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*Following a brief historical review of state-level assessment research and practice, this article discusses the current objectives and outcomes of state-level assessment policies throughout the United States, possible explanations for the gap between assessment policy objectives and outcomes, and the implications for urban institutions of higher education.*

## **Promise and Peril: Assessment and Urban Universities**

The article is intended to serve as a useful primer on state-level assessment policy issues for audiences from urban and metropolitan institutions of higher education. It is divided into four sections: a segment tracing the high points in the history of state-level interest in assessment, which provides a context for the subsequent discussion; a brief review of the three major national surveys that have been conducted to date on state-level assessment; a report of the recent research findings of the authors on the objectives and outcomes in state-level assessment policies since 1996; and, finally, a discussion of some of the possible implications of this research for urban and metropolitan universities.

### **Historical Context for State-Level Assessment Policies**

There have been numerous incentives for public higher education to engage in the assessment of the quality of teaching and learning on campuses. By the mid-1980s, the addition of assessment standards in regional accreditation for colleges and universities, burgeoning state policy initiatives, national reports from a variety of commissions, and external funding (e.g., the Kellogg Foundation's support of the University of Tennessee's performance funding system) all served as catalysts for the assessment movement in higher education (Banta and Moffett, 1987).

Interest in outcomes assessment on the part of states, however, is not a recent development. Since the establishment of land-grant colleges in the nineteenth century, states have been concerned with the effectiveness and quality of their postsecondary education institutions. The historic foundations for state involvement in pub-

lic higher education stemmed from concern about commitment to access, economic development, and the preparation of a skilled citizenry (Ewell, 1985).

The post-World War II expansion of student enrollments and federal funding of student aid, research, and development increased government involvement in assessment policies and practices. With an increase in funding from the state and federal levels came increased concern about the effective and efficient use of public resources, as well as a call for those institutions receiving these resources to be held accountable (Stevens and Hamlett, 1983).

In spite of the growth in the financial resources and size of colleges and universities, the new responsibilities for assessment are a consequence of a shift in priorities during the last twenty years, from expansion in quantity to an increase in quality. "We have talked about quality in public higher education in the past, but I believe it is fair to say that at the level of state government our necessary preoccupation in the 1960s and 1970s was with quantity rather than quality. Now state governments will be told that it is time to give renewed attention to the quality of our higher education endeavors" (Millett, 1984).

So despite long-standing state concerns about institutional quality and effectiveness, it was not until the early 1980s that states began requiring more systematic and coordinated approaches to assessment. For example, in 1982, the Florida State Legislature directed the state's system of public higher education to develop the College-Level Academic Skills Test, or CLAST. In 1984, the South Dakota Board of Regents adopted a resolution that created a program testing students' academic performance. And, in 1985, the New Jersey Board of Higher Education established the College Outcomes Evaluation Program, or COEP, a comprehensive outcomes assessment project.

The 1980s also saw a number of reports that decried the declining quality and lack of accountability in higher education and called for reform. Among these reports were *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community*, a 1985 report from the Association of American Colleges, *Involvement in Learning*, a 1984 report from the National Institute of Education's Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, and *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education*, issued by the National Endowment of the Humanities.

At about the same time, Peter Ewell authored an influential working paper for the Education Commission of the States (ECS), contending that state governments should be involved in assessing undergraduate education because of their significant financial investment in public higher education, and the institutions should, in turn, enable the state to meet other policy objectives (Ewell, 1985). In order for states to have such an influence, Ewell recommended that they develop funding and regulatory policy mechanisms that induce institutional-level efforts toward self-improvement and monitor those efforts by regularly collecting and reporting on identified measures of effectiveness (Ewell, 1985).

### **Review of Prior Survey Research on State-Level Assessment Policy**

Four national surveys on state assessment policies and practices have been conducted since 1985. The first came in late 1986, when ECS, in conjunction with the

State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), administered a survey of the executive and academic officers in the SHEEO network in all 50 states. This survey was part of a larger, three-year ECS project entitled “Effective State Action to Improve Undergraduate Education.” Among the survey’s findings: by 1987, two-thirds of the states had some type of formal assessment policy; assessment was broadly defined across the states and, as a result, the assessment mechanisms varied considerably from state to state; and, while the degree of state involvement in assessment activity varied, most state boards recognized that assessment is ultimately a campus responsibility (Boyer, Ewell, Finney, and Mingle, 1987).

In 1990, ECS, SHEEO, and AAHE teamed up again to cosponsor a second survey on state assessment policies. This survey, sent to state academic officers, allowed ECS researchers to compare responses to the 1987 survey and discern trends and patterns in state assessment activity. According to the 1990 survey, assessment had become an identifiably distinct policy area at the state level, most states believed the primary focus of assessment was the measurement of student learning outcomes, substantial variations among states’ approaches to assessment were still evident, and state leaders were starting to see assessment as a “powerful lever for change” (Ewell, Finney, and Lenth, 1990).

The third national study on state assessment policy was conducted by American College Testing (ACT) in early 1995. State higher education commissions, regional accrediting associations, two and four-year institutions, and various national higher education associations and agencies were surveyed. The survey report revealed that external pressures from state and federal agencies were major forces in the assessment arena, and that outcomes assessment was considered most important in the areas of general education and foundation skills (Steele and Lutz, 1995).

In late 1995, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) held a workshop addressing assessment with state representatives, assessment researchers, and NCES staff. As part of the workshop, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to explore the origins and development of the assessment approaches in their states, the types of measurement instruments used, obstacles to implementation, and methodological problems. In general, the results reflected a shift in focus from improvement to accountability and greater concern about productivity than quality; an increased use of common measures across institutions that had more meaning for audiences beyond the institutions (e.g., parents and legislators); continued importance of regional accrediting associations in the assessment process; and the linkage of assessment policies to other state-level policy initiatives, including funding. Among the obstacles noted were the high costs of developing assessment instruments, the lack of appropriate or effective instruments, absence of consensus about what was to be measured, and general institutional resistance to state requirements (NCHEMS, 1996).

### **The Current Landscape in State Assessment Policy**

This article picks up where the survey research leaves off by updating the current condition of state-level assessment policies and practices across the country. In par-

ticular, it reports research findings describing the explicit objectives and outcomes of such policies, and the possible explanations for the gap between policy objectives and outcomes. We conclude with a discussion of the implications that state-level assessment policies may have for urban and metropolitan institutions.

One of the most important elements of any state-level assessment policy is its objective. In general, states seek to meet a wide array of objectives with their assessment policies, from improving student learning to holding institutions accountable. Clearly, the objectives of such policies are significant because they reflect policymakers' perceptions of what colleges and universities should be doing and how they should be doing it. Assessment policy objectives also indicate overarching priorities: which is a higher priority—improvement or accountability? In essence, a policy objective demonstrates intention, i.e., what is intended by the policy. Understanding these perceptions, priorities, and intentions at the state level is essential for institutional leaders.

Based on our earlier analysis of state-level assessment policy documents, we compiled a list of nine possible assessment policy objectives:

- increasing accountability to the public;
- increasing fiscal accountability;
- improving teaching;
- improving student learning;
- promoting planning;
- improving academic program efficiency;
- facilitating intrastate comparisons;
- facilitating interstate comparisons; and
- reducing academic program duplication.

We then asked the academic officers in each state to mark which of these objectives applied to his/her own state's assessment policy. (The state academic officers were identified using a list of persons in these positions in all 50 states compiled by the State Higher Education Executive Officers, or SHEEO, organization.)

According to the responses received from a total of 44 (of 50) state academic officers, the most common assessment policy objective across the states was increasing accountability to the public. (The "public," in this case, refers not only to the general public, but also to publicly elected representatives such as a state's governor and legislators.) A very close second in terms of frequency was improving student learning, followed by improving teaching. Each of these objectives was marked by at least 20 state academic officers. The least common assessment policy objectives, marked by five or fewer state academic officers, were facilitating intrastate comparisons and reducing academic program duplication.

Based on these data, it is clear that state academic officers perceive their states' assessment policies as seeking to meet a range of objectives. Given the increasing demands on higher education to be more responsive to public and political constituencies, it is not surprising that the leading policy objective across the states is increasing accountability to the public. It is interesting to note, however, that increasing fiscal

accountability is an objective in only half of these states, according to the state academic officers. This difference suggests that accountability is not monolithic but rather multifaceted, and certain facets are more important than others. Because accountability has played, and will continue to play, such a prominent role in the assessment movement, understanding its various facets is a necessary next step.

Given that most, if not all, states have multiple objectives for their assessment policies, it is also crucial to understand the interaction between these objectives. It is possible that some may complement each other. For example, promoting planning on campuses might well lead to improving academic program efficiency, which might, in turn, help reduce academic program duplication.

On the other hand, some of these objectives might work at cross-purposes. If one of the assessment policy objectives is facilitating intrastate or interstate comparisons, there is the risk that such comparisons, the data drawn from them, and the state policies based on the data might obscure the fundamental differences across academic programs, student populations, and institutional types, which could hinder the improvement of teaching and learning. This potential danger has led a number of institutions and state agencies to campaign actively against this particular objective.

Objectives tell only half the policy story, however. Equally important (and revealing) is an analysis of outcomes. While a state may have certain objectives for its assessment policy, those objectives may not always be met. Conversely, an assessment policy may have unintended or unexpected outcomes. This distinction between policy objectives and outcomes is a significant one, particularly as we attempt to understand the dynamics of the policy process at the state level. An effort has been made to distinguish between intentional analysis, which focuses on what was, or is, intended by a policy, and functional analysis, which focuses on what actually happened as a result of a policy (Dubnick and Bardes, 1983). For the purposes of this article, we consider policy objectives as the focus of intentional analysis, and policy outcomes as the focus of functional analysis.

In terms of outcomes, the most common assessment policy outcome reported by state academic officers was increasing accountability to the public, followed immediately by promoting planning on campuses. Third in frequency was improving teaching, trailed by improving student learning and improving academic program efficiency. It is important to observe that there are interesting divergences between policy objectives and outcomes indicated by these data. Whereas thirty state academic officers listed improving student learning as an objective, only twenty reported it as an outcome. Five officers who reported increasing fiscal accountability as an objective did not report it as an outcome. On the other hand, seven more states marked promoting planning on campuses as an outcome rather than as an objective, suggesting that this is an unintended effect of the policy. (While unintended, such an outcome is probably undesirable.)

Thus, the data point to a gap between policy objectives and outcomes. But why? Our survey of state academic officers suggests seven possible explanations. First, there is simply a lack of resources—primarily financial—with which to conduct as-

assessment activity or to implement state-level assessment policy. Declining state appropriations for public higher education are always a possibility, and higher education faces stiff competition from other state functions—e.g., health care, criminal justice, and elementary and secondary education—for scarce state funds (Zumeta, 1995). Ironically, higher education needs more money to conduct assessment to demonstrate that it serves a vital state function, which would then allow it to compete more favorably with other pressing public needs.

One alternative to the use of more sophisticated (and thus expensive) assessment instruments—the results of which can be complex and difficult to explain to lay audiences—is to rely on more conventional, and less complex, measures. Higher education might choose to compare the relative costs of putting one student through an undergraduate curriculum to the costs of keeping one inmate in prison for four years. Colleges and universities could point to the increased rates of employment among graduates, or the more abstract but no less compelling need for an educated citizenry, to make the case for higher education in a more competitive state appropriations environment. The use of statistically valid measures of student outcomes assessment is essential from an academic and cognitive perspective, but from a political perspective, more basic measures might be at least equally effective.

The second possible explanation for a differences between assessment policy objectives and outcomes is a lack of commitment on the part of institutional administrators and faculty. In some states, institutions tend to resist state requirements, and faculty, in particular, see state-mandated assessment activity as burdensome and intrusive. In other states, there is a wide gulf between institutions on this issue; some are quick to take advantage of the political and popular good will that assessment reports can generate, while others are apprehensive about doing assessment and reporting results that will damage the institution's image and reputation.

Still other institutions may be conducting assessment, but in a way that is mostly meaningful for them and the constituencies they serve, as opposed to what state policymakers want. Indeed, the "lack of commitment" may be true only from the state perspective; perhaps institutions are fully committed to assessment, but from a different perspective. Related to the lack of commitment is a concern about institutional autonomy. Many administrators and faculty are trying to protect their autonomy from additional state regulations, and these attempts may be seen at the state level as lack of commitment, or institutional resistance.

The decentralized nature of many states' assessment policies can also make it difficult to produce policy outcomes that correspond with objectives. Although some states mandate assessment, they leave the means largely up to individual institutions. In some states, it is acknowledged that institutions with different missions (e.g., research universities and community colleges) will very likely produce different outcomes, which renders a "one-size-fits-all" system unworkable. Such states expect different outcomes from different institutional types, depending on the assessment approach used.

A fourth possible explanation suggested by our research is the overall policy climate. No policy is stagnant, and the policy climate swirling around a particular one is

constantly changing. In part, this is the nature of the policy process, which moves in cycles from problem formation to policy adoption, formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The policy climate changes from stage to stage within this cycle, as different “players” in the policy process become more or less important, and as the issue achieves greater political saliency. As the climate changes, certain policy objectives may become obscured, emphasized, and even altered as the policy itself is formulated and implemented. Naturally, the evaluation of a policy can lead to dramatic modifications in objectives, as evaluators develop new perceptions and/or priorities.

Perhaps the most straightforward explanation is simple confusion about the requirements of the policy. In a case study of the interactions between state policies and institutional perceptions related to assessment, one of the most striking findings was the number of institutions that either reported confusion about what the state policy required, or reported requirements that differed from those expressed by the state (Augustine, Peterson, and Cole, 1998). If an institution is unclear about the objectives of an assessment policy, a gap between objectives and outcomes is almost unavoidable.

Related to this lack of policy clarity are the difficulties associated with assessment instruments and indicators. If a policy objective is the improvement of student learning, what measures should be used as evidence that this has, in fact, improved, i.e., that the improvement of learning is an outcome? Similarly, how should the improvement of teaching be measured? Despite extensive research on these and related questions, some state academic officers still blame part of the disparity between objectives and outcomes on the lack of a common understanding or consensus regarding appropriate assessment measures.

The seventh explanation for this gap is structural: there is a natural and inevitable difference in perspectives between states and institutions. Most state-level policymakers are not experts on higher education or assessment, and, in the course of crafting assessment policy, the policymakers may or may not consult with the researchers and analysts who are experts. At the same time, state policymakers are often motivated by different forces than institutional administrators and faculty. As the general public has become less confident about higher education and demanded more accountability, state policymakers react to the change in popular opinion by seeking to regulate colleges and universities to a greater extent. Institutions, by contrast, tend to think of themselves as insulated from political and popular pressures, or as above the fray of competing political interests and agendas. This is a dangerous attitude, especially in an era of increased competition for decreased state appropriations. The fundamental differences in the nature of state policymaking on the one hand, and institutional governance on the other, sometimes strains the lines of communication and distorts policy initiatives, both in terms of objectives and outcomes.

### **Implications for Urban and Metropolitan Institutions**

These research findings hold numerous implications for urban and metropolitan institutions of higher education. Perhaps most critical is the need for leaders of these campuses to be aware of the perceptions, priorities, and intentions of state-level

policymakers with reference to assessment. In many cases, knowing the shape of the next wave can make staying afloat much easier. Our research indicates that the recent trend toward increasing institutional accountability to the public is widespread and will likely continue. All institutions must be ready for additional state requirements and mandates designed to hold institutions accountable, and one of the most prevalent accountability mechanisms is assessment.

Making this case for institutional quality and effectiveness to state policymakers requires the use of assessment data. Urban and metropolitan institutions should take special pains to ensure that the provisions of current and future state assessment policies do not place them at a comparative disadvantage to other institutional types in a particular state when it comes to the collection and analysis of assessment data. For example, research has demonstrated the many differences in the demographic and socioeconomic composition of the student populations on urban campuses. Research also shows that these populations tend not to do as well on some popular assessment instruments, such as standardized examinations. Therefore, metropolitan institutions need to identify assessment instruments appropriate for their distinctive populations and argue for their inclusion in policies at the state level.

Similarly, there is often an important difference in the research agendas of urban institutions, where the research tends to be more applied in nature than the "pure" research conducted at other institutions. Urban campuses should be alert for research productivity measures that value pure research more than applied research. There is also an issue of institutional service, and a strong need for metropolitan institutions to be accountable to local businesses, communities, and populations. For some state flagship institutions, the mission is more national, or even international, in scope. This does not mean that there is a difference in value. In each of the facets of the traditional tripartite institutional mission—teaching, research, and service—urban campuses must articulate their own special missions and seek to be assessed on how well they achieve them. This need should unite urban colleges and universities in an effort to influence the state assessment policy process. Institutional assessment cannot be, and should not be, a cookie-cutter exercise.

Assessment is now a fixture in the American higher education landscape. The assessment movement affects all of higher education, at every level, from the individual classroom to the floor of the state legislature. It is complex and controversial and, in some states, highly charged politically. Assessment research and analysis continues at a robust pace as state policymakers strive to develop reasonable, effective, and efficient assessment policies. Institutional leaders and faculty, especially at metropolitan colleges and universities, should use assessment research to take the initiative in defining the assessment needs of their particular institutional type and articulate those needs to state policymakers. Only by presenting a strong and compelling case for their own interests can metropolitan institutions assure themselves of fair treatment in the state assessment policy process.

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