STUDENT LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT
Marvin Peterson, Project Area Director

This project focuses on key dimensions of student assessment and learning at several levels: accreditation and state level governance; institutional policies and practice; and academic program and department-levels. The project examines the status and trends in assessment at each level, and then examines how the coexistence of the policies and practices at the various levels affect student development and outcomes. The overall objective is to understand how assessment is being used as a tool for improving teaching and learning in the nation's colleges and universities.

State Policies and Regional Accreditation Practices of Assessment for Student Learning
Michael Nettles, Principal Researcher

As assessment has become an increasingly prominent issue within higher education, many state legislatures, state systems of higher education, and regional accrediting associations have sought to meet the calls for improvement and accountability by developing assessment policies. In some states, legislatures have reacted to pressure from business interests and the public by mandating assessment policies for higher education systems and institutions. In other states, the legislature and the state higher education executive authority have collaborated to craft and implement an assessment policy. At the same time, most of the major regional accrediting associations have included an assessment requirement to their institutional accreditation protocols.

The focus of this project is to gather, analyze, and report information about the variety of state and regional accreditation policies and practices as well as to examine how they affect the improvement of institutional climate, student learning, and performance. Goals for the project include:

Collect and analyze data related to the assessment policies and practices of all states and six regional accreditation associations.

Survey state higher education policymakers concerning the status of assessment activity in their states and how this activity relates to the improvement of teaching and learning.

Conduct multiple case studies of selected states and regional accreditation associations to explore the impact of assessment policies and practices on postsecondary institutions, academic programs, and students.

Synthesize the research and its results to design a clear, practical model for states to use in improving their assessment policies and practices.

The chief outcome of this research is to inform the policymaking process and contribute to the efforts of state higher education authorities to improve teaching and learning.

Findings

Data suggest that state governance structures play a key role in developing state assessment policies and practices. The project's findings include:

- *Policy Type.* Approximately one-half of the states have policies designed to both ensure quality and make institutions accountable to a higher authority—be it the governor, state legislature, or coordinating or governing board; nine states have policies which focus exclusively on quality assurance; five emphasize accountability.

- *Policy Stage.* Nearly half of the states are in the process of implementing their policy; one-fifth are evaluating and reformulating their policies.

- *Authority.* Twenty-one states reported the adoption of assessment policies, indicating non-legislative means; twelve states have statutory authority assessment initiatives; and eight states reported a combination of both assessment initiatives and policies.

Larger themes that emerged from the state analysis study included:

The extent and implications of common assessment practices. The increasing use of common assessment practices, such as common instruments, may facilitate comparisons across institutions by legislatures. However this practice has resulted in concern—primarily at the institutional level—that state assessment policies do not recognize the substantial differences across institutional types and missions. The failure to recognize these differences raises concerns about the fairness and efficiency of such assessment policies.

The use of incentives and/or consequences in assessment policies. A number of states use financial incentives, or consequences, to achieve campus compliance with state-level assessment policies. These range from allowing institutions to charge their students "assessment fees" to variations of the "performance funding" system first used by Tennessee in the 1970s.

For the accreditation associations, the project learned:

- Neither processes nor a single set of outcomes are mandated by any of the regional associations;

- In terms of process or approach to assessment, the associations' expectations are similarly broad; and

- Accrediting associations have only recently engaged in systematic guidance and training for their institutional membership with regard to assessment practice and processes.

The following issues were identified from the analysis:

The loss of institutional autonomy on policy formation and implementation. In a growing number of cases, institutions are concerned about the loss of autonomy as they seek to satisfy the call for assessment by accrediting associations.

The relationship between state and accreditation association assessment policies and practices is an evolving one. In a handful of cases, states have essentially removed themselves from the assessment picture by calling on institutions to meet the assessment requirements of the accrediting associations rather than imposing additional state-level requirements.

Publications

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Institutional Support for Enhancing Student Assessment and Performance
Marvin Peterson, Principal Researcher

While state agencies, accrediting associations, and institutional leaders have pursued efforts to actively develop student assessment for almost two decades, there has been limited research-based evidence on how to design and implement an institutional assessment process that ensures the information is used to improve teaching, learning, the curriculum, and overall academic performance.

This project seeks to understand how institutions develop and improve their student assessment efforts by examining how institutions respond to external pressures for, and promote the effective use of, student assessment practices that impact student learning and institutional performance. Ultimately, the project's goal is to enhance institutions' academic performance by developing an inventory of exemplary institutional policies and practices for use by policymakers and institutions.

The project will review and synthesize the conceptual and research literature on institutional approaches to student assessment, organization and administration support patterns for student assessment, and the evidence of the institutional utilization and impacts of student assessment; develop an analytic framework for understanding these dynamics for research; develop an instrument to assess institutional support for student assessment; and conduct a national survey of postsecondary institutions. Researchers will then conduct case study visits that reflect different state level approaches to student assessment, accrediting regions, and institution types.

The completion of the comparative case study and survey work will provide the basis for an in-depth exploration of the climate for student assessment and the patterns of organizational and administrative support that are most effective in promoting student assessment efforts that achieve positive institutional impacts.

Findings

Institutional Approach to Student Assessment. Institutions' approaches to student assessment emphasize the use of entry measures and easily quantifiable indictors of student performance (e.g., academic progress, academic intentions) and give less attention to more complex measures of student performance (e.g., higher order cognitive skills, affective development). Institutions make limited use of less traditional, student-centered assessment methods (e.g., portfolios, capstone projects). Few institutions conduct studies of the relationship between students' performance and various aspects of their experiences within the institution. The content and methods of student assessment approaches varies significantly among specific types of institutions.

Organizational and Administrative Support for Student Assessment. The three most prevalent purposes for engaging in student assessment are to prepare for accreditation self-studies, improve student achievement, and improve academic programs. Institutions have used a variety of activities and governance structures to promote student assessment. Most have some form of institutional plan or policy for student assessment. Governance for student assessment is generally shared across functional areas and between administration and faculty; academic affairs typically has primary responsibility for directing student assessment activities. Institutions have made fairly extensive use of policies to promote student involvement in assessment activities. They are less likely to provide professional development on student assessment or to use faculty evaluation and reward policies to promote

faculty involvement in student assessment. Many institutions report incorporating student assessment information into processes for academic planning and review.

Institutional Perceptions of External Influences on Student Assessment. Institutions perceive regional accreditation requirements, and to a lesser extent, state requirements, as important and positive influences on their student assessment efforts. Perceptions of the influence of accreditation and state requirements on assessment efforts vary significantly by institutional type and control.

Uses and Impacts of Student Assessment. Student assessment information is most often used to modify student assessment processes, design or reorganize academic programs or majors, and modify student academic support services. It is seldom used to make decisions concerning faculty promotion or rewards. Most institutions have not monitored the effects of student assessment on students, faculty or on their relationships with external constituents.

Institutional and External Influences on Student Assessment Uses and Impacts. The extent to which institutions use assessment management policies and practices, their patterns of organizational and administrative support for assessment, and the content and extensiveness of their student assessment approaches are stronger influences on assessment uses and impacts than are broad institutional characteristics or external influences. The extent to which institutions incorporate student assessment information into academic planning and review processes, and the number of studies conducted concerning the relationship between students' performance and their institutional experiences are important predictors of assessment uses and impacts in all types of institutions. Beyond these common features, patterns of predictors vary for each specific assessment use and impact measure, and for each type of institution.

Researchers also found that patterns of institutional support for student assessment vary across different types of postsecondary institutions. Major findings included:

The Use and Impact of Student Assessment Information. Survey responses from all four types of institutions reveal that many institutions do not use student assessment data to make academic decisions. Similarly, many institutions report very minimal impacts from student assessment data.

Assessment Purposes. All four types of institutions report that accreditation mandates and improving undergraduate education are both very important purposes for engaging in assessment; however, researchers found that doctoral and research institutions accord less importance to meeting external mandates from state officials and regional accreditors than do other types of institutions.

Researchers have also found that the purpose for which assessment is being conducted is significantly related to the institution's approach to assessment and using assessment information. In general, institutions that report that they employ student assessment as a means to promote internal improvement are more likely to actually use assessment information in making educational and institutional decisions.

Computer Support. Fewer than half of associate of arts, baccalaureate, and comprehensive institutions report that they have a student information system that tracks students from application through graduation. Even fewer have either a system that includes student performance indicators or an integrated database. Of doctoral and research institutions, only half have such student information systems, and again, even fewer have integrated institutional databases.

Researchers have found that along with improving the management of student assessment data, creating relational databases in which student assessment information can be linked to other institutional data facilitates analyses of the relationship between students' performance and their experiences within the institution.

Professional Development. All four types of institutions offer professional development on student assessment to their faculty and academic administrators. Doctoral and research institutions offer less extensive policies of this nature than do other types of institutions. In all cases, such professional development policies are more likely to involve activities that do not significantly affect time in the classroom, rather than those that involve greater expenditure of administrative and faculty time.

Researchers found that those institutions that offer extensive professional development are more likely to use their student assessment information to make decisions regarding faculty and this information is more likely to have an impact on their faculty.

The results of National Survey of Institutional Support for Student Assessment and the subsequent case studies of institutions provide the first comprehensive picture of the institutional approaches to, support for, and use of student assessment information. As a result of their work, researchers have discovered the critical importance of embedding the student assessment process in other academic management or educational improvement processes. Furthermore, they have become aware of differing strategies used for student assessment at different types of institutions.

Researchers have also found that case study institutions have shown an interest in disseminating and using the findings, as several institutions plan to use the case study documents and reports to inform their institutional student assessment efforts for upcoming accreditation visits.

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Academic Programs and Students: Studying Student and Faculty Issues that Impact Teaching, Learning and Assessment
Eric Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, Principal Researchers

This project seeks to discover what institutions are interested in improving as part of their undergraduate educational mission. The work has been pursued in two areas. A research team studying reform and innovation is focusing on the development of new information on teaching, learning, and assessment through a series of campus case studies focused on educational reform and innovation. A second group is analyzing existing multi-institutional data resources relevant to current practices and concerns.

Findings

Faculty interest in the scholarship of teaching is becoming more common, although in many departmental settings it has yet to be formally rewarded. Researchers' study of three campuses revealed that many faculty members already practice assessment techniques in an effort to improve their own teaching.

Interviews with faculty revealed that student performance information is not simply used for determining student grades; such information is broken into various areas to evaluate performance in relation to learning goals. Overall, the use of clearly articulated goals associated with performance was explicit in the classrooms of innovating faculty.

Institutional research can support and document faculty innovators' work by systematically collecting evidence of student learning. Student performance information can be "scaled up" to provide information that is used in assisting faculty to reflect on their own teaching and to help determine what students were learning across a department. By integrating faculty expertise and coordinating multiple levels of assessment activity, institutional research can create a coherent portrait of how the campus is "making a difference."

Documenting and researching different types of assessment with regard to institutional contexts allowed a more complex understanding of different institutional approaches to implementing and coordinating assessment on campus. For example, one campus was attempting to develop an ecological model of linking the various levels of assessment (classroom, department level, program review, general education assessment) in terms of building on faculty activity, while another introduced and coordinated assessment practices more centrally while developing faculty consensus along the way. Both approaches are vehicles for developing a portrait of institutional progress toward improving undergraduate education.

The results of a study on student satisfaction show the importance of student-faculty interaction, student involvement in extracurricular activities, as well as the importance of other campus experiences in promoting student satisfaction with various aspects of their collegiate experiences.

The results of a study on the effects of college or occupational prestige suggest that college attendance and degree attainment are more important factors in promoting occupational status over the life course than are issues related to attending a prestigious institution.

Publications.

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