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Introduction

This 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: first, a segment tracing the high points in the history of state-level interest in assessment, which provides a context for the subsequent discussion; second, a brief review of the three major national surveys that have been conducted to date on state-level assessment; third, 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 colleges and universities.

Historical Context for State-Level Assessment Policy

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 additions 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 19th century, states have been concerned with the effectiveness and quality of their postsecondary education institutions. The historic foundations for state involvement in public higher education

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stemmed from concern about commitment to access, economic development, and the preparation of a skilled citizenry (Ewell, 1985; Fisher, 1988).

The post-World War II expansion of student enrollments and federal funding of student aid and research and development increased government involvement in assessment policies and practices (Bender, 1983; Sabloff, 1997). 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 colleges and universities that received 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, 1979).

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

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in 1985, the New Jersey Board of Higher Education established the College Outcomes Evaluation Program, or COEP, a comprehensive outcomes assessment program.

The 1980s also saw a number of reports that decried the declining quality and lack of accountability in higher education and called for education 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 public higher education should, in turn, enable the state to meet other policy objectives (Ewell, 1985). In order for states to have an influence on institutions, Ewell recommended that they develop funding and regulatory policy mechanisms that induce institutional-level efforts toward self-improvement and monitor those institutions efforts by regularly collecting and reporting on identified measures of effectiveness (Ewell, 1985).

Review of Prior Survey Research on State-Level Assessment Policy

Since 1985, four national surveys on state assessment policies and practices have been conducted. The first came in late 1986, when ECS, in conjunction with the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the American Association of Higher

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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).

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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 more 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 particular, this article reports research findings describing the explicit objectives and outcomes of state-level assessment policies, and the possible explanations for the gap between policy objectives and outcomes. This article then concludes with a discussion of the implications that state-level assessment policies may have for urban and metropolitan institutions.

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One of the most important elements of any state-level assessment policy is the policy's 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 an assessment policy 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 policy priorities: which is a higher priority—improvement or accountability? These priorities have obvious consequences for institutional behaviors and decisions. 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: (1) increasing accountability to the public; (2) increasing fiscal accountability; (3) improving teaching; (4) improving student learning; (5) promoting planning on campuses; (6) improving academic program efficiency; (7) facilitating intrastate comparisons; (8) facilitating interstate comparisons; and (9) reducing academic program duplication. We then asked each state academic officer to mark which of these objectives applied to his/her own state's assessment policy.

According to the responses received from a total of 44 state academic officers¹, 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

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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 this data, it is clear state academic officers perceive that their states' assessment policies seek 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 multi-faceted, 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 the various facets of accountability 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 nature of the interaction between these objectives. It is possible that some of these objectives complement each other. For example, promoting planning on campuses might well lead to improving academic program efficiency, which might, in turn, result in reducing academic program duplication.

On the other hand, some of these objectives might work at "cross-purposes" to one another. If one of the assessment policy objectives is facilitating intrastate or

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interstate comparisons, there is the risk that such comparisons, the data drawn from such comparisons, and the state policies based on this 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 policy objective.

Objectives only tell half of 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. This distinction has also been addressed in the policy analysis literature. 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 is an interesting set of divergences between policy

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objectives and outcomes indicated by this 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 than as an objective, suggesting that this is an unintended effect of the policy. (While unintended, such an outcome is probably not unwanted.)

Thus, the data points 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 assessment activity or to implement state-level assessment policy. The trend toward declining state appropriations for public higher education is clear, and higher education faces stiff competition from other state functions, such as health care, criminal justice, and elementary and secondary education, for scarce state funds (Zumeta, 1995). Ironically, higher education needs more money to conduct assessment so that it can demonstrate it effectively serves a vital state function, which would allow it to compete more favorably with these other pressing public needs. But without additional funds, institutions will be hard-pressed to afford expensive assessment instruments and the time and energy of a thorough assessment effort, which will make it harder for higher education to make its collective case to state legislatures. In short, higher education is caught in a vicious cycle.

The second possible explanation for a divergence 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

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and, 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 goodwill 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 more 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 the concern about institutional autonomy. Many administrators and faculty are trying to protect their autonomy from additional state regulations, and these attempts to safeguard institutional autonomy is 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 of assessment largely up to the individual institutions. These states will very likely see different outcomes from different institutions, depending on the assessment approach used. This decentralization can also manifest itself in very loosely defined policy objectives from the state, which makes looking at outcomes almost meaningless; institutions interpret the state's assessment policy objectives differently, and therefore should be expected to have different outcomes. Still another result of decentralization is a variation across institutions in terms of their place in the assessment process. Some institutions may have made much

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more progress than others, and this could be for a variety of reasons, including the length of time involved with assessment, the amount of time and money spent on assessment, and the degree of administrative and/or faculty commitment.

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 policy is constantly changing. In part, this is the nature of the policy process, which move sin 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 policy 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 the requirements 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 student learning has, in fact, improved,

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i.e., that the improvement of learning is an outcome? Similarly, how should the improvement of teaching be measured? Despite the extensive research that has been done 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 differences in perspectives between states and institutions. Most state-level policymakers are not experts on higher education or assessment, and these policymakers may or may not consult with those researchers and analysts who are experts on these subjects in the course of crafting assessment policy. 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 in higher education and demanded more accountability, state policymakers react to this 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 else think of themselves as “above the fray” of competing political interests and agendas. This is a dangerous attitude, especially in this 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

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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, including urban and metropolitan campuses, 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 this assessment data. Research has demonstrated the many differences in the demographic and socioeconomic composition of the student populations on urban campuses. Research has also shown that these populations tend not to do as well on some popular assessment mechanisms, such as standardized examinations. Therefore, metropolitan institutions need to identify assessment instruments appropriate for their distinctive populations and argue for their inclusion in assessment policies at the state level. This need should unite urban colleges and universities in an effort to influence the state assessment policy process. It is clear that institutional assessment can not be, and should not be, a “cookie-cutter” exercise.

Assessment is now a fixture on the American higher education landscape. The assessment movement impacts all of higher education, at every level, from the individual

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classroom to the floor of the state legislature. It is complex and controversial, and in some states, is 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.

¹ We received responses from 44 state academic officers. Six responses indicated there was no formal assessment policy in effect at the state level. Therefore, this data is drawn from the 38 usable replies.