The State Higher Education Assessment Questionnaire

SHEAQ -- Instrument Description

Methodology and Instrument

The questionnaire is divided into six sections—

1. **State political context**
2. **State assessment policy objectives**
3. **State-level assessment processes**
4. **The outcomes of state assessment practices**
5. **The evaluation of state assessment policies**
6. **Future directions**

Context Questions. Questions 1-3 seek to establish a context for the questions (and answers) that follow. Questions 1 and 2 ask about the recent history of the state's assessment policy, and Question 3 asks about state governance structure.

Questions 1 and 2. The policy documents which informed the development of the State Higher Education Assessment Questionnaire were collected during the summer and fall of 1996. Since one of the goals of the project is to observe and report on the evolution of state-level assessment policies and practices, these questions seek to identify changes in a state's assessment policy since that time. Documentation related to the policy change(s) were requested to be attached to the survey for analysis and interpretation. Changes in policy at the state level will be reflected in subsequent updates of Benchmarking Assessment, the first year research report.

Question 3. One of the interesting themes that emerged from the Year One research was the nature of the relationship between a state's assessment policy and that state's governance structure. The literature reviews revealed that the effect of governance structure on state higher education policy is a relatively new and unexplored area. Volkwein and Malik (1997) examined states' regulation of higher education and a range of social, political, and economic characteristics of those states.[i] Hearn, Griswold, and Marine (1996) examined the role that governance structure plays in the formulation of state tuition and financial aid policy.[ii] Hearn and Griswold (1994) studied the degree to which the centralization of a state's governance structure affected postsecondary policy innovation.[iii]

The second year NCPI research on state-level assessment policies builds on this timely and evolving body of research by examining the nature of the relationship between a state's assessment policy and that state's governance structure. Since governance structure is one of the fundamental lenses through which to examine state-level assessment policies and practices, a detailed set of definitions taken from the literature is provided here.

This question in the SHEAQ seeks to identify the type of governance structure employed by each state. This permits us to discern what patterns, if any, exist between assessment and governance. The most prominent taxonomy for state governance structures comes from the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Based on their own review of the state higher education policy literature, McGuinness *et al.*, categorize state structures into three broad

categories: 1) consolidated governing boards, 2) coordinating boards, and 3) planning agencies.[iv] States with consolidated governing boards "assign responsibility for coordinating functions for most, if not all, higher education to a board whose primary responsibilities relate to governing the institutions under its jurisdiction." Among those responsibilities enumerated by McGuinness and his colleagues are "authority both to develop and implement policy; advocate for the needs of the institutions to the legislature and governor; authority to allocate and reallocate resources between and among the institutions within its jurisdiction."[v]

States with coordinating boards are subdivided into two categories: regulatory and advisory boards. Regulatory coordinating boards "have authority to approve academic programs, presumably indicating a greater degree of authority to regulate the substance of academic policy." By contrast, advisory boards "have authority only to review and make recommendations regarding academic programs to the institutional governing boards." In contrast to the consolidated boards, coordinating boards focus more on "state and system needs and priorities than on advocating the interests of the higher education community."[vi]

The third type of governance structure—planning agencies—have "essentially no coordinating authority delegated to a statutory entity that extends much beyond a voluntary planning and convening role and ensuring good communications among institutions and sectors."[vii] If we envision a spectrum, running from "state control" at one end to "institutional autonomy" at the other end, consolidated governing boards are closer to "state control," planning agencies are closer to "institutional autonomy," and coordinating boards, both regulatory and advisory, fall somewhere in the middle, depending upon the state in question.

Objectives Questions. Questions 4-7 address the objectives of a state's assessment policies and practices. If a state's policy has more than one objective, we seek to determine which objective is most significant. Since our primary focus in Project 5.1 is to research assessment policies as they relate to the improvement of teaching and learning, Questions 6 and 7 address these issues directly.

Another important lesson learned from our research during Year One was the wide range of objectives that the states seek to meet through their assessment policies and practices. We attempted to capture this variety by adapting existing public policy typologies to an analysis of state assessment policy documents.[viii] The resulting policy typology consisted of four categories, each reflecting the ultimate objective, or goal, of the assessment policy: regulatory, reforming, quality assurance, and accountability. A regulatory policy is designed to encourage or ensure compliance with regulations; a reforming policy is designed to encourage or ensure some type of reform; a quality assurance policy is designed to assure quality; and an accountability policy is designed to make higher education institutions more accountable to some higher authority, generally the state legislature and/or the governor. In some cases, state policies had elements of two or more of these types. In other cases, none of the four policy types accurately or completely reflected a state's expressed objectives.

Thus in the second year, we revisited this issue of policy type using a different approach. Drawing on our reading of the state policy documents, we compiled a list of nine policy objectives. The SHEAQ asked SHEEOs to mark each of these nine objectives that they believed applied to their states' assessment policies. The nine objectives are the following: (1) increasing

accountability to the public; (2) increasing fiscal accountability; (3) improving teaching; (4) improving student learning; (5) promoting planning on campus; (6) improving academic program efficiency; (7) facilitating intrastate comparisons; (8) facilitating interstate comparisons; and (9) reducing academic program duplication. Respondents were also given an option to add additional policy objectives.

Question 4. In the first report of findings and analyses of the original policy documents related to assessment for each of the 50 states, a list was compiled of every assessment policy objective encountered. In some cases, a state's policy objectives were found to be clearly stated; in other cases, the objectives were implicit. In order to establish some parameters, and give the discussion of policy objectives a greater degree of generalizability, these nine objectives were offered to the state academic officers, who selected all of the objectives that applied to their states' assessment policies. In case other objectives were important, the "other" option was provided for this question.

Question 5. Again, drawing from the findings from Year One, there was the sense that few states, if any, had only one objective for their assessment policies. Often, these policies were designed to meet multiple objectives. When this was the case, it was not clear if all of the multiple objectives were given similar weight, or if certain objectives were, in fact, more "significant" than others. Given that the central focus of this research is upon the use of assessment for improving teaching and learning, the significance of these objectives, in addition to the other seven objectives identified in Question 4, were sought.

Questions 6 and 7. These questions directly address the relationship between assessment and teaching (#6) and learning (#7). At least for some states, simply indicating that the improvement of teaching and learning were policy objectives, or evaluating the significance of these objectives, would not provide a sufficiently detailed picture of the relationship. These two questions give the state academic officer an opportunity to describe this relationship in their own words.

Processes Questions. Questions 8-12 seek to understand the dynamics of the policymaking process at each of five policy stages, and what entities play the most important roles during each stage.

This section of the SHEAQ represents the first attempt to apply a public policy process framework to guide an analysis of higher education assessment policies at the state level. This policy process framework is spelled out by Anderson *et al*. (1984), who describe the policy process as "the various activities by which public policy is formed."[ix] Anderson and his colleagues (1984) articulated a six-stage conceptual framework as a means of analyzing the policy process in general, while acknowledging the differences in policy processes across content areas. "Welfare policy, natural resource regulation, economic stability policy, and civil rights policy are distinguished by different processes….This does not mean that the environment of each policy area is unique in such a way that precludes generalizations about public policy."[x]

While education policy in general, and higher education policy in particular, are also distinguished by different processes as a policy domain, and that these processes also differ by state, the stages described by Anderson *et al*., are useful tools in researching state-level

assessment policy in higher education. These stages are detailed here; definitions are taken from Anderson *et al* (1984).

1. Problem formation: "relief is sought from a situation that produces a human need, a deprivation, or dissatisfaction." (For the purposes of our study, the first two stages in the Anderson model—problem formation and policy agenda—were collapsed into one stage representing the period when the need for a state-level assessment policy was first declared.)

2. Policy formulation: "pertinent and acceptable proposed courses of action for dealing with public problems are developed."

3. Policy adoption: "support is developed for a specific proposal such that the policy is legitimized or authorized."

4. Policy implementation: "the application of the policy to the problem."

5. Policy evaluation: "an attempt is made to determine whether or not the policy has been effective."

In adapting this framework to the analysis of state-level assessment policies, we were most interested in identifying the most important entities at each of these five stages. So we added another dimension to this framework: a list of twelve entities, compiled from our analysis of state assessment policy documents and our Year One literature review. These twelve entities are: (1) state legislature; (2) governor/executive staff; (3) executive agencies; (4) system boards of trustees/regents; (5) campus executive officers; (6) faculty; (7) external consultants; (8) existing policies and practices on campuses; (9) other states' policies and practices; (10) professional organizations, such as SHEEO and AAHE; (11) regional accreditation associations; and (12) disciplinary accreditation associations. By asking the SHEEOs to assess the relative significance of each of these entities on a four-point, Likert-type scale, with "1" representing "not significant" and "4" representing "very significant," we sought to develop a better understanding of who are the most significant "players" at each stage in the assessment policy process.

Questions 8-12. In Year One, this policy process framework was used as a means of analyzing the assessment policy process for each of the 50 states. Based on the analysis of the original policy documents collected from the states in Year One, each state was assigned to one stage in the policy process as outlined by Anderson and his colleagues. This allowed us to conduct a genuinely comparative analysis of state-level assessment policies across the United States. Where were states in the assessment policy process? Had most states already formulated an assessment policy? How many states were implementing their assessment policies? How widespread across states was evaluation of these policies?

For our Year Two questionnaire, we took this analysis one step further, by asking state academic officers to rate the significance of various entities—individuals and groups—on the various stages in the assessment policy process. By asking these questions, we can determine who the "players" are in the assessment policy process at the state level.

We can also determine if the significance of these "players" differs from stage to stage, and if so, what patterns can be discerned? Does increased significance of certain entities signal the development of a particular type of policy? What does the significance of different entities say about the degree to which assessment is a state-level or institutional-level concern? And again, given the focus on the improvement of teaching and learning, who are the most significant entities in states with policies focusing on those issues? The data gathered from the answers to these questions will allow for a systematic comparison of different entities across states, across state governance structures, across policy stages, and across policy objectives.

Question 8. This question asks about the problem formation stage, when "relief is sought from a situation that produces a human need, a deprivation, or dissatisfaction." A state's assessment policy is not developed in a vacuum; there is something that motivates or provokes the policy. Who are the most significant entities in this earliest stage of the policy process? Who are the people who bring this issue "to the table," so to speak?

Question 9. This question asks about the policy formulation stage, when "pertinent and acceptable proposed courses of action for dealing with public problems" are developed. Seldom, if ever, is there only one policy option or course of action advanced regarding assessment. Which entities are most significant in developing these options?

Question 10. This question asks about the policy adoption stage, when "support is developed for a specific proposal such that the policy is legitimized or authorized." Support forms and shifts in the midst of the various courses of action proposed for an assessment policy. Who are the people most significant in attracting support and/or building coalitions around a particular course of action?

Question 11. This question asks about the policy implementation stage, when there is the "application of the policy to the problem." This is where the "rubber hits the road." Once an assessment policy has been adopted, which entities are most significant in executing the policy?

Question 12. This question asks about the policy evaluation stage, when "an attempt is made to determine whether the policy has been effective." Evaluation is a critical part of the policy process; whether the policy will be continued, and if so, what direction the policy will take are decided during the evaluation stage. Which entities have the significant role in evaluating state-level assessment policies?

Outcomes Questions. Questions 13-15 examine outcomes, with special attention to the potential discrepancies between policy objectives and outcomes, as well as the use of common assessment practices and their effect(s) on policy outcomes.

Based on the first year's research, as well as conversations with SHEEOs, we came to the realization that while a state may have certain objectives for its assessment policy, those objectives may not always be met. By the same token, the policy may have unintended or unexpected outcomes. This distinction between policy objectives and policy outcomes is an important one, particularly as we attempt to understand the dynamics of the policy process and make practical recommendations to states on how to achieve the objectives they set for their assessment policies.

This distinction between objectives and outcomes is also addressed in the public 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.[xi] For the purposes of Year Two, we regard objectives as the key to our intentional analysis, and outcomes as the key to our functional analysis.

In the question about assessment policy outcomes, the SHEEOs were given the same list of nine items that were provided in the question about policy objectives. The SHEEOs were asked to mark all of the nine outcomes that applied to the assessment policies in their states.

Question 13. In Question 4, we ask about the *objectives* of a state's assessment policy. In Question 13, we ask about the *outcomes* of that same policy, which may or may not differ from the objectives. If, in fact, state academic officers report a difference between objectives and outcomes in their states' assessment policies, then we can analyze their answers to Questions 8-12 to determine which entities are responsible for those differences.

Question 14. One of the three themes discussed at length in our Year One report was the use of common assessment practices across states. Based on our review of the original state policy documents, we found that there is some evidence of a trend toward the use of common indicators and instruments by states. But why do such trends exist, and what do they mean for the future of state-level assessment activities? In this question, we are asking state academic officers to provide an indication of whether their state is currently using any of the practices described. There are two groups of four practices; the first group of four relates to teaching and the second group of four relates to student learning.

Question 15. If a state is using any of the practices described in Question 14, we ask the state academic officer to describe the impetus for the interest in, or the adoption of, these practices. With this question, we seek a more informed understanding of why states are moving in these directions. Hopefully, this more informed understanding will also allow us to forecast trends in state-level assessment policies into the near future.

Evaluation Questions. Questions 16-20 call for an evaluation of the state's assessment policy, particularly as the policy relates to the improvement of teaching and learning. If a state has been successful in improving teaching and learning through the use of its assessment policy, then these questions seek to understand the reasons for that success. Conversely, if a state has been unsuccessful, then these questions seek to understand the reasons for the lack of success.

Question 16. This question relates to Questions 4 and 13. If there is a difference between assessment policy objectives and outcomes, we ask the state academic officer to comment on why such a difference exists. The analysis of these answers will prove particularly useful for states encountering difficulty in achieving their original policy objectives, or for states experiencing unwanted policy outcomes.

Questions 17 and 17a. If the improvement of teaching is an objective of a state's assessment policy, this question seeks to understand what factors have contributed toward achieving that objective. Question 17a asks for evidence—quantitative or qualitative—that this objective has been met.

Questions 18 and 18a. If the improvement of learning is an objective of a state's assessment policy, this question seeks to understand what factors have contributed toward achieving that objective. Question 18a asks for evidence—quantitative or qualitative—that this objective has been met.

Question 19. If the improvement of teaching is an objective of a state's assessment policy, this question seeks to understand what factors have worked against achieving that objective.

Question 20. If the improvement of learning is an objective of a state's assessment policy, this question seeks to understand what factors have worked against achieving that objective.

Future Directions Question. Year One consisted of policy document collection, analysis and interpretation. Year Two consisted of the construction of the SHEAQ, and then analyzing and interpreting the responses to that questionnaire. Years Three and Four will consist of case studies that will allow for an even more in-depth examination of six of the most interesting and/or innovative states and regional accrediting associations, their policies, and how those policies affect institutions, with particular attention to teaching, learning, and public accountability.

Question 21. This data is collected to assist Projects 5.2 and 5.3 in determining possible candidates for their institutional case studies, to be conducted in conjunction with the Project 5.1 state-level case studies, during Years Three and Four.

Results and Commentary

These results reflect a total of 32 responses, out of 50 questionnaires mailed. As additional responses are received, they will be incorporated into subsequent updates of this report.

Governance Structure

In the SHEAQ, SHEEOs were asked to identify their states' governance structures as one of the five types described above—consolidated governing board for all institutions, split consolidated governing boards for four-year and two-year institutions, coordinating regulatory board, coordinating advisory board, or planning agency.

Nine SHEEOs identified their state structures as consolidated governing boards, and seven identified their structures as split boards. [See Figure 1, State Governance Structures.] Twelve SHEEOs identified their structures as coordinating regulatory boards, while three SHEEOs checked coordinating advisory board. Two SHEEOs marked "planning agency." (In one case, a SHEEO indicated his/her state had split system governing boards as well as a state planning and coordinating agency. For the purposes of this report, this state was counted as having split governing boards.)

Policy Objectives

According to the SHEEOs, the most common objectives of states' assessment policies was "increasing accountability to the public," which was marked by twenty-seven SHEEOs. [See Figure 2, State Assessment Policy Objectives.] A very close second, marked by twenty-six SHEEOs, was "improving student learning." "Improving teaching" was the third most common policy objective, with twenty-four responses. The two least common policy objectives were "facilitating intrastate comparisons" and "reducing academic program duplication."

While frequency is important, we also wanted to measure the relative significance of each of these objectives within states, in an effort to learn which objectives were considered more urgent, or important, than others. Significance was measured on a four-point, Likert-type scale, with a "1" representing "not significant" and a "4" representing "very significant."

According to the SHEEOs, the most significant objective of their states' assessment policies was "increasing accountability to the public." [See Figure 3, Significance of Assessment Policy Objectives.] Next was "improving student learning," followed by "improving teaching." The fourth most significant objective was "promoting planning on campuses," which was followed closely by "increasing fiscal accountability."

In looking at the relationship between governance structure and policy objective, "increasing accountability to the public" was an objective in eight of nine states with consolidated governing boards, all seven states with split governing boards, ten of twelve states with coordinating regulatory boards, and one of three states that reported a coordinating advisory board.

"Increasing fiscal accountability" was an objective in fewer states of each structure type—only four states with consolidated boards, three with split boards, and six with coordinating regulatory boards. "Improving learning" was reported as an objective in seven states with consolidated boards, seven with split boards, ten with coordinating regulatory boards, and two of three states with coordinating advisory boards.

Based on this data, it is clear SHEEOs perceive that their states' assessment policies seek to meet a variety of objectives. Given the increasing demands on higher education to be responsive to a wide range of public and political constituencies, it is not surprising that the leading policy objective across the states responding to this questionnaire is increasing accountability to the public. Only half of these SHEEOs, however, consider increasing fiscal accountability to be an objective. This difference would suggest that "accountability" is multi-faceted, and certain facets of accountability are more important than others. Because accountability continues to play such a prominent role in the assessment movement, understanding the components of accountability is a critical next step.

Given that most, if not all, states have multiple objectives for their assessment policies, understanding the nature of the interaction between these objectives is also essential. It is possible that some of these objectives complement each other; for example, promoting planning on campuses might very well lead to improving academic program efficiency, which might, in turn, result in reducing academic program duplication.

On the other hand, some of the objectives might work at cross-purposes to one another. If one of the policy objectives is facilitating intrastate or interstate comparisons, there is the possibility that such comparisons will obscure the fundamental differences across academic programs, student populations, and institutional types, which might hinder the improvement of

teaching and learning. The potential risks of such comparisons has led a number of states to campaign actively against this particular policy objective.

Policy Outcomes

The most common outcome of states' assessment policies was, not surprisingly, "increasing accountability to the public," followed immediately by "promoting planning on campuses." "Improving teaching" was an outcome in twenty states, "improving student learning" in nineteen states, and "improving academic program efficiency" in sixteen states. It is important to observe that there does exist an interesting set of discrepancies between policy objectives and outcomes indicated by this data. Whereas fourteen states reported "increasing fiscal accountability" as an objective, only ten states reported it as an outcome. More dramatically, twenty-six states marked "improving student learning" as an objective, and only nineteen states reported that this was, in fact, an outcome of their states' assessment policies. Understanding why outcomes do not necessarily match objectives in all states will be a major focus on subsequent research for Project 5.1, particularly as it relates to teaching and learning issues.

An examination of the relationship between governance structure and outcome, reveals that "increasing accountability to the public" was an outcome in six of nine states with consolidated governing boards, six of seven states with split governing boards, eleven of twelve states with coordinating regulatory boards, and one of three states with coordinating advisory boards. These numbers are consistent with the data reported for objectives. The numbers of "increasing fiscal accountability" as an outcome are also consistent with the numbers reported for objectives.

"Improving teaching" was an outcome in five of nine states consolidated governing board states, five of seven split governing board states, nine of twelve coordinating regulatory board states, and one of three coordinating advisory board states. "Improving student learning" was also marked as an outcome in five of nine states with consolidated boards, five of seven states with split boards, nine of twelve states with coordinating regulatory boards, and none of the states with coordinating advisory boards.

The Policy Process

During the problem formation stage, when the need for an assessment policy is expressed, SHEEOs ranked the system boards of trustees/regents as the most significant, followed very closely by state legislatures and campus executive officers. Interestingly, although system boards are ranked as the most significant, their average significance score was only a 2.8 on a 4.0 scale. Least significant at this stage are disciplinary accrediting association and external consultants. At this earliest stage in the policy process, the state legislatures enjoy their greatest significance, suggesting that legislators, campus executives officers, and system boards work most closely at this stage than any other.

During the policy formulation stage, when a variety of policy options are presented and considered, SHEEOs scored campus executive officers as the most significant entities, with an average significance score of 3.2. Just a fraction lower were system boards. There is a large gap between these top two entities are state legislatures, which have the third highest average significance score, at 2.4. Clearly, SHEEOs perceive campus executive officers and system boards as the entities generating the ideas and policy options during this stage. The slide in the

significance of legislatures and governors suggest that once assessment enters the policy domain, it becomes less a political matter and more of an academic one.

Campus executive officers are also the most significant entities during the policy adoption stage, according to the SHEEOs. Support forms, shifts, and reforms around different options during this stage. Following campus executive officers in significance during this stage are system boards, faculty, legislatures, and existing campus policies and practices. The data here reflects the prevalence of campus-based influences, including faculty, as the "nuts and bolts" of the assessment policy is determined. This makes sense, considering that the campuses and faculty will be the entities responsible for executing whatever policy is ultimately approved.

During the policy implementation stage, when the "rubber hits the road" and a policy is put into effect, SHEEOs once again rank campus executive officers as the most significant, with a high average score of 3.7. Faculty are next, at 3.2, followed distantly by system boards at 2.8 and existing campus policies and practices at 2.3. At this stage, legislatures and governors receive average significance scores below 2.0. Here again, the campus-based entities—executive officers and faculty—are the leaders, as they are the "front line" in the policy implementation effort at the institutional level. The low average significance scores of legislatures and governors suggest that "outside" political interference during the implementation stage is limited, perhaps reflecting the continued recognition and respect of institutional autonomy.

Finally, when the time comes to determine just what the assessment policy is doing and how well it is doing it, SHEEOs yet again regard campus executive officers as the most significant. System boards rank second, the only other entity with a score at or above 3.0. Faculty are third, at 2.6, and legislatures and executive agencies are a very distant fourth, at 2.0.

Assessment Policies and the Improvement of Teaching and Learning

Given that the primary area of our research emphasis is the use of assessment to improve teaching and learning, the SHEAQ asked a series of open-ended questions designed to give SHEEOs an opportunity to reflect and comment upon what they saw the relationship between their states' assessment policies and the improvement of teaching and learning. The following are themes that emerged as a results of our analysis of the SHEEOs' responses.

Relationship between assessment policy and improvement of teaching

In a number of states, this relationship was seen as implicit. Often the improvement of teaching was the natural result of assessment policies designed to achieve other, more explicit goals. "The impact of our policies on teaching are mostly, indirect, implicit rather than explicit," according to one southeastern SHEEO. "I think we would all agree that the improvement of teaching is key to program effectiveness. Therefore the commitment to the improvement of teaching is implicit," observed a western SHEEO. A midwestern SHEEO replied that the relationship was "[I]ndirect. Policy emphasis is program outcomes. As faculty strive to improve outcomes, teaching may improve."

A southwestern SHEEO commented that "[I]mproving teaching probably underlies the policymakers' thinking, and certainly underlies institutions' positions in the accountability debate. However, in my state, that objective is indirect, being obscured by statements that more explicitly target the need for better student performance and greater institutional accountability."

"Our policy does not directly demonstrate a commitment to the improvement of teaching. The relationship is indirect. The implementation of this policy on the various campuses in our system is certainly directed toward this end," according to another midwestern SHEEO.

Some states' policies stress how feedback from assessment can lead to the improvement of teaching. "[Our] policy emphasizes instructional improvements and how assessment data can be used to foster such improvements," according to one eastern SHEEO. "The emphasis is for campuses to examine the relationship between assessment and improvement of teaching," replied a northwestern SHEEO. A southeastern SHEEO said his/her state's policy demonstrated a commitment to the improvement of teaching "[B]y encouraging discussion of the teaching-learning process….The policy leads to the identification and assessment of specific learning outcomes, student attainment of those outcomes, and the improvement of student learning through more effective curriculum design and teaching."

As for factors enhancing the improvement of teaching, the answers to this question varied widely. One western SHEEO gave credit to people, not policy. "Program heads and faculty interested in making this [improved teaching] happen find ways to do so." A handful of SHEEOs from across the country suggested that interaction and communication among faculty played an important role in improving teaching. "Appointment of a statewide group of faculty…to meet on issues related to teaching and learning" was one such factor, according to a midwestern SHEEO. A southwestern SHEEO commented that "[T]he primary factor in moving assessment in my state has been the statewide networking initiated among faculty."

At least one SHEEO, also from the midwest, alluded to "links with regional accrediting bodies" as another factor enhancing the improvement of teaching. Still another midwestern SHEEO indicated that allowing institutions to have autonomy from state regulation was a key to success in this area. "We believe the success is not requiring standardized instruments which obscure the major differences in the various academic disciplines." In a number of states with relatively new state-level assessment policies, the SHEEOs replied that it was simply too early to tell what effect, if any, the policies would have on improving teaching.

Relationship between assessment policy and the improvement of student learning In many cases, the SHEEOs referred back to their answers to the previous question about the improvement of teaching. At least two SHEEOs made it clear that they considered teaching and learning "highly interdependent," and that looking at the two issues separately was "too fine a distinction for me to make as it relates to state policy." Two SHEEOs made references to their states' performance funding policies as promoting the improvement of student learning. A number of SHEEOs also made references to requirements in their states' policies that addressed the use of examinations as a means of measuring the extent to which student learning had improved.

Money, in one way or another, was cited by many of the SHEEOs. A southeastern SHEEO said "[S]everal years of level funding or worse has resulted in the loss of significant numbers of outstanding faculty who have left for 'greener pastures.'" Echoing that sentiment was another southeastern SHEEO, who pointed to "low faculty salaries and competition in the job market for teachers in non-teaching positions." "Budget constraints" was offered by another southeastern SHEEO, while a western SHEEO said simply: "[R]estricted budgets." According to a southwestern SHEEO, part of the problem is "lack of funding to implement assessment

activities that are soundly conceived and carried out." An eastern SHEEO said: "[C]osts of assessment instruments."

Another broad theme across the answers, with a number of variations, was resistance at the institutional and/or faculty levels. "Campus resistance (primarily faculty) to looking at what students learn in new ways—that replace conventional wisdom of faculty," offered one northwestern SHEEO. A SHEEO in the southwest observed that "the limited sophistication of personnel at some campuses, especially small ones," was a hindrance. Other hindrances along these lines were "attitude of some faculty and lack of diligence in developing, implementing, and monitoring the use of assessment at the institutions," according to a midwestern SHEEO.

Another recurring theme here was the difficulty inherent in measuring student learning outcomes. For one northeastern SHEEO, "difficulty in measuring learning and lack of commitment to trying to measure learning" were both hindrances. According to a midwestern SHEEO, "[F]aculty are concerned with student learning, but they have a very narrow view of what that learning should include." Another midwestern SHEEO cited "difficulties associated with perfecting measurement indicators." "Common understanding of adequate measures of student learning has not yet been developed sufficiently," according to a western SHEEO. A northwestern SHEEO answered "[C]ampus cultures that support looking at student learning in a fragmented way." And at least one SHEEO, from the east, mentioned "the costs of assessment instruments" as another hindrance.

Reasons for differences between policy objectives and policy outcomes

According to a northeastern SHEEO, these differences can be attributed to a "[L]ack of resources on campuses to implement assessment, and a lack of faculty commitment to assessment." According to a southeastern SHEEO, such differences stem from the decentralized nature of his/her state's system. 'The only differences are varying stages of progress from one institution to another because assessment implementation is decentralized and stresses institutional autonomy." A western SHEEO also referred to institutional autonomy by saying "[P]olicy places responsibility on campus administrators and faculty. Each campus handles the policy implementation differently." "Objectives and policy in my state are only very loosely defined. There also is only a loosely-coordinated process for assessment. My state still operates within an overriding policy of institutional autonomy, quite fiercely defended by the institutions," according to a southwestern SHEEO.

Another southeastern SHEEO offered this explanation: "[W]here differences might exist could be explained by changes in the climate surrounding an initiative. Objectives can become strengthened from cycle to cycle based upon a need for heightened awareness/assessment." A midwestern SHEEO provided a structural reason: "[T]he policy objectives in my state are related to accountability…the outcomes, however, are dependent upon faculty and administrative interest, commitment, and talent at the various institutions."

Future Directions

In the third year, Project 5.1 will conduct case studies of states as well as regional accrediting associations. These case studies will be planned, in large part, based on the findings from the second year, detailed in this report. Among the issues that will be considered during the case studies are the following:

1. Communications across levels within states: Do policymakers at the state level know enough about what campuses and individual faculty are doing to inform adequately the ongoing policy process? Are the actions of campuses and faculty taken into account when conducting policy evaluation? Are there multiple streams of assessment activity occurring simultaneously in states—at the state, institutional, and individual levels? Do these streams intersect? If not, why not?

2. Tracing different assessment policy options through the policy process in different states: There are a wide variety of options for states when it comes to assessment policies. For example, states can implement performance funding, program review, mandated use of common instruments, the use of standardized examinations, the use of common indicators, annual reporting requirements, and/or reliance on accrediting association assessment requirements. It is essential to determine which of these options are most likely to improve teaching and learning.

3. Lack of alignment between policy objectives and outcomes: Why does this misalignment exist? What factors within the policy process make such misalignment more likely?

4. The differences between teaching and learning: a number of SHEEOs seem to think that these are inextricably linked, that an improvement in teaching will necessarily result in an improvement in learning, or that an improvement in learning reflects an improvement in teaching. What is the nature of the relationship between teaching and learning? Related to this issue is the question of intentionality. Is the improvement of teaching and learning an end, a means to another end, or an unintended consequence or fringe benefit for policymakers?

5. Difficulty in measuring student learning outcomes: There is widespread agreement about the difficulty in measuring student learning outcomes. This difficulty, in turn, makes it very challenging, if not impossible, to design coherent and effective outcomes assessment policies. How have states dealt, or not dealt, with this difficulty?

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