



Tracking a Subtle Storm Assessment Policies in Higher Education

Welcomed, resisted, or debated, “outcomes assessment” has become a staple of K-12 reform over the last two decades. The eagerness of state legislators to use outcome measures to help sort through the competing demands for reform has brought with it both public scrutiny and political controversy.

What has passed with much less public fanfare, but no less fervor, is the implementation of similar assessment initiatives for higher education. Over the same two decades, state policymakers—together with leaders of public colleges and universities—have sought an effective set of strategies for assessing college outcomes. Indeed, by 1997, more than three-quarters of American states had adopted some form of assessment policy. Yet little systematic knowledge has been available to measure the extent and scope of publicly mandated outcomes assessment at the postsecondary level.

This issue of *The Landscape*, by focusing on assessment initiatives, supplies a foundation for renewed discussion of this topic. State-level policies in all 50 states have been surveyed, compared, and categorized—affording a comprehensive look at trends in current assessment practice.

Establishing the Groundwork

The research presented here represents initial findings from a multistage, multiyear research project headed by Michael Nettles, John Cole, and Sally Sharp at the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education (CSHPE) at the University of Michigan for the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI). The project’s ultimate goal is to understand the extent to which various higher education assessment policies have a direct effect in the nation’s classrooms.

As a first step, researchers at CSHPE examined policy documents from each of the 50 states and, for a sample of

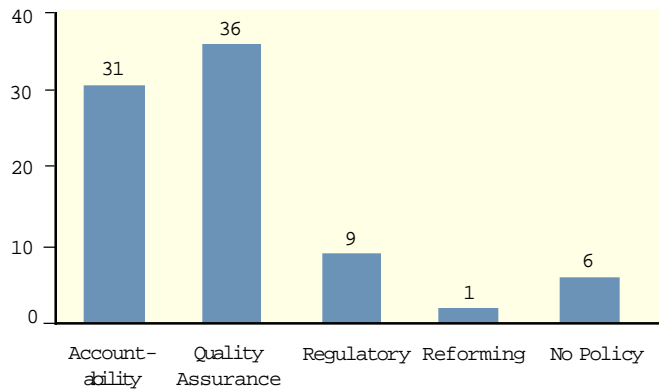


states, conducted interviews with state higher education officers. What emerged was both a new and more complete understanding of the evolution of state assessment policies and their impact on instructional quality. State policy approaches to higher education assessment now cover a broad spectrum of initiatives: from low expectations and limited intrusiveness at one end, to very high expectations and externally measured outcomes at the other. Each state also has a unique history behind its adoption of assessment policies—a reflection of particular state customs and traditions, as well as geographic and cultural heritages. Even when different states appear to use similar language to describe policies and strategies, the actual content of the initiatives often differs widely.

While the sheer variety of policies makes aggregating state-level activity difficult, the task is not impossible. The movement is now two decades old—providing sufficient time and history to assign more conventional analytical categories to aspects of these initiatives. A survey of activity in the 50 states can be collapsed into a framework with three

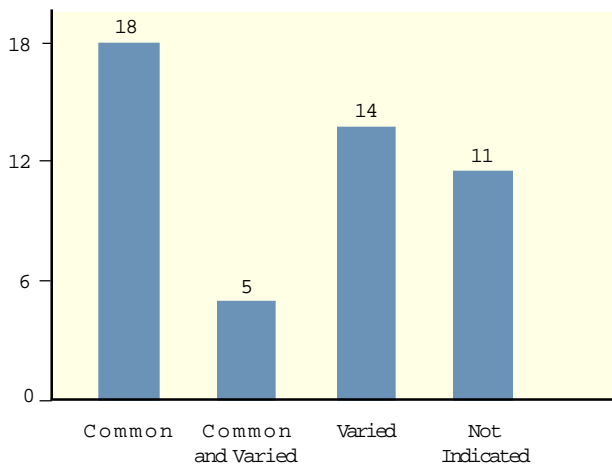
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Chart 1
Number of States Implementing Assessment Policies by Type*



* Information was unavailable for two states, which were excluded from the analysis. Many states are implementing multiple types of assessment policies, and all policy types are counted for each state.

Chart 2
Number of States Using Common vs. Varied Assessment Indicators*



* Information was unavailable for two states, which were excluded from the analysis.

depicts the number of states that have adopted assessment policies by type. Clearly, the most prevalent forms are efforts to achieve accountability (typically to the governor, state legislature, or the public) and quality assurance (ensuring high quality in instructional performance through concrete evidence). In fact, more than half of the states have policies that include *both* quality assurance and accountability measures. Regulatory reforms, or policies designed to ensure compliance with regulations and to distribute resources based on successful compliance, are less common—although, as discussed later, outcomes measures are increasingly being used to determine funding levels for higher education. The most infrequent form of assessment policy is “reforming,” one designed to encourage or ensure a particular reform initiative.

Whether or not states mandate common assessment indicators or outcomes across their institutions is depicted in Chart 2. Eighteen states expect common indicators and/or outcomes to be measured across their institutions, while 14 states use varied measures and techniques. In some states, a mix of common and varied measures are used. Does the relative predominance of common measures indicate a genuine trend toward using consistent indicators? Perhaps for some state legislatures, commonality of expectations and measurements is one way to facilitate comparisons, valid or not, across institutions. There remains, however, no shortage of institutions and boards that have resisted the use of such tools for comparative purposes.

The effect of governance structure on the formation of state assessment policy is relatively unexplored territory. In order to draw such a comparison, state assessment activities must first be categorized according to how the initiative was set: by statute, policy, or a combination of both.

Chart 3 displays the results of this analysis. “Policy” indicates that the initiative was prompted by non-

primary themes:

- The extent and implications of state use of common assessment practices within its colleges and universities.
- The relationships between state assessment policies and governance structures.
- The use of financial incentives or consequences in assessment policies.

The Lay of the Land

The description begins with an account of the context of assessment policy across the 50 states. Chart 1

legislative means, usually by a state higher education governing board or agency in cooperation with institutions, while “statute” indicates it was created through legislation. Assessment activities were established by policy in 21 states, by statute in 14 states, and by a combination of both in eight.

These categories can then be compared with the higher education governance structures within states to reveal trends in assessment initiatives. Chart 4 distributes the number of states with a particular assessment initiative type according to the governing authority of state systems. The chart indicates the presence of an interesting relationship—which could very well be cause-and-effect—between the type of governance authority and assessment activities.

Of the 19 states with consolidated governing boards, the assessment initiatives in 14 of them (74 percent) were established by policy. Not a surprising finding, considering the “advocacy” role that many governing boards play for state universities or systems. Although states with coordinating/regulatory boards had a more even mix, there was a slightly greater number of assessment initiatives governed by statutes—again, consistent with the role of many state-appointed boards. At the other end of the “authority” spectrum are five states with planning agencies, for which four (80 percent) had no state-level assessment activity at all.

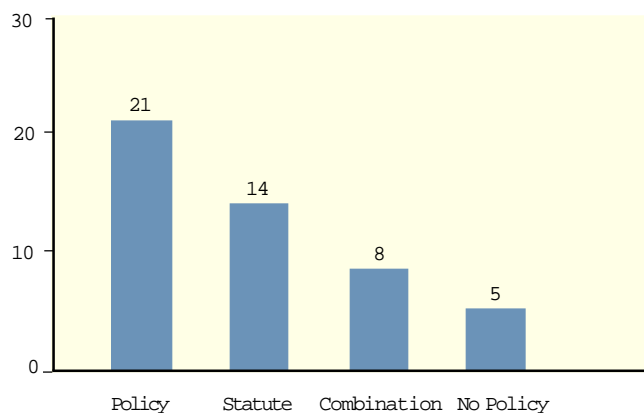
One of the most compelling approaches to state-level assessment is the use of financial incentives and consequences to encourage colleges and universities to participate. There are at least four approaches to using such incentives across the states: performance funding; budget lines for assessment activities; student fees for assessment purposes; and reimbursing institutions for their assessment activities. Chart 5 shows the distribution of 17 states among these four categories.

At the time this study was con-

ducted, five states—Arkansas, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee—had implemented performance funding for part, if not all, of their higher education systems, and three states—Colorado, Kentucky, and South Carolina—were quickly moving in that direction. In addition, Arizona initiated a system

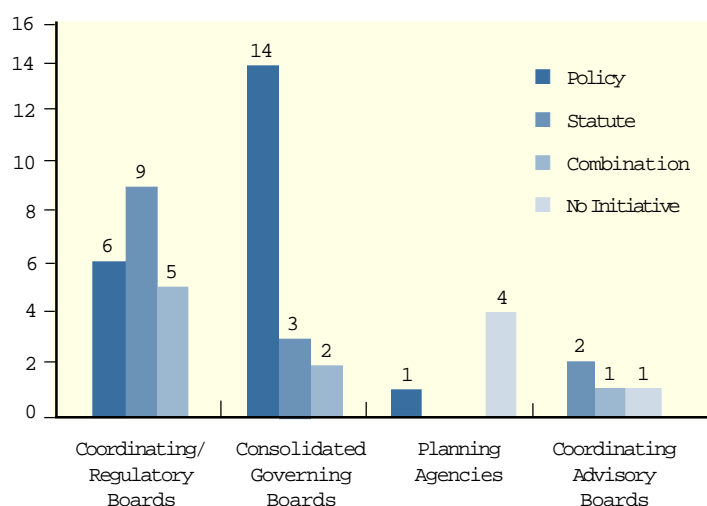
through its Budget Reform Act of 1993 that requires performance funding for all state programs, including higher education. Minnesota maintains two sets of performance measures, one for the University of Minnesota and another for the State College and University System. For each measure

Chart 3
Number of States Establishing Assessment Activities by Policy, Statute, or Both*



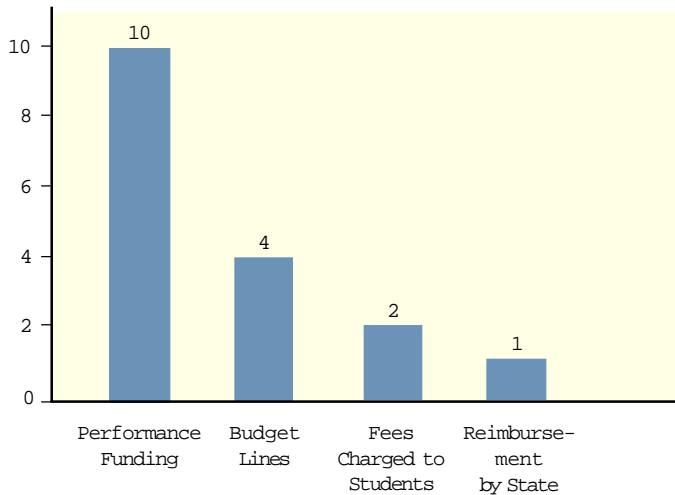
* Information was unavailable for two states, which were excluded from the analysis.

Chart 4
Distribution of Assessment Initiatives by Origin and the Authority of State Agencies*



* Information was unavailable for two states, which were excluded from the analysis. The state agency categories used in this analysis were adopted from McGuiness and Aims, et al., “State Postsecondary Education Structures Handbook,” Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States, 1994.

Chart 5
Number of States Using Financial Incentives to Promote Assessment



that an institution fulfills, it receives \$1 million, with a maximum total of \$5 million. When this research was conducted, however, Minnesota had not yet released the funds, pending performance reports from the higher education systems.

Beyond the use of performance funding, four states—Oregon, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia—maintain separate budget lines to fund their assessment activities. Only two states—Oklahoma and South Dakota—permit their institutions to charge student fees for assessment activities. In Oklahoma, institutions are limited to charging no more than \$1 per credit hour; in South Dakota, the fee can be no higher than 25 cents per credit hour. Only one state, California, is required by its constitution to reimburse institutions for costs incurred while carrying out a state-mandated activity such as assessment.

Given these distributions and patterns, an interesting intersection between a state’s higher education governance structure and its use of performance funding begins to emerge. Of the 10 states that currently have or are considering performance funding

measures, only two have consolidated governing boards. The remaining eight states all have coordinating boards. This fact begs a series of questions: Do governing boards resist the use of performance funding because they consider it to be an external infringement on their own authority? What is it—if anything—about coordinating boards with regulatory authority that makes them conducive to performance funding as a strategy? Do other factors, such as the political climate and public demand for greater accountability, influence a state’s use of performance funding?

Perspective

As this research implies, the outcomes assessment movement in higher education has steadily, and rather quietly, gained momentum. In fact, the push to implement assessment initiatives may recently have become a rush in an effort to establish increased public accountability to taxpayers, who provide the largest single source of funding for public institutions, and to ensure educational quality by providing concrete evidence about instructional performance.

The questions raised by this analysis point to a host of concerns voiced by many college and university administrators in the age of shared governance. Where does campus autonomy end and external leadership begin? As a bottom line, how do assessment policies and statutes affect instructional quality—for better or worse? Where they do improve teaching and learning, how, exactly, do they do it?

The state context—governance structure, political climate, and public mood—contributes to the tenor of assessment within a state. As this research evolves, it will address these and other questions by probing deeper into the assessment activities of each state and investigating the interaction between the agencies and institutions that make decisions and implement policies. □