



# **Assessment of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and Public Accountability**

M I C H A E L T . N E T T L E S

J O H N J . K . C O L E

S A L L Y S H A R P

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*The work reported herein was supported in part by the Educational Research and Development Center program, agreement number R309A60001, CFDA 84.309A, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in the report do not reflect the position or policies of OERI or the U.S. Department of Education. NCPI Technical Report Number 5-02.*

**“Assessment of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and Public Accountability: State Governing, Coordinating Board & Regional Accreditation Association Policies and Practices”**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the first results of a multistage research process by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) that aims to understand and present the progress that has been made by the 50 states and six regional accrediting associations during the past decade toward establishing and implementing higher education assessment policies. The primary interest of NCPI is in policies and practices that seek to improve teaching and learning in the nation's colleges and universities. While this first report focuses upon policies adopted by the 50 states and the six regional accrediting associations to assess teaching and learning, it also includes the broader outcomes assessment policies of the states and six regional accrediting associations. Examining both the emphases on teaching and learning and other aspects of colleges and universities helps reveal the priorities that state policymakers and regional accrediting associations are giving to teaching and learning compared to other components of colleges and universities.

In this first stage, during the first year of NCPI, the researchers reviewed the literature of prior research on state assessment and regional accreditation policies, examined policy documents of each state, examined the policy and standards documents of the six regional accrediting associations, and discussed the policies and procedures with state higher education governance and regional accreditation officers. Reactions from state higher education and regional accreditation officers to the draft reports prepared by the NCPI researchers about their state or accrediting association were requested. This final report has been reviewed by Pat Callan of the Higher Education Policy Institute in California and Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

The primary purpose of the first year's research and this report is to describe the various assessment policies and practices of each state, and of the six regional accreditation association to provide the basis for interstate and inter-association comparative analysis, to note emergent themes, and to lay the groundwork on which subsequent years of research will be built.

The information presented in this report includes a brief history of state and regional assessment policy development, a review of the published and unpublished findings of prior research, and an analysis of the status of assessment policies and practices across the 50 states and six regional accrediting associations. Each state policy and each regional accreditation policy related to college and university outcomes assessment is presented within a policy analytic framework that describes the policy and presents its major components.

Thirteen tables are presented, illustrating the current status and a comparative analysis of state and accreditation association assessment policies and practices. Three themes emanating from the patterns and trends in the state analysis are discussed:

and the use of incentives and consequences in assessment policies. For the accreditation associations, the issues include: the nature of the assessment of student learning and teaching effectiveness, the influence of institutional autonomy on policy formation and implementation and the relationship between state and accreditation assessment policies and practices.

For nearly two decades, the establishment of strategies for assessing college outcomes has concerned educators, policymakers and accrediting agencies alike. At the state level this search for appropriate policy and measurement mechanisms has involved leading policymakers and the leaders of public colleges and universities. For about the same time,

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Background

Historical Overview - The States

Historical Overview - Accreditation Associations

### Review of Past Research

### Findings

State Policies and Practices

Discussion of State Findings

Accreditation Association Policies and Practices

### Future Directions

### References

### Appendix A—State Assessment Policy Analysis

Alabama

Alaska

Arizona

Arkansas

California

Colorado

Connecticut

Delaware

Florida

Georgia

Hawaii

Idaho

Illinois

Indiana

Iowa

Kansas

Kentucky

Louisiana

Maine

Maryland

Massachusetts

Michigan

Minnesota

Mississippi

Missouri

Montana

Nebraska

Nevada

New Hampshire

New Jersey

New Mexico

New York  
North Carolina  
North Dakota  
Ohio  
Oklahoma  
Oregon  
Pennsylvania  
Rhode Island  
South Carolina  
South Dakota  
Tennessee  
Texas  
Utah  
Vermont  
Virginia  
Washington  
West Virginia  
Wisconsin  
Wyoming

Appendix B—Regional Accreditation Association Assessment Policy Analysis

Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges  
New England Association of Schools and Colleges  
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools  
Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges  
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools  
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

leaders of regional accreditation associations have also sought ways to cause colleges and universities to assess the outcomes of college. The extent to which each state and regional accrediting association has succeeded in both establishing good policies and constructing useful measurement strategies are matters in need of exploration.

This report presents the first results of a multistage research process by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) that aims to explore the progress that has been made by the 50 states and six regional accrediting associations during the past decade toward establishing and implementing higher education assessment policies. The primary interest of NCPI is in policies and practices that seek to improve teaching and learning in the nation's colleges and universities. While this first report focuses upon policies adopted by the 50 states and the six regional accrediting associations to assess teaching and learning, it also includes the broader outcomes assessment policies of the states and regional accrediting associations. Examining both the emphases on teaching and learning and other aspects of colleges and universities helps reveal the priorities that state policymakers and regional accrediting associations are giving to teaching and learning, compared to other components of colleges and universities.

This report presents the results of the first of four stages of research to be conducted from 1996 through 2001. This first report investigates how various assessment policies and practices relate to teaching and learning. In this first stage, during the first year of NCPI, the researchers reviewed the literature of prior research on state assessment and regional accreditation policies, examined policy documents of each of the 50 states, examined the policy and standards documents of the regional accrediting associations, discussed the policies and procedures with state higher education governance and regional accreditation officers, and requested reactions from state higher education and regional accreditation officers to the draft reports prepared by NCPI researchers about their state or accrediting association.

The information presented in this report includes a brief history of the state and regional assessment policy development, a review of the published and unpublished findings of prior research, an analysis of the status of assessment policies and practices across the 50 states and six regional accrediting associations, and a review of the published standards, criteria and guidelines of the regional accreditation associations and the policy documents of the state higher education agencies in each state.

This report contains the following four features:

- first, it presents a brief historical overview of the assessment policies and practices of regional accrediting associations and the states;
- second, it presents a review of the past research dealing with state and regional accreditation policies and practices on outcomes assessment in higher education;
- third, it presents a comparison and contrast of the assessment policies of the regional accreditation associations and the 50 states;

- and fourth, it presents each state policy and each regional accreditation policy related to college and university outcomes assessment within a policy analytic framework that describes the policy and presents its major components.

The rationale offered by accreditation associations and the states for adopting assessment practices has varied, but there are some common themes/phrases that emerge across the nation, including the following:

- increasing public accountability to taxpayers whose taxes provide the largest single source of funding for colleges and universities;
- ensuring quality to citizens by providing concrete evidence about the instructional performance of the colleges and universities that they are considering attending or otherwise supporting;
- identifying strengths and limitations of colleges and universities for purposes of state planning;
- achieving greater efficiencies in state systems of higher education and within individual institutions;
- identifying new criteria to use in funding colleges and universities; and
- increasing international, interstate, and intra-state competition for high quality higher education.

The state policy and regional accreditation association approaches to instituting higher education assessment have covered a broad spectrum from low expectations and limited intrusion at one end of the spectrum, to very high expectations and external involvement in measuring outcomes at the opposite end. The policies that reflect low expectations and no intrusion typically focus upon persuading regional accrediting associations to establish new policies or encouraging colleges and universities to voluntarily plan and conduct assessments with no clear consequences. More aggressive policies include state laws that require colleges and universities to measure and report their quality and performance, or funding formulas that provide incentives or rewards to colleges and universities for either carrying out assessments or for performance on various types of assessments. The techniques for measuring quality and performance have also varied widely from administering standardized tests that measure undergraduate student achievement to consumer-oriented surveys of student and alumni satisfaction and self perceptions of their own achievement and the effectiveness of their alma maters.

Each regional accrediting association and state has a unique and distinctive history regarding college and university assessment policies. Much of their distinctiveness is an artifact of their unique state customs/traditions and their geographic and cultural heritage. So even when different regional accrediting associations and states appear to use similar language to describe their policies and implementation strategies, they are often dissimilar. Each state agency was founded under different circumstances and is possessed of different statutory authority for adopting and carrying out assessment policies. For some, the central focus of assessment is upon student learning and development and instructional quality, while for others, broader criteria are important and assessment of teaching and learning plays a relatively minor role in a multidimensional policy that includes access, administrative efficiency, research, development, and overall productivity. Each of the six regional accrediting associations has established higher education assessment standards and criteria during the past 12 years and each one is unique. Only a handful of states has failed to establish higher education assessment policies and even these few have different reasons why they lack policies, and different estimates about when they will achieve these.

## **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE STATES**

The impetus for colleges and universities to periodically assess the quality of teaching and learning on campus has been manifold. As of the mid-1980s the catalysts for the assessment movement in higher education have included additions of assessment standards in regional accreditation for colleges and universities, burgeoning state policy initiatives, national reports from a variety of leading special commissions, and funded institutional projects such as the Kellogg Foundation support of University of Tennessee's performance funding initiatives (Banta & Moffett, 1987). State higher education governance and regional accrediting association interest in outcomes assessment are not, however, recent developments.

Since the establishment of land grant colleges and universities in the mid and late 19th century, states have been concerned with and involved in the effective workings of their public postsecondary institutions. The historic foundations for state involvement in public higher education have rested on long-standing concerns for whether state commitments to access, economic development within the state, and the cultivation of a skilled citizenry are being adequately addressed by their public colleges and universities (Ewell, 1985a, 1985b, 1987; Fisher, 1988).

The post-World War II expansion of student enrollments and federal funding of student aid and institutional research have increased government involvement in institutional policies and practices (Bender, 1983; Sabloff, 1997). In 1939-1940 the federal government was the source<sup>1</sup> of just over \$38 million of the revenue generated by higher education institutions. In 1959-1960 that amount exceeded \$1 billion, and by 1979-1980 the amount of federal funding appropriations to institutions of higher education had grown to nearly \$9 billion.

The growth in state government contributions to higher education institutions<sup>2</sup> was even more dramatic over this period of time, increasing from \$151 million in 1939-1940 to \$1.3 billion in 1959-1960, and to over \$18 billion in 1979-1980 (NCES, 1995, p. 333). This increase in higher education dollars from federal and state government has prompted increased concern at all levels about the effective and efficient use of valuable and highly competitive resources and accountability by the colleges and universities that receive the resources (Stevens & 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 the priorities in public higher education over the past 15 years away from expansion in the number and size in favor of greater emphasis upon quality. As early as 1979, a distinguished leader of public higher education in Ohio, John Millett, foretold the changing emphasis in the role and focus of state-level, centralized lay boards:

*“State boards of higher education are going to hear a great deal about quality in the next several years. 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).*

Fisher (1988) confirms the accuracy of Millett’s forecast and contends that the renewed attention to quality fostered new levels of state legislative involvement in the affairs of public higher education institutions. Despite long-standing state concerns for institutional quality and effectiveness, the 1980s saw some states made explicit their expectations for more systematic and coordinated approaches to assessment and the demonstration of specific outcomes. For example, in 1982 the Florida state legislature directed the higher education system to develop the College-Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) as a rising junior exam. In 1984 the South Dakota Board of Regents adopted Resolution 32-1984 which created a testing program designed to measure students academic performance. In 1985 the New Jersey Board of Higher Education created the College Outcomes Evaluation Program (COEP), a comprehensive outcomes assessment program.

Throughout the 1980s, a flurry of national reports hailed the need for substantive educational reform. Included among the organizations and reports that critically analyzed the declining quality and lack of accountability of postsecondary education were: the Association of American Colleges’ *Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community* (1985); the National Institute of Education’s Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, *Involvement in Learning* (1984) report; and the National Endowment of the Humanities, in *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (1984).

At about the same time, Peter Ewell (1985a) authored an influential working paper for the Education Commission of States, arguing that state governments should get involved in assessing undergraduate education because of their significant financial investment in their systems of higher education and because successful higher education systems should, in turn, facilitate the meeting of other state policy objectives. According to Ewell, in order for states to have an influence on their institutions, they must develop funding and regulatory policy mechanisms that induce institutional-level efforts toward self improvement and monitor those institutional efforts by regularly collecting and reporting on identified measures of effectiveness (Ewell, 1985a, 1985b).

Recognizing the historical and distinctive character of public colleges and universities as self-governing, autonomous cultures, Ewell (1985a) posits that lasting changes, particularly the now publicly demanded improvements expected of higher education, need to come from within the educational institutions themselves. Citing examples of past and ongoing state policy mechanisms as reference points, Ewell (1985c) urged state policymakers to follow

certain guidelines for action, including the following six:

- recognize and preserve institutional diversity;
- create positive incentives for improvement;
- distinguish funding incentives for improvement from ongoing institutional funding mechanisms;
- afford institutions discretion in achieving improvement, but hold all accountable for regularly demonstrating their progress;
- stress use of concrete information on, as well as, multiple indicators of institutional performance;
- and whenever possible use existing information.

Among the national reports decrying the need for educational reform and seemingly responding to Ewell's observations of how states could influence institutional assessment, is the National Governors Association (NGA) 1986 report, *Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education*. In the preface of the report, Task Force Chairman John Ashcroft, then Governor of Missouri, defended state intervention:

*"The public has the right to know what it is getting for its expenditure of tax resources; the public has a right to know and understand the quality of undergraduate education that young people receive from publicly funded colleges and universities. They have a right to know that their resources are being wisely invested and committed."*

The states' role in the assessment movement was considered paramount by this representational body. "As the primary source of funds for public higher education the states have a major stake in the quality of postsecondary education that goes beyond the measures of input and processes. State attention must be directed to the outcomes of the higher education system—namely measuring how much students learn in college" (Roaden, 1987, p.9).

The National Governors Association formed seven task forces to formulate policies to improve various aspects of education. Six of the seven task forces were charged with matters related to elementary and secondary schools; the seventh was the Task Force on College Quality. Based upon the testimonies and advice of higher education officials and professionals from assessment organizations and national education associations, the Task Force on Quality recommended the following five actions regarding college outcome assessment:

- State officials should clarify the missions of each public institution and encourage the same for independent colleges;
- State officials should re-emphasize the fundamental importance of undergraduate instruction;
- Each college and university should implement programs that use multiple measures to assess undergraduate student learning as a means of evaluating

institutional and program quality and share the information with the public;

- State officials should adjust funding formulas to provide incentives for improving undergraduate student learning based upon the results of comprehensive assessment programs and encourage independent colleges to do likewise;
- State officials should reaffirm their commitment to access to public higher education for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds (National Governors' Association Center for Policy Research and Analysis, 1986). As-

As a link between the suggested mandates of the NGA Report and actual practices at the state level, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) formed a Task Force on Program and Institutional Assessment to enlarge upon NGA's recommendations. In recommending 10 approaches to outcomes assessment, the SHEEO Task Force emphasized institutional flexibility and autonomy in assessment at the campus level. While wanting to honor institutional independence the Task Force also saw the need to acknowledge "the role of statewide assessment in relation to assessment at each campus as the upper part of a pyramid. There are certain common aims of higher education that should be subject to statewide assessment, but in no way should these exhaust the assessment undertaken at each campus" (Roaden et al., 1987, p. 2). Clearly SHEEO was treading carefully amidst a culture now characterized by both the need to honor institutional autonomy and the needs of states for detailed information on how their public institutions are faring on a variety of measures of quality and effectiveness.

SHEEO's policy statement on program and institutional assessment recommended that states develop uniform definitions of graduation and retention for institutional comparison. SHEEO urged financial incentives for higher quality instructional programs, and the inclusion in institutional budgets of funding for assessment programs. Public colleges and universities were called on by the states to assess entering students for purposes of placement and remediation, and to determine the achievement of general education objectives, the performance of students on licensure and certification examinations, the successful placement of students from occupational programs into matching jobs, the successful transfer of community college students to four-year institutions, and the satisfaction of alumni (Roaden et al., 1987).

Leading up to or either immediately following the NGA 1986 report and SHEEO's policy statement, the state legislatures and governors in Florida and Colorado passed statutes and the states of California, Florida, Georgia, South Dakota, Tennessee and Utah established policies. Today twelve states have statutes, twenty-one have policies, and eight have a combination of statute and policy that require colleges and universities to assess student outcomes.

Like accreditation standards, state statutes and policies have varying goals and objectives as well as methods they use to assess progress toward achieving their goals. Some state initiatives are aimed toward determining student eligibility to progress to the higher levels in the curriculum or to qualify for a degree; some are aimed toward helping policymakers allocate resources; still others are aimed at curriculum and program evaluation; and others have the singular goal of public accountability. This research project is particularly interested in understanding whether states have policies and practices in place to examine the nature and

outcomes of teaching and student learning A description of each state's current statutes and policies and their evolution are presented in Appendix A.

#### **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: ACCREDITATION ASSOCIATIONS**

Accreditation is a uniquely-American construction, characterized as a voluntary, self-regulating, evaluative process that combines outside peer review and consultation of institutions with internal evaluation and planning. The accreditation process emerged as a national concern and practice at the 1906 meeting of the National Association of State Universities (NASU), where a corps of higher education leaders including representatives from the four existing regional associations recommended the development of common institutional definitions and standards of college admissions (Young, 1983). Since their founding at the turn of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>, the historic role of the six regional accrediting associations in the United States has expanded and is now manifold. Originally the associations assisted in defining criteria for the transition from high school to college and establishing institutional requirements for membership in their organization (Young, 1983). Practices and priorities in accreditation have experienced considerable change over the years: from working to fit all institutions into a common mold to recognizing and encouraging institutional uniqueness and diversity; and from judging institutional adherence to criteria to facilitating institutional

improvement (Young, 1983).

Even though the chief administrative and academic leaders of colleges and universities constitute the governing bodies of these accrediting associations, they have maintained the public image of being impartial judges of the quality of their colleges and universities. They establish the policies by which accrediting associations operate, set the standards by which institutions are judged, and ultimately approve whether member institutions that seek to be accredited (every five to ten years) meet accreditation standards.

A stamp of approval by any of the six regional accrediting associations for many years has been tantamount to approval for funding both by the federal government and by state governments. Since the 1952 Veterans Re-adjustment Act, the federal government has relied upon regional accrediting associations to determine which colleges and universities were of sufficient quality to receive federal funding (Section 253 of Pub. L. 82-550; 66 STAT.675). All federal statutes since 1952, wherein funds are appropriated to higher education institutions, contain a statement by Congress requiring the U.S. Commissioner of Education, now the U.S. Secretary of Education, to publish a list of nationally recognized accrediting associations that are reliable authorities of the quality of training or education offered by postsecondary institutions (Finkin, 1973; Kaplin, 1975). In addition every state has a "Postsecondary Education Authorization Act" requiring higher education institutions to be approved by a designated state agency (generally the centralized governing/coordinating board) or be accredited by an accrediting association in order to be licensed to operate in the state.

Colleges and universities also rely upon accrediting associations to decide whether to accept course credits from students transferring from other academic institutions; and graduate and professional schools rely upon them when admitting students by taking into account the quality of their undergraduate institutions.

Despite the long tradition and widespread public dependence upon regional accrediting associations, as early as two decades ago William Troutt (1978) pointed out the growing number of criticisms directed at the accrediting associations by state policy makers, government leaders and campus officials for failing to have standards that provide assurance of quality in teaching and learning. Troutt (1978) observed,

*"regional accreditation standards primarily serve purposes other than quality assurance. Most standards relate to institutional self-improvement. The perfection of institutional "machinery" far outweighs concerns about institutional quality in terms of student achievement" (p. 49).*

Critics have charged that the standards used by regional accrediting associations place heavy emphasis upon inputs such as admissions scores of entering students, the number of books in the library, the size of the endowment and the physical plant, and the credentials of the faculty, without being concerned about outcomes and results (Troutt, 1978).

In 1980, Young and Chambers (1980) offered commentary on the continuing evolution of the accreditation process, and noted, in particular, the emerging focus on clearly defining and measuring expected educational outcomes during the institutional self-evaluation process. In 1983 Stark and Austin observed that "considerable criticism has recently been aimed at accreditors because of their failure to take an explicit interest in student needs and develop-

ment” (p. 214) and they predicted that the ways in which the measurement of educational quality captured and informed students’ educational experiences would be of tremendous relevancy to the higher education community, its critics and its benefactors.

While state involvement in assessment was the target of considerable scrutiny and discussion as of the mid-1980s so, too, were the regional accrediting associations. As Albrecht (1989) observed, regional accrediting associations were at a crossroads, pondering whether they would continue to be effective instruments for ensuring quality or become obsolete.

The NGA Governors’ 1986 Action Agenda chided the regionals to be more explicit about the accreditation process. The NGA report emphasized the importance of accrediting associations collecting and utilizing information about undergraduate student outcomes. According to the NGA (1986), demonstrated levels of student learning and performance should be a consideration in granting institutional accreditation (NGA, 1986). And the SHEEO Task Force on Program and Institutional Assessment recommended that accreditation agencies use the results of institutional assessment, including assessment of student outcomes in the accreditation process (Roaden et al., 1987).

In 1986 the North Central Association of College and Schools (NCACS) held a Wingspread Conference on Rethinking Accreditation. NCACS Commissioner Frederick Crosson in one of the papers that emerged from that meeting wrote about the need for institutional improvement to be of clearer and greater importance in the institutional review and accreditation process. Impetus for change in accreditation practices was coming from both internal and external pressures and in recent years the associations’ role and focus has shifted toward providing quality assurance for higher education institutions and serving as a catalyst for enhancing institutional quality and effectiveness (NEASC, 1996; Thrash, 1989). Through the continuation of institutional self-study and periodic peer review processes, accreditation has gauged institutional quality by evidence of inputs, resources, and processes and more recently outcomes that reveal the extent of institutional quality (Young and Chambers, 1980).

As of the mid-1980s and early 1990s, outcomes assessment and, in particular, the assessment of student learning and instructional processes began to emerge as means by which accrediting associations could continue to secure their role in ensuring the public of the quality and effectiveness of higher education institutions. Table 1 illustrates that between 1984 and 1992 the six regional accrediting associations revised and/or adopted accreditation standards and criteria, and in some cases developed new policies, separate from accreditation criteria or standards, explicitly aimed at assessing educational outcomes.

A stamp of approval by any of the six regional accrediting associations for many years has been tantamount to approval for funding both by the federal government and by state governments. Since the 1952 Veterans Re-adjustment Act, the federal government has relied upon regional accrediting associations to determine which colleges and universities were of sufficient quality to receive federal funding (Section 253 of Pub. L. 82-550; 66 STAT.675). All federal statutes since 1952, wherein funds are appropriated to higher education institutions, contain a statement by Congress requiring the U.S. Commissioner of Education, now the

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Despite the long tradition and widespread public dependence upon regional accrediting associations, as early as two decades ago William Truitt (1978) pointed out the growing number of criticisms directed at the accrediting associations by state policy makers, government leaders and campus officials and to have standards that provide assurance of quality in teaching and learning. Truitt (1978) observed, "regional accreditation standards primarily serve purposes other than quality assurance. Most standards relate to institutional self-improvement. The perfection of institutional "machinery" far outweighs concerns about institutional quality in terms of student achievement" (p. 49). Critics have charged that the standards used by regional accrediting associations place a heavy emphasis upon inputs such as admissions scores of entering students, the size of the endowment and the physical plant, and the credentials of the faculty, without being concerned about outcomes and results (Truitt, 1978).

In 1980, Young and Chambers (1980) offered commentary on the accreditation process, and noted, in particular, the emerging focus on clearly defining and measuring expected educational outcomes during the institutional self-evaluation process. In 1983 Stark and Austin observed that "considerable criticism has recently been aimed at accreditors because of their failure to take an explicit interest in student needs and development" (1983). The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (1992) Policy Statement on Institutional Effectiveness captured and informed students' educational experiences with tremendous relevancy to the higher education community, its critics and its benefactors.

**Developments as of the 1980s: Impetus for Changes in Accreditation Associations**

While state involvement in assessment was the target of considerable scrutiny and discussion as of the mid-1980s so, too, were the regional accrediting associations. As Albrecht (1989)

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) led the regional associations in its early (1984) adoption of assessment as a means of measuring institutional effectiveness. Section III: Institutional Effectiveness, of its six Criteria for Accreditation, addresses how institutions should approach the use of institutional assessment for examining instructional practices and learning processes and gauging overall institutional effectiveness. In order to plan and evaluate the primary educational activities of teaching, research, and public service, an institution must: “establish clearly defined purposes appropriate to collegiate education, formulate educational goals consistent with the institution’s purpose; develop and implement procedures to evaluate the extent to which these educational goals are being achieved and use the results of these evaluations to improve educational programs, services, and operations” (*Criteria for Accreditation*, 1996, p.20). One of SACS’ current imperatives is that institutional success be measured in terms of student achievement (*Criteria for Accreditation*, 1996).

Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges has 16 characteristics of excellence which are used as accreditation standards. In 1985 the association adopted a standard for outcomes assessment, which in the 1994 edition of the Association’s *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* states that an institution’s accreditation is determined by the presence of “policies and procedures, qualitative and quantitative, as appropriate, which lead to the effective assessment of institutional, program, and student learning outcomes.” In the 1990 edition of *Framework for Outcomes Assessment*, Middle States explicitly linked institutional excellence and educational quality with the extent and quality of student learning. According to Middle States an institution is effective when it is asking itself what should students be learning; how well are they learning it; how do we know this; and what do we plan on doing with the answers. According to the most recent edition of *Framework*, the “ultimate purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning” (1996, p. 14).

In 1995 the association sought to determine its progress in outcomes assessment by surveying member institutions. One key recommendation resulting from the responses urged greater associational guidance for how to go about assessing outcomes. In the fall of 1996, Middle States responded by instituting training symposia designed to provide information on effective outcomes assessment approaches and programs.

More than ten years after the initial adoption of assessment as an accreditation standard Middle States drafted a Policy Statement on Assessment (1996) reaffirming its expectation that institutions will attend to the assessment of student learning outcomes as their primary means of improving institutional quality.

In 1988 the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) adopted revised accreditation standards with one of the new major emphases being the incorporation of assessment for assuring institutional and program quality and effectiveness. The issue of assessment is found embedded in four sections of the association’s standards: institutional effectiveness (Standard 2.C), evaluation of general education (Standard 4.B), program review (Standard 4.F.5), and co-curricular educational growth (Standard 7.A). The intent of this initiative has been to create a “culture of evidence within institutions such that the asking of questions related to effectiveness of educational programs and support services is ongoing and appropriate data are collected to respond” (WASC Resource Manual, 1992, p.2). In 1995 the association created a Task Force on the Role of Accreditation in the Assessment of Student Learning and Teaching Effectiveness. Their final report identified minimal institutional require-

ments for the assessment of learning and teaching and more importantly argued for the educational experience of students to become a central focus of the accrediting process. In July 1996 Ralph Wolff, Executive Director of WASC, stated that his goal was "to move the accreditation process to a much more learner- and learner-centered process" (Wolff, 1996, p.1). To achieve this end, WASC is as of the spring of 1997 embarking on a series of experimental self studies and visits which are putting assessment and learning at the center of the accreditation process.

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCACS) published a Statement on the Assessment of Student Academic Achievement in October, 1989. Comparable to Middle States, NCACS took and has held the position in two subsequent revisions of the Statement, that the assessment of student learning is an essential component of measuring overall institutional effectiveness. And the ultimate goal of assessment is the improvement of student learning. Two of NCACS's five criteria for accreditation emphasize the use of assessment in evaluating and improving teaching and learning at member institutions. Criteria Three asks for evidence that "the institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes." Criteria Four looks for evidence that the "institution can continue to accomplish its purposes and strengthen its educational effectiveness." Of all the possible outcomes NCACS member institutions might study as a means of documenting institutional effectiveness, none are required except for outcomes documenting student academic achievement.

As of June 1995 all member institutions were required to submit an institutional plan demonstrating to NCACS how they intended to assess student academic achievement on their campus. Those plans were reviewed and a report, *Opportunities for Improvement: Advice from Consultant-Evaluators on Programs to Assess Student Learning*, describing broad, emerging institutional developments and directions was published in March 1996 (Lopez, 1996).

While the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEAS&C) has 11 Standards for Accreditation, assessment was originally and is most directly addressed in its 1992 Policy Statement on Institutional Effectiveness. This policy emphasizes that, "an institution's efforts and ability to assess its effectiveness and use the obtained information for its improvement are important indicators of institutional quality. The teaching and learning process is a primary focus of the assessment process." Accreditation and assessment share the same end – enabling institutions to reach their full academic potential. The association Evaluation Manual states that "one institutional goal of NEAS&C's effectiveness criteria is to cultivate within an institution a habit of inquisitiveness about its effectiveness with a corollary commitment to making meaningful use of the results of that curiosity." According to the Background Paper used in training evaluation team members on issues of assessment, "the assessment of an institution's effectiveness carefully differentiates between what graduates know and what the institution has done to enable them to learn."

As of April 1997, NEAS&C initiated the Student Outcomes Assessment Project, an effort to assist its member institutions' efforts to use student outcomes assessment for improvement of institutional effectiveness. The first stage of the project is a survey of institutional assessment efforts which will be subsequently shared in aggregate form with member institutions. From the survey results annual forums and publications will be designed and distributed as a form of institutional support.

The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges Accreditation Handbook (1994) includes

Policy 25: Educational Assessment. This states that educational effectiveness is defined in terms of the change it brings about in students. Outcomes assessment is viewed as an essential component of the self-study process. Of the association's 12 Standards for Self Study, Standard Five: Educational Program and Its Effectiveness is most explicitly related to assessment. The subcategories of this standard establish that educational program planning be based on regular and continuous assessment. Assessment is to be well-integrated into institutional planning. As well, institutions must be prepared to demonstrate how the evidence gathered via their assessment efforts is used to improve learning and teaching.

The new accreditation standards seem to reflect a new era for regional accreditation in which every college and university seeking approval must engage in assessing the quality of their teaching and learning processes. Given the recent changes, the next phase of this research will seek to discover from the regional accreditors, the extent to which colleges and universities seeking re-approval are focusing upon the student learning and instructional improvement aspects of the criteria. The variation in standards among the six regions coupled with the lack of prescription as far as requiring specific instruments or methods and procedures may explain why many state policymakers feel the need to develop statutes and policies around quality assurance. The complete standards on outcome assessment for all six accrediting areas are presented in Appendix B.

## REVIEW OF PAST RESEARCH

The climate of heightened expectations and burgeoning guidelines for state government and regional accreditation association involvement in institutional assessment begs the question of the actual nature of state and accrediting association commitment to outcomes assessment. What state and regional accreditation assessment policies and practices exist? What has been their evolution over the period of time from the 1980s to present? Since 1987 four surveys regarding state and regional accreditation association assessment policies and practices have been conducted. This section describes these prior surveys and presents the important and relevant findings.

As 1985-86 Chairman of the Education Commission of States (ECS), New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean initiated a three-year project called, *Effective State Action to Improve Undergraduate Education*. As a means of informing this agenda, ECS, along with SHEEO and the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) cosponsored a survey of the assessment and outcomes measurement policies and practices of the 50 states (Boyer, Ewell, Finney & Mingle, 1987a). In December of 1986 a structured survey was mailed to both the academic and executive officers of the SHEEO network. Responses from all 50 states were obtained either in writing or over the phone. Profiles for each state were written "to capture the flavor of each state's response to the survey and to present a faithful presentation of that response, including what was not said, within appropriate state context" (Boyer, Ewell, Finney & Mingle, 1987b, p. 7). Key findings from this survey included the following:

- As of 1987 two-thirds of states had formal assessment policies.
- A trend toward institutional autonomy in design and implementation of assessment approach was noted.
- State boards were found to be playing an important role – two-thirds of states had explicit statewide assessment program planned or in place. Most of those states without statewide efforts reported campus assessment activity.
- Assessment was broadly defined among the states and resulting assessment programs that included everything from sophomore to senior testing programs, institutional and program reviews, using outcomes measures, to alumni surveys.
- The nature of state role in assessment varied, particularly in terms of the extent to which assessment and outcomes measurement were considered or had become a distinct policy or whether they were incorporated into already existing policy processes such as strategic planning or program review.
- The degree of state involvement varied. Approximately one-third of the states played a minimal role, coordinating, monitoring, and reporting what individual institutions and/or systems were doing. In over one-half of the states, the board's role was to "actively" encourage, promote or facilitate; "serve as a catalyst," "provide incentives," and "develop guidelines." About 10 states were actively designing and implementing assessment programs, primarily in the form of testing programs of some kind. "Most state boards recognize that assessment is ultimately a campus responsibility" (Boyer, Ewell, Finney & Mingle, 1987b, p. 10).

The respondents commented on positive outcomes of state level involvement with assessment. With increased accountability came increased state financial support for such programs as “centers of excellence” and other quality-focused improvements. Institutional leaders found that state involvement facilitated the development of other internal reforms such as improved data gathering and campus level program reviews. On the negative side, there had been an underestimation of the extent of the costs for assessment programs. And assessment itself was found to be not necessarily followed by improvement. A connection between the two must continually be forged, one to the other.

From the perspective of those state policymakers filling out the 1987 survey, the future of assessment was likely to be characterized by increased state interest and involvement in the next one to two years. A third of respondents believed further development of tests and instruments measuring basic skills, general education outcomes, critical thinking and other higher order skills were in line. One fourth of the respondents anticipated assessment of entering student skills, abilities, and attitudes along with alumni surveys. A majority expressed opinions that responsibility for designing and implementing assessment should be that of individual institutions. If the institutions performed their jobs adequately, they would be left alone. Only a minority predicted the likelihood of further legislative action, but they acknowledged that the legislature was hard to predict. Perhaps the most powerful observation resulting from the 1987 ECS survey was that “governors and legislators have placed the quality of undergraduate education and student learning on the state agenda. The state boards aim to keep it there” (Boyer, Ewell, Finney & Mingle, 1987b. p. 9).

In the fall of 1989 ECS, SHEEO, and AAHE cosponsored a second survey on state initiatives in assessment and outcome measurement which was mailed to SHEEO academic officers (Paulson, 1990). From the returned surveys and in some unidentified cases, from relevant reports and policies which were returned with the questionnaires, a common format describing statewide or systemwide approaches to assessment and outcomes measurement was developed for each state. For each of the 50 states the following information was included, if available: origins of the initiative, description of initiative, primary purpose of assessment, collection (or lack thereof) of common data or test results, reporting requirements for institutions, whether state approval was required for institutional initiatives, funding, and anticipated future evolution or development of assessment initiatives. Ewell, Finney and Lenth (1990) describe the emerging pattern of state-based assessment, particularly as it compares to the findings of the 1987 survey. The following developments were noted:

- States could more fully document their assessment efforts. They had gone from discussion and planning to implementation.
- “A sharper image of assessment had emerged among state leaders” (Ewell, Finney and Lenth, 1990, p. 3). There was now recognition that assessment of college outcomes was different from assessment of basic skills upon entry.
- Most states saw the primary focus of assessment to be student learning. While student persistence and satisfaction studies were still prevalent, they were not viewed as assessment in and of themselves.
- Assessment had evolved into an identifiably distinctive policy arena at the state level.

- Distinct variations among states' policies were found to persist.
- While an assessment of student learning was required by all states, the approaches varied.
- All institutions required reporting of some kind, but content and format varied.
- Some policies and programs were funded by new state dollars; many more were financed using state appropriations from base budgets.
- Only 8 of 48 reporting states (ND, DE, NB, OK, PA, MI, VT, and WY) indicated they had no assessment practices or policies in place or planned.
- Just over half (27) of the states reported having in place "an identifiable assessment initiative."

Four emerging themes were observed by Ewell, Finney and Lenth (1990). First, assessment had made considerable advancement from the experimental to the mainstream of state policy. Second, institutional flexibility, and to a great degree autonomy persisted. Despite institutional-based fear that assessment instruments would be mandated by the state, this practice remained a relative rarity. Commonality in cognitive outcomes testing was in place in four states (FL, GA, NJ, TN). Four states reported common basic skills testing (TX, NJ, AK, VT). Four states reported periodic use of common alumni and student surveys and 12 states reported the development of statewide comparative student retention data. The third emerging pattern was the strong trend toward institutional responsibility for financing assessment. Assessment should have been interpreted not as an add-on commanded by the state, but as something institutions should naturally be engaged in. The fourth and final trend noted by this survey was that improvement continued to be a stronger theme than accountability within the state initiative. Thirty-one of the states viewed assessment's primary purpose as institutional improvement or curricular revitalization, while three states thought the primary purpose of assessment was the development of more uniform academic standards. Six of the respondents believed the primary purpose was demonstrating the effectiveness of higher education to the legislature and the public.

As of 1990 an emergent policy consensus was evident. "State leaders are beginning to agree that when handled properly, assessment can be a powerful 'lever for change'" (Ewell, Finney & Lenth, 1990, p. 5).

In February of 1995 American College Testing mailed a postsecondary assessment needs survey to each state commission, the six regional accrediting associations for higher education, 223 four-year regional state colleges and universities, 177 two-year public colleges and 33 national higher education associations and agencies. The goal was to capture a snapshot of current assessment practices and concerns, as well as future anticipated directions for assessment (Steele and Lutz, 1995). Responses were received from 33 states, 4 regional accrediting associations, one-third of institutions, and only 3 of the national associations / agencies. A Focus Group was referred to, but neither a description of the approach or the participants, nor questions asked were included in the final report.

The resulting report identified broad contextual elements which according to the respondents were currently shaping and which were expected to affect the future of the assessment movement. These involved external pressures from state and federal agencies, which were a

major force in shaping the movement towards outcomes assessment. Accrediting agencies were now asking institutions to document institutional effectiveness via the measurement of student achievement and learning.

Future factors that would keep accountability issues at the forefront of considerations included, "workforce development issues; training coupled with welfare reform; and changes in instruction brought about by the growth of distance learning" (Steele and Lutz, 1995, p. 2).

Key Findings from the survey:

- States saw assessment of higher education as an important concern.
- Twenty of 33 responding state boards expressed an interest in or need for the development of common measures.
- Areas where outcomes assessment were seen as most important included general education and foundation skills.
- Half of the colleges that responded identified concerns with the ability to define and assess general education, and the absence of faculty involvement in the assessment process (It is not clear who filled out institutional surveys, which might clarify the positions of those concerned about this lack of faculty involvement).

Key findings from Focus Groups:

- The desire for more funding on the part of institutions was now paired with their burgeoning recognition that funding would be or already was directly linked with assessment activities.
- State and federal pressures were resulting in more of a compliance mode than efforts aimed at improving quality on the part of institutions.
- Legislature and public were calling for greater accountability, not necessarily improvement.
- Institutional climate was one of anxiety rooted in comparison and evaluation uses of assessment data and processes.

State Boards identified specific concerns/questions they wanted answered. They included:

- The desire to understand how institutions measure accurately what students gain from their enrollment in the institution versus what skills and knowledge they already possess upon enrolling (issue of value-added, capabilities of pre- and post-testing students).
- Are students developing an adequate level of general education skills?
- How are institutions using outcomes information for improvement in multiple areas, including the curriculum?
- What indicators exist to demonstrate status of students and institutions (i.e. graduation rates)?

- How can the state determine if the measures institutions are using are valid and reliable?

Steele and Lutz (1995) note from the results of the survey that “state boards express much more concern than colleges about the meaningful use of assessment data to improve effectiveness and efficiency in teaching/learning. However, they do not indicate much greater awareness of the difficulties in introducing substantive change or the need for a variety of support structures and incentives to support change efforts” (p. 6).

In December of 1995 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) held the third workshop in a series examining the assessment of learning at the college level with representatives responsible for postsecondary assessment activities in the 50 states and selected territories, plus assessment experts and NCES staff. Participants were asked to complete a pre-workshop inventory characterizing the origins and development of their assessment approach, kinds of assessment instruments used, obstacles to assessment initiatives, and methodological problems encountered. NCES wanted to examine the extent and characteristics of state-level postsecondary assessment activities.

*“Because it was expected that states would differ in both capacity and approach, the posed question was not whether raw state results could be summarized into a single indicator. Rather it was the degree to which these many state efforts might help to paint a broader collective picture of collegiate attainment in relation to broadly-identified workplace and societal skills” (NCHEMS, 1996, p. 3).*

The purpose of capturing and characterizing what the 50 states were doing was the intention to “determine the degree to which the results of such activities are sufficiently consistent with one another and the domains addressed by Goal 6.5 [of the National Education Goals] to provide an initial basis for constructing a national indicator of collegiate achievement. In this respect the information provided by the state background papers indicated that current state programs could not provide such a basis” (NCHEMS, 1996, p. 5-6). Gathering state information was a means to an end — not the single focus of this design.

Key findings included the following:

- Little substantive change noted since 1989/90 study.
- More states were explicitly involved in assessment initiatives.
- Most still used “institution-centered” approach that encouraged development of local plans, use of results, and did not require common measures.
- Focus shifted from improvement to accountability. Wider political context revealed growing emphasis on governance and fiscal matters were predominating over issues of educational improvement. Concerns about quality were being replaced by concerns about productivity.
- Institution-specific outcome measures did not translate well to such external audiences as state officials, parents, and students. Therefore more consideration was being given to development and reporting of common measures.

- Move from formative toward summative approaches.
- Overall, about half the states had institution-centered policy approaches in which institutions devised their own assessment methods according to general state guidelines. About two-thirds of the institution-centered approaches were the result of board mandates versus explicit legislation.
- While assessment policy patterns remained consistent, this report noted that states had de-emphasized actively enforcing assessment policies with institutions, because other policy concerns had taken precedence.
- Political instability of assessment agencies (e.g., abolition of NJ assessment program) and ongoing fiscal concerns required that assessment not just provide data, but be embedded in broader set of restructuring initiatives.
- Some states saw regional accrediting bodies as taking dominant role in requiring and enforcing institution-centered assessment activities.
- The de-emphasis on assessment enforcement was due to state dissatisfaction with the ability of institution-centered approaches to address increasing pressure for public accountability.
- Approximately one-third of “institution-centered” states expected common performance indicators (mostly non-outcomes based) to be part of institutional reporting requirements.
- Few (15%) states used or were developing a common outcome measure. Several “institution-centered” states were considering using common testing. States were very interested in using common measures (17 collect/report measures of institutional performance; 35 report graduation/completion rates) for student assessment, but are constrained by “lack of appropriate instruments” and “costs of implementation and development” (not by any ideological problems with use of common testing).
- Compared to mid-1980s, assessment policies were now more likely to be linked with other policy initiatives, or systems of regulation and incentive. Assessment data were included in accountability report cards that contained information on faculty work load, student completion rates, instructional costs. Assessment policies were more frequently linked to funding.
- Assessment activities were being built into the basic operations of institutions in some states (e.g., use of performance-based or competency-based approaches to admission testing versus college entrance exams, or use of authentic assessment for credentialing in “virtual university”).
- Overall, quality of postsecondary education seemed to be losing importance as a public policy issue (to prisons, health care, and tax reform); higher education is being viewed as primarily benefiting individuals and therefore less deserving of public funds.
- Most important obstacles to assessment identified were: high costs of developing assessment instruments; lack of appropriate instruments, lack of agreement on domains to be assessed; institutional resistance (faculty/research universities).

- Most important needs identified: additional funding; training and staff development (for state agency staff, faculty, and information sharing among states); clear policy leadership from federal government.
- In terms of actions to further assessment at the state-level, the report cited the need to embed student assessment measures into existing statewide academic program review processes, and work more closely with regional accreditation bodies to develop common performance standards.

It appears as though what states needed—uniform accountability information that is easily communicable to external audiences—was not what institutions needed—information that links changes in student outcomes to specific institutional experiences like curriculum and teaching methods. Lenth (1996) referred to this as a “dynamic tension within assessment between the internal and external, between improvement and accountability, between formative and summative uses, and between those doing it and those who need to know” (p. 157).

Since the mid-1980s several studies describing the variety of state and regional accrediting associations’ assessment policies and practices have been conducted. This research extends those efforts in several substantive ways. First, the ACT study (1995) was the only national study of assessment policies and practices to include the six regional accrediting associations. While the ACT survey was sent to the six associations, only four responded (Steele and Lutz, 1995). It is not clear which four. Moreover, the report does not include information about what the association assessment policies were and how they evolved over time. Using a single conceptual template for analyzing original documents from each of the six accrediting associations, this report describes the associations’ commitments to assessment for improvement of learning and teaching, including expectations and requirements for the kinds of outcomes measures to be considered, and processes used in the institutional approaches to assessment (Appendix B).

This research extends what is currently known about state assessment policies by constructing a policy framework for analyzing original policy documents for each of the 50 states. Use of this conceptual framework makes it possible to compare state policies from a common perspective. The studies cited earlier have relied upon survey responses from the states and have taken the form of descriptions of state policies from each state perspective without a common framework. The lack of framework has impeded cross-state comparison. Prior research reports have “the flavor of each state’s response” (Boyer, et al., 1987), emerging patterns (Ewell et al., 1990), and a broader collective picture of collegiate attainment (NCHEMS, 1996), but have not afforded a consistent state-by-state analysis. By focusing upon the policy context, policy type, policy stage, and outcomes as a research framework this research provides a model for the systematic collection, analysis, and dissemination of state policy information, and facilitates cross-state comparisons.

Finally this policy analytic approach to the research makes it possible to analyze whether and how regional accreditation and state policies and practices converge in the states, and show the interrelationships of policies established by the state and by the accreditation associations.

## **FINDINGS: STATES & ACCREDITATION ASSOCIATIONS**

This phase of the research gathered, analyzed and is now reporting information that considers the variety of state and regional accreditation assessment policies and practices and shows how they affect the improvement of institutional climate, student learning, and performance. The present status of assessment policies and practices in each of the fifty states and the six regional accreditation associations is reported in this section. Detailed analyses of the policies of the 50 states and six regional accreditation agencies are presented in Appendix A and B. These analyses have been shared with state and accreditation agency administrators to verify the accuracy of interpretation. Feedback from these sources, with few exceptions, supported the accuracy of analysis and in some cases clarified and augmented the interpretation.

## STATE ASSESSMENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

In order to make a comprehensive report on the present status of state assessment policies and practices, documents describing the assessment practices and policies of each of the 50 states were requested, gathered, analyzed, and organized. Appendix A presents an analysis of each of the states.

A review of the substantial amount of information received from the states regarding their various assessment policies and practices led to the development of the conceptual framework to facilitate an analysis for each state. This framework also permits a comparative analysis of policies across states so commonalties, differences, trends, and patterns could be discerned. This section offers an explanation of how and why this framework was devised.

According to Palumbo (1988), "policy is the output of the policy-making system. It is the cumulative effect of all of the actions, decisions, and behaviors of the millions of people who make and implement public policy" (p. 17). This research conceptualizes public policy as government activity that takes place over time rather than as a single event, decision, or outcome (Palumbo, 1988; Hecl, 1973).

The focus of this study is assessment policy in public postsecondary education. Assessment has clearly become a state government activity since it has taken the form of legislation and guidelines issued by state-level executive agencies (e.g., State Education Department or Higher Education Coordinating Board). For the purposes of this analysis, any assessment activity initiated by a state legislature, state (higher) education executive agency, or state college/university system governing or coordinating board is considered public policy. In a handful of states, there is no assessment activity at any of these levels. No policy is, however, in fact, a policy. It is a policy decision on the part of these states, not to act.

The framework's broadest function is to provide a picture of the inputs, processes, outcomes, and impacts (Worthen and Sanders, 1987) of each state or system's assessment policy. Within these overarching categories, however, the framework needs to answer several specific questions. The first specific question is: What is the policy context? For the purposes of our framework, the policy context consists of three elements: historical inputs, political inputs, and policy description:

Historical inputs. Historical inputs address the perceived need(s) for assessment, if any, in a state, and prior policies, if any, which address that need.

Political inputs. Political inputs include a description of the original legislation, as well as any current legislation.

Policy description. According to Dubnick and Bardes (1983), there are six ways to describe a policy: (1) intentional – what is intended by the policy? (2) functional – what actually happened with this policy? (3) population-focused – who is affected by the policy? (4) developmental – how does the policy fit with what has come before? (5) programmatic – what programs will be created to carry out the policy? and (6) comparative – how does the policy compare with other policies? The policy description, adapted slightly from this one, attempts to capture the first four dimensions in the Policy Context section, the programmatic dimension in the Programs/Positions section, and the comparative dimension in the narrative that features the overall findings of our research.

The second question to answer is: What is the policy type? The most prevalent policy typology was established by Theodore Lowi (1972), who concluded that there are three basic types of policy: distributive, redistributive, and regulatory. Almond and Powell's (1966) typology categorizes policies as allocative, extractive, control, or symbolic. Richard Rose (1976) classified policies as static, cyclical, linear, or discontinuous. Each of these typologies informed the creation of our own policy typology, which was designed to accommodate the variety of state-level assessment policies as described in the state documents.

- 1) Regulatory – the policy is designed to encourage/ensure compliance with regulations; resources may be distributed, in part, based on successful compliance. This differs somewhat from Lowi's definition of a regulatory policy, which calls for a choice between "who will be indulged and who [will be] deprived." (Lowi, 1964)
- 2) Reforming – the policy is designed to encourage/ensure reform of some type.
- 3) Quality assurance – the policy is designed to assure quality.
- 4) Accountability – the policy is designed to make institutions accountable to some higher authority, typically the governor and state legislature.

The third question we address is: What is the policy stage? Palumbo describes five stages in his policy cycle: "first, an issue gets placed onto the policy-making agenda, which means it becomes a problem that is dealt with by a governmental agency, such as a legislature, court, or administrative agency; second, the issue is discussed, defined, and a decision is made whether to take action with regard to that issue – this is the policy formation stage; third, the action or decision is given to an administrative agency to be implemented; fourth, the actions taken by the administrative agencies are evaluated to determine what impact they have on the intended audiences and clientele; and fifth, policies may be terminated if they lose political support, are found not to be achieving their goals, are too costly, or for some other reasons. In addition, there are sub-loops running from implementation and evaluation to formulation because policies often are adjusted based on knowledge about their actual impact and shortcomings" (Palumbo, 1988, p. 7).

Another system of stages was developed by Steele and Lutz (1995), which was in turn, derived from McClain, Krueger, and Kongas (1989). Steele and Lutz rates policy on a scale from 0 to 4. A score of 0 meant the state had “no clear commitment or mandate to initiate an assessment program”; 1 meant the state was in the planning / startup stage; 2 indicated the state was implementing an assessment program; 3 meant the state had reached the stage of utilization / acceptance of assessment and its results; and 4 meant the state was committed to assessment, “reflecting integration of assessment into decision making and changes processes.” Anderson and his colleagues (1984) established stages similar to Palumbo’s. For the purposes of our framework, we used the following six stages established by Anderson et al. (1984).

- 1) Problem formation – relief is sought from a situation that produces a human need, deprivation, or dissatisfaction.
- 2) Policy agenda – problems, among many, that receive the government’s serious attention.
- 3) Policy formulation – development of pertinent and acceptable proposed courses of action for dealing with public problems.
- 4) Policy adoption – development of support for a specific proposal such that the policy is legitimized or authorized.
- 5) Policy implementation – application of the policy by the government’s bureaucratic machinery to the problem.
- 6) Policy evaluation – attempt by the government to determine whether or not the policy has been effective.

Our analyses also includes the following important policy relevant information for each state:

- recommended or mandated guidelines for campuses;
- programs and /or staff positions created at state and /or institutional level to work with assessment;
- list of indicators /outcomes measured;
- names of assessment instruments mandated or recommended;
- specific language pertaining to teaching and learning elements within the policies and procedures;
- requirements for public reporting;
- state and institutional budgets for assessment;
- regional accreditation association affiliation;
- relationship between state and regional accreditation association;
- relationship with disciplinary accreditation associations;
- presence, or lack, of statewide database<sup>4</sup>; and focus on technology.

## **FINDINGS FROM STATES**

A complete detailed analysis for each of the 50 states is found in Appendix A. Each state's original assessment initiative is listed in Table 2 along with the year it was enacted. New Jersey and Tennessee led the way with their initiatives in the late 1970s, but it took another 10 years for a majority of states to implement a policy. Nearly a fifth of the states did not implement a policy until the 1990s. Four states (Delaware, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Vermont) have no assessment initiatives at the state or system level.

**Table 2: Name of Original State Assessment Policy and Year Initiated**

<b>State</b>	<b>Original Initiative</b>	<b>Year of Initiative</b>
Alabama	Statewide Policy on Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes	1988
Alaska	Educational Effectiveness Policy	1996
Arizona	Regents' Annual Report	1987
Arkansas	Act 98	1989
California	Higher Education Assessment Act	1990
Colorado	Higher Education Accountability Program Act	1985
Connecticut	Strategic Plan	1988
Delaware	none	none
Florida	College-level Academic Skills Test (CLAST)	1982
Georgia	Planning Policy	1989
Hawaii	Executive E5.210	1989
Idaho	Governing Policies and Procedures on Outcomes Assessment	1988
Illinois	Recommendations of the Committee on the Study of Undergraduate Education	1986
Indiana	State-level performance objectives	1984
Iowa	Regents Policy on Student Outcomes Assessment	1991
Kansas	Assessment Policy	1988
Kentucky	Accountability Enhancement Program	1992
Louisiana	Act 237	1993
Maine	Planning Goals	1986
Maryland	Reorganization of Maryland Higher Education Act	1988
Massachusetts	Performance Measurement System	1997
Michigan	none	none
Minnesota	Postsecondary Quality Assessment	1987
Mississippi	Trustees' Policies and Bylaws	n/a
Missouri	Value-Added Assessment Program (NE MO St. U.)	early 1980s
Montana	Proficiency Admission Requirements and Developmental Education	n/a

Nebraska	Program Review	1994
Nevada	Regents' Assessment Policy	1989
New Hampshire	none	none
New Jersey	Basic Skills Assessment Program (BASP)	1977
New Mexico	Strategic Plan and Report Card	1990
New York	Commissioner's Regulations	n/a
North Carolina	Assessment Reports	1989
North Dakota	Strategic Plan	1996
Ohio	State Bill 140	1989
Oklahoma	Regents Policy	1991
Oregon	Oregon Assessment Model	1993
Pennsylvania	none	none
Rhode Island	Board of Governors' Policy on Quality in Higher Education, Program, and Institutional Review Processes	1986
South Carolina	Act 629	1988
South Dakota	Assessment Policy	1984
Tennessee	Performance Funding	1979
Texas	Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP)	1987
Utah	HB 37 Assessment Policy	1992
Vermont	none	none
Virginia	Assessment Program	1986
Washington	Assessment Policy	1989
West Virginia	Assessment Policy	1987
Wisconsin	Accountability Policy	1993
Wyoming	n/a	n/a

\* This information was provided by Russell (1995) Advances in Statewide Higher Education Data Systems.

\*\*n/a indicates information currently unavailable

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The policy context section of each state's analysis includes a description of the original, as well as any updating legislation (see Appendix A). In some cases the focus and nature of a state's assessment policies and practices have evolved since their initiation. The current policy type and stage for each state is presented in Table 3. Approximately half of the states have policies designed to both ensure quality and make institutions accountable to a higher authority, be it governor, state legislature, or the coordinating or governing board. Nine states have policies which focus exclusively on quality assurance; five emphasize accountability. We categorized one state each as a combination of accountability/ reforming (Indiana), quality assurance/regulatory (New Mexico), and quality assurance/distributive (North Carolina).

The states are in different stages with regard to their assessment initiatives as Table 3 illustrates. Nearly half are in the process of implementing their policy; one-fifth are evaluating and reformulating their course of action. Colorado is formulating a new course of action having instituted a new statute in 1995. Tennessee is in a constant cycle of ongoing implementation and evaluation. Ohio is implementing its policy at the two-year level, while formulating its course of action for the four-year institutions.

**Table 3: Current State Assessment Policy Type and Stage**

<b>State</b>	<b>Current Policy Type</b>	<b>Current Policy Stage</b>
Alabama	accountability; quality assurance	implementation (of Act 96-577)
Alaska	quality assurance	implementation
Arizona	accountability; regulatory	implementation
Arkansas	n/a	n/a
California	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Colorado	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	formulation (of performance funding policy)
Connecticut	quality assurance	implementation
Delaware	none	none
Florida	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Georgia	quality assurance	implementation
Hawaii	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Idaho	quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Illinois	quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Indiana	accountability; reforming	evaluation and reformulation
Iowa	quality assurance	implementation
Kansas	accountability; quality assurance	evaluation
Kentucky	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	implementation
Louisiana	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Maine	none	none
Maryland	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Massachusetts	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Michigan	none	none
Minnesota	accountability; regulatory	adoption
Mississippi	accountability	implementation
Missouri	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Montana	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Nebraska	accountability; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Nevada	quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation

New Hampshire	none	none
New Jersey	accountability	implementation
New Mexico	quality assurance	implementation
New York	quality assurance	implementation
North Carolina	quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
North Dakota	accountability	implementation
Ohio	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	implementation; formulation (of performance indicators for four- year institutions)
Oklahoma	accountability; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Oregon	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Pennsylvania	none	none
Rhode Island	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
South Carolina	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	implementation; adoption (of 100% performance funding policy)
South Dakota	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Tennessee	accountability; regulatory; quality assurance	ongoing implementation and evaluation
Texas	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Utah	accountability; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Vermont	none	none
Virginia	accountability; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
Washington	accountability; quality assurance	evaluation and reformulation
West Virginia	quality assurance	implementation
Wisconsin	accountability; quality assurance	implementation
Wyoming	n/a	n/a

\*n/a indicates information currently unavailable

Whether states mandate common instruments for assessment and mandate common indicators and/or outcomes across their institutions is captured in Table 4. Currently, eight states (Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas) indicate their use of common instruments to measure outcomes and Colorado is currently considering use of common instruments. Kentucky and Missouri use common instruments (NTE and Praxis II) to assess the preparedness of their K-12 teacher candidates. Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina and Texas have constructed their own instruments, while Tennessee uses a commercially-developed product.

Seventeen states expect common indicators and/or outcomes to be measured across their institutions; five states have a mix of common and varied indicators and outcomes. Twelve states submitted that their institutions used varied indicators and outcomes. Ten states made no mention of indicators or outcomes.

**Table 4: State Assessment Instruments and Indicators/Outcomes**

<b>State</b>	<b>Instruments of Assessment Mandated as Common</b>	<b>Assessment Indicators/Outcomes</b>
Alabama	none	vary by institution
Alaska	none	none
Arizona	none	common
Arkansas	n/a	n/a
California	none	common
Colorado	under construction	under construction
Connecticut	none	none
Delaware	none	none
Florida	CLAST; entry-level placement tests; survey	one common set for four-year institutions; another common set for two-year institutions
Georgia	Regents' Exam; Comprehensive Performance Exam	vary by institution and institutional type
Hawaii	none	common
Idaho	none	common
Illinois	none	vary by institution
Indiana	none	common
Iowa	none	vary by institution
Kansas	none	vary by program and institution
Kentucky	Praxis II for teacher education	common
Louisiana	none	vary by institution
Maine	none	vary by institution
Maryland	none	common
Massachusetts	none	none
Michigan	none	none
Minnesota	none	one common set for each system
Mississippi	none	none
Missouri	NTE and C-Base for teacher education	some common; some varied
Montana	none	n/a
Nebraska	none	common
Nevada	none	vary by institution
New Hampshire	none	vary by institution
New Jersey	none	common

New Mexico	none	common
New York	none	common
North Carolina	survey	some common; some varied
North Dakota	none	none
Ohio	none	common for two-year institutions
Oklahoma	none	some common; some varied
Oregon	none	common
Pennsylvania	none	none
Rhode Island	none	common
South Carolina	survey	common
South Dakota	none	vary by institution
Tennessee	ACT-COMP or C-BASE	common
Texas	TASP	n/a
Utah	none	some common; some varied
Vermont	none	none
Virginia	none	vary by program and by institution
Washington	none	vary by institution
West Virginia	none	vary by institution
Wisconsin	none	some common; some varied
Wyoming	n/a	n/a

n/a indicated information currently unavailable

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Whether the state’s assessment initiatives were guided by legislative or other means and the type of state higher education agency is illustrated in Table 5. Twelve of the states have statutes, meaning that their assessment initiative is for the most part guided by legislative means, usually a bill is passed by the state legislature that directs an executive board or agency to establish a policy. Twenty-one states have policies, indicating that assessment is for the most part guided by non-legislative means, usually an executive policy promulgated by a state higher education governing board or agency. Eight states had both statutes and policies shaping their assessment initiatives. Five states have no state-level assessment activity.

State structure type or authority of the governance structure (McGuinness, Epper, & Arredondo, 1994) illustrated in Table 5 demonstrates that 21 states are governed by coordinating/regulatory boards, 21 by consolidated governing boards, six by planning agencies, and four by coordinating advisory boards.

**Table 5: Assessment Activity Type and Authority of State Agency**

<b>State</b>	<b>Policy, Statute or Combination</b>	<b>Authority of State Agency</b>
Alabama	policy	coordinating/regulatory
Alaska	policy	consolidated governing
Arizona	combination	consolidated governing
Arkansas	n/a	coordinating/regulatory
California	statute	coordinating/advisory
Colorado	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Connecticut	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Delaware	none	planning
Florida	statute	consolidated governing
Georgia	policy	consolidated governing
Hawaii	policy	consolidated governing
Idaho	policy	consolidated governing
Illinois	policy	coordinating/regulatory
Indiana	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Iowa	policy	consolidated governing
Kansas	policy	consolidated governing
Kentucky	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Louisiana	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Maine	policy	consolidated governing
Maryland	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Massachusetts	combination	coordinating/regulatory
Michigan	none	planning
Minnesota	statute	coordinating/advisory
Mississippi	policy	consolidated governing
Missouri	combination	coordinating/regulatory
Montana	policy	consolidated governing
Nebraska	statute	coordinating/regulatory
Nevada	policy	consolidated governing
New Hampshire	none	planning
New Jersey	combination	coordinating/regulatory
New Mexico	combination	coordinating/advisory
New York	policy	coordinating/regulatory
North Carolina	statute	consolidated governing
North Dakota	policy	consolidated governing
Ohio	combination	coordinating/regulatory
Oklahoma	policy	coordinating/regulatory
Oregon	policy	planning

Pennsylvania	none	coordinating/ advisory
Rhode Island	policy	consolidated governing
South Carolina	statute	coordinating/ regulatory
South Dakota	policy	consolidated governing
Tennessee	statute	coordinating/ regulatory
Texas	combination	coordinating/ regulatory
Utah	statute	consolidated governing
Vermont	none	planning
Virginia	combination	coordinating/ regulatory
Washington	policy	coordinating/ regulatory
West Virginia	combination	consolidated governing
Wisconsin	policy	consolidated governing
Wyoming	n/a	consolidated governing

n/a indicates information currently unavailable

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Each state's pattern of sharing information with its public and its ability to gather, organize, and analyze information from each of its institutions via a state- computerized database is portrayed by the information contained in Table 6. Twenty- three of the states require annual, five biennial, and one triennial reporting of assessment findings. In three states public reporting is voluntary (Connecticut, Minnesota, and Rhode Island); in two it is cyclical. California indicates it uses systemic reporting.

State-level governing and coordinating boards have been collecting higher education data since their inception. The development of institutional and statewide computerized data systems has facilitated the sharing and comparing of data from multiple institutions. Table 6 contains data gathered by Russell (1995) which characterizes the higher education data systems in each state. As indicated, more than half of the states have comprehensive state-wide databases containing student records from four-year and two-year public institutions. Only five states indicate they have no multi-institutional database.

**Table 6: Frequency of Public Reporting and Availability of Database Within State**

State	Public Reporting	State Database
Alabama	voluntary	1
Alaska	annual	1
Arizona	annual	4
Arkansas	annual	1
California	systemic	1
Colorado	annual	1
Connecticut	voluntary	1
Delaware	none	5

Florida	annual	3
Georgia	annual	1
Hawaii	annual	1
Idaho	annual	1
Illinois	voluntary	1
Indiana	biennial	1
Iowa	annual	5
Kansas	none	5
Kentucky	annual	1
Louisiana	annual	1
Maine	periodic	1
Maryland	annual	1
Massachusetts	annual	n/a
Michigan	none	5
Minnesota	voluntary	1
Mississippi	none	2
Missouri	annual	1
Montana	none	5
Nebraska	annual	5
Nevada	none	1
New Hampshire	none	1
New Jersey	annual	1
New Mexico	annual	1
New York	cyclical	3
North Carolina	cyclical	1
North Dakota	cyclical	1
Ohio	annual	1
Oklahoma	annual	1
Oregon	annual	2
Pennsylvania	none	4
Rhode Island	voluntary	5
South Carolina	annual	1
South Dakota	annual	2
Tennessee	annual	1
Texas	annual	1
Utah	biennial	1
Vermont	none	2
Virginia	biennial	1

Washington	annual	2
West Virginia	periodic	1
Wisconsin	triennial	1
Wyoming	n/a	n/a

1= comprehensive statewide database at the SHEEO level  
2= non-comprehensive statewide database at the SHEEO level  
3= multi-institutional database, not at SHEEO level  
4= limited multi-institutional database  
5= no multi-institutional database (Russell, 1995)  
n/a indicates information currently unavailable

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Funding for assessment activities appears to remain the primary responsibility of the individual institutions. A majority of the policy documents give no indication of the availability of state funding support or use of funding as an incentive for institutional assessment activities. (See Table 7). Noteworthy exceptions include Missouri, where the 1997 Funding For Results Program earmarked as incentive funding \$2 million for two-year and \$10.6 million for four-year institutions. In Tennessee \$25-30 million is awarded each year through the Performance Funding Policy. Ohio recently allocated \$1.5 million to two-year institutions as part of its performance funding policy.

**Table 7: State Financial Incentives and Consequences Tied to Assessment**

State	Financial Incentives and Consequences
Alabama	Institutions pay for assessment activities through regular appropriations
Alaska	Funding for assessment is included in 1996 budget request
Arizona	n/a
Arkansas	n/a
California	State constitution requires the state to reimburse local agencies and school districts for costs incurred by state-mandated activities (e.g., assessment)
Colorado	The state is currently determining what percentage of appropriations will be linked to performance indicators
Connecticut	n/a
Delaware	n/a
Florida	n/a
Georgia	Regents' policy says that each institution shall link its major budget allocations and other major academic and administrative decisions to its planning and assessment process
Hawaii	n/a
Idaho	first-year assessment planning costs were borne by institutions
Illinois	Total reinvestment of funds under Priorities, Quality, and Productivity (PQP) initiative was \$153.6 million; \$27.5 million of this was designated for improvement of undergraduate education
Indiana	n/a

Iowa	n/a
Kansas	n/a
Kentucky	n/a
Louisiana	n/a
Maine	some funds were appropriated by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in 1988, 1989, and 1990
Maryland	n/a
Massachusetts	n/a
Michigan	n/a
Minnesota	The legislature placed \$5,000,000 in the performance incentive accounts for both systems, for a total of \$10,000,000
Mississippi	n/a
Missouri	For 1997 Funding for Results (FFR), \$2 million went to two-year institutions and \$10.6 million went to four-year institutions
Montana	n/a
Nebraska	n/a
Nevada	n/a
New Hampshire	n/a
New Jersey	n/a
New Mexico	n/a
New York	n/a
North Carolina	n/a
North Dakota	n/a
Ohio	In 1996, the Regents allocated \$1.5 million to two-year institutions as part of its performance funding policy
Oklahoma	Each institution is permitted to charge a fee for the purpose of conducting institutional and programmatic assessment. This fee can be no more than one dollar per credit hour
Oregon	State has used "small amounts of incentive funds (\$200,000/biennium) to urge campuses to participate in collaborative assessment projects."
Pennsylvania	n/a
Puerto Rico	n/a
Rhode Island	n/a
South Carolina	Not clear what percentage of appropriations formula is determined by performance indicators for 1997 and 1998, but the formula will be 100% indicator-driven by 1999
Tennessee	\$25 to \$30 million is awarded each year through the Performance Funding Policy
Texas	n/a
Utah	n/a
Vermont	n/a
Virginia	An average of \$12 per student was appropriated to institutions for assessment
Washington	State funding for assessment has been available since the 1989-91 biennium when \$400,000 was given for assessment activities at each of the six four-year institutions and to the State Board of Community Colleges. In 1990 supplemental funds of \$60,000 per institution was given to the 27 community colleges. Total funding levels for public four-year institutions, community colleges and technical institutions have remained relatively constant for each successive biennium budget. The Community Colleges and Technical System Governing Board has funding to coordinate assessment activities, while the Higher Education Coordinating Board does not.
West Virginia	"West Virginia governing boards have allocated approximately \$15,000 annually for state-wide assessment programs and materials. However, the primary responsibility for funding assessment has been borne by the campuses."

Indiana	n/a
Iowa	n/a
Kansas	n/a
Kentucky	n/a
Louisiana	n/a
Maine	some funds were appropriated by the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in 1988, 1989, and 1990
Maryland	n/a
Massachusetts	n/a
Michigan	n/a
Minnesota	The legislature placed \$5,000,000 in the performance incentive accounts for both systems, for a total of \$10,000,000
Mississippi	n/a
Missouri	For 1997 Funding for Results (FFR), \$2 million went to two-year institutions and \$10.6 million went to four-year institutions
Montana	n/a
Nebraska	n/a
Nevada	n/a
New Hampshire	n/a
New Jersey	n/a
New Mexico	n/a
New York	n/a
North Carolina	n/a
North Dakota	n/a
Ohio	In 1996, the Regents allocated \$1.5 million to two-year institutions as part of its performance funding policy
Oklahoma	Each institution is permitted to charge a fee for the purpose of conducting institutional and programmatic assessment. This fee can be no more than one dollar per credit hour
Oregon	State has used "small amounts of incentive funds (\$200,000/biennium) to urge campuses to participate in collaborative assessment projects."
Pennsylvania	n/a
Puerto Rico	n/a
Rhode Island	n/a
South Carolina	Not clear what percentage of appropriations formula is determined by performance indicators for 1997 and 1998, but the formula will be 100% indicator-driven by 1999
Tennessee	\$25 to \$30 million is awarded each year through the Performance Funding Policy
Texas	n/a
Utah	n/a
Vermont	n/a

Virginia	An average of \$12 per student was appropriated to institutions for
Wisconsin	n/a
Wyoming	n/a

n/a=information currently not applicable

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## DISCUSSION OF STATE FINDINGS

This section will discuss three themes emanating from the patterns and trends captured in our data:

- the extent and implications of state use of common assessment practices;
- the relationships between state assessment policies and governance structures;
- the use of incentives and consequences in assessment policies.

The extent to which states have been moving toward the use of common indicators and common instruments has been examined previously (ACT, 1995; NCHEMS, 1996). Our analysis of the state documents for the most part confirms what these previous studies found: that 17 states currently have common indicators and that eight states use common instruments. Whether this constitutes a genuine trend toward commonality, either in terms of indicators or instruments, is a judgment call. Indeed, making a statement about trends in state assessment policies is difficult because it has only been during the last decade that assessment has become an issue at the state level, and spotting a trend over such a relatively short period of time is a challenge.

But if there is a trend toward common indicators and instruments, what does it mean? Perhaps for some state legislatures, commonality in expectations and measurements is one way to facilitate comparisons across institutions. In New Mexico, for example, the state legislature passed a law requiring the State Commission on Higher Education to compile an “annual report card,” consisting of a variety of measures taken from all public institutions. The purpose of this “report card” was explicitly comparative: “The indicators [of performance] are to be published annually in order to draw comparisons among school districts and among institutions of higher learning.” (Annual Report Card Act of 1990).

Institutions, however, have been quick to resist intra-state comparison. In New Mexico, the report card requirement was dropped because of criticism from institutions, which stated that the “diversity of New Mexico’s institutions, missions, and students” make such comparative tools “unreliable” or “only minimally indicative of institutional performance.” Institutions and boards in other states, perhaps sensing the comparative potential of common indicators and instruments, have asserted their own uniqueness and offered similar arguments against the validity of such comparisons.

In California the state Postsecondary Education Commission acknowledged in its 1996 report that the “breadth and complexity of California public higher education make the development of measures of performance that are comparable across systems very challenging.” In Georgia the assessment policy allows for the fact that assessment procedures may differ from

institution to institution. Idaho's Board of Education makes it very clear that assessment "should not be used to compare institutions." In Illinois, the state Board of Higher Education has been reluctant to make assessment practices uniform. Instead, the state's approach to assessment of students "is to call upon institutions to develop appropriate assessment programs rather than develop some sort of statewide assessment test or common set of indicators." Iowa, Nevada, and Oklahoma are also among the states that recognize diversity of institutions, missions, and students. If, indeed, some states are looking at common indicators and instruments as a good way to draw comparisons between institutions, there is certainly no shortage of institutions and boards that have resisted (and, in the case of New Mexico, repealed) the use of such tools for comparative purposes.

While this study and others (NCHEMS, 1996) have examined the extent to which states have begun using common instruments, this study has also looked beyond the commonality of instruments to the more fundamental question of what these common instruments actually measure. In some cases, instruments (particularly standardized tests) are used at or near the time of a student's entry to college as opposed to a student's exit. For example, Florida's CLAST was implemented, in part, "to ensure that college students...entering the upper division at a state university possess basic or essential skills deemed necessary for success." Florida also administers a common entry-level placement exam to incoming freshmen at two- and four-year institutions. In Texas, the TASP (Texas Academic Skills Program) exam is administered to entering college freshmen to determine if students can read, write, and compute "at levels needed to perform effectively in higher education." Some states also refer to the use of the SAT or ACT as means of assessing students at entry.

There are a handful of states that use standardized tests as common instruments to measure students' performance upon exit from college. Tennessee, for example, uses the ACT-COMP and/or C-BASE as means of evaluating a student's general education program. South Dakota also uses the ACT-COMP to assess the achievement of students in the general education component of the baccalaureate curriculum. There also seems to be growing interest in use of common standardized instruments in teacher education programs. In Missouri, a state-wide administrative rule mandates the use of C-BASE and NTE for admission to and exit from teacher education programs. Kentucky uses the scores of teacher education program graduates on the multiple-choice component of all Praxis II subject area exams and compares their scores to the national averages, as means of measuring the preparation of K-12 teachers.

More broadly speaking, many states use students' scores on professional licensure and certification exams in a variety of areas as instruments of assessment, though these are not often mandated as common. More often, states turn to surveys measuring the satisfaction — both of students and their employers — for assessment purposes. If states are moving toward common instruments, then it will be interesting to observe whether they choose to measure their students at entry, exit, or both. The measurements at entry (like CLAST and TASP) are largely a reflection on the quality of elementary and secondary school systems, while measurements at exit (like ACT-COMP and C-BASE) are more of a reflection of the quality of the postsecondary institutions.

Perhaps colleges and universities will resist attempts to impose common instruments to measure exit performance of their students for the same reasons they resist drawing comparisons across institutions: institutions have different missions and different students. For

some institutions, common, standardized measurements of exit-performance might be invaluable or worse, misleading. Further it is easier, at least intuitively, to assess entry rather than exit because students come to college with what is, for the most part, a similar educational background from grades K-12. They do not, however, exit college with the same degree of similarity. In some states, even the general education core differs dramatically from institution to institution, not to mention major field of study and elective courses. Common instruments would fail to account for these differences.

The effect of governance structure type on state higher education policy is a relatively new and unexplored area. Hearn, Griswold, and Marine (1996) examined what role governance structure played in the formulation of state tuition and financial aid policy. Hearn and Griswold (1994) looked at the degree to which the centralization of a state's governance structure affected postsecondary policy innovation. Given the significance of assessment as a policy issue in most states, it seems reasonable to consider also what impact, if any, governance structure type has on states' assessment activities.

In order to do this, this study first categorized state assessment activities in one of three ways: statute, policy, or a combination of both. For the purposes of this study, a state is said to have a policy if its assessment activities are, for the most part, guided by non-legislative means, usually an executive policy promulgated by a state higher education governing board or agency. A state is said to have a statute if its assessment activities are, for the most part, guided by legislative means, usually a bill passed by the state legislature that directs an executive board or agency to establish a policy. A state is said to have a combination if its assessment activities are guided by a combination of both policy and statute. Usually, a statute is passed and a policy is established to implement the statute, but the statute retains its significance.

Based on this categorization, this study found that 12 states had statutes, 21 states had policies, 8 states had combinations, and 5 states with no state-level assessment activity. (Four states did not respond to the request for information.) These categories were then juxtaposed with the patterns of state higher education governance structure developed by McGuinness, Epper, and Arredondo (1994).

As Table 5 illustrates, of the 23 states with consolidated governing boards, 15 had assessment policies, three had assessment statutes, two had combinations, and two did not have any state-level assessment activity. (One of these 23 states did not respond.) Of the 21 states with coordinating boards with regulatory authority, six had policies, seven had statutes, five had combinations, and three did not respond. Of the six states with coordinating boards with advisory capacity, three had statutes, one had a policy, one had a combination, and one did not have state-level assessment activity. Finally, of the five states with planning agencies, four did not have any state-level assessment activity, and one state had a policy.

The relative authority of these boards decreases in this order: governing board; coordinating board with regulatory authority; coordinating board with advisory capacity; and planning agency. (Ibid.) Given this, the juxtaposition of the type of governance structure with the type of assessment activity reveals some interesting relationships, which may or may not be cause-and-effect. For example, of the 23 states with consolidated governing boards, 15, or 66%, had policies. At the other end of the authority spectrum, of five states with planning agencies, four, or 80%, had no state-level assessment activity. Intuitively, a planning agency

has the least authority of the four structures proposed by McGuinness et al., and thus is the least likely to be engaged in assessment activity. One future direction of our research will be to examine these relationships.

One of the most compelling aspects of state-level assessment has been the use of financial incentives and consequences as a means of assessment or a means of encouraging assessment activity. A 1996 report prepared by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education as part of that state's performance funding movement offered an overview of performance funding by state. As of July, 1996, five states – Arkansas, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee – had implemented performance funding, and three states – Colorado, Kentucky, and South Carolina – were moving quickly in that direction (SCCHE, 1996). In addition to these states, our study found that Arizona has a performance funding system as a result of the Budget Reform Act passed by that state's legislature in 1993. This law requires performance funding for all state programs, including higher education. Minnesota also has two sets of five performance measures, one for the University of Minnesota and another for the Minnesota State College and University System. For each performance measure an institution fulfills, it will receive \$1 million, for a maximum possible total of \$5 million. At the time of this report, however, funds have not been released pending the performance reports from the systems.

Beyond the use of performance funding, four states – Oregon, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia – have separate budget lines for assessment activities. Oregon provides \$200,000 for institutions engaged in "collaborative assessment." Virginia gives institutions an average of \$12 per student for assessment purposes, while Washington and West Virginia appropriate a certain amount of funds annually.

Two states – Oklahoma and South Dakota – permit their institutions to charge students a fee for assessment activities. In Oklahoma, institutions can charge no more than \$1 per credit hour; in South Dakota, the fee can be no higher than \$0.25 per credit hour. One state – California – is constitutionally required to reimburse institutions for costs incurred while carrying out state-mandated activity, of which assessment is an example.

Based on these findings, it seems there are at least four types of approaches to using financial incentives and consequences across states: (1) states with performance funding; (2) states with budget lines for assessment activities; (3) states that allow institutions to charge fees to students for assessment purposes; and (4) states that reimburse institutions for assessment activities. One of our future research agendas will be to ascertain why states choose the policy approaches that they are currently implementing.

To this end, another interesting observation we made based on state documents is the intersection between the second and third themes of this discussion: the relationship between governance structure type and the use of performance funding. For example, of the 10 states that either currently have performance funding measures or are considering adopting such measures, only two – Arizona and Florida – have governing boards.

Interestingly, the remaining eight states all have regulatory coordinating boards. Do governing boards resist the use of performance funding because they see it as an infringement on their authority? Is performance funding, especially when mandated by a state legislature, really an infringement on board authority? What is it about coordinating boards with regu-

latory authority that is conducive to performance funding? Do other factors, such as the political climate and the public demand for greater accountability, affect the likelihood of a state to use performance funding? All of these questions will inform our construction of the survey we will distribute to SHEEOs and other state-level higher education policymakers.

Perhaps the most important observation to make regarding assessment is that states define assessment differently based on their own individual assessment needs and goals, and these differences in definition result in a variety of policies and practices. Given this variety, the overall purpose of this state analysis has been three-fold: (1) to introduce and explicate a new policy analysis framework that may facilitate a comparative discussion of state-level assessment policies and practices; (2) to provide, in the form of six tables, a concise visual summary of the information gathered and discussed in greater detail in the individual state templates; and (3) to elucidate three very broad, comparative themes this study has discovered in its review of state assessment policies and practices.

The value of this study is its approach. This study “worked backwards” and developed the analytical framework and template based on what we were seeing in the state documents. This is in contrast to administering an instrument designed to capture specific, pre-determined dimensions of assessment. Our initial request for documents relating to assessment policies and practices was open-ended and somewhat ambiguous by design, so that states would be inclined to send “too much” information rather than “too little.” Once we had this information, however, we could categorize and quantify it as we wanted; we were not tied to the pre-existing limits and boundaries of a survey instrument. In the end, we believe this approach, while it may have been “messier” and perhaps required more work, has enabled us to offer a genuinely comparative summary and analysis of assessment activities at the state level to an audience with diverse interests and perspectives on assessment issues. Of course, this report is only the beginning. Based on our findings, and the comments and suggestions of those who read this report, Year Two of our research will involve a more focused approach to the analysis of state-level assessment activities. This approach will consist of a survey informed by the data already collected and the conclusions already drawn. Ultimately, this research will be of use to the various participants in the state policy-making process as they continue to work toward a fair, efficient, and valid system of assessment.

## ACCREDITATION ASSOCIATION POLICIES & PRACTICES

Documents describing the assessment practices and policies of the six regional accreditation associations were gathered, analyzed, and organized into individual analytic frameworks which can be found in Appendix B. Because the primary purpose of this data collection was to discover what policies exist and the emphases these policies give to improving student learning and achievement, the frameworks provide an overview of the associations' focus on assessment for learning and teaching improvement and highlight the following specific information:

- specific policies and practices emphasizing students, student learning and teaching;
- kinds of outcomes measured and processes used;
- emphasis on institutional accountability, as well as autonomy.

These policies and practices paint only part of the picture of accrediting associations' efforts to facilitate institutional effectiveness. In order to garner as broad an understanding as possible of how the accrediting associations have engaged in improving faculty teaching and student learning, the following information was also included in the framework:

- relationship of association to state higher education department, council or coordinating boards;
- association's efforts to evaluate its assessment program;
- materials the association provides to guide its member institutions and association efforts to train accrediting teams;
- identification of who is involved in assessment at the institution;
- and, emphases on issues of technology use and development and diversity.

Assessment of student learning and teaching emerged as a focus of the accreditation associations between the mid 1980s and early 1990s. The logical next question is what form has outcomes assessment taken? According to the accreditation associations, how should institutions approach assessing student learning and teaching effectiveness? What evidence should be gathered; what means are to be used?

Without exception what the associations mandate is documentation of institutionally identified outcomes and analysis of those outcomes, as well as demonstration of action following from the analysis. But as Table 8 illustrates, specific processes are not required, nor is an identified single or set of outcomes. Rather some domains and processes are "highlighted."

**Table 8: Regional Association “Highlighted” Outcome Measures and Assessment Processes**

Regional Association	Measures	Processes
Middle States Association	multiple: cognitive abilities, information literacy, integration and application	varied - qualitative and quantitative
New England Association	multiple: cognitive, behavioral and affective learning	varied - qualitative and quantitative
North Central Association	multiple: cognitive, behavioral, and affective	varied - direct and indirect - qualitative and quantitative
Northwest Association	multiple: problem solving, analysis, synthesis, making judgment, reasoning, communicating	varied
Southern Association	multiple: major field and general education achievement, affective development	varied - qualitative and quantitative
Western Association	multiple: effective communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking	varied - qualitative and quantitative

According to North Central Association’s recently revised Criteria Three and Four an appropriate assessment program is one that “will **document** (its emphasis) proficiency in skills and competencies essential for all college-educated adults; completion of an identifiable and coherent undergraduate level general education component; and mastery of the level of knowledge appropriate to the degree attained.” It remains up to the institution to define those skills and competencies. NCA provides some greater direction in the 1996 report, *Opportunities for Improvement*, where the association recommends that institutions determine the extent to which they contribute to student learning within three domains: cognitive, behavioral, and affective.

WASC cites effective communication, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking and other competencies judged essential by the institutions as possible outcomes to be considered. Middle States lists as measures of student achievement cognitive abilities, content literacy, competence in information management skills and value awareness. Clearly some of the associations guide their member institutions in their contemplation of desired learning outcomes, but none has established a mandated list.

In terms of process or approach to assessment, the associations’ expectations are similarly broad. Assessment is to be ongoing and incremental and longitudinal multi-measure studies are thought to produce more meaningful results. Use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches is considered important. Most associations provide a broad list of possible

approaches (e.g. alumni and employer surveys, course and professor evaluations, student satisfaction inventories, course completion rates) from which institutions can choose.

Guidance for the assessment of instructional processes is equally as broad, and at best, indirectly addressed. For Middle States teaching is clearly a part of the teaching-learning improvement loop used to illustrate the inter-linking of assessment and institutional improvement, and yet only minimal mention is made of how instruction is assessed. Faculty peer evaluation is the only approach listed among possible methods of determining instructional program quality.

SACS (1996) states that “methods of instruction must be appropriate for the goals of each course and the capabilities of the students...and methods of evaluating teaching effectiveness must be varied and may include use of standardized tests and comprehensive examinations, assessment of the performance of graduate in advanced programs or employment” (Criteria for Accreditation. p. 30-31).

WASC’s Task Force on the Role of Accreditation in the Assessment of Student Learning and Teaching Effectiveness (1995) captures what may characterize the approach of most of the associations to assessing teaching effectiveness. They state the clear need to more meaningfully explore and connect the relationship between teaching effectiveness and student learning, while simultaneously acknowledging that this has been an area that has been overlooked and understudied. The dearth of attention to assessment of teaching found in the association materials may be thus explained.

As Table 9 illustrates, those responsible for the campus assessment efforts vary by association, but typically faculty are listed. Support and involvement of other campus constituencies in the assessment effort are left to the discretion of each institution.

**Table 9: Association Expectation for Who Will Conduct Campus Assessment**

<b>Regional Association</b>	<b>Responsibility for Campus Assessment Effort</b>
Middle States Association	faculty, administrators, students
New England Association	individuals and groups responsible for achieving institutional purposes
North Central Association	faculty with institutional support from governing board, president and senior executive officers
Northwest Association	faculty
Southern Association	president and appropriate constituent groups
Western Association	faculty

Elliott (1983) posits that institutions have the right to expect four constants in their relationship with their accreditation associations: clear standards, guidance for improvement, protection from fraudulent and improper practices, and preservation of institutional autonomy. All six regional associations either implicitly or explicitly acknowledge that the distinct and diverse purposes and goals of their member institutions demand equally diverse assessment

approaches and processes. For instance, according to WASC, “member institutions are in the best position to define their standards for student learning, teaching effectiveness.” Middle States holds that “it is an institution’s prerogative to determine how best to implement assessment.” This commitment to preservation of institutional distinctiveness and autonomy provides perhaps the best explanation for why the outcomes measured and processes used by the six regional associations are so broadly defined.

Stevens and Hamlett (1983) and Bender (1983) have noted that the states abrogated their responsibility for gauging institutional effectiveness by either ignoring the issue or passing it to the accrediting associations, raising among other questions, what has been the convergence of state and accreditation association policies and the resulting influences on assessment practices. In the second half of the twentieth century as the states began to take greater interest in and responsibility for institutional regulation and oversight, an accommodating and often cooperative relationship between state agencies and the accrediting associations emerged (Bender, 1983).

An analysis of the accreditation (See Table 10) and state (see Table 11) policy documents indicates that over one-third of the states mention a relationship with either their regional accrediting and/or disciplinary/professional accrediting associations, while four of the regional accrediting associations (MSACS, NCACS, NEAS&C, SACS) explicitly mention a relationship with the state higher education agencies in their regions. The relationships range from formal policies directing communication between the accrediting association and state coordinating and governing boards to more informal communication links between state and accrediting agency.

**Table 10: Relationship with State Agencies as Reported by Regional Accreditation Associations**

<b>Regional Association</b>	<b>Relationship with State Agency</b>
Middle States Association	informal
New England Association	formal
North Central Association	informal
Northwest Association	none apparent
Southern Association	formal
Western Association	none evident

**Table 11: Relationship with Regional Accreditation Association as Reported by States**

State	Agency	Relationship with Accreditation Agency
Alabama	SACS	not evident
Alaska	NWACS	Recent NWASC assessment requirement for self-study is cited as an influence on Educational Effectiveness Policy.
Arizona	NCACS	not evident
Arkansas	NCACS	not evident
California	NWACS	not evident
Colorado	NCACS	not evident
Connecticut	NEACS	not evident
Delaware	MSACS	not evident
D.C.	n/a	not evident
Florida	SACS	not evident
Georgia	SACS	not evident
Hawaii	WACS	not evident
Idaho	NWACS	not evident
Illinois	NCACS	State Board of Higher Education noted NCACS' 1989 request that institutions develop student assessment plan. The types of outcomes evidence suggested by NCACS closely parallel the BOE's assessment components.
Indiana	NCACS	not evident
Iowa	NCACS	not evident
Kansas	NCACS	In its most recent NCACS report, the University of Kansas system of assessment was described as "extremely sophisticated" and "not inexpensive."
Kentucky	SACS	Assessment activities are complementary to both institutional and programmatic accreditations.
Louisiana	SACS	not evident
Maine	NEACS	not evident
Maryland	MSACS	not evident
Michigan	NCACS	not evident
Minnesota	NCACS	not evident
Mississippi	SACS	The Trustees' policy links assessment with the accreditation requirements of the SACS.
Montana	NWACS	not evident
Nebraska	NCACS	The state sees the assessment requirements of NCACS as complementary to its own goals of consistency with the state Comprehensive Strategic Plan.
Nevada	NWACS	The Regents recognize that the "NWACS is now placing a greater emphasis on assessment. The [state] Commission on Colleges expects each institution and program to adopt an assessment scheme responsive to its mission and

		needs, and the campuses are responding.”
New Hampshire	NEACS	not evident
New Jersey	MSACS	not evident
New Mexico	NCACS	Current unwritten policy is to encourage progress at the institutional level in assessment of student learning and institutional performance, supporting NCACS’ accreditation requirements.
New York	MSACS	“The Department is also moving toward a closer working relationship with the [MSACS]...as a means of assuring consistency in standards as well as efficiencies in staff time and cost.”
North Carolina	SACS	not evident
North Dakota	NCACS	The State BOE policy requiring institutions to assess student achievement in light of institutional mission “is interpreted to minimally be the assessment required by the NCACS.”
Ohio	NCACS	A connection between assessment of student learning outcomes and the assessment of accreditation has been drawn by the BOR.
Oklahoma	NCACS	The Regents acknowledge the NCACS’ expectation that “all institutions are expected to assess the achievements of their students...”
Oregon	NWACS	not evident
Pennsylvania	MSACS	not evident
Puerto Rico	MSACS	not evident
Rhode Island	NEACS	The Board of Governors’ policy allows institutions to substitute accrediting reports for program reviews, and requires institutions to submit accrediting reports as part of their larger institutional quality reports.
South Carolina	SACS	Accreditation of degree-granting programs is one of the performance indicators.
South Dakota	NCACS	Policy 2:11 links the state requirement closely to the accreditation requirement for outcomes assessment of the NCACS.
Tennessee	SACS	One of the performance indicators calls for institutions “to achieve and maintain program accreditation.”
Texas	SACS	not evident
Utah	NWACS	Regional and professional/disciplinary accreditation processes are “essential to maintaining quality.”
Vermont	NEACS	not evident
Virginia	SACS	not evident
Washington	NWACS	not evident
West Virginia	NCACS	not evident
Wisconsin	NCACS	The Academic Quality Program (AQP), in particular, was designed “with special emphasis on meeting the NCACS accreditation guidelines for assessment.”
Wyoming	NCACS	not evident

SACS has a written policy regarding the participation of representatives of governing, coordinating, and other state agencies on college visiting committees. The policy statement indicates that SACS will provide the relevant documents concerning the institutional self-study, the visiting committee's report, and each institution's response to their accreditation visit with their state agency. Departments of higher education in states within the New England Association of Schools and Colleges region are notified annually of institutions being evaluated by the commission and often a staff member of the department accompanies the accreditation team as an observer.

MSACS has participated in informal discussions with the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education and with New Jersey's Excellence and Accountability Committee. NCACS maintains regular communications and discussions with officers of state governing and coordinating boards in its region. Interestingly, of the six regional associations NCACS has gone to the greatest lengths to understand the potential, and pursue opportunities for connections with state policymakers. In 1990 and 1996 NCACS surveyed the state higher education agencies of the 19 states in its region, asking states about their expectations for assessment and how much the states knew of NCACS's initiative to assess student academic achievement. The 1996 report, *State Agency Expectations for Assessment in the North Central Region: A Follow-up on the 1990 Survey*, made the following observations:

- North Central's assessment initiative has had significant impact in terms of informing and accelerating a number of state assessment efforts;
- States would like to see greater communication and collaboration between themselves and North Central to enhance institutional assessment efforts via information sharing and training opportunities;
- And, a joint cataloging of NCACS and state assessment expectations would be helpful to the association, state agencies, and institutions.

The Oklahoma and Ohio Boards of Regents acknowledge that North Central's expectations for assessment have influenced their state policies. Illinois' and South Dakota's assessment policy components closely parallel those of North Central. In Wisconsin the AQP was designed as a means of meeting the association's guidelines for assessment.

The patterns found in the North Central region can be found elsewhere. Mississippi, which is a SACS constituency, explicitly states that its trustees clearly linked their assessment policies and practices with the SACS requirements. The development of Alaska's Educational Effectiveness Policy and Nevada's assessment practices are partially attributed to Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges' self-study assessment requirements.

A pattern of interdependence and mutual influence between some state and regional accreditation associations is evident. The actual strength and nature of the influence are difficult to fully discern at this stage of the research, but the connections suggest future direction for the next stages of this project. The states need to be explicitly asked how and in what specific ways the regional accreditation association assessment policies have influenced state policies and institutional practices.

Over the past 12 years the regional accrediting associations have adopted as a central measure of institutional effectiveness the assessment of student learning. Institutional adoption

and use of outcomes assessment is best characterized as still being in the early phases of development. As Table 12 illustrates, the associations have only recently engaged in systematically guiding and training their institutional membership in assessment practices and processes.

**Table 12: Association Assessment-Focused Resource Materials and Institutional Training Programs**

<b>Regional Association</b>	<b>Resource Materials</b>	<b>Institutional Training</b>
Middle States Association	Framework (1990,1996 editions)	Training Symposia (1996-1997)
New England Association	Background Paper /Planning and Evaluation Session and Student Outcomes Assessment Project	Initiated in 1997, Student Outcomes Assessment Project's aim is to inform development of training
North Central Association	Characteristics of an Assessment Program and Worksheet to Judge Inclusion of Assessment Data	1991 regional workshops introducing commitment to assessment
Northwest Association	Policy 25	none apparent
Southern Association	Resource Manual on Institutional Effectiveness	none apparent
Western Association	Resource Manual: Achieving Institutional Effectiveness Through Assessment	assessment included in all institutional self-study workshops

Concomitantly several of the associations have recently engaged in efforts to determine the status of their assessment efforts (see Table 13). In 1995 Middle States conducted a survey of their member institutions to determine what progress their members had made in assessment. The association found that over half of the responding institutions had no institutional assessment plan and just over one-third had a plan that was no more than three years old. Institutions requested assistance in developing their plans and Middle States has responded by designing workshops for their member institutions. In the fall of 1996 and continuing into 1997 the training seminars Middle States has been conducting have been well-attended, indicating the present need and desire for associational assistance.

**Table 13: Association Evaluation of Assessment Efforts**

<b>Regional Association</b>	<b>Evaluation Project Name and Year</b>
Middle States Association	Outcomes Assessment Survey /1995
New England Association	Student Outcomes Assessment Project /1997
North Central Association	Opportunities for Improvement /1996
Northwest Association	none apparent
Southern Association	none apparent
Western Association	none apparent

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges is currently following directly in Middle States footsteps with the initiation of the Student Outcomes Assessment Project. The major goal of this initiative is to assist institutions in designing systematic approaches and specific processes for assessing institutional effectiveness and designing means for quality improvement. Member institutions were to be surveyed in the spring of 1997 to determine how the association should proceed, what the institutions need assistance with, and what kind of initiative the association should design. Institutions are being asked to indicate how they understand and approach student outcomes assessment in undergraduate academic programs and how assessment results are used to inform institutional decision making and planning processes. From these responses materials and training sessions will be designed to facilitate institutional progress with regard to outcomes assessment.

North Central, as of June 1995, required all of its member institutions to submit an explicit plan for how they have been or will be approaching the assessment of student academic achievement. By March of 1996 most of the plans had been received and reviewed and a report describing the scope and direction of assessment in the region was written. Review of the plans culminated in one overarching recommendation that institutions determine more explicitly how they were contributing to student cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective development.

These three regional accreditation associations are working to determine where their member institutions are and how they can facilitate further progress in assessing outcomes through training workshops and materials, as well as definitional fine-tuning.

Of the regional accrediting associations the Western Association of Schools and Colleges is taking some of the greatest strides forward. Specifically, it is trying to reframe the goal of accreditation around building institutional capacity to improve teaching and learning, versus merely meeting standards. In a series of experimental self-studies being conducted in the spring of 1997, WASC is attempting to reconsider what the role of accreditation might be – a role that engages the critical issues in higher education. WASC seeks to involve and support institutions in building “cultures of evidence” which consciously consider what information is needed to understand what and how students are learning; how instructional practices affect that process and what can be done with the information once gathered.

WASC’s work suggests that accreditation is at yet another crossroads, as the association strives to move the assessment of outcomes to a level of greater clarity and maturity in practice. At the same time, leaders in the other regional accrediting associations are pursuing critical queries and providing insightful answers as to how learning and teaching can be enhanced in our nation’s colleges and universities.

This report has provided a brief history of state and regional accreditation association assessment policy development, a review of prior research findings, and an analysis of the status of assessment policies and practices in each of the fifty states and six regional accrediting associations. This work lays the foundation for Year 2 of research which will focus on gaining an even more detailed understanding of the intent and role of the states and accreditation associations in shaping assessment policies and practices. Of equal importance will be the solicitation of the opinions of policymakers and higher education and regional accreditation leaders about the effectiveness of the current policies and practices.

The following questions and observations which emerged from this first year of policy analysis will guide the next year of inquiry:

- In what ways does the political context ( e.g., governance structure, relationship of state council and board executives with political leaders) of each state influence the nature and content of state assessment policies and practices?
- In what ways are states influencing each other's assessment policies and practices?
- What is the degree and nature of influence between the states and regional accrediting associations with regard to their assessment policies and practices. Who is influencing whom, and how?
- What is the intent of those states using common assessment practices and instruments?
- Four approaches to using financial incentives and consequences to leverage assessment activities have been identified. What explains why states chose the policy approaches that they are currently implementing? Is there evidence of differing outcomes based on approach?

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