to institutional or position-related differences, and the alignment between AER qualifications and responsibilities with the CACUSS SPRA competency domain.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Core</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terms and Concepts</td>
<td>• Know and be able to describe terms, concepts and strategies</td>
<td>• Differentiate between assessment, program review, evaluation, planning and</td>
<td>• Disposition to view assessment, evaluation and research as an essential element for improvement at the unit, division, institutional, and professional levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>associated with assessment, program review, evaluation, planning and research.</td>
<td>review, evaluation, planning and research as well as the methods appropriate to each.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values/Ethics/Politics</td>
<td>Explain the necessity to follow institutional and divisional procedures and policies (e.g. ethics approval, informed consent) with regard to ethical assessment, evaluation and other research activities. Identify the political and educational sensitivity of raw and partially processed data and results, handling them with appropriate confidentiality and deference to organizational hierarchies.</td>
<td>Employ project management techniques to ensure effective planning and execution of a project. Actively contribute to the development of a culture of evidence at the department level wherein assessment, program review, evaluation, and research are central to the department’s work, and ensure that training and skills development in these areas is valued, budgeted for, and fully embedded in day-to-day procedures. Use culturally relevant and culturally appropriate terminology and methods to conduct and report assessment and research findings.</td>
<td>Manage and/or adhere to the implementation of institutional and professional standards for ethical assessment and research activities. Anticipate and proactively address challenges related to individual and institutional politics, competing constituencies and interests, and divergent values especially as related to communications, reporting, and utilization of data to inform practice. Create a culture of evidence in which the institution, division, or unit expects assessment to be central to professional practice and ensures that training/skill development happens across the organization. Ensure institutional, divisional, or unit compliance with professional standards concerning ethical assessment and research activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AER Design</td>
<td><strong>Know the theoretical frameworks that align with organizational outcomes, goals, and values. Ability to create learner-centered outcomes that align with divisional and institutional priorities; to design and lead a process-oriented strategy to address the assessment's purpose or research questions. Disposition to think critically and systematically about questions and problems of practice.</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Explain to students and colleagues the relationship of assessment and research processes to learning outcomes and goals&lt;br&gt;• Ensure a proactive approach to program planning, project coordination, and programming which includes opportunities for continuous assessment and development</td>
<td><strong>Design program and learning outcomes that are appropriately clear, specific, and measurable; that are informed by theoretical frameworks, and that align with organizational outcomes, goals and values.</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Educate stakeholders in the institution about the relationship of departmental assessment processes to learning outcomes and goals at the student, department, division, and institutional level.&lt;br&gt;• Discern and discuss the appropriate design(s) to use in assessment and research efforts based on critical questions, necessary data, and intended audience.</td>
<td><strong>Utilize formal student learning and development theories as well as scholarly literature to inform the content and design of individual and program level outcomes as well as assessment tools such as rubrics.</strong>&lt;br&gt;• Prioritize program and learning outcomes with organizational goals and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis</td>
<td>• Able to conduct basic research and program assessment</td>
<td>• Select research and assessment methods, methodologies, designs, and tools that fit with research and evaluation questions and with assessment review purposes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know strengths and limits of research methodologies. Ability to match methodology with purpose of assessment and guiding questions; to collect and analyze data. Dispositions to take critical stance in collection and analysis of data; rigorous attention to detail; creative thinking.</td>
<td>• Assess the legitimacy, trustworthiness, and/or validity of studies of various methods and methodological designs (e.g. qualitative vs quantitative, theoretical perspective, epistemological approach).</td>
<td>• Design on-going and periodic data collection efforts such that they are sustainable, rigorous, as unobtrusive as possible, and technologically current.</td>
<td>• Demonstrate a working knowledge of additional methodological approaches to assessment (e.g. mixed methods, historical or literary analysis, or comparative study) including elements of design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, as well as strategies for ensuring quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider the rudimentary strengths and limitations of various methodological research approaches in the application of findings to practice in diverse institutional settings and with diverse student populations.</td>
<td>• Apply the concepts and procedures of qualitative research, evaluation, and assessment including creating appropriate sampling designs and interview protocols with consultation, participating in analysis teams, contributing to audit trails, participating in peer debrief, and using other techniques to ensure trustworthiness of qualitative designs.</td>
<td>• Participate in the design and analysis of quantitative and qualitative research studies including understanding statistical reporting that may include complex statistical methods such as multivariate techniques and articulating the limitations of findings imposed by the differences in practical and statistical significance, validity and reliability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Facilitate appropriate data collection for system/department-wide assessment and evaluation efforts using current technology and methods.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain</td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
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<tr>
<td>81</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Lead, supervise, and/or collaborate with others to design and analyze assessment, program review, evaluation, and research activities that span multiple methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, among others) including writing and disseminating results in a manner that critically considers the strengths and limitations of implications for practice, policy, theory, and/or future study in a sophisticated way.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Core</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Advanced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results</td>
<td>Know how to interpret data in practical terms that are relevant to the institutional context. Ability to present results concisely in reports that are useful to a variety of audiences; to use findings to make informed decisions and to align resources. Dispositions to collaborate; to represent findings accurately and fairly; to share interpretations with stakeholders, including students.</td>
<td>• Ensure all communications of assessment and research results are accurate, responsible, and effective. • Effectively articulate, interpret, and apply results of research and assessment reports and studies, including professional literature. • Effectively manage, align, and guide the utilization of assessment reports and studies.</td>
<td>• Communicate and display data through a variety of means (publications, reports, presentations, social media, etc.) in a manner that is accurate; transparent regarding the strengths, limitations, and context of the data; and sensitive to political coalitions and realities associated with data as a scarce resource • Lead the design and writing of varied and diverse communications (e.g. reports, publications, presentations, social media, etc.) of assessment, program review, evaluation, and other research activities that include translation of data analysis into goals and actions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The bold text indicates competencies which are included in both the CACUSS (2016) SPRA Competencies and the ACPA and NASPA (2016) AER Competencies, but have a higher-level designation in the CACUSS SPRA Competencies. Competencies that are italicized are unique to the CACUSS (2016) SPRA competencies. All other text is consistent with both the CACUSS SPRA Competencies and the ACPA and NASPA (2016) AER Competencies.
In the initial coding phase, the qualifications and responsibilities sections of each PD were coded categorically based on whether AER competencies were present or absent. This process was repeated for each of the CACUSS Competency Domains. A series of chi-square analyses were conducted to determine if there were statistically significant differences in the frequency with which AER competencies are represented in qualifications sections versus responsibilities sections of PDs, in the rate at which various CACUSS Competency Domains are represented in PDs, or if there are relationships between SPRA Competencies and other CACUSS Competencies in terms of their representation in PDs. Effect sizes were reported using phi ($\phi$) or Cramer’s $V$, depending on the number of categories.

In an effort to explore variations in AER responsibilities or qualifications due to institutional or position-related differences, categorical groupings related to institutional and PD characteristics were established to allow for cross-tabulation. Some categories, such as institution type and functional area, were previously established through the relevance sampling procedures. However, the establishment of other categories required the review, and in some cases pooling, of data to establish groupings of an appropriate size so as to ensure that no more than one of the expected frequencies would be less than five. A series of chi-square analyses were then conducted to determine if there is a relationship between institution type, location, or size and the frequency that AER competencies are included in either the qualifications or responsibilities sections of SAS PDs. A follow-up series of chi-square analysis were conducted to determine if there are any relationships between the professional level of a position, the level of education required, the years of experience required, the date a PD was last updated, or the functional area and frequency that AER competencies are included in either the qualifications or responsibilities sections.
of SAS PDs. Effect sizes were reported using phi ($\phi$) or Cramer’s $V$, depending on the number of categories.

The final stage of data analysis in Phase I of the study was designed to explore the degree of alignment between the AER competencies represented in PDs and the CACUSS SPRA Competency Domain as well as the overall alignment between AER qualifications and responsibilities within PDs. Utilizing a directed approach to qualitative content analysis as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), all instances where AER competencies appear in a PD were coded as one of the five SPRA competency domains using the rubric presented in Table 1. Any statements included in a PD that did not reflect a CACUSS SPRA competency were grouped separately. Qualitative content analysis was conducted to assess the level of alignment within each of the SPRA domains as well to determine any patterns regarding the complexity of AER competencies represented in PDs and the overall alignment of AER competencies within PDs and within functional areas.

**Ethical Considerations.** The content analysis phase of this study did not involve human subjects and therefore did not require approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, care was still taken to obtain the consent of each participating institution. No individual institution or position has been identified in the presentation of the results of the study.

**Phase II – The Qualitative Approach**

The second, qualitative, phase of this study was intended to offer greater depth to the initial findings drawn from the content analysis. While the analysis of PDs offers insights into the representations of AER competencies, PDs do not provide details about how decisions have been made about what competencies are, or are not, included in these documents. Position Descriptions are not neutral documents. Although they are intended
to describe the essential qualifications and responsibilities of a position, they also represent the interests of a wide array of stakeholders. The inclusion of a qualitative phase to the study was intended to provide a window into the factors that influence senior leaders’ decisions regarding the representations of AER competencies in the PDs within their divisions. This section will provide a brief overview of the qualitative stance and discuss the procedures used in this study for sampling, data collection, and analysis.

The Qualitative Stance. Qualitative research explores the ways in which people interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences, and construct their worlds (Merriam, 2009). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). Merriam (2009) identifies four characteristics that are key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: (1) a focus on meaning and understanding; (2) situating the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; (3) an inductive process; and (4) the production of richly descriptive data.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) state that the purpose of an explanatory design is to use a qualitative phase to explain initial quantitative results. One of the strengths of this design is that it facilitates emergent approaches where the second phase can be influenced by what is learned from the initial phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The second phase of this study explored the factors that influence SSAOs decisions regarding the representation of SPRA competencies in SAS PDs. The investigation of this question in a more direct and contextual manner provides an opportunity to develop a greater depth of understanding than could be achieved through the content analysis of PDs alone.

Selection of Participants. The initial findings of the first phase of the study were used to inform the selection of participants and the focus of the semi-structured
interviews. Senior Student Affairs Officers (SSAOs) were selected as the interview participants. SSAOs hold the most senior level administrative positions in their SAS divisions and typically have responsibility for setting divisional priorities, exercising budgetary oversight, and determining staffing complements. In addition, it was anticipated that in their leadership capacity SSAOs may engage with a variety of stakeholders, including the provincial government, other senior institutional leaders, SAS divisional leadership, union leadership, student unions, professional organizations, and other SSAOs through tables such as OCSA and the Committee of VP Students, thereby bringing a broad perspective of the various interests involved in the development of SAS PDs to the interviews.

Consideration was given to ensuring representation of SSAOs from across the Province, from both colleges and universities, and from institutions of varying size. Using these criteria, 12 SSAOs from institutions that participated in Phase I of the study were invited to participate (See Appendix C). In addition, a list of four alternates was developed for use in the case that an SSAO declined to participate. Unfortunately, none of the SSAOs from participating institutions in the Northern region of the Province responded to the invitation to participate in an interview. As such, alternates from institutions in other regions, but of similar type and size were invited to participate. This decision was made based on the results of Phase I which suggest that the representation of AER competencies does not vary as a result of institution location but is influenced by institution size. A detailed description of the results that informed this decision is presented in Chapter Four.

All interviews were conducted in person or via telephone based on the preference of the participant. Participants were forwarded informed consent forms prior to the interview (See Appendix C). They were asked to sign and return the consent form and the
forms were reviewed with participants at the start of each interview. The consent forms included a consent to be audio recorded and participants were also informed verbally that they were being recorded prior to each interview. Each interview followed a consistent semi-structured protocol (See Appendix D). Interviews lasted between 40 to 60 minutes. Participants were generally very open to the process and to discussing the topic of AER in SAS. Many participants responded to each question in depth without the requirement for additional prompts.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation.** At the conclusion of the interviews, all of the recordings were transcribed, and the data were verified by reading through the transcripts while listening to the recordings. The transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO and once verified, the data were coded using the stages outlined by Saldaña (2016).

The coding process is meant to link data and ideas. Saldaña (2016) notes that through the process of coding and re-coding, the researcher begins to construct meaning through the development of categories and themes. In the first cycle of coding three methods were used, Attribute, Descriptive, and Values coding.

Attribute coding notates the basic descriptive information of the setting, participant, demographics, and format (Saldaña, 2016). Saldaña (2016) suggests that Attribute coding is particularly well suited to studies with multiple participants and sites and is consistent with good qualitative data management. The Attribute codes used in Phase II of the study were based on the institution-specific factors identified in Phase I. These codes included, institution type, institution size, and institution location.

Descriptive coding identifies and links comparable contents, summarizing the core topic of a passage of qualitative data in the form of a word or short phrase (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding leads to a categorized inventory of the data’s contents. An example of
an excerpt from one of the interviews coded using Descriptive coding is presented in Figure 2.

“I mean I’ve obviously read and commented on the CACUSS competencies as they were being developed but I haven’t thought about employing them in that way because my fear would be they are at a standard or an ideal that wouldn’t map on to the competencies of my existing complement. That sounds like I don’t have a lot of confidence in my staff which is not true. But for whatever reason you know because we’re not dripping in resources here. We don’t have an internal professional development program. We have very little professional development. What people do get is you know maybe once a year they get to go to a conference or something but there’s not very many mechanisms to build those competencies so it’s a bit ironic to apply them and say that OK for example with assessment, in order to rise to a higher level, you have to have a thorough understanding of assessment and have experience in program assessment when in fact we’ve never given them the resources to actually develop those skills”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 Limited Resources</th>
<th>3 Professional competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Professional development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Professional competencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Hiring decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Assessment skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Example of Descriptive coding of interview transcripts.

Because Descriptive codes focus on the topic and not the content of the text, Saldaña (2016) recommends the inclusion of another meaning-driven method in the analysis process. To address this concern, Values coding was also applied in this study. In this process, units coded according to participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and values were categorized and their collective meaning, interaction, and interplay was analyzed (Saldaña, 2016). An example of an excerpt from one of the interviews coded using Values coding is presented in Figure 3.

In the transition phase of analysis, the codes were charted with a condensed paragraph of each participant’s primary data set in one column and the accompanying major codes in an adjoining column.
"I mean I've obviously read and commented on the CACUSS competencies as they were being developed but I haven't thought about employing them in that way because my fear would be they are at a standard or an ideal that wouldn't map on to the competencies of my existing complement. That sounds like I don't have a lot of confidence in my staff which is not true. But for whatever reason you know because we're not dripping in resources here. We don't have an internal professional development program. We have very little professional development. What people do get is you know maybe once a year they get to go to a conference or something but there's not very many mechanisms to build those competencies so it's a bit ironic to apply them and say that OK for example with assessment, in order to rise to a higher level, you have to have a thorough understanding of assessment and have experience in program assessment when in fact we've never given them the resources to actually develop those skills”.

| i Professional engagement (A) |
| ii Professional competencies as ideal (B) |
| iii Commitment to staff (V) |
| iv Fair hiring practices (V) |

A=Attitude  B=Belief  V=Value

*Figure 3. Example of Values coding of interview transcripts*

The goal of second cycle coding is to organize first cycle codes by category, theme, concept, or theory (Saldaña, 2016). In this study, Pattern coding was used to group the summaries developed in the first cycle coding to identify emergent themes or explanations (Saldaña, 2016). These codes were then used to re-label the data and identify themes. An example of the Pattern coding process is presented in Figure 4.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Cycle Codes</th>
<th>Pattern Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value Assessment Present on Assessment</td>
<td>Assessment Valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate Value</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Orientation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High importance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Question</td>
<td>Resource Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small vs Large Institutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment as luxury</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.* Example of second-cycle Pattern coding of interview transcripts.

**Validity and Reliability**

Validity refers to evidence that the data collected are meaningful indicators of the construct being examined (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest classifying evidence into three types to assess validity: content validity (how reviewers assess whether items or questions are representative of possible items); criterion-related validity (whether scores relate to some other external standard); and construct validity (whether they measure what they are supposed to measure).

While Creswell and Plano Clark’s (2011) definition of validity aligns with traditional definitions of quantitative validity, Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) note that the term “validity” itself is somewhat problematic in the context of mixed-methods research as some qualitative researchers object to the term based on their rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) suggest that because inferences are made in research studies regardless of whether the associated interpretation is inductive or deductive, the term “inference quality” may be more appropriate than “validity” in the context of mixed methods research.
Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) identify two components of inference quality: (1) design quality; and (2) interpretive rigor. Design quality is the standards used for evaluating the methodological rigor of the study, whereas interpretive rigor refers to the standards used to evaluate the accuracy of conclusions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). “Inference transferability” is the term developed by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) to encompass the quantitative term “external validity” and the qualitative term “transferability,” and involves the determination of whether conclusions may be extrapolated beyond the particular conditions of the research study.

Several steps were taken in this study in an effort to address issues of inference quality and inference transferability. In Phase I of the study the population of relevant PDs was defined through the application of previous research into the organizational structures of SAS divisions in the Province of Ontario by Seifert et al. (2011) and a study of AER competencies in SAS job postings in the U.S. by Hoffman and Bresciani (2010). In addition, it was explicitly the CACUSS SPRA Competencies against which PDs were evaluated. These competencies are grounded in a review of recent and foundational literature related to professional development and the development of the field of SAS in Canada (Fernandez et al., 2016). Fernandez et al. (2016) also engaged in an extensive consultation process involving SAS professionals from across Canada, including focus groups, webinars, 21 key informant interviews, an engagement event at the 2016 ACPA Convention, consultations with the CACUSS Communities of Practice, and meetings with the CACUSS board of directors. The CACUSS SPRA competencies are adapted from the ACPA and NASPA (2015) Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators, which are grounded in 19 core documents produced by NASPA, ACPA and CAS, and were
reviewed by a broad cross-section of SAS professionals through an extensive consultation process.

Although CACUSS has not developed an SPRA competencies rubric, there is significant overlap between the CACUSS SPRA competencies and the ACPA and NASPA (2016) AER competencies. As such, the framework presented in Table 1 places the CACUSS SPRA competencies within the ACPA and NASPA (2016) *Professional Competencies Rubric*. Any competencies included in the CACUSS SPRA competencies, but not found in the ACPA and NASPA (2015) competencies, were placed in the domain to which they are most closely associated.

A limitation of many PDs is the inability to determine whether a job analysis informed their development. As such, Polivka and Chaudry (2014) suggest that the internal validity of any study of PDs would be strengthened by first conducting a job analysis and then assessing the degree to which the PD represents the actual job and incorporates relevant competencies. Although it was not feasible to conduct a job analysis of the 311 positions represented in the sample, one frequently used method to compare and confirm the transferability of data from different qualitative sources is triangulation. The mixed model design of this study, with the inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative methods, was intended to enhance the overall validity of the study. The addition of a qualitative component to the content analysis in Phase I provided a means of assessing the inference quality and inference transferability of the qualitative analysis in Phase II. In addition, the results of each of the Phases, as well as overarching inferences resulting from the integration of Phase I and Phase II, were compared to existing literature to assess consistency with current knowledge and theory in the field.
A limitation to the transferability of the findings of this study may be the fact that PDs were not randomly selected. Instead, this study obtained a stratified relevance sample of PDs from SAS divisions at colleges and universities in the Province of Ontario.

In addition to validity, reliability was also addressed. Krippendorff (2004) argues that a study is reliable when “it responds to the same phenomena in the same way regardless of the circumstances of its implementation” (p.211).

In an effort to address reliability in Phase I all PDs were coded by the same individual. Each PD was reviewed several times throughout the coding process and intra-coder reliability was verified at increments throughout the process to ensure consistency over time. The quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated to look for convergences and explore patterns in this first phase of the study. The results of Phase I were used to develop interview questions for Phase II to facilitate a deeper exploration of these initial findings. Prior to the commencement of interviews in Phase II, the interview guide was pilot tested with two SSAOs from institutions not participating in the study.
Chapter 4

Results

This chapter will report the results from both Phase I and Phase II of the study. An overview of participating institutions is provided as well as a description of the PDs collected. This is followed by the presentation of results of the content analysis, including the chi square analyses and qualitative analyses. Initial conclusions of the content analysis of PDs are presented as foci for Phase II of the study. Finally, themes emerging from the qualitative analysis of the interviews will be presented and the chapter will conclude with a discussion of the integration of the analyses from Phases I and II.

Participating Institutions

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the institutions that agreed to participate in Phase I of the study by providing a sample of PDs from their SAS division. Of the 42 provincially-funded, English-speaking, post-secondary institutions in the Province of Ontario, 26 (61.9%) accepted the invitation to participate in the study. With the exception of institution type, the categories presented in Table 2 were created to ensure that they were of a sufficient size to facilitate data analysis. A larger number of institutions from within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and those with more than 20,000 students participated in the study. In the case of institution size, the distribution of participating institutions is comparable to the distribution of institutions in the Province. However, in the case of institution location, there was a slight over-representation of institutions in the GTA and a slight underrepresentation of institutions in Northern Ontario and South-Western Ontario.
Table 2

*Participating Institutions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (n=26)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 5,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000-9,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-19,999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20,000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTA</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 provides an overview of the PDs that were collected from each category of institution.

Table 3

*Characteristics of Position Descriptions by Institution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (n=311)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution type</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>38.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 5,000</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000-9,999</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-19,999</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20,000</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution location</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTA</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>42.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 provides an overview of the characteristics of the PDs collected as part of the sample. Using the sampling procedures described in Chapter 3, a total of 311 PDs were included in the study. The categories for years of experience were created based on a review of the PDs in the study in order to create balanced categories for analysis.

Table 4

*Characteristics of Position Descriptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional area (n=311)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence life</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility services</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services for diverse students</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic success</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education required (n=309)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College diploma</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of professional experience required (n=285)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 or more</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional level (n=311)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessment Qualifications and Responsibilities**

The initial review of PDs suggested differences in the representations of AER qualifications and responsibilities across PDs. As such, as part of the preliminary coding process, each PD was coded according to the presence or absence of AER competencies
within the qualifications and responsibilities sections of the PD. A summary is presented in Table 5.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (n=311)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AER Qualifications</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AER Responsibilities</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>82.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of a chi-square analysis revealed a statistically significant difference, with a moderately strong effect size, between the frequency with which AER qualifications and AER responsibilities are represented in PDs, $\chi^2(1) = 25.3$ $p < .001$, $\phi=0.29$. Although 82.3% of PDs were found to include AER responsibilities, only 34.7% of PDs were found to include AER qualifications. As a result of this variation, 48.6% of PDs were found to include AER responsibilities, but no commensurate AER qualifications. Only three PDs (0.01%) in the sample contained AER qualifications, but no AER responsibilities.

Further analyses were conducted to explore any possible relationships between the representations of AER qualifications or responsibilities and institutional characteristics. A chi-square analysis was conducted to examine whether the frequency with which AER qualifications are represented in PDs varies by institution-type. The results suggest that colleges and universities include AER qualifications in PDs with similar frequency ($\chi^2(1) = 0.17$, $p=.68$). Similarly, there was no statistically significant difference found in the frequency of AER qualifications as a result of institution location ($\chi^2(3) = 5.04$, $p=.17$).

The results of a chi-square analysis suggested a statistically significant, but relatively weak, difference in the frequency with which AER qualifications are represented
in PDs at institutions of different size ($\chi^2(3) = 8.67, p=.03$, Cramer’s $V=0.17$). As described in Table 6, institutions with more than 20000 students included AER qualifications in PDs at a significantly higher frequency than smaller institutions.

Table 6

**Analysis of AER Qualifications by Institution Size**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution size</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4999</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>-12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5000-9999</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>-1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10000-19999</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>-10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20000+</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>+6.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of a chi-square analysis demonstrated no statistically significant differences in the frequency of representations of AER responsibilities within PDs due to institution type ($\chi^2(1) = 1.33, p=.25$), institution size ($\chi^2(3) = 5.40, p=.14$), or institution location ($\chi^2(3) = 2.85, p=.42$).

**Education.** A chi-square analysis was conducted to examine whether the representation of AER qualifications in PDs is related to required levels of education. The results suggest that the inclusion of AER qualifications occurs more frequently as the required level of education increases ($\chi^2(3) = 12.70, p=.005$, Cramer’s $V=0.20$). Positions requiring a graduate degree included AER qualifications more often (44.4%) than those that required an undergraduate degree (37.4%) or a College diploma (21.7%).

A chi-square analysis also demonstrated a statistically significant difference in the frequency with which AER responsibilities are represented in PDs related to education requirements ($\chi^2(3) = 18.23, p<.001$, Cramer’s $V=0.24$). However, unlike AER
qualifications, AER responsibilities appeared at a similar rate in positions that required graduate (86.1%) or undergraduate degrees (87.9%). Positions that required a College diploma included AER responsibilities only 72.8% of the time. Positions requiring a High School diploma were not included in the analysis due to the small number in the sample and an expected count less than five.

**Years of Experience.** The results of a chi-square analysis demonstrated no statistically significant differences in the frequency of inclusion of AER qualifications ($\chi^2(2) = 3.52, p=.17$) or AER responsibilities ($\chi^2(2) = 4.54, p=.10$) related to the required years of experience stated in PDs.

**Professional Level.** The results of a chi-square analysis suggest that AER qualifications are included more frequently in PDs as the professional level increases ($\chi^2(2) = 22.97, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V=0.27$). Senior level PDs included AER qualifications with a higher frequency (53.8%) that those at the mid-level (38.1%) or entry-level (22.4%). Similarly, the results of a chi-square analysis also demonstrated a statistically significant difference in the frequency with which AER responsibilities are included in position descriptions among professional levels ($\chi^2(2) = 22.41, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V=0.27$). Senior level PDs included AER responsibilities with a higher frequency (96.3%) that those at the mid-level (86.9%) or entry-level (72.1%).

**Date PD Updated.** The results of a chi-square analysis demonstrated no statistically significant differences in the frequency with which AER qualifications ($\chi^2(4) = 4.31, p=.37$) or AER responsibilities ($\chi^2(4) = 6.52, p=.16$) were included in PDs related to the date the PD was most recently updated.
**Functional Area.** The results of the chi-square analysis suggest a statistically significant difference in the frequency with which AER qualifications are included in PDs by functional area, $\chi^2(8) = 32.36$, $p < .001$. Cramer’s $V$ was calculated at 0.32, which would be considered to be a strong measure of association. As described in Table 7, AER qualifications were most frequently included in positions within the Student Engagement functional area (52.3%). AER qualifications were included less often within the Accessibility Services functional area than in any other functional area (10.5%). It is important to note that PDs falling within the Assessment functional area were removed from this analysis as the expected frequency was less than five.

Table 7

*Analysis of prevalence of AER qualifications by functional area*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional area</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Expected</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Observed</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>+3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence life</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>-7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>-24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services for diverse students</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>-4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic success</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>+4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>+17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>-9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>-8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results of the chi-square analysis of AER responsibilities by functional area demonstrated a statistically significant difference in the frequency with which AER responsibilities are included in PDs across the nine SAS functional areas included in the study, $\chi^2(8) = 21.75$, $p = .005$. Cramer’s $V$ was calculated to be 0.26, suggesting a moderately strong association. An overview of the prevalence of AER responsibilities across functional areas is presented in Table 8. Aside from Assessment-focused PDs which would be expected to include AER responsibilities, the functional area with the highest
rate of AER responsibilities is Student Engagement (92.3%), followed closely by Academic Success (90.9%). AER responsibilities were included least often in PDs within the Counselling functional area (62.5%). AER responsibilities were also represented less often in the Health Services (70.4%) and Accessibility Services (73.7%) functional areas.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional area</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Expected %</th>
<th>Observed %</th>
<th>% Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career services</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence life</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>86.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services for diverse students</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>81.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic success</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student engagement</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>92.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health services</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>70.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Relationships to Other Competencies.** In an effort to better understand how the representation of AER competencies in SAS PDs compares to other professional competencies, the PDs were coded as to the presence or absence of competencies in each of the domains of the CACUSS Competency Model. Table 9 presents an overview of the frequencies with which each Competency Domain is represented in the qualifications sections of PDs in the sample.
Table 9

*Frequencies of Representation of Competency Domains as Qualifications*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency domain (n=311)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>72.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional and interpersonal intelligence</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural fluency</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous cultural awareness</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary acumen</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>66.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, diversity and inclusion</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership, management and administration</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>83.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Planning, research, assessment</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student advising, support and advocacy</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student learning and development</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology and digital engagement</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an effort to determine if there are professional competencies more likely to be associated with SPRA competencies, a series of chi-square analyses were performed. The results demonstrate statistically significant relationships between the inclusion of SPRA competencies as qualifications in PDs and the inclusion of competencies within the Communication ($\chi^2(1) = 20.86, p<.001$), Intercultural Fluency ($\chi^2(1) = 7.25, p=.007$), Post-secondary acumen ($\chi^2(1) = 8.33, p=.004$), Leadership, Management, and Administration ($\chi^2(1) = 11.29, p=.001$), and Student Leadership and Development ($\chi^2(1) = 17.89, p<.001$) domains. However, the levels of association range from weak to moderate. It is possible that these relationships are more a function of the functional areas where SPRA competencies are more prevalent (i.e., Student Engagement) and the professional levels where SPRA competencies are more prevalent (i.e., senior level positions) than evidence of a relationship between professional competency domains. The full results of the analysis are presented in Table 10.
Table 10

*Analysis of Relationships Between SPRA Qualifications and Other Competency Domains*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency domain</th>
<th>AER Qualifications</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>$\chi^2$</th>
<th>$P$</th>
<th>$\phi$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication (n=224)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>20.86</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional &amp; interpersonal intelligence (n=209)</td>
<td></td>
<td>77</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural fluency (n=46)</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52.2</td>
<td>7.25</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous cultural awareness (n=22)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary acumen (n=206)</td>
<td></td>
<td>83</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equity, diversity &amp; inclusion (n=165)</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership, management &amp; administration (n=261)</td>
<td></td>
<td>101</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>11.29</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student advising, support and advocacy (n=167)</td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student leadership &amp; development (n=186)</td>
<td></td>
<td>82</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>17.89</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology &amp; digital engagement (n=193)</td>
<td></td>
<td>71</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Alignment of AER Qualifications and Responsibilities**

The results of the quantitative analysis revealed inconsistencies in the frequency with which AER qualifications and responsibilities are represented in the PDs of SAS professionals. Although 82.3% of position descriptions were found to include AER responsibilities, only 34.7% of position descriptions were found to include AER qualifications; 48.6% of position descriptions were found to include AER responsibilities, but no commensurate AER qualifications. The qualitative analysis of the PDs provided an opportunity to further explore the alignment of AER qualifications and responsibilities represented in these documents. Results of this analysis suggest a deeper level of inconsistency beyond the basic frequency of representations.
Analysis of PDs that included both AER qualifications and AER responsibilities suggests low levels of alignment between the stated AER qualifications and responsibilities in more than half of the documents included in the sample. A clear pattern emerged of PDs that included several complex AER responsibilities, but only basic AER qualifications. Table 11, 12, 13, and 14 present a representative selection of qualifications and responsibilities which illustrate this finding.

Table 11

Representative AER qualifications and responsibilities for an entry level PD in the health functional area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area: Health</th>
<th>Level: Entry</th>
<th>Education: Undergraduate Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AER Qualifications</strong></td>
<td><strong>AER Responsibilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understands the importance of evidenced based practice within the health care field.</td>
<td>• Participates in the planning, development, delivery and evaluation of health promotion programs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is a key member of the Quality Assurance program in the clinic monitoring quality, satisfaction, and financial outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participates in the planning, development, delivery and evaluation of health promotion programs, screening programs, medical directives and policies / procedures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12

*Representations of AER qualifications and responsibilities for a mid-level PD in the student engagement functional area*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AER Qualifications</th>
<th>AER Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Minimum 5 years’ experience in an experiential program delivery environment, with an emphasis on project and program development, implementation, assessment and group facilitation, preferably within an educational setting, or the non-profit sector</td>
<td>• Monitors progress and assesses student-learning outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leads team on planning of project and program development, implementation, assessment and group facilitation through research, learning and utilizing theoretical approaches and best-practices for orientation, transition and engagement programs.</td>
<td>• Assesses needs of students on an ongoing basis, revising and developing appropriate programs as necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Incorporates the application of learning outcomes and competencies with student activities, delivers student assessment plans. Administers and compiles assessment and evaluation reports for all orientation, transition and engagement programs.</td>
<td>• Manages, monitors and evaluates the performance of partnerships supporting engagement and capacity-building activities by soliciting feedback and generating statistics and reports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensures regular data collection and statistical analysis of program activities and impact including preparing reports on key performance indicators.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13

*Representative AER qualifications and responsibilities for a mid-level PD in the residence life functional area.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AER Qualifications</th>
<th>AER Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Experience in developing, implementing and monitoring service excellence.</td>
<td>- The incumbent is responsible for the planning, organizing, implementation, and evaluation of the Residence Life Model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The incumbent facilitates residence community development via the assessment, development, coordination, promotion, implementation and evaluation of student/residence life programming, based on a theory and understanding of student development for all students living in residence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Continually assess the climate/environment within the residence to improve the ability to respond with necessary policy changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The incumbent will author reports at the conclusion of significant events, such as RLS training, Year-end, Student staff hiring process, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The incumbent will seek feedback on policy changes from staff and students, through surveys, focus groups, evaluations, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 14

Representative AER qualifications and responsibilities for a senior level PD in the counselling functional area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area: Counselling Services</th>
<th>Level: Senior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education: Graduate Degree</td>
<td>AER Responsibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AER Qualifications</th>
<th>AER Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Basic computer knowledge and skills, including data collection and statistical analysis.</td>
<td>• Ensures service delivery meets relevant professional standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Oversees policy and program planning, implementation and monitoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provides leadership and direction for Counselling and Accessibility programs and services. Ensures that services are consistent with College strategic directions, best practices in the post-secondary educational environment, and meet the needs of current and future students and potential students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Develops goals, objectives, plans, policies and procedures and continually improves services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Monitors and evaluates services and develops improvements based on analysis and feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Compiles, analyses and maintains statistical data/reports of department operations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In cases where there was found to be alignment between the stated AER qualifications and responsibilities, these PDs tended to fall on either of the extreme ends of a spectrum. These positions tended to be either extremely AER focused with very high levels of AER responsibilities and qualifications or have very limited AER responsibility with very basic AER responsibilities and qualifications. Tables 15 and 16 provide exemplars of the AER responsibilities and qualifications from PDs at either end of this spectrum.
Table 15

*Basic AER qualifications and responsibilities for a mid-level position in the health functional area*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area: Health</th>
<th>Level: Mid</th>
<th>Education: Undergraduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AER Qualifications</strong></td>
<td><strong>AER Responsibilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Experience with program planning, implementation and evaluation</td>
<td>• Oversees program development, coordination and evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16

*Advanced AER qualifications and responsibilities for a senior-level position in the assessment functional area.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area: Assessment</th>
<th>Level: Senior</th>
<th>Education: Undergraduate degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AER Qualifications</strong></td>
<td><strong>AER Responsibilities</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• At least ten years of data management and performance reporting experience and a demonstrated record of progressively responsible management level experience.</td>
<td>• Builds, analyzes, and reports on metrics and key performance indicators for the Vice-Provost Students (VPS).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Thorough understanding of relational database technology.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• responsible for creating, maintaining, interpreting and disseminating dashboards and reports that monitor and measure performance against outcomes and objectives for marketing, recruitment, admissions, enrollment, and retention. These tools are used by stakeholders in the Division of Students and across the campus to measure, monitor, and manage performance of core strategies and tactics, and provide insights and qualitative and quantitative evidence to analyze activities at both micro and macro views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of qualitative research methods and report development</td>
<td>• The [incumbent’s] data analysis, interpretation, and related action-oriented outcomes support strategic, tactical, and operational efforts and decision making in areas such as marketing, advertising, and communications campaigns; goals and outcomes for recruitment and admissions activities; student progression, retention, and satisfaction; as well as initiatives for public, corporate, and media relations. The data and information to be collected, analyzed, and reported cover a wide range of target audiences and sources throughout the student life cycle that includes prospective students, current</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expertise in data management and analysis such as modeling, visualization, migration, validation, database and data warehousing solutions development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of data visualization tools and best practices that enable end-users to view, explore, analyze, and better understand data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advanced proficiency in Excel for analysis and reporting (e.g., building and utilizing formulas, pivot table, macros, and external data sources/queries)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advanced knowledge of database software, notably MS Access, Oracle, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students, alumni, advisory boards, the university, and external audiences such as corporations, non-profit, and government agencies.

- Manage data, develop analysis and interpretation, and effectively recommends related action-oriented outcomes to support strategic, tactical, and operational efforts and decision making.

- Working collaboratively ..., define data required, the definitions and the underlying rules that manipulate the data to support reports and analysis required by the Division.

- Create reports that shape unstructured data into clear visualizations that provide end-users an ability to discover relationships within related data in new and innovative ways that lend to making decisions, planning next steps, and executing action items.

- Analyze data/report discrepancies and make effective recommendations on remediation steps required to address these discrepancies.

- Remain current with emerging and prevailing trends and issues in the data assessment industry particularly as they apply to metrics/business analytics.

- Define business needs, source data, identify anomalies, interpret results and make effective recommendations.

- Develop and analyze operational and strategic reporting requirements.

- Present influential reporting such as predictive modelling to stakeholders in a variety of formats, including formal presentations, to inform planning, policy formation and decision-making activities.

- Build, analyze, and report on metrics and key performance indicators to measure impact and ROI from strategies and tactics.

- Collaborate with campus partners to build, measure, and evaluate metrics to determine and report on the success of strategies and tactics.

- Create reports, interpret data, and distribute analysis on trends in the student life cycle to measure, monitor, and manage goals and outcomes.

- Formulate policy objectives and make recommendations on the development of administrative programs and operations.

- Assist stakeholders in improving quality of data.

- Work with other systems, data, and analyst staff members across the campus on cross-functional projects with the ultimate goal of a continuous process of improvement in attracting, recruiting, retaining, satisfying and graduating students.

- Develop overarching Divisional policies applicable to consistent data mining management and reporting.

- Facilitate the efficient use and application of data visualization tools and best practices.

- Provide support in the efforts to develop and launch surveys, analyze and distribute results, and identify patterns in relation to needs, interests, goals, career trajectory, goal attainment, etc., from new students through alumni (e.g., utilizing career path patterns, testimonials, etc., for marketing and recruitment purposes).

- Support data management projects to access and integrate data, analysis, process, and practices in order to scale research and reporting results to improve organizational ability to make informed data based decisions.

- Effectively recommend operational changes based on data analysis.

- Make binding decisions involving independent judgment and discretion over important aspects of the University’s business (e.g., independently negotiate and authorize contracts for data management tools).
Among those PDs that were found to have AER responsibilities, but no AER qualifications, there was no single theme that emerged among the AER responsibilities in these PDs to suggest that they differed from those found in PDs with AER qualifications. PDs in this category included a broad range of AER responsibilities consistent with those found in PDs with AER qualifications. A representative selection of these AER responsibilities is presented in Table 17.

Table 17

AER Responsibilities Represented in PDs without AER Qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>AER Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Functional Area: Counselling  
Level: Senior  
Education: Graduate Degree | Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of service delivery and makes adjustments to policies, procedures and services, in consultation with relevant managers and staff.  
Provides statistical and narrative reports on a regular basis and on an ad hoc basis as necessary/requested. |
| Functional Area: Accessibility  
Level: Senior  
Education: Graduate Degree | Has responsibility to demonstrate effectiveness of service delivery and institutional performance on key metrics like retention, graduation and employment rates for students with disabilities.  
Research, assess and implement initial accommodation process to ensure the utmost efficiency and timeliness of service to students  
Research the efficacy of group service provision in some cases, i.e. assistive technology training  
Effectively collect, analyze and present statistics that help the department and institution make good decisions regarding student support  
Assess overall operations of Disability Services to determine what changes might be beneficial |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area: Career</th>
<th>Facilitate &amp; interpret student assessments, research techniques, motivational practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level: Entry</td>
<td>Analyze and report on comprehensive statistics to monitor industry trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: College Diploma</td>
<td>Monitor analytics, google analytics, comparative analysis, database reports and survey results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administer evaluation forms to ensure quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluate and analyze evaluation forms to look for trends, challenges and successes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make recommendations to manager based on trends, challenges and successes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional Area: Student Engagement</th>
<th>Contributes to the development, implementation and assessment of programs and initiatives that promote and celebrate the purposeful development and engagement of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level: Mid</td>
<td>this position is accountable for the coordination, delivery and ongoing assessment of strategic initiatives that foster and enhance student leadership and professional skills development and peer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>Facilitating and assessing workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tracking student participation in programs and overseeing the management of student data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assess programmatic and activity-based learning outcomes and metrics to measure student learning and development and to demonstrate program effectiveness and success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working with colleagues and campus partners to support the articulation of program outcomes for specific projects and assess progress toward those outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging students, faculty, and student affairs professionals in collaborative assessment, both informal and formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluating and reporting on initiatives to determine whether efforts are meeting student needs and generating the desired outcomes, to identify unmet needs, and to inform evidence-based decisions on future programming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alignment with CACUSS Professional Competency Model

The AER qualifications and responsibilities found within the sample of PDs were coded in an effort to examine their alignment with the CACUSS SPRA competencies. The rubric presented in Chapter 3 was used to facilitate the coding process. Overall, there was found to be moderate alignment with the CACUSS Competency Model, with nine of the 34 competencies within the SPRA Competency Domain consistently represented.

**Terms and concepts.** The core competency associated with the Terms and Concepts domain is the ability to differentiate between assessment, program review, evaluation, planning, and research, as well as the methods appropriate to each (Fernandez et al., 2016). The analysis of the PDs included in this study found none that contained AER responsibilities or qualifications that connected directly to this competency. Further, across the collected PDs the terms “evaluation,” “assessment,” and “research” tended to be used interchangeably, often even within the same PD.

**Values, ethics, and politics.** The focus of the Values, Ethics, and Politics domain is competencies related to the ethical principles associated with AER, as well as the ability to navigate institutional policies and politics. The analysis of PDs included in this study found very few instances where competencies within this domain were included in PDs. The only functional area where this domain was represented was Assessment-focused positions. However, with only eight PDs that fall within this functional area included in the study, and only four that include competencies within the Values, Ethics, and Politics domain, there is insufficient data to draw conclusions about any possible pattern beyond a general lack of representation in all other functional areas.
**AER design.** The AER Design domain includes competencies related to aligning theoretical frameworks to organizational outcomes, creating learner centred outcomes, designing and leading an assessment strategy, and thinking critically about problems of practice (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The analysis of the AER qualifications and responsibilities represented in the PDs included in this study suggests that two competencies within this domain appear consistently:

1. Ensure a proactive approach to program planning, project coordination and programming which includes opportunities for continuous assessment and development; and
2. Design program and learning outcomes that are appropriately clear, specific, and measurable; that are informed by theoretical frameworks and that align with organizational outcomes, goals and values (Fernandez et al., 2016).

The two competencies represented are considered to be at the core and intermediate levels of the CACUSS Professional Competency Model. There were no competencies at the advanced level that were represented with a degree of consistency that would constitute a clear pattern. A selection of representative statements from the AER Design domain which are included in the collected PDs are presented in Table 18. The AER Design competencies that do not appear consistently refer to the ability to communicate with institutional stakeholders regarding the relationships between learning outcomes and assessment, as well as discerning appropriate assessment or research designs.
### Table 18

**Examples of AER Design Competencies Represented in PDs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>AER Design Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functional Area: Student Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Leads a team on planning of project and program development, implementation, assessment and group facilitation through research, learning, and utilizing theoretical approaches and best practices for orientation, transition, and engagement programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level: Mid</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leads the Career Development team in the development and implementation of methods of practice and related processes (including reporting, evaluation and learning outcomes) that optimize resources and support the delivery of sustainable student-focused programming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oversee an outcome measurement &amp; evaluation program, including the administration of assessment and evaluation reports for all career programs offered, and sharing of results to raise awareness of the impact of student experiences in developing career ready graduates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functional Area: Student Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Plans, develops, implements, evaluates and assesses all aspects of...programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level: Entry</td>
<td>The incumbent utilizes evidence-based practice to assess the developmental and educational needs of student leaders and works toward fostering a sense of self-efficacy, self-mastery, goal achievement, empowerment, and success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: College Diploma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Methodology, data collection, and data analysis.** Competencies within the Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis domain focus on an understanding of the strengths and limitations of research methodologies, including the ability to select an appropriate methodology based on the purpose of the assessment, and collect and analyze data (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The analysis of the AER qualifications and responsibilities
included in the PDs in this study suggests four competencies that appear consistently in the documents:

1. Able to conduct basic research and program assessment;

2. Facilitate appropriate data collection for system/department-wide assessment and evaluation efforts using current technology and methods;

3. Design on-going and periodic data collection efforts such that they are sustainable, rigorous, as unobtrusive as possible, and technologically current; and

4. Lead, supervise, and/or collaborate with others to design and analyze assessment, program review, evaluation and research activities that span multiple methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, among others) (Fernandez et al, 2015).

A representative selection of statements from PDs that align with the Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis Domain are presented in Table 19. The represented competencies within this domain include those at the core, intermediate, and advanced levels. However, it should be noted that there are several competencies at each level that are not consistently represented. These competencies are related to assessing methodologies or methodological designs and applying more sophisticated qualitative and quantitative methods, including complex data analysis skills.
Table 19

Examples of Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis Competencies Represented in PDs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional Area: Residence Life Level: Entry Education: Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>Conduct focus groups to understand student needs and develop recommendations for Student Housing Services, particularly resulting from formal surveys (those concerned with residence satisfaction and curriculum assessment).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Area: Career Level: Senior Education: Graduate Degree</td>
<td>Measures and provides analysis on the effectiveness of services, including, but not limited to: developing survey instruments, participating in national or provincial studies and conducting/coordinating research in conjunction with the College’s Corporate Planning and Institutional Research department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional Area: Academic Success Level: Entry Education: Undergraduate Degree</td>
<td>Design and implement evaluation strategies such as surveys, focus groups, and rubrics to measure program outcomes and effectiveness. Analyze and interpret data for purposes of evaluating results, communicating with partners and stakeholders, and informing future planning. Understand research methodologies used in student development and adult education research and be able to evaluate empirical and theoretical research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Interpreting, reporting, and using results.* This domain includes competencies related to the interpretation of data within an institutional context as well as the ability to present results and use findings to inform decision making (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The analysis of the AER responsibilities and qualifications represented in the sample of PDs suggested three competencies that are consistently represented:
1. Ensure all communications of assessment and research results are accurate, responsible and effective;

2. Effectively articulate, interpret and apply results of research and assessment reports and studies, including professional literature; and

3. Lead the design and writing of varied and diverse communications (e.g., reports, publications, presentations, social media.) of assessment, program review, evaluation, and other research activities that include translation of data analysis into goals and actions (Fernandez et. al, 2016).

The competencies represented from this domain include those at each level of the SPRA Competency Domain – core, intermediate, and advanced. Examples of statements from PDs that illustrate the representation of this domain are presented in Table 20. The competencies within the Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results domain that were not found to be consistently represented in PDs were at the intermediate and advanced levels. These competencies relate to the utilization of assessment reports, the communication of data in a contextually appropriate manner, and the prioritization of budgetary and human resources to support AER efforts.
### Examples of Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results Competencies Represented in PDs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functional Area: Academic Success</strong></td>
<td>Prepares and presents an annual report on Academic Success operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level: Senior</td>
<td>Oversees an outcome measurement &amp; evaluation program, including the administration of assessment and evaluation reports for all academic success programs offered, and sharing of results to raise awareness of the impact of student experiences in developing the whole student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: Graduate Degree</td>
<td>Applies and evaluates literature, research, institutional data, and theoretical frameworks to establish, manage, and transform evidence-based programs and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develops information driven insights to help identify trends and opportunities and provide solutions based on these insights.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Functional Area: Services for Diverse Students** | Completes follow-up consultation, review and evaluation including tracking participant information and drafting a report |
| Level: Entry | Files reports with Director on all activities and survey outcomes and organizes post-activity debrief and review. |
| Education: Undergraduate Degree |  |

| **Functional Area: Counselling** | Provide input to the director for annual reporting including: Ministry reports, year-end reports, the Student Services Fee Committee report. |
| Level: Mid | Publish and/or present research and resources through appropriate journals and conferences |
| Education: Graduate Degree |  |

Overall, the results of the qualitative analysis of PDs suggest a moderate degree of alignment between the AER responsibilities and qualifications represented in the PDs and the SPRA competencies included in the CACUSS professional competency model. Although
there were no AER-related competencies that appeared consistently within the PDs that are not included in the CACUSS SPRA competencies, it should be noted that there are several competencies identified as “core” within the CACUSS SPRA competency domain that do not appear consistently in PDs that include AER qualifications and/or responsibilities. These competencies are listed below:

1. Differentiate between assessment, program review, evaluation, planning and research as well as the methods appropriate to each;
2. Explain the necessity to follow institutional and divisional procedures and policies (e.g. ethics approval, informed consent) with regard to ethical assessment, evaluation and other research activities;
3. Identify the political and educational sensitivity of raw and partially processed data and results, handling them with appropriate confidentiality and deference to organizational hierarchies;
4. Explain to students and colleagues the relationship of assessment and research processes to learning outcomes and goals;
5. Assess the legitimacy, trustworthiness, and/or validity of studies of various methods and methodological designs (e.g. qualitative vs quantitative, theoretical perspective, epistemological approach); and
6. Consider the rudimentary strengths and limitations of various methodological research approaches in the application of findings to practice in diverse institutional settings and with diverse student populations (Fernandez et al, 2016).
Transitioning to the Qualitative Phase

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-model design. As such, the second, qualitative phase was intended to address the results of the first phase of the study in greater depth. The content analysis of PDs suggested a modest degree of alignment with the CACUSS competency model, with only nine of the 34 competencies within the SPRA competency domain consistently represented and several “core” competencies largely unrepresented. In addition, the SPRA competency domain was among the domains with the least representation in qualifications sections, with only Intercultural Fluency and Indigenous Cultural Awareness appearing less often. Significant differences were found in the frequency of representation of AER qualifications and responsibilities based on level of education required, professional level, and functional area – with AER competencies represented less often in PDs from Health, Counselling and Accessibility Services. In addition, the content analysis revealed a lack of alignment between the AER-related qualifications and responsibilities represented in PDs, both in terms of frequency and content.

The initial findings of the first phase of the study were used to inform the selection of participants and the focus of the semi-structured interviews. Consideration was given to ensuring representation of SSAOs from across the province, from both colleges and universities, and from institutions of varying size. Using the criteria, 12 SSAOs from institutions that participated in Phase I of the study were selected. In addition, a list of four alternates was developed in the case that an SSAO declined to participate. Unfortunately, none of the SSAOs from participating institutions in the Northern region of the Province responded to the invitation to participate in an interview. As such, alternates from institutions of similar type and size in other regions of the province were invited to
participate. This decision was made based on the results of Phase I which suggest that the
representation of AER competencies does not vary as a result of institution location but is
influenced by institution size. Table 21 provides an overview of the institutional
demographics of interview participants. Seven of the 12 participants were women (58.3%)
and 10 participants were Caucasian (83.3%). Additional demographic information about
individual participants has not been provided in an effort to maintain their confidentiality.

Table 21

Institutional Demographics of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Characteristic (n=12)</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institution-type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTA</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-West</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution size</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5000-9999</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10000-19999</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;20000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix D) was designed to develop a
deeper understanding of the factors that influence SSAOs decisions regarding the
representation of AER qualifications and responsibilities in PDs; the degree to which
professional competency models are currently used in the development or revision of PDs;
the level of interest in using professional competency models for this purpose; and the
overall value placed on AER competencies by SSAOs. The results of the interviews are reported in the following section.

**Developing Qualitative Themes**

For analysis, the interview transcripts were initially coded using Attribute, Descriptive, and Values coding. In the transition phase, all codes were listed, and finally Pattern coding was used to group codes and review the data. Four overarching themes developed through the iterative process of analysis:

1. Commitments to evidence-informed decision-making;
2. Balancing espoused values and administrative realities;
3. Inconsistent AER skills and knowledge; and
4. Variation in the perceived applicability of professional competency models.

Within the second theme several sub-themes emerged related to financial constraints, human resource policies, and variations across functional areas and professional levels. Similarly, the fourth theme also includes sub-themes related to individualized approaches to AER competencies and competency models more broadly, Each of these themes will be described in greater detail in the sections that follow.

**Commitment to Evidence-Informed Decision-Making.** The value of AER skills and knowledge, and the ability to engage in evidence-informed decision making was a strong theme. Every interview participant clearly articulated a commitment to strategic planning, research, and assessment in some form. As one participant stated, “I don’t think I’ve heard anyone say, I don’t think assessment is important, or, I don’t need evidence, I need to be able to tell the stories and be able to demonstrate that we’re engaged in evidence-based practice.”
This commitment to evidence-informed decision making was closely tied to participants’ perception of AER as tools to communicate the value of the work of SAS professionals and divisions. One participant commented, “I have tried over the years to really push this agenda because for me it’s also very important to be able to show the importance of the work we do.” The interest in communicating the value of SAS functions was often driven by expectations on the part of institutional leadership and government for SSAOs to demonstrate value in order to secure resources. As one participant noted:

I think we’ve moved from a place 20 years ago of not really having a strong framework and not needing in the same way to demonstrate our value, to a place now where it’s like, OK, I need you to help me to tell the story about why it is that you need more resources to do X, Y or Z, and you need to be able to tell me how many people are being impacted by X, Y or Z verses something else you could be doing, and what is the nature of that impact.

Another participant commented:

The importance of assessment is something that is becoming more and more clear because we’ve been able to use the data that we’ve had to get more resources and more space. So, it has made a difference to us already to have data in hand.

Although committed to evidence-informed decision-making, participants primarily spoke of extrinsic motivators to engage in AER activities such as institutional accountability measures and the drive for resources. Most exhibited deeply pragmatic approaches to AER activities and the development of SPRA competencies, describing them as necessary for the justification of resources and the positioning of SAS divisions as a source of expertise on student experience, student engagement, and student success.
Several participants also noted the drive for resources as a motivator for their staff to engage in AER activities. One participant commented:

I give a presentation...about how your good assessment results get better funding. I talk about how telling stories with numbers gives me money from upstairs and I’ll be able to fund things.

It is important to note that this participant went on to clarify that by “good” they meant “a solid finding” rather than a positive result.

**Balancing Espoused Values and Administrative Realities.** Although all participants spoke of the value of assessment and evidence-informed decision-making, this commitment was consistently tempered by a discussion of the challenges associated with administrative realities. Many participants suggested that limitations posed by a lack of financial resources, Human Resource policies, and the current level of the SPRA competencies of staff, compromised their ability to enact their espoused values related to AER. This challenge was particularly salient among participants from campuses with smaller student populations who described feeling forced to make difficult decisions about meeting student needs on a daily basis versus directing resources to AER activities. As one participant from a mid-size institution stated:

At [NAME OF INSTITUTION] there’s just not a lot of time or a lot of resources to dedicate to conducting full blown evaluations and assessments...so I need to be measured. Leaders need to be measured in terms of the expectations we are putting on our staff, and to the level of awareness, expectation, and most importantly, ability to execute on these types of activities. So, you know, my staff doesn’t have a lot of time to evaluate how our [NAME of PROGRAM] is doing. My staff doesn’t have time to evaluate our [NAME OF PROGRAM]. My staff doesn’t have a lot of time to
evaluate whether or not the interventions we’re providing in our Accessibility Services office are making a difference in terms of the retention or graduation of our students. We’re just struggling to meet that demand. The everyday demand of the students who walk through our door.

Although participants at larger institutions also identified challenges related to financial resources, SSAOs from these colleges and universities were also more likely to share information about AER-specific positions in their portfolios or external contractors they had engaged to support AER efforts such as Campus Labs or the Education Advisory Board – something that one participant from a small campus described as a “luxury.” At the same time, SSAOs from larger institutions acknowledged these discrepancies. One participant noted:

It’s a resource question. I think schools with resources are able to do better than some of the smaller schools. They just don’t have the staff bandwidth, the money to invest in infrastructure, and very often these projects start off as side projects on the side of someone’s desk. That’s how it started here until we were able to demonstrate value for it and find the resources to create a whole position...at [NAMES TWO SMALLER INSTITUTIONS] they’re never going to be able to do that. I would imagine, given their limited resources they’re even going to find it difficult to find somebody who can do it off the side of their desks.

In addition to challenges related to the financing of AER activities, many participants described limitations associated with Human Resources, including alignment with collective agreements, value of the work of SAS professionals, balancing a desire for SPRA competencies with a commitment to internal advancement opportunities, and the
need to make difficult decisions regarding the prioritization of professional competencies when engaged in hiring processes.

The SSAOs who participated in the study spoke in-depth about their processes for the development or review of PDs within their portfolios. In every case the Human Resources department of the institution was involved as a partner in this process. Of the 12 interview participants, only one SSAO worked at an institution that did not have any unionized administrative staff, and several of the SSAOs were from institutions with multiple bargaining units in addition to non-unionized managerial staff. Participants generally spoke very positively about their relationships with Human Resources departments and expressed respect for collective agreements. However, many SSAOs also noted limitations associated with the development of SAS PDs as a result of the need for Human Resource policies and collective agreements to be broadly applicable to administrative positions across an institution. As one SSAO noted:

Any time we create a new position, HR is really very much in favour of finding a position somewhere within a job family they have already created to give us something to start with. They really don't like it when we start from scratch. So, we try to follow the process, but because Student Affairs roles are quite unique, I don't find the process very helpful.

The process of rating new or revised PDs for the purpose of assigning them to a pay band was noted as a place of intersection between financial and human resource limitations. Participants described a need to balance their desired qualifications with those identified by Human Resources as aligning with the pay band they have the budget to finance. One participant described the process this way:
I mean it’s all negotiated. If it’s a new position, then one of us will write the position description and qualifications that we want and try to run it by Human Resources and they say, OK, well, this is going to probably come out at a certain level, and we sort of say, oh well, that’s too high or that’s too low, you know. There’s budgetary concerns in terms of whether we can afford it, but there’s also ensuring that we’re not underselling the position and then not able to recruit.

Among participants from colleges, it was noted that the majority of administrative staff within SAS divisions are included in the same bargaining unit across the college sector. In the interviews with college SSAOs the Job Fact Sheet (JFS) questionnaire and Position Description Form (PDF) that are used in the job classification process in Ontario’s colleges were noted as components of the process that influenced the final PD. As one SSAO described:

I used to work at a university and it wasn’t nearly as onerous as I find the college system. We have what’s called a PDF position description template that is like many many many many many pages. That’s what has to be completed and it’s very hard. It’s very easy to lose yourself in the process of completing the PDF so you’re just filling out the form as opposed to being thoughtful in the flow of the information and where the emphasis may be and what you’re trying to highlight. …From that PDF HR goes through the process of creating a job description ..., and again here’s a flaw. They just kind of pull from what you’ve written to the best of their ability ..., but if you haven’t written your PDF with the right emphasis then your job description may not have the emphasis you had in mind because it’s an interpretation. It’s a one-page document that goes from like 18 pages to one.
SSAOs from colleges also prioritized inter-institutional consistency among PDs more highly than participants from universities, describing a need to seek out comparable PDs from other colleges and ensure consistency of language and rating. As one participant noted:

In the college system we do comparisons across the system where you know there are other similar roles. Are there Career Consultants in five of the other colleges? If so, where are they classified and what are their jobs? So sometimes I will seek out people in other colleges to say, “do you have this type of position?” “Would you be willing to share your job descriptions”? ...That’s not necessarily a limitation. Sometimes it’s a good thing because it helps us learn from each other, but it can be a limitation in the sense that you’re all sort of carving out similar roles.

All of the interview participants were asked to describe the extent to which they prioritize AER skills and knowledge in the hiring processes in their division. SSAOs consistently espoused the value of AER skills and knowledge; however, they also indicated that they would prioritize other CACUSS professional competencies above SPRA competencies and AER competencies would be unlikely to make the difference in a hiring decision. As one participant noted:

Unless it’s a position that has been specifically designed for [assessment], and I’m not aware of any at this point..., I would say that it falls down the list. I mean more important are the things like university acumen and emotional and interpersonal intelligence and those types of things. How you work in a university environment with other people tends to be given much more priority than something like research or assessment.
In addition to a lower prioritization of AER competencies in hiring processes, participants noted that for unionized positions they are generally discouraged from asking questions that are not directly related to the qualifications and responsibilities explicitly stated in PDs. However, SSAOs consistently stated that questions related to AER are included in the interview processes in their divisions. Many described questions that ask candidates to walk them through a program or service they have developed, including the assessment or evaluation component, or to provide a presentation on their approach to a contemporary issue in SAS, including an assessment or evaluation framework. In speaking about this topic, several participants suggested that the conversation had sparked an opportunity for reflection on their practice. As one participant noted after describing the AER-related interview questions used in their division:

> So, it’s funny, when I say that, you would think, OK, we are clearly thinking about assessment and evaluation in the interview process even though it’s not really embedded in the position. There’s the position description, and I would say that when we create a new program we have the thought process that clearly if you’re going to develop something new you want to be able to figure out if it worked. But in reality, we fall apart at the end.

Within the discussions related to hiring practices, many participants noted that their commitment to internal promotions also influenced their ability to prioritize AER skills and knowledge. Because many current staff have limited AER competencies, and may not have had the opportunity to gain AER-related experience, hiring managers are reticent to prioritize these competences, thereby disadvantaging internal candidates.
The question of educational requirements also arose in discussions with SSAOs related to AER competencies and hiring processes. Participants indicated that their expectation is that candidates with Master’s degrees in Higher Education or Student Affairs would bring a strong understanding of AER. One participant stated:

Of course, I’ll have an expectation that somebody who graduated with their Master’s from [NAME OF INSTITUTION] will have taken an assessment and research course. I didn’t learn about survey design when I was in my Master’s or Doctoral program, but I do have an expectation now that people coming from an established graduate program would.

**Inconsistent AER Skills and Knowledge.** Participants described the level of AER skills and knowledge among SAS staff in their divisions as highly variable, with many SSAOs expressing that the general level of AER competence in their division was lower than they would ideally like it to be. When asked about the level of AER skill and knowledge in their division, one participant commented, “it’s still lower than average. Certainly, lower than I want it to be or lower than the competence level that would really make me feel satisfied.” In many cases, participants suggested that the development of AER competencies was reliant on individual staff members who had a personal interest in the topic and who take initiative to engage in AER activities or seek out AER-related professional development opportunities. One participant described the AER competencies of the staff in their division this way:

It’s very individual. Some people love it and are very interested in it, including some of the Directors. Some people are like, well we do it because we have to, and everything in between. I think there are some people who are coming in who don’t
have any kind of background in [assessment], particularly those who are coming in at an entry level. However, many of them would be eager to learn more about it.

The reliance on the interest of individual staff members to advance AER activities was a particularly salient theme among institutions with smaller student populations and was connected to resource constraints, as well as a lack of continuity in AER activities due to staff turnover.

One area where SSAOs from colleges described a reasonably high level of skill among their staff was grant writing. As one college SSAO noted:

There’s a lot of strength in grant writing. It’s interesting because we’re always needing money and folks have developed this amazing skill to put the research part together, plus comb the data they have in order to make a case. And we tend to be quite successful in getting grants. And some of those grants have research built in.

The skill of grant writing was not consistently identified in the interviews with SSAOs from universities.

**Variation in the language of AER.** In addition to the variation in AER skills and knowledge among SAS staff in their divisions, there was a high degree of inconsistency in the language used by participants to define AER. Across the interviews, SSAOs provided wide ranging, and often contradictory, definitions of these terms. Many participants acknowledged their uncertainty when offering these definitions. As an example, one SSAO said “I’ve read this so many times and it’s still fuzzy for me.” Another participant noted “I think there is a difference, but they tend to get tossed around a bit, more or less synonymously.”
There was a particularly high level of contradiction in the definitions offered of assessment and evaluation. Due to the variation, there were no strong themes that emerged that would suggest a consistent definition of these terms by SSAOs. One participant differentiated between assessment and evaluation in this way:

Evaluation is at the end of something or not formative, kind of a post-mortem if something has ended or is over you want to evaluate how it went. Assessment for me is ongoing; it is formative. Assessment is measuring progress or lack of progress.

However, another SSAO provided the following definitions:

Assessment is really about taking stock of where you are and finding ways to improve it. It’s more on the construct of things. Evaluation...in my mind it’s ranking instead of putting together an end-of-term assessment-type thing.

Another participant suggested the following:

If there’s a difference [between assessment and evaluation] I think it’s scale. Assessment is something where it’s on a smaller scale. You’re not going into as much depth. Perhaps you’re looking at the rollout of a program or the first year of a program. Evaluation is something that should go a bit deeper in the sense that you do start to get into elements of the scientific method and you’re looking at outcomes, and whether outcomes were achieved.

When discussing research, participants tended to differentiate between what one SSAO described as “big R versus little r research,” with “big R” research involving direct data collection and analysis, and “small r” research more similar to literature reviews. So-called “big R” research tended to be described quite narrowly by participants and align with a post-positivist worldview. One participant stated that research "looks to
understand causality...to understand, connect, and contribute in a specific way to the overall landscape.” Another SSAO stated that the definition of research “is clear in the sense that it’s part of the academic mission. Research requires the scientific method. It requires ethics consideration and needs to be robust”.

Variation in the Perceived Applicability of Professional Competency Models.

When SSAOs were asked about their use of professional competency models and the *CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Professional Competency Model* specifically, participants consistently indicated that these were not frameworks that they generally applied when developing or revising PDs, nor were they interested in doing so. A small number of participants indicated that they had occasionally consulted the CAS Standards, but this was not a consistent theme across the interviews. Instead, SSAOs expressed the value of an institution-specific approach to the development of professional competencies. As one participant noted:

No, I have not consciously used something like the CACUSS competencies at this point. ...The concern that I would have is that they are often developed to an ideal. I have a tendency to value institutional knowledge and people who come up from within. ...I’ve obviously read and commented on the CACUSS competencies as they were being developed, but I haven’t thought about employing them in that way because my fear would be that they are at a standard or ideal that wouldn’t map on to the competencies of my existing complement.

This SSAO went on to clarify that this comment should not suggest that they do not have confidence in their staff, but rather reflects a disconnect between the ideal competencies espoused in professional competency models and the administrative realities in their division that limit access to professional development.
The area of professional development is where many SSAOs indicated that they had, or would, consider the use of the CACUSS professional competency model. This theme was particularly strong among institutions with larger student populations. SSAOs from these institutions referenced internal professional development opportunities more frequently than those from smaller institutions. SSAOs from colleges and universities with smaller student populations often cited staff professional development as another area where limited resources necessitated restraint.

With regard to the application of SPRA competencies specifically, several participants described the establishment of inter-departmental assessment committees within their divisions. The purposes of these committees tended to revolve around the sharing of promising AER practices, skill development, and facilitating the development or enhancement of AER activities. One participant described the assessment committee in their division in this way:

I think with our assessment council we purposefully bring together people from each of the departments to a broader group to discuss assessment generally and to build capacity in that way. I think it’s been really valuable, and again, some people run ahead, and some people plod along.

Similar to other AER initiatives, SSAOs from larger institutions were more likely to mention the establishment of assessment committees in their divisions.

*Variation across functional areas and professional levels.* When asked about the potential application of the CACUSS competency model, and specifically the SPRA competencies, participants suggested that some competency domains are more relevant to SAS professionals in particular functional areas or those at more senior levels.
SPRA competencies were specifically identified as more relevant to those in senior positions. Participants found it difficult to reconcile the strategic planning competencies with the AER competencies in this domain, commenting that they wished they were separated because they viewed them as different domains of professional competency. The strategic planning aspect of the SPRA competency domain was identified as crucial for staff in senior positions, while a basic understanding of assessment and evaluation was identified as valuable across all levels.

When asked if they would prioritize any competency domains over others, participants consistently responded with “it depends on the position.” The SSAOs who were interviewed did not view the CACUSS competency domains as broadly applicable across functional areas. When discussing the SPRA competency domain specifically, participants suggested that these competencies would be less relevant to positions in Health, Counselling, and Accessibility functional areas and staff in these areas would be less inclined to view AER activities as part of their role. One participant described the different levels of engagement with AER this way:

You’ve got your student affairs pros, so that would be your residence life people, transition people, mentoring programs, academic advisors. And then you’ve got...professional service delivery people, your doctors, your counsellors. On the student affairs side of things..., they have a stronger sense of evaluation in terms of the delivery of a program and the interaction with a student that goes from a transactional basis to more of a macro kind of outcome, and that’s where you will have the basic to moderate to even advanced skill when it comes to evaluation. And then when you go into other kinds of professional fields...it really is transactional...and assessment and evaluation just don’t come into the cards. ... If I
went to my Doctor who runs our Health Services and I talked about assessment and evaluation of the work they are doing, she would look at me and just kind of say, what are you talking about?

Participants described this variation in terms of professional identities. Functional areas such as Student Engagement, Residence Life and Academic Success were identified as areas where the primary professional identity of staff is as a Student Affairs professional. Whereas, in Health and Counselling, the primary professional identities were believed to be that of Doctor, Psychologist, etc. Among many participants Accessibility Services was also identified as a functional area where many staff may not see Student Affairs as their primary professional identity. There were no consistent themes that emerged related to the professional identities of staff in Career Services or Services for Diverse Students.

In speaking about Health, Counselling, and Accessibility Services specifically, some participants suggested that concerns regarding student privacy may pose a challenge to AER activities in these departments. As one participant noted:

In the Counselling office I think there’s some natural, and I think justified, resistance to [assessment]. A counselling context is a good example where there are confidentiality issues. I think there’s a ton of data that could be pulled there, but I think there’s a lot of resistance even to think about things at an aggregate level. There’s a bit of a knee jerk resistance to evaluation that I think is hard to break through.

**Integration of Phases I and II**

The data collected through the interviews conducted in Phase II of this study provide a useful lens through which to consider the results of the content analysis of PDs collected in Phase I. The insights gathered through the analysis of these interviews offer
context for the findings of the content analysis that can inform conclusions and recommendations. Whereas the content analysis focused on what AER competencies and responsibilities were represented in PDs, the qualitative interviews offer insight into why these decisions may have been made and how the competencies and responsibilities represented in PDs are enacted in practice. The discussion that follows seeks to integrate the two phases of the study and respond to the question, “To what extent are AER competencies represented in the PDs of SAS professionals in the province of Ontario, and what factors influence their representation?” In fact, there appears to be a nuanced relationship between the representations of AER competencies, professional competency models, and the values of SSAOs with significant levels of both inter, and intra-institutional inconsistency.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

In recent decades assessment, evaluation, and research have emerged as activities of increasing significance in the work of SAS professionals (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Love & Estanek, 2004; Schuh, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). However, there has remained a lack of understanding as to the AER competencies expected of SAS administrators (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010) and their contingent AER professional responsibilities.

The research question and sub-questions in this study were designed to explore the extent to which AER competencies are represented in the PDs of SAS professionals working in post-secondary institutions in the Province of Ontario, the degree to which the AER competencies that are represented in PDs are aligned with the CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Professional Competency Model, and the factors that influence their representation.

As a mixed model study, the content analysis conducted in Phase I included both quantitative and qualitative methods. Using the components of content analysis described by Krippendorf (2004), unitizing, sampling, recording, and reducing the data took place during Phase I. The two final stages of the process are inferring and narrating.

Inferring moves the content analysis outside of the data to bridge the gap between descriptive data and their meaning (Krippendorf, 2004). Krippendorf (2004) suggests that researchers must rely on one or more of the following sources of certainty when making these inferences: previous successes and failures, expert knowledge and experience, established theories, and embodied practices. In drawing conclusions about the representations of AER competencies, evidence from the content analysis of PDs and the
qualitative interviews with SSAOs is integrated in this chapter and discussed in the context of existing literature. This chapter concludes with the presentation of a revised conceptual framework and a discussion of implications and recommendations resulting from this study, a process that Krippendorf (2004) refers to as narrating.

**Discussion**

**Prevalence of AER Competencies and Responsibilities.** Previous research suggests that many SAS divisions in Canadian post-secondary institutions remain in the early stages of collecting, analyzing, and using evidence to demonstrate the ways in which they are contributing to broader institutional goals (Fisher, 2011; Lane, 1998; Seifert et al., 2011; Tang, 2014). One of the purposes of this study was to explore the extent to which these AER activities have begun to permeate institutional administrative structures and attain representation in the PDs of SAS professionals at Ontario colleges and universities. The findings of this study indicate that, across the field of SAS, AER responsibilities are represented in the PDs of SAS professionals with a relatively high degree of frequency (82.3%). However, only 34.7% of PDs included any AER qualifications. This intra-PD incongruence appears to not be limited to the mere frequency of AER qualifications versus responsibilities, but to also include inconsistencies in the alignment between AER qualifications and responsibilities in PDs where they are both present. Interviews with SSAOs suggested that institutional Human Resource policies and structures imposed by collective agreements may limit hiring managers’ flexibility with regard to the AER qualifications included in PDs and may contribute to these inconsistencies.

Although the results of this study suggest a relatively low prevalence of AER qualifications in the PDs of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities (34.7%), it is worth noting that this percentage is higher than the frequency found by Hoffman and
Bresicani (2010) in their study of the AER requirements represented in job postings through *The Placement Exchange*. Hoffman and Bresicani (2010) found that only 27.1% of job descriptions specifically required candidates to demonstrate AER competencies or to complete AER duties as part of their job responsibilities. It is important to consider that Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) only studied job postings rather than full PDs, and the data for the study were collected 10 years ago. However, this finding suggests that the prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities in the PDs of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities well exceeds the prevalence found in the United States in 2008. Several of the SSAOs interviewed as part of the present study shared a belief that SAS assessment efforts in the U.S. are far more advanced than in Canada. These findings suggest that in terms of the overall prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities in SAS PDs, Canadian SAS PDs may be at least comparable to those in the U.S. and may even have higher levels of representation of AER qualifications and responsibilities.

In addition to investigating the overall prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities, this study included further analysis of the representation of AER competencies in relation to a variety of institutional and position-related factors.

**Institutional differences.** In an effort to expand on the initial findings and respond to the first sub-question in the study, several potential differences in the prevalence of AER competencies in PDs were explored in relation to institutional factors such as institution type, size, and location. There were no differences in the prevalence of AER responsibilities in relation to any of these factors. There were also no differences found in the prevalence of AER qualifications in relation to institution type or location. Institution size was found to be associated with differences in the prevalence of AER qualifications in PDs, with larger institutions more likely to include AER competencies in the qualifications
sections of SAS PDs than those with fewer than 20,000 students. However, it should be noted that the effect size of institution size was relatively small.

These findings are somewhat consistent with those of Hoffman and Bresciani (2010), who found no differences in the required AER skills or job duties between public and private institutions or institutions of various sizes. Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) did not separate AER qualifications and responsibilities, however, making comparison challenging.

Although the content analysis of PDs found limited variation in the representations of AER qualifications and responsibilities related to institution size, in the interview process many SSAOs of small and mid-size colleges and universities identified institution size as a differentiator between “have” and “have not” institutions with regard to resources to support AER activities. This apparent contradiction suggests that there may be inconsistencies between the representations of AER competencies and responsibilities in SAS PDs and the AER activities that occur in practice related to institution size and resources.

**Positional differences.** In addition to institutional differences, possible differences in the representations of AER qualifications and responsibilities related to positional differences were also explored as part of this study. Specifically, potential variations related to level of education required, professional level, years of experience required, date the PD was last updated, and functional area were examined. There were no differences related to the years of experience required by a position or the date a PD was last updated. However, the level of education required for a position as well as professional level and functional area were related to the prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities in PDs.
Education and professional level. Results of the quantitative analysis of PDs suggests that, as the level of education required for a position increases, so too does the frequency with which AER qualifications and responsibilities are included in PDs. However, in the case of AER responsibilities, there was no difference between positions that required graduate or bachelor’s degrees; it was only positions that required a college diploma that had a lower frequency of AER representation. Similar to level of education, the findings suggest that, as the professional level of a position increases, the prevalence of AER responsibilities and qualifications in SAS PDs also increases. Senior level positions had the highest frequency of AER qualifications and responsibilities, followed by mid-level positions, and then entry-level positions. These results are consistent with the findings of Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) who found significant differences in the job duties and AER skills required by jobs with varying educational requirements.

When these findings are considered in the context of the results of the Phase II interviews with SSAOs, the finding that AER competencies are more closely associated with senior level positions requiring higher levels of education is further strengthened. When discussing the CACUSS professional competencies, SSAOs specifically identified SPRA competencies as more relevant to those in senior positions and stated that in most cases they would not be considered priorities for entry-level SAS professionals. At the same time, the quantitative analysis reveals that 72.1% of entry-level PDs include some AER responsibilities, suggesting further inconsistency between PDs, hiring practices, and lived positions with regard to AER responsibilities.

On the topic of education, participants stated that they would expect candidates with a Master’s degree, particularly one with a focus on Higher Education or Student Affairs, to bring a strong understanding of AER. However, these same participants also
stated that they did not necessarily feel that they could rely on the educational qualification and would need to explore a candidate’s AER skill and knowledge through the interview process. In the U.S., concerns have been raised that different learning outcomes across Master’s level SAS preparation programs have led to inconsistency in the knowledge, skills, and dispositions among entry-level professionals (Herdlein et al., 2013). It is unclear if these results translate to the Canadian context given the relatively small number of graduate preparation programs, and the tendency for Canadian SAS professionals to pursue graduate study on a part-time basis after gaining professional experience in the field. However, 34.7% of the PDs included in the sample for this study required a graduate or professional degree as a minimum qualification, and several SSAOs referenced staff members who possessed graduate degrees despite it not being required for their position. These findings bring into question whether SAS in Canada truly remains a baccalaureate profession, particularly for SAS professionals interested in advancing to more senior levels within the field. In addition, these findings suggest the existence of inconsistent understandings of the learning outcomes associated with graduate study in Student Affairs in Canada and the AER skills and knowledge that can reasonably be expected of an individual who holds a Master’s degree in Student Affairs or Higher Education.

*Functional area.* Findings of the content analysis of PDs suggest differences in the prevalence of AER responsibilities and qualifications related to the functional area of the position. Overall, positions within the Student Engagement functional area, which includes activities such as orientation and transition programming, mentorship, and leadership development, had the highest prevalence of both AER qualifications and responsibilities. Positions that were associated with Accessibility Services, Health Services,
and Counselling Services included AER qualifications and responsibilities the least often. These results differ somewhat from the findings of Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) who found that Multi-Cultural Services, New Student Programs, and Student Activities had the highest rates of requirement for AER skills and duties, while Residence Life positions had the lowest. Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) categorized functional areas differently than the present study, making comparison somewhat challenging. However, New Student Programs and Student Activities would typically be included in the Student Engagement functional area in the Canadian context (Seifert et al., 2011). Multi-cultural services would be similar to Services for Diverse Students, which the findings of this study suggest have a lower than expected frequency of AER responsibilities and qualifications. Although PDs from the Residence Life functional area had lower than expected rates of AER qualifications, they were not the lowest, and PDs from this functional area actually had higher than expected levels of AER responsibilities. It is difficult to discern how the different categorization of positions in these two studies may have affected the results of the analysis, thereby making comparison something to be considered cautiously. However, the results do suggest that there may be differences between Canada and the U.S. in the prevalence of AER responsibilities and qualifications in the PDs by functional area. Alternatively, there may have been shifts in the prevalence of AER responsibilities and qualifications in certain functional areas over the past 10 years.

The analysis of the qualitative interviews with SSAOs offers additional context to the quantitative findings regarding the variation in prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities across functional areas. When speaking specifically about the SPRA competency domain of the CACUSS professional competency model, many SSAOs stated that these competencies are less relevant to positions in the Accessibility, Health, and
Counselling functional areas, and that staff in these areas would be less likely to view AER activities as part of their role. SSAOs suggested that these variations may be due to differences in professional identity on the part of staff in these units who often hold professional designations outside of SAS (e.g., Doctor, Nurse, Psychologist, Occupational Therapist). Many of these staff may have worked outside a post-secondary environment before joining a college or university and may well transition out again at some point in their career. In many cases these staff are also members of a professional College or Association that provides standards for their professional practice. Several SSAOs suggested that they gave these staff significant freedom to manage their own responsibilities because of the expectation that these staff would perform in accordance with the guidelines of their professional accreditation.

With regard to AER activities in these areas, SSAOs indicated that their expectations were relatively low even though they had significant interest in assessing these particular services. Although resource constraints were raised as a limiting factor with regard to AER in these areas, differing attitudes towards AER were also identified as a significant challenge. Interestingly, research grant applications and other forms of more traditional research were identified by some SSAOs as a strength of these particular functional areas as many of the staff possess advanced degrees; and, in the case of colleges, Counsellors are categorized as faculty rather than administrative staff members. However, these research activities may be based on the research interest of individual staff members, rather than the priorities of the division.

These variations across functional areas raise questions about the broad applicability of the CACUSS professional competency model. They also bring into question the degree to which SAS professional competency models are aligned with the standards
of professional practice adhered to by SAS professionals who have multiple professional identities.

Alignment with the CACUSS Professional Competency Model. Results of the content analysis in Phase I suggest a modest degree of alignment between the AER competencies included in the PDs and the CACUSS SPRA competency domain, with nine of the 34 competencies included in the domain consistently represented in the PDs. Table 21 provides an overview of the SPRA competencies that were found to be consistently represented. It is noteworthy that several of the competencies that are included in PDs are ones that are unique to the CACUSS competency model or were placed at a higher level than in the ACPA and NASPA model. This suggests that while the number of competencies from the CACUSS competency model is low, those that are represented consistently in PDs are well-aligned to the Canadian-specific aspects of the CACUSS competency model.

At the same time, results of the interviews with SSAOs suggest that the CACUSS SPRA competencies included in PDs are not present due to an intentional movement towards alignment. This is perhaps not a surprising result given the relatively recent release of the CACUSS Competencies Model for Student Affairs in Canada. However, SSAOs expressed minimal interest in aligning the PDs in their divisions to the CACUSS competency model or any other professional competency model in the future. Instead, SSAOs described the value of institution-specific approaches to the identification and development of professional competencies. Several SSAOs noted a belief that competency models are developed to an ideal that does not necessarily align with the administrative realities at their institution or their institution-specific needs.
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<th>Domain</th>
<th>Core</th>
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<tr>
<td>Terms and Concepts</td>
<td>Ensure a proactive approach to program planning, project coordination, and programming which includes opportunities for continuous assessment and development</td>
<td>Design program and learning outcomes that are appropriately clear, specific, and measurable, that are informed by theoretical frameworks, and that align with organizational outcomes, goals and values.</td>
<td>Lead, supervise, and/or collaborate with others to design and analyze assessment, program review, evaluation, and research activities that span multiple methodological approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, among others) including writing and disseminating results in a manner that critically considers the strengths and limitations of implications for practice, policy, theory, and/or future study in a sophisticated way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Values/Ethics/Politics</td>
<td>Able to conduct basic research and program assessment</td>
<td>Design on-going and periodic data collection efforts such that they are sustainable, rigorous, as unobtrusive as possible, and technologically current.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AER Design</td>
<td>Facilitate appropriate data collection for system/department-wide assessment and evaluation efforts using current technology and methods.</td>
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<td>Methodology, Data Collection, and Data Analysis</td>
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<td>Domain</td>
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<td>Interpreting, Reporting,</td>
<td>Ensure all communications of assessment and research results are</td>
<td>Effectively articulate, interpret, and apply results of research and assessment reports and studies, including professional literature.</td>
<td>Lead the design and writing of varied and diverse communications (e.g. reports, publications, presentations, social media, etc.) of assessment, program review, evaluation, and other research activities that include translation of data analysis into goals and actions.</td>
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<td>and Using Results</td>
<td>accurate, responsible, and effective.</td>
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*Note: The bold text indicates competencies which are included in both the CACUSS (2016) SPRA Competencies and the ACPA and NASPA (2016) AER Competencies, but have a higher-level designation in the CACUSS SPRA Competencies. Competencies that are italicized are unique to the CACUSS (2016) SPRA competencies. All other text is consistent with both the CACUSS SPRA Competencies and the ACPA and NASPA (2016) AER Competencies.*
These findings suggest that although CACUSS as a professional organization may support the rhetoric of professional competencies and standardisation, this approach may not be embraced at the institutional level or be seen as a rationale for action. They are noteworthy when placed in the context of existing literature related to professional competency models and approaches to professional standardisation. In a study of the knowledge work of professional associations and various approaches to standardisation, Nerland and Karseth (2015) found that there can be highly variable approaches to the development and circulation of standards for professional knowledge and practice. However, the lack of alignment between CACUSS and SSAOs may have important implications for the professionalization of the field of SAS. As Nerland and Karseth (2015) note, “some form of standardisation is required in order to ground professional practice in shared knowledge” (p. 17). However, standards may also be a double-edged sword, on one side defining the competencies needed for professional work, thereby allocating responsibilities and securing space for professional discretion, and on the other side potentially regulating practice in ways that limit the autonomy of professionals on a daily basis (Nerland & Karseth, 2015). Interestingly, SSAOs did not express concerns about the potentially reductionist effects that have been noted by Eaton (2016), Nerland and Karseth (2015) and others. Rather, the concern expressed by SSAOs was that the CACUSS professional competency model and other professional competency models are too aspirational in nature for practical application. The lack of interest in the operationalization of SAS professional competencies at the institutional level may represent a concern for protecting professional autonomy; however, Nerland and Karseth (2015) assert that such an approach may in fact have the opposite effect, leaving the
profession more exposed to external regulation and/or compromising professional discretion.

In addition to potential concerns about the longer-term implications of this approach to professional competencies on professional autonomy, these findings raise questions about the broad relevance and efficacy of SAS professional competency models. Redmond (2013) found that employee perceptions of professional competency models influence the efficacy of these models. If SSAOs do not believe that the existing SAS professional competency models are strategically or personally relevant enough to inform Human Resource functions in their divisions, it is unlikely that staff perceptions will be different.

Relationships to Other Professional Competencies. When the prevalence of SPRA competencies in the PDs of SAS professionals was compared to the prevalence of other professional competency domains, SPRA competencies were found to have one of the lowest rates of representation. Only Intercultural Fluency and Indigenous Cultural Awareness were included less often. The Leadership, Management, and Administration domain was represented most often, followed by Communication, and Emotional and Interpersonal Intelligence. These findings are interesting when placed in the context of previous research on professional competencies in SAS as well as the results of the interviews with SSAOs.

In a meta-analysis of research on professional competencies in SAS, Herdlein et al. (2013) found that the most frequently mentioned knowledge characteristics of SAS professionals were multi-cultural and diversity issues and that AER were the most frequently mentioned skills, followed by communication, administration, supervision, leadership, and writing effectiveness. With the notable exception of AER skills, these
findings align closely with the results of both the content analysis of PDs and the interviews with SSAOs. Although Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion competencies were only included in 53.1% of PDs, this domain was consistently cited by SSAOs as one that they would prioritize for their staff. In addition, several SSAOs noted that they believed there would be an increase in the representation of the Indigenous Cultural Awareness Domain in PDs resulting from institutional efforts to respond to the 2015 Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. As previously noted, Communication and Leadership, Management, and Administration were the two competency domains most frequently represented in PDs. These two domains were also identified by SSAOs as competencies that they would prioritize for staff development as well as in hiring processes over AER skills and knowledge. This is consistent with the work of Browne et al. (2015) who found that SSAOs at Canadian post-secondary institutions place less importance on AER than they do on more traditional skills such as leadership and communication.

These findings prompt the question of why this incongruence exists between the emphasis on AER in the literature on professional competencies in SAS, the representations of AER competencies in PDs, and SSAO attitudes towards AER skills and knowledge? When the results of Phase I and II of the study are integrated they suggest that the ability of SSAOs to prioritize AER competencies is influenced by conflicts between their stated commitments to evidence-informed practice, resource constraints, competing professional identities of SAS staff within a division, and variations in AER skills and knowledge among SAS professionals.

**Factors Influencing Decisions Regarding Representation of AER in PDs.** The value of AER competencies and evidence-informed practice emerged as a strong theme
from the interviews, with every SSAO articulating a commitment to assessment, evaluation, and/or research in some form. Participants identified the importance of data as tools to communicate the value of SAS work to the institution and to students. However, these same SSAOs also stated that they would prioritize other competencies above AER skills and knowledge in hiring processes, AER activities often receive lower priority with regard to resource allocation, and there is significant variation in the AER skills and knowledge of staff in their divisions.

These results are consistent with findings by Lane (1998) who found very positive attitudes related to AER among leaders in SAS divisions and departments at Canadian universities, but that AER practices themselves were relatively introductory and unsophisticated. However, in the 20 years since that study, AER have become the most commonly cited skills in SAS literature on professional competencies (Herdlein et al., 2013) without a commensurate change in the priority given to AER activities in SAS divisions. In fact, Lane (1998) found that time, financial resources, and administrative support were identified as the greatest barriers to AER activities, the same resources identified as the barriers to AER in the present study.

Smaller institutions stated that they experienced significant challenges related to the resourcing of AER activities. SSAOs from these institutions shared that they must often choose between directly serving students and engaging in AER activities. The trade-off being that AER is required to determine if the services being provided are in fact meeting student needs.

Although larger institutions also described a lack of AER resources, many of these institutions described strategies and resources that were in place to support AER activities in their divisions. These included external contracts for online survey tools or research,
internal assessment committees, and professional development activities. A small number of institutions also have a full-time staff member dedicated to AER. However, these supports all require resources that may be out of the reach of smaller institutions. Even an internal assessment committee requires significant staff time away from direct program or service delivery as well as a staff member to coordinate and chair the group.

The content analysis of PDs suggested significant inconsistency in the prevalence of AER qualifications and responsibilities within SAS PDs. When these findings are placed in the context of the interviews with SSAOs what emerges is a picture of SAS leaders who believe in the value of evidence-informed practice and aspire for their staff to consistently engage in these activities while caught between significant resource constraints and the application of Human Resource policies. The inclusion of AER responsibilities aligns with the espoused values of SSAOs with regard to AER activities. The lack of commensurate qualifications may reflect hesitation on the part of managers and leaders to include qualifications that may raise the pay band of a position beyond the budget, limit the applicant pool to candidates outside the current divisional structure, and/or ultimately prove to be unnecessary for the enacted position. AER qualifications had one of the lowest rates of representation in SAS PDs and this is consistent with the priorities expressed by SSAOs in the interview process. Ultimately, when faced with difficult choices, SSAOs view AER competencies as “nice to have” while other competencies such as leadership and communication are “need to have.”

These decisions may also be complicated based on functional area. As noted earlier, this study found significant variations in the prevalence of AER responsibilities and qualifications in PDs across functional areas, with Health Services, Counselling, and Accessibility Services having the lowest levels of representation. In addition, SSAOs
confirmed that they were less likely to prioritize AER competencies for staff in these areas and several suggested that staff in these areas would be less receptive to receiving direction to conduct AER activities than those in other functional areas. These findings raise important questions about the professional identities of SAS professionals. Bruss and Kopala (1993) define professional identity as “the formation of an attitude of personal responsibility regarding one’s role in the profession, a commitment to behave ethically and morally, and the development of feelings of pride for the profession” (p. 686). Wilson, Liddell, Hirshey and Pasequi (2016) suggest that SAS professionals make meaning of their experiences through professional roles and memberships which provide context for professional identity. However, staff in Counselling, Health Services, and Accessibility Services may have multiple professional identities and belong to professional organizations outside SAS that inform their practice. Results of the content analysis of PDs and interviews with SSAOs suggest that the language of AER used in SAS divisions and the approach to these activities endorsed in the CACUSS competency framework, and SAS literature more broadly, may not resonate broadly across SAS functional areas, particularly those related to Health, Counselling, and Accessibility.

Although SSAOs identified resource constraints and variability across functional areas as factors that influenced the representation of AER competencies in PDs, it is perhaps equally notable what factors were not discussed. None of the interview participants raised concerns about the rising tide of neoliberalism in higher education and the degree to which the increased focus on AER competencies could be linked to demands for practical knowledge, performativity, or accountability. In this sense, the findings of the interviews with SSAOs are consistent with the dominant literature surrounding AER in SAS in that the SSAOs raised concerns about barriers to AER but did not identify concerns
about the purpose or impact of increasing attention to AER. In addition, none of the SSAOs raised concerns about a lack of diversity of epistemological frameworks or the validity of AER activities in SAS. As noted by Harper et al. (2018), low levels of representation of Black and Indigenous staff in institutional research offices and at senior leadership levels has led to a lack of inclusion in decision making processes related to AER activities that may preclude insights into systemic racial inequities. The lack of acknowledgement of these potential issues on the part of SSAOs suggests that it is unlikely these issues are being adequately considered or addressed in current institutional AER processes.

**AER skills and knowledge.** Results of the interviews with SSAOs suggested that the level of AER skills and knowledge across SAS Divisions is highly variable. Many SSAOs expressed that the overall level of AER skills across their divisions was lower than they would ideally like. Many described a reliance on individual staff members who had developed AER skills and knowledge through prior education or experience, or those who had taken it upon themselves to develop their AER skills through professional development. Overall, the level of AER skill and knowledge and the organizational development structures in place to support these activities across SAS divisions appears to be quite low.

Herdlein et al. (2013) found that the focus on AER as an area of knowledge and an important skill set increased dramatically in the last 15 years. However, the findings of this study suggest that while SSAOs espouse the value AER competencies, they are reticent to prioritize these skills in hiring processes and face resource challenges which limit entry and mid-level professionals from gaining AER experience or professional development. The content analysis revealed that the representation of AER competencies in PDs increases with the level of education required and the professional level of a position,
suggesting an expectation that SAS staff with an interest in professional advancement would develop these skills over the course of their career; however, results of the interviews with SSAOs suggest that opportunities to develop these skills may be limited – particularly at smaller institutions.

**Conceptual Framework Revised**

In Chapter two, Figure 1 was presented as a conceptual framework for this study. Given the conclusions discussed earlier in the chapter, a revised conceptual framework is offered below in Figure 5.

The revised conceptual framework provides a summary of the conclusions offered in this study. Figure 1 suggested that the Professional Domain and Institutional Domain equally inform the development of PDs and the lived experience of the staff who hold these positions. However, the findings of this study suggest that while SSAOs are familiar with professional competency models, these models do not currently inform the development or revision of SAS PDs and there is minimal interest in aligning PDs with these models in the future. The revised framework has re-positioned the Professional Domain and bounded it with a dotted line. The intent of this revision is to retain the presence of the Professional Domain while also acknowledging its modest impact on the representations of competencies in PDs.

In the revised framework the Institutional Domain has been given greater prominence and is bounded by a solid line. This change is intended to reflect the findings of the study which suggest that SSAOs place a higher value on institution-specific competencies than on broad professional competencies. The placement of the Institutional Domain also reflects the substantial impact of institutional HR policies and collective agreements on the development and revision of PDs. Results of the content analysis
indicate that the only institution-specific factor that influences the representation of AER competencies is institution size – which has now been included in the Institutional Domain. Further research is required to determine if institution size influences the representation of other professional competency areas.

Figure 5. Factors influencing the representations of competencies and responsibilities in SAS position descriptions.
Figure 1 placed SAS PDs at the centre of the two inter-connected spheres of the Professional Domain and the Institutional Domain. In the revised framework SAS PDs are nested within the model. The revised placement is intended to represent the substantial impact of the Institutional Domain on the development and revision of PDs, while still acknowledging the professional sphere in which this work is situated. The results of the content analysis indicate that the level of education required of a position and the level of the position itself (entry, mid, senior) were related to the inclusion of AER competencies. Once again, further research will be required to determine if these factors are also related to the representation of other competency areas.

The lived experience of the staff who hold the positions described in the PDs is represented at the intersection of the SAS PD, the Institutional Domain, and the Professional Domain. However, unlike in Figure 1, the revised framework is intended to reflect the findings of this study which suggest that the lived experiences of SAS professionals are more heavily influenced by institutional factors and their individual PD than by the Professional Domain, although this may vary as a result of individual SAS professionals who have a personal interest in developing their AER skills and knowledge. The overlapping and transparent circles are intended to reflect the ways in which the domains influence each other. The findings of the study suggest that individual staff influence the revision of their PDs as well as the ways in which these PDs are enacted. In addition, the Institutional Domain both influences and is influenced by the Professional Domain to varying degrees.

Finally, as in Figure 1, the domains remain embedded in the larger global, national, and local contexts of neoliberalisation, increasing managerialism, marketization, and calls for greater accountability in higher education and across the broader public sector.
Although these forces were not directly addressed by the interview participants, there is significant evidence within the higher education literature to suggest the ongoing influence of these forces (for examples see Giroux, 2002, 2014; Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Marginson & Rhodes, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Zepke 2015). In addition, the affinity for evidence-informed practice expressed by SSAOs and the belief that AER are valuable because of their potential to communicate the value of the work of SAS divisions is strongly aligned with the movement towards managerialism. However, in the revised conceptual framework the weight of the line representing these forces has been reduced in an effort to represent the perhaps limited effect that these forces have had on SAS practice to this point. Although the rhetoric of managerialism, accountability, and evidence-informed practice seems to have permeated the field, the findings of this study suggest that it has not infused the priorities within SAS divisions or the daily practice of SAS professionals.

**Implications and Recommendations**

In recent decades, literature from across the field of SAS has focused on AER as activities of increasing importance in the work of SAS professionals (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Herdlein et al, 2013; Love & Estanek, 2004; Schuch, 2009; Upcraft & Schuch, 1996). SAS professionals have been called upon to view themselves as educators, ensure that programs and services are grounded in research and institution-specific assessment data (ACPA, 1994), and engage in the development and assessment of co-curricular student learning (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Dungy & Gordon, 2011; Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010; Keeling, 2004; Keeling, 2006). However, despite the increasing discussion of AER activities, there has remained a lack of understanding about the AER competencies of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities. Therefore, the purpose of this research
was to explore the prevalence of AER competencies in SAS PDs, the degree to which these competencies are aligned with the CACUSS professional competency model, and the factors that influence the representation of AER competencies in SAS PDs.

The findings revealed no differences in the prevalence of AER competencies in PDs related to institution type or location, and only a small variation based on institution size. However, level of education required, professional level, and functional area were all related to differences in the prevalence of AER competencies across institutions. At the same time, the findings also revealed what can be described as “consistent inconsistencies” within PDs. Although 82.3% of PDs included some mention of AER responsibilities, only 34.7% included any AER qualifications. Further analysis revealed low levels of alignment between the AER qualifications and responsibilities in PDs where they were both present, and only a modest degree of alignment with the CACUSS SPRA competencies. Similarly, interviews with SSAOs revealed inconsistencies in their espoused values related to AER and the practice in their divisions. Every SSAO expressed a commitment to evidence-informed practice; however, in contrast, the majority of SSAOs also stated that they would give AER competencies less priority than other competency areas when engaged in a hiring process, AER activities are considered lower priority with regard to resource allocation, and they described the overall level of AER skills and knowledge of their staff as low.

The primary implication of these findings is that the practice of AER activities in Ontario colleges and universities is out of alignment with the literature in this area. The findings of the present study are consistent with findings by Lane (1998) from 20 years ago who suggested that while attitudes towards AER activities were largely positive, AER activities themselves were relatively introductory in nature. This is not to say that the
attitudes, skills, and knowledge related to AER have not evolved during this time, but perhaps not at the rate that the literature would imply. Of course, it must also be acknowledged that the majority of the literature related to AER in SAS originates in the U.S., making it possible that these incongruences are related to differences between the U.S. and Canadian post-secondary contexts. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities may benefit from engaging in reflection about the alignment between their espoused values related to AER and their practice.

As the field of SAS has evolved, SAS professionals have increasingly argued for the integration of curricular and co-curricular student experiences and the role of SAS professionals in supporting the academic mission of the institution. However, the separation of AER from co-curricular student learning on the part of SAS divisions draws into question the level of integration of these two areas at Ontario colleges and universities. Many SSAOs indicated that these were activities that occurred “off the side of staff members’ desks” and they simply did not have the resources to support AER activities in the way they would like. However, the lack of formalized staffing models and resources to support these activities also brings into question their perceived value by other areas of the institution and/or the perceived role of SAS divisions in the assessment and evaluation of student success and engagement activities. Within the province of Ontario, colleges and universities have recently entered into their second Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) with the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. The SMAs include a section dedicated to Student Experience and key metrics which must be achieved in this area. While these metrics are not currently connected to provincial funding, the Ontario government has expressed its intention to do so in the next iteration of the SMAs scheduled to begin in 2021 (MTCU, 2015). This will mean that, for the first time in the
Province of Ontario, provincial operating grants will be tied, in part, to metrics related to the student experience, and by extension, the work of SAS professionals.

Many of the metrics currently in place come from NSSE, the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange, and the College Student Satisfaction Survey, though institutional metrics vary. Although the current metrics tend to be quite high-level (e.g., proportion of fourth year students who have completed two HIPs, year one to two retention, participation rates in Study Abroad), understanding how to influence these metrics at an institutional level is likely to require a much more detailed understanding of the factors that influence them. HEQCO has recommended that institutions assess small-scale interventions in off-cycle years and follow processes of implementation-assessment-retesting when implementing engagement activities (Zhao, 2011). SAS divisions are arguably uniquely positioned to gather and interpret this data; however, SAS professionals must have the requisite skills and resources to be able to do so. As the co-curricular student experience is increasingly seen as an integral part of a student’s overall college or university experience, external calls for accountability are also likely to continue to increase. SAS divisions may be called upon to reflect on their current approach to AER activities, consider the role that SAS divisions can, or should, play in institutional AER related to co-curricular student success and engagement, and evaluate their ability to meet these demands.

If it is indeed the case that the assessment and evaluation of the programs and services offered by SAS divisions is a priority for the profession, then it may be necessary to reflect on the current practice and explore new possibilities for conducting AER activities. As a first step, the establishment of a common language of assessment, evaluation, and research may support enhanced communication both within and across
institutions. As noted in Chapter Four, over the course of the interviews with SSAOs, participants were asked how they define the terms assessment, evaluation, and research; almost every participant provided a different definition. This issue of language is not unique to SAS divisions in Ontario. Even within the SAS AER literature there are varying definitions of these terms and some of the most commonly referenced definitions of assessment and evaluation (e.g., Banta & Palomba, 2015; Upcraft & Schuh, 2009) are not aligned with the definitions of these terms used in K-12 education, other areas of higher education, or the broader public sector. However, the establishment of a common language may serve to clarify the AER expectations of SAS professionals. At a minimum, SAS managers and SSAOs may wish to consider aligning the language of AER within their own divisions and PDs.

In addition to a focus on the language of AER, SAS divisions may benefit from a consideration of the development of enhanced pipelines for SAS professionals with AER skills and knowledge. Results of the content analysis of PDs indicated that the presence of AER competencies was related to higher levels of educational requirements and as well as higher professional levels. This was consistent with the findings of the interviews with SSAOs who suggested that AER competencies would be more relevant for senior level positions than for those at mid or entry levels. However, SSAOs also spoke of a reticence to prioritize AER competencies in hiring processes due to the low skill levels among their current staff and resource constraints that compromised their ability to provide staff with AER experience or professional development. Unless this cycle is disrupted, SAS divisions are unlikely to experience a significant shift in the overall level of AER competencies across levels or the ability to promote staff members with AER skills and knowledge from within. As part of an enhanced pipeline, SAS divisions should consider directing increased
attention to the development of AER competencies among underrepresented communities within the profession, such as Black and Indigenous SAS professionals; the current lack of representation may reinforce one-sided ways of knowing that exclude the voices of a large proportion of the student population in AER processes.

Finally, SAS divisions may wish to consider alternative models for conducting AER activities. Recognizing the resource limitations that exist, particularly at smaller institutions, it may simply be unrealistic to suggest that SAS staff broadly should develop AER competencies or engage in AER projects. However, results of this study suggest that the current approach is quite institution-centric with relatively little collaboration occurring across institutions. Although CACUSS and other professional organizations offer AER related professional development, there appear to be relatively few collaborative projects that serve to increase the actual capacity of SAS divisions to engage in these activities. Collaborative AER activities would still require some human and financial resources; however, it may be more feasible for a small institution to contribute a proportional fee to the hiring of a research associate to conduct a small number of joint projects – perhaps related to key SMA metrics. While it would still benefit SAS professionals to understand how to interpret and apply research findings, there may be less of a need for them to develop advanced research skills.

An alternate possibility that must be considered is that SAS divisions may determine that AER is not in fact a priority for their practice and these activities are better handled by other areas of the institution. In fact, the findings of this study suggest the possibility that this may already be the case. Although there is a strong alignment between the rhetoric surrounding evidence-informed practice found in the SAS literature and the value of AER espoused by SSAOs, in practice there is minimal alignment between the same
literature and the AER competencies represented in PDs or enacted in SAS divisions in Ontario post-secondary institutions. While SSAOs list a lack of financial and human resources as the source of this disconnect, the prioritization and allocation of these resources is generally within the purview of these positions. SSAOs may be faced with very difficult choices, but they are choices. These inconsistencies between stated values related to AER and the prioritization of resources in support of these activities, in combination with the rejection of the notion of using professional competency models to inform the development of PDs, raises questions about the possibility of an implicit resistance to the forces of managerialism on the part of SSAOs in favour of SAS’ historical commitments to more humanistic processes. However, if this is the case then SAS professionals must reconsider the current narrative regarding evidence-informed practice espoused in the SAS literature and by SSAOs, and whether AER skills and knowledge are in fact a core competency of the profession.

Regardless of the level of value placed on AER competencies within SAS divisions, a key recommendation emerging from the findings of this study is that managers and senior leaders should engage in a review of the PDs in their departments and divisions to ensure that qualifications and responsibilities listed in PDs are aligned.

Implications for Professional Competency Models. Although professional competency models were not the primary focus of this study, the findings do suggest potential implications for the use of these frameworks in Canadian SAS divisions. SSAOs stated that they do not currently refer to competency models when developing or revising PDs and they do not believe this is something they are likely to do in the future, with many expressing a preference for institution-specific models. One of the concerns raised about competency models in general was that they are aspirational rather than practical.
These concerns prompt the question, what is the purpose of professional competency frameworks such as the CACUSS competency model? Literature related to workplace professional competency models more broadly suggests that these models are most effective when they are used to develop HR systems (e.g., hiring, appraisal, promotion, and compensation), they inform a practical notion of effective job performance tailored to the organization, and the currency of the model is maintained over time (Campion et al., 2011). However, SSAOs indicated that they did not believe that the CACUSS competency framework would align with their HR systems, and many of the listed competencies are out of alignment with current practice. Some SSAOs expressed the potential value of competency models to inform professional development; however, it may be worth considering whether professional development activities are best aligned with models that are disconnected from HR processes and the degree to which such an approach serves the best interests of SAS staff interested in career advancement.

The findings of this study also raise questions about the broad applicability of SAS professional competency models across functional areas in the field. The authors of the CACUSS competency model state that it is meant to be applied to all areas of SAS in Canada (Fernandez et al., 2016). However, results of the interviews with SSAOs suggested a belief that certain competency areas were more or less relevant to specific functional areas. When speaking about functional areas such as Health, Counselling, and Accessibility Services, many SSAOs suggested that staff in these areas may not see SAS as their primary professional identities and may look elsewhere for professional guidance and standards. As an organization, CACUSS many wish to explore the engagement of professionals across SAS functional areas, the degree to which staff in the areas of Health, Counselling, and
Accessibility identify as SAS professionals, and how the CACUSS professional competency model may, or may not, align with other relevant professional standards from outside SAS.

Interestingly, SSAOs did not raise concerns about the potential for professional competency models to be reductionist (Eaton, 2016; Nerland & Karseth, 2015). Rather, the concern expressed by SSAOs was that the CACUSS professional competency model and other professional competency models are too aspirational in nature for practical application. The lack of interest in the operationalization of SAS professional competencies at the institutional level may represent a concern for protecting professional autonomy; however, Nerland and Karseth (2015) assert that such an approach may in fact have the opposite effect, leaving the profession more exposed to external regulation and/or compromising professional discretion.

**Further Research.** Given the insights from this study related to the prevalence and depth of AER competencies in SAS PDs, further research into the prevalence of other professional competency domains would be beneficial. Comparing the representations of various professional competency domains and the values of SSAOs could provide insight into the ways in which professional competencies map onto the qualifications and responsibilities expected of SAS professionals through their PDs.

In addition to a deeper exploration of other competency domains, further research regarding the attitudes and experiences of SAS staff at varying levels would be valuable as this study was only able to include the voices of SSAOs. The ability to compare the perceptions of SSAOs, staff within a division, and PDs could provide a more holistic perspective on values associated with AER activities, AER skills and knowledge, and perceptions of professional competency models more broadly.
Although professional identity was not the focus of this research, results of the content analysis and interviews with SSAOs suggested that there may be differences in the professional identities of staff across functional areas, particularly in Health, Counselling and Accessibility. Further research into the professional identities of Canadian SAS professionals and the potential implications for professional organizations, professional competencies, and divisional cohesion may be warranted.

Finally, the results of this study demonstrate a strong alignment between the rhetoric surrounding evidence-informed practice found in the SAS literature and the value of AER espoused by SSAOs. However, the findings also indicate very minimal alignment between the same literature and the AER competencies represented in PDs or enacted in SAS divisions in Ontario post-secondary institutions. Consistent with much of the dominant literature in SAS related to AER, SSAOs suggest that the rationale for this disconnect is a lack of financial and human resources (for examples, see Banta & Palomba, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). However, the prioritization of such resources typically falls within the responsibility of SSAOs. What remains unclear is why SSAOs continue to espouse the value of AER in theory but hesitate to prioritize AER in practice. In the context of a rising tide of neoliberalism in higher education and an increasing focus on managerialism, critics have suggested that SAS professionals, like many other staff and faculty, find themselves in the position of actively negotiating their work to address greater demands for measurement and accountability (Phelps-Ward et al., 2017). Further research into the perceptions of SAS professionals regarding the forces of neoliberalism in higher education may be warranted. Additional investigation of the ways in which SSAOs are choosing to navigate demands for accountability, while balancing the professions historic commitments to more humanistic processes, may serve to facilitate
the development of a deeper understanding of how SAS divisions can, and do, react to forces of managerialism in higher education.

**Limitations of the Study**

A mixed-model design was chosen in an effort to provide a deeper and richer understanding of the issue under investigation. Despite the strengths of the approach, there are certain elements of the present study that warrant discussion and may limit the transferability of the findings. These include the relatively recent release of the CACUSS professional competency model, the sampling strategies employed to collect PDs, and the use of a single coder in the content analysis.

The relatively recent publication of the *CACUSS Student Affairs and Services Professional Competency Model* in the Fall of 2016 poses a potential limitation to this study as the impact of any changes resulting from this document may not yet be reflected in PDs. For this reason, it is important to note that this study explored the degree to which there is alignment between the AER skills, knowledge, and duties represented in SAS PDs and the CACUSS SPRA competencies, but without the assumption that there should be a causal relationship. At the same time, it should be noted that the CACUSS competency model is grounded in a review of literature related to professional development in SAS and was developed through an extensive consultation process with SAS professionals across Canada (Fernandez et al., 2016), making it reasonable to assume that the current professional expectations of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities should be reflected in the Model.

The sampling strategy in Phase I of the study was guided by the research questions and employed both relevance and stratified sampling techniques in an effort to obtain a representative sample of PDs from across institutions, functional areas, and professional
levels. Through the process of relevance sampling as described by Krippendorf (2004), the population of relevant texts for this study was limited to PDs from SAS divisions in colleges and universities in the Province of Ontario, that fell under one of the following units described by Seifert et al. (2011) and Hardy Cox and Strange (2010): First Year Experience and Student Engagement, Counselling Services, Health Services, Accessibility Services, Career Services, Academic Skills Services, and Services for Diverse Students. In addition, PDs that fell under Residence Life were also included in the sample as well as PDs dedicated to AER. While there may be staff or units within an institution who self-identify as SAS professionals, only PDs from the units described above, where such units fell within an institution’s SAS portfolio, were included in the study. However, in order to obtain the PDs themselves, participating institutions were offered the choice of providing all of the PDs from their division from which a sample would be selected by the researcher or providing a sample of PDs from their division using a set of sampling guidelines (See Appendix B). The majority of institutions chose to provide their own sample. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that factors such as ease of access to particular PDs and social desirability bias associated with a desire to present well-constructed PDs could have impacted the sample selection. However, a review of the provided samples suggested that the sampling guidelines were followed.

Finally, the use of a single coder during the content analysis process may pose a limitation to the reliability of the findings. Krippendorf (2014) suggests that a research procedure is reliable when it responds to the same phenomena in the same way regardless of the circumstances of its implementation and identifies three types of reliability for content analyses: stability, reproducibility, and accuracy. In an effort to ensure reliability, stability measures were employed, specifically test-retest procedures. The text of the PDs
was reread, and where necessary categorized, several times throughout the coding process. Measuring stability is an important step in establishing the reliability of data; however, Krippendorf (2014) suggests that the highest levels of reliability can be achieved through a two-step process that involves at least three or more observers working independently and formal decision rules for reconciling discrepancies. The resources available for this study precluded such an approach.

**Significance of the Study**

As an emerging profession in Canadian Higher Education, SAS has pursued a drive towards professionalization in the midst of, and perhaps in concert with, a rising tide of neoliberalism and enhanced focus on managerialism across post-secondary education and the broader public sector. The findings of this study contribute to an emerging body of literature related to SAS in Canada by illuminating the extent to which the focus on AER within the SAS literature has been operationalized in SAS divisions at colleges and universities in the Province of Ontario. Ultimately, the findings reveal what can be described as ‘consistent inconsistencies’ between the AER qualifications and responsibilities listed in SAS PDs, the AER competencies listed in SAS professional competency models and those represented in PDs, the espoused values of SSAOs related to AER and the AER enacted in practice in their divisions, and the emphasis on AER in the SAS literature and its relatively low prioritization by SSAOs in Ontario colleges and universities. SSAOs indicated that these inconsistencies are the result of financial and human resource constraints, and when forced to choose between funding a specific student service or program, or between a candidate with AER skills versus more traditional SAS skills, SSAOs do not prioritize AER.
In addition to the inconsistencies in the representations of AER revealed through this study, also of significance is what was not said by SSAOs when discussing the factors they consider when making decisions about the inclusion of AER competencies in PDs. None of the SSAOs interviewed as part of this study raised concerns about the rising tide of neoliberalism in higher education and the degree to which the increased focus on AER competencies could be linked to demands for practical knowledge, performativity, or accountability. In this sense, the findings of the interviews with SSAOs are consistent with the dominant literature surrounding AER in SAS in that the SSAOs raised concerns about barriers to AER but did not identify concerns about the purpose or impact of increasing attention to AER. In addition, none of the SSAOs raised concerns about a lack of diversity of epistemological frameworks or the validity of AER activities in SAS. There were no consistent critiques of AER in SAS presented by the SSAOs, with each of the interview participants espousing the value of evidence-informed practice. And yet, the findings suggest that AER activities are not prioritized by SSAOs to the extent that would be implied within the existing literature. It may be possible that as of yet SSAOs have not directly felt the impact of increasing calls for accountability and do not feel pressured to prioritize AER. With the impending alignment of student experience metrics with provincial funding scheduled for implementation in SMA III in 2020, this may be an area for future research. Alternatively, it may be the case that SSAOs are implicitly engaged in a resistance to the forces of managerialism through a continued prioritization of activities more closely aligned with SASs’ historical commitments to humanistic processes, or a combination of the two.

The findings of this study also raise questions about AER competencies across SAS functional areas and the professional identities of SAS professionals more broadly. The
results of the content analysis indicate that PDs in the Health, Counselling, and Accessibility functional areas have the lowest prevalence of AER competencies. SSAOs reinforced the notion of variation across functional areas, with many participants suggesting that they have different expectations for AER in different areas. Health, Counselling, and Accessibility were noted as functional areas where there was less likely to be significant AER expectations or activities, and where staff would be less likely to refer to a SAS professional competency model because they would turn to the professional standards associated with their primary professional identity. These findings suggest a need for more exploration of the broad applicability of professional competency models in SAS across functional areas.

Finally, the results of this study raise questions about the use of professional competency models in Canadian SAS more broadly. SSAOs indicated that in most cases they had not used a professional competency model to inform the development or revision of PDs in their divisions and they did not anticipate doing so in the future. Although this study was focused on AER competencies specifically, these findings have implications across competency domains.

The findings of this study are significant because they provide a window into the AER activities occurring in Ontario SAS divisions and the lack of current lack of alignment between SAS PDs, the espoused values of SSAOs, professional competency models, and SAS AER literature more broadly. It is hoped that this study has the potential to spark reflection of the true value placed on AER in SAS divisions in Ontario college and universities and/or the consideration of alternate approaches to AER activities that reflect the administrative realities of many SAS divisions. In addition, the findings of this study may be applicable to the future review and development of SAS PDs, professional
development planning for SAS professionals, and perhaps the review of the CACUSS SPRA competencies themselves.

**Conclusions**

This study investigated the prevalence of AER competencies in the PDs of SAS professionals in Ontario colleges and universities and the factors that influence senior leaders’ decisions regarding their representation.

The findings revealed that 82.3% of PDs include a reference to AER competencies. There were no differences found in the prevalence of AER competencies in PDs related to institution type or location, and only a small variation based on institution size. However, level of education required, professional level, and functional area were all related to differences in the prevalence of AER competencies across institutions. Although the overall representation of AER competencies was quite high, findings of the content analysis revealed significant intra-PD inconsistencies in the representation of AER qualifications and responsibilities. Although 82.3% of PDs included some mention of AER responsibilities, only 34.7% included any AER qualifications. Further analysis revealed low levels of alignment between the AER qualifications and responsibilities in PDs where they were both present, and only a modest degree of alignment with the CACUSS SPRA competencies. Similarly, interviews with SSAOs revealed inconsistencies in their espoused values related to AER and the practices in their divisions. Despite stating a commitment to evidence-informed practice, SSAOs indicated that they would give AER competencies less priority than other competency areas when engaged in a hiring process, AER activities are considered lower priority with regard to resource allocation, and most SSAOs described the overall level of AER skills and knowledge of their staff as low.
The findings of this study suggest that although the overall prevalence of AER competencies in SAS PDs is reasonably high, the actual level of AER activity and the AER skills and knowledge of Ontario SAS professionals may still be quite low. The findings further suggest that the current discourse regarding AER competencies in SAS literature and across the profession may be out of alignment with the ways in which AER is enacted in practice in SAS divisions in Ontario colleges and universities.
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Appendix A

- A Request for Your Participation -

[DATE]

[PARTICIPANT ADDRESS]

Dear [NAME],

I am writing to request your assistance with a study I am conducting as part of my PhD research in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Ruth Childs. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which professional competencies are represented in the position descriptions of Student Affairs and Service (SAS) professionals at post-secondary institutions in the province of Ontario, with a particular emphasis on skills, experience, and responsibilities related to assessment, evaluation and research. The results of this study may help to guide professional development planning, inform future review and development of SAS position descriptions, and influence the development and/or evaluation of professional competency models.

I hope to be able to access a representative sample of SAS position descriptions from Colleges and Universities across the province of Ontario. Unlike job postings, full position descriptions are generally not publicly available. As the [NAME OF INSTITUTION] representative on the [Coordinating Committee of Vice President’s, Students OR Ontario Committee on Student Affairs], I hope that you will consider supporting this research by providing me with access to a sample of position descriptions from within your division. The names of participating institutions will not appear in the thesis or reports resulting from this study. Individual positions will not be identifiable, and institutions will only be described by size and type.

I hope to gather at least one representative position description at the entry level, at the mid-level and at the senior level from each of the functional areas within your portfolio – where such positions exist (e.g. Student Engagement, Counselling Services, Career Services, Residence Life, Services for Diverse Students, Assessment and Evaluation, etc). Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) positions will not be included in the study, nor will positions related to Enrolment Management or Athletics and Recreation.

I recognize that you have many demands on your time and I will make every effort to ensure that your participation in this study does not create an undue burden for you or your staff. Should you
choose to participate, I ask that you please respond to this email confirming your participation and identifying the contact person (or people) for your division.

The role of the contact person(s) will be to act as a liaison, obtain the position descriptions, and provide them to me. Once the contact person(s) for your division have been identified, I will work with them to obtain a sample of position descriptions. For your reference, the sampling guide is attached.

If you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation or have any questions about this study, please contact me at 416-978-7246 or by email at melinda.scott@utoronto.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Ruth Childs at 416-978-1079 or by email ruth.childs@utoronto.ca.

I hope that the results of my study will be beneficial to [NAME OF INSTITUTION] and the [NAME OF DIVISION], as well as Student Affairs and Services professionals across Canada and the broader research community. I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance with this project.

Yours sincerely,

Melinda Scott
PhD Candidate
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

Dr. Ruth Childs
Professor
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
Appendix B

Sampling Guide

Thank you for your participation in this research project.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which professional competencies are represented in the position descriptions of Student Affairs and Service (SAS) professionals at post-secondary institutions in the province of Ontario, with a particular emphasis on skills, experience, and responsibilities related to assessment, evaluation and research. The names of participating institutions will not appear in the thesis or reports resulting from this study. Individual positions will not be identifiable, and institutions will only be described by size and type.

Unlike job postings, full position descriptions are often not publicly available. Your assistance in gathering a sample of full position descriptions from your institution that align with the guidelines described below is greatly appreciated. If you are not able to select a sample of positions descriptions, you may choose instead to forward all of the position descriptions from your division, and an appropriate sample will be selected for you.

1. Determine how you would prefer to gather your sample of position descriptions. As noted above, you may select your own sample or you may prefer to forward all of your position descriptions and have a sample selected for you. If you would prefer to select your own sample, please proceed to step 2. If you would prefer to have a sample selected for you, please proceed to step 4.

2. Only position descriptions that fall within one of the following functional areas will be included in this study:
   - First year experience and student engagement (e.g. orientation and transition programs, mentorship programs, leadership development programs, etc.)
   - Counselling Services
   - Health Services
   - Accessibility Services (i.e. Services for Students with Disabilities)
   - Career Services
   - Academic Skills Services
   - Services for diverse students (e.g. Sexual and Gender Diversity Office, Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity, Multi-faith Services, Mature Student Services, Aboriginal Student Services, etc.)
   - Residence Life
   - Assessment and Evaluation

If one or more of these areas are not present at your institution or they fall outside the Division of Student Affairs and Services (or equivalent), there is no need to obtain position
descriptions from that area. If two or more functional areas are combined in a single administrative unit (e.g. Health and Counselling Services, Accessibility and Academic Skills, etc.), please treat them as separate functional areas by selecting position descriptions from each of them.

3. Select three representative position descriptions from each of the functional areas represented within your division (e.g. Health Services, Accessibility Services, Career Services, Residence Life, etc.), including one at the entry level, one at the mid level, and one at the senior level, where such positions exist.

- Entry level positions are typically those that require less than 5 years of experience. Generally, staff in entry-level positions would not have responsibility for supervising or managing the workflow of other professional staff.
- Mid-level positions would typically require more than 5 years of professional experience. Staff in these roles may have greater levels of responsibility than those at an entry-level and may supervise others.
- Senior level positions generally require significant professional experience and relevant education. Senior level staff often hold directorial positions in which they have significant responsibilities related to staff supervision, decision-making, and financial management.

If a functional area does not have positions at one or more of these levels, simply include the position descriptions(s) at the levels that are represented. Please note that Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) and/or Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) positions will not be included in this study.

4. When the position descriptions have been collected, you may choose the most convenient way to transfer them. This can be done via email, fax, dropbox, or I can provide you with a USB key and a postage paid envelope to return the key.

5. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be happy to provide support via email, telephone, skype, or in person. I can be reached at melinda.scott@utoronto.ca or 416-978-7246.

Once again, thank you for your support of this research. I hope that the results of this study will be beneficial to your division and your institution, as well as Student Affairs and Services professionals across Canada and the broader research community. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
Melinda Scott
PhD Candidate
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
Appendix C

Dear [NAME]

In the Fall of 2017 you provided a sample of position descriptions from your portfolio as part of a study investigating the ways in which professional competencies are represented in the position descriptions of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) positions at post-secondary institutions in the province of Ontario, with a particular emphasis on skills, experience, and responsibilities related to assessment, evaluation and research (AER). Your support of the initial phase of this research is truly appreciated and the preliminary analysis of these documents has provided valuable insight into the representations of AER responsibilities and qualifications in SAS position descriptions.

At this time, I am writing to invite you to participate in a follow-up interview intended to further explore factors that may influence the representation of AER competencies in the position descriptions of SAS roles at Ontario colleges and universities. The interview would last approximately 60 minutes and can be held on your campus in a location of your choosing, or via telephone. I will be taking notes, and with your permission, recording the interview.

This study is being conducted as part of my PhD research in the Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Ruth Childs. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and there are no known or anticipated risks associated with participation. You may decline to answer any questions you feel you do not wish to answer and you may withdraw from the study at any time. All information you provide will be considered confidential and grouped with responses from other participants. Further, you will not be identified by name or institution in my thesis or in any report or publication resulting from this study. Only researchers associated with this study will have access to the encrypted study records. Paper files will be locked securely in a filing cabinet. The data collected through this study will be kept for a period of five years. At the end of this period, all data will be destroyed in accordance with University of Toronto policy.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance by the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board. Should you have any questions about your rights as a participant, please feel free to contact the Research Oversight and Compliance Office – Human Research Ethics Program at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273. The research study you are participating in may be reviewed for quality assurance to make sure that the required laws and
guidelines are followed. If chosen, (a) representative(s) of the Human Research Ethics Program (HREP) may access study-related data and/or consent materials as part of the review. All information accessed by the HREP will be upheld to the same level of confidentiality that has been stated by the researcher.

If you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation or have any questions about this study, please contact me at [redacted] or by email at [redacted]. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Ruth Childs at [redacted] or by email [redacted].

I understand that you are very busy and have many demands on your time. I sincerely appreciate your consideration of this request. It is my hope that the results of this study will be beneficial to [NAME OF INSTITUTION] and the [NAME OF DIVISION], as well as Canadian Student Affairs and Services professionals more broadly.

Sincerely,

Melinda Scott
PhD Candidate
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto
Consent of Participants Agreeing to Participate in Interview

Date:

Study Title: Assessment in Practice: A Mixed Methods Study of the Representations of Assessment Competencies in the Position Descriptions of Student Affairs and Services Professionals

Investigator: Melinda Scott

I understand the nature and purpose of the research study indicated in the title above and described in the information letter. I understand that I am free to participate or not participate in all or some of the parts of the study as I have indicated below.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary. I am free to refrain from responding to any question(s) that I do not wish to answer and I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If I do withdraw, any data collected from me will be destroyed and will not be included in any report.

I understand that the data collected will be kept in confidence and stored in a secure area only accessible to the investigator.

I understand that no individual will be identified or identifiable in the thesis or in any publication or conference presentation of the research findings. A copy of the findings will be made available to me on request.

I agree to participate in this phase of the study and understand that I will be asked to participate in an interview regarding the professional competencies of Canadian Student Affairs and Services Professionals, with a particular focus on skills and knowledge related to assessment, evaluation and research. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes of my time.

☐ I agree to participate in the interview as described above

☐ I do NOT wish to participate in the interview
Audio Recording

Interviews will be recorded in an effort to ensure that all of the information shared is fully captured. Following the completion of the interview, the recording will be stored in a secure location. The recording and all transcripts will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

Do you consent to have your comments audio recorded?

☐ Yes, I agree to have my comments audio recorded

☐ No, I do NOT give my consent to be audio recorded

Participant name: __________________________________________

Participant signature: ________________________________________

Date: __________________________
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Interview #: 
Date: 

Introduction

- Welcome participant and thank them for their participation in the study.

- Introduce investigator: I am a PhD candidate in Higher Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto.

- Review purpose of study: the purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which professional competencies are represented in the position descriptions of Student Affairs and Services positions at Ontario colleges and universities – with a particular emphasis on skills and knowledge related to assessment, evaluation and research.

- Review purpose of interview: During the first phase of this study you shared a sample of position descriptions from your portfolio; the analysis of these documents has provided valuable insight into the representations of professional competencies in position descriptions across institutions. The purpose of this interview is to explore in greater detail how senior leaders make decisions regarding these representations.

- Reminder and review of consent: For the records of the study, I would like to remind you of the consent form you signed to prior to your participation in this study. As a reminder, your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to respond to any question, and you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequence.

- Interview structure: I expect that the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I will be taking notes, and with your permission, recording the interview.

- Do you have any questions before we begin?
Position Descriptions – General

I would like to begin with a general discussion about the review and development of position descriptions within your portfolio.

1. Can you walk me through the process for how you (or your managers) approach the review of existing position descriptions and/or the development of new position descriptions?

   Possible prompts:
   - How do you make decisions about what responsibilities and qualifications to include in a position description?
   - What resources (if any) do you use?
   - To what extent are other departments involved in the process (e.g. Human Resources)
   - Are there any limitations to this process?

Professional Competency Models

2. When reviewing existing position descriptions or developing new position descriptions, have you or your teams made use of any professional competency models or other professional standards?

   Possible prompts:
   - What specific models have been used?
   - How effective have you found this to be?
   - Is there any variation in how you have used them between functional areas (e.g. Career Services, Housing, Health Services, etc)?
   - Have professional competency models been used in other ways (e.g. professional development)?
   - Would you ever consider making use of a professional competency model for this purpose?

I would like to turn our conversation specifically to the CACUSS Competency Model for a moment. This sheet provides a summary of the 11 competency domains included in the Model (provide handout).

3. Thinking broadly about the positions within your portfolio and the qualifications you require of your staff, are there any competency domains that you would prioritize higher than others? If so, which ones and why?

   Possible prompt:
   - To what extent do you prioritize the inclusion of assessment, evaluation and research related competencies as qualifications?
Follow-up: Thinking broadly about the field of Student Affairs and Services – do you think that there are specific competency domains that are more or less likely to be represented in existing position descriptions? If so, which ones and why?

Possible prompt:
• How much of a priority do you think is placed on assessment, evaluation, and research competencies?

AER – General

For the final part of the interview, I would like to turn our attention to assessment, evaluation and research competencies more specifically.

4. How do you differentiate between the terms “assessment”, “evaluation” and “research”?

Follow-up:
• In general, how much emphasis do you and your teams place on each of these activities?

5. In general, how would you describe the typical assessment, evaluation or research responsibilities that you require of your staff?

Possible prompt:
• Thinking about the different functional areas within your portfolio, are there any differences in assessment, evaluation and research responsibilities?

6. In general, how would you describe the level of assessment, evaluation and research skills and knowledge of your staff?

Possible prompt:
• Are there areas where they are particularly strong?
• Are there areas where they would benefit from additional development?

7. When you are engaged in a hiring process, how much consideration would you generally give to a candidate’s level of assessment, evaluation and research skills or knowledge?

Possible prompt:
• How do you make determinations about a candidate’s level of assessment, evaluation and research skills or knowledge?

8. Do you have any addition comments you would like to add?
Conclusion

- This concludes the interview. Thank you for your participation.
- If at any point you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.
- If you would like to request a copy of the results at the conclusion of the study, please contact me.