putting ideas to work

What is the impact of state policies and regional association standards on the assessment practices of postsecondary institutions and their academic programs? How do the interactions among state government officials, the SHEEO agencies, and institutional representatives affect policy outcomes? What contextual factors in the political and social climate for assessment are relevant?

Lessons Learned:
The impact of state and regional assessment policies on institutions

Although governments, regional accreditation associations and higher education institutions have made great progress in the last 20 years in adopting formal assessment policies, assessment standards have remained largely invisible to those outside the process; yet these policies are an integral part of governance and quality assurance in higher education. Almost all states have developed assessment policies or standards. All six regional accreditation associations have developed assessment standards and outcome measures.

As part of a larger research project on assessment, NCPI researchers examined the impact of state policy and regional association standards on institutions, academic programs, and teaching and learning. Based on the knowledge that the interactions among different policy levels is an important factor in the evolution of assessment practices and provides insight into why policies are either successful or produce different or unexpected outcomes, researchers examined the relationships of three levels: the state policies, the regional accreditation association standards, and the student assessment practices in affected colleges and universities. Research was centered around initial policy objectives, policies implemented, and the resulting outcomes.

The Research Phases and Methodology
An initial report, "Benchmarking Assessment," provided an historical overview of the state's role in assessment in public higher education, a review of recent surveys conducted on the subject, and a profile of the assessment policies and practices of each state and each regional accrediting association. Next, researchers developed a survey instrument, the State Higher Education Assessment Questionnaire (SHEAQ), which was sent to state higher education academic officers. Based on the analysis of the responses to the SHEAQ questionnaire, and a synthesis of the literature review, researchers developed an interview protocol.

Site visits followed, which included meeting with the state higher education executive officer, the

Higher Education Assessment Policies and Practices of Five State Governments and Three Regional Accreditation Associations

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chief academic and fiscal officer, the lead staff person for community and vocational institutions and for colleges and universities, the chairs of the House and Senate Education Committees, key staff in the governor's office, and individuals from institutions who are involved in assessment activity. The team was particularly interested in the assessment policy's academic components, fiscal components, and governance, as well as the inter-relations among legislators, the executive branch, the Board of Education, and the colleges and universities. The team was also interested in how state policymakers thought the policies influenced teaching and learning in the state's colleges and universities.

In order to analyze the effects of centralization on assessment, researchers chose states with varied approaches to assessment. They also sought states in different accreditation regions in order to examine the interaction of assessment policies, accreditation standards and criteria, and institutions. The three accreditation associations included are the Middle States Association, the Northwest Association, and the North Central Association. Additional criteria for choosing the five case study states—Florida, Missouri, New York, South Carolina and Washington—included:

(1) the degree of higher education policy centralization in the state;
(2) being located in one of the regions of our selected regional accreditation associations; and
(3) the extent to which the state played a pioneering role in a particular area of assessment and/or accountability policy.

The resulting case study report, "Higher Education Assessment Policies and Practices of Five State Governments and Three Regional Accreditation Associations," focuses on lessons learned in development, enactment and implementation of various assessment policies. The following recommendations and examples are taken from the report, which can be found at http://ncpi.stanford.edu. Tools for policymakers and administrators, as well as more information on the research can be found in the NCPI toolkit, "State Government and Regional Accreditation Association Policies for Assessment of Student Learning: Tools for Policymakers and Administrators," at http://www.stanford.edu/group/ncpi/unspecified/assessment_states/index.html.

POLICY DESIGN AND STRUCTURE

RECOMMENDATION	ILLUSTRATION FROM RESEARCH
Have a Clear and Focused Purpose. Having a precisely defined vision for the form assessment will take and the purposes it will serve assists the policy development process.	Policymakers and institutions will benefit from knowing the rationale for establishing a policy and its requirements, and will be more apt to work toward a process that has definite goals. Missouri is the best example of this as virtually all institutions possess the same understanding of the state's policy goals and priorities for higher education.
Limit Structures and Mechanisms. Trying to accomplish too much will yield a policy that achieves very little.	Directed change is a slow process and given the complexity of higher education at the institutional and state levels, the coordination required to produce effective policy will allow personnel to focus meaningfully on only a narrow set of goals and processes at any given time.
Policy Must Provide Data Useful to Institutional Decisionmakers.	A policy that provides data that are meaningful and useful to academic managers and faculty will find greater acceptance than one that demands information without regard as to how it improves internal institutional processes. Assessment must be incorporated into institutional management.
Differentiate By Sector and Mission. Given the diverse missions, student bodies, and structures of higher education institutions, it is unlikely for any one policy tool to accurately reflect the institutional differences that cause outcomes to vary in different contexts.	Applying standardized criteria, performance targets, or evaluation criteria to all institutions will be unfair to some institutions and overly generous to others. South Carolina officials have set unique performance targets for each institution based on prior performance. New York and Washington are also acknowledging institutional diversity by allowing institutions to determine their own methods for complying with state priorities and goals.

RECOMMENDATION	ILLUSTRATION FROM RESEARCH
EMPHASIZE INSTITUTIONAL IMPROVEMENT.	An assessment policy will benefit from having administrators and faculty to take ownership of the process. This is one way assessment can become incorporated into institutional management.
EMBRACE SIMPLER RATHER THAN COMPLEX INDICATORS AND REPORTING MECHANISMS. Policymakers are better off attempting to do more with less in terms of indicators and outcomes.	Having a system with 20, 30, or more indicators may become cumbersome and expensive to monitor, and it is hard for stakeholders to see that they lead to improvement. Institutions spend a great deal of time and energy complying with the requirements, and accomplish less. States are typically interested in measures of productivity and efficiency, and focusing on a few of these could lead to other efficiencies. South Carolina executives have decided to focus on fewer indicators and implement fewer reporting requirements. Missouri officials decided to scale their system down to 10 indicators because of the difficulty in managing the data, and Washington and Florida have started their systems with a small number of priorities on which to gather data.

POLICY PROCESS

CULTIVATE SUSTAINED COMMITMENT BY LEADERSHIP. Having leadership committed to the idea of developing and implementing a policy that accomplishes state objectives and serves institutions provides stability.	Sustained leadership keeps policy actors on task when the process becomes difficult or murky, and provides some stability over time as legislators, assessment directors, and government personnel change. Consistent leadership is also critical when revisiting the policy and its effectiveness. The Missouri Assessment Consortium provides an innovative and critical form of leadership as it facilitates communications between policy actors. The coordinating board has also been very proactive in promoting assessment. Washington's coordinating board has also been active as a mediator between the institutions and the legislature.
DEVELOP POLICY IN CONSULTATION WITH INSTITUTIONS. Focus policy on outcomes associated with the needs and processes of colleges and universities.	Consulting institutions affords them the opportunity to declare which data are most critical to their operations. The goal of assessment policies is the betterment of institutions and all of higher education; Emphasizing outcomes without attending to internal processes only serves to frustrate administrators and irritate academic managers.
HAVE STATEWIDE DISCUSSIONS ABOUT ASSESSMENT. The policy process can be as, if not more, important than its eventual results.	Bringing institutional representatives, policymakers, and business and civic leaders together to debate or determine the priorities for higher education and the purposes for assessment can be quite beneficial even if no policy evolves from the discussions. Policy actors emerge with a clearer understanding of the perspectives, realities, and needs of the others and leave with a better grasp of assessment policy.
MANAGE STAKEHOLDER INPUTS. While it is useful for policymakers to receive input from a variety of stakeholders, involvement in the formal policy development process should be limited.	Trying to involve too many individuals and groups may lead to an unfocused policy. Community colleges in Florida have seven different reporting requirements because seven distinct entities require them to submit data. These provisions were not all instituted at the same time but have accumulated as new requirements for data emerged, thus, there is duplication of effort in the policy. Missouri managed to incorporate input from different sectors across the state as policies options were considered, but became efficient about identifying who would be involved in making final decisions.

POLICY PROCESS

RECOMMENDATION	ILLUSTRATION FROM RESEARCH
PLAN TO OVERCOME RESISTANCE. Consider how to manage resistance so that all sides come to understand one another more clearly.	Keeping the lines of communication open among all policy actors can help them overcome uncertainty and difficult situations. Washington and South Carolina are two states in which trust and credibility eroded as performance funding system were developed. It has taken time and active participation from the coordinating boards in these states to work through difficulties so that the policies could be successfully implemented. Addressing institutional concerns was key to the process.
NEW POLICIES MAY NOT REPLACE OLD ONES. Implementing and maintaining a successful assessment policy becomes an ongoing process.	As new polices are added, old ones need to be evaluated. Revisiting policies periodically ensures that they are relevant to institutions and serving state needs. Adding new directives without revisiting old ones can lead to a policy of accretion, whereby overlapping and duplicative policies can be enacted, creating a burden on institutions.

MOVING FORWARD

As policymakers move forward, they will face challenges in several areas:

FUNDING
State policymakers have demonstrated significant interest in attaching appropriations to performance, but are experiencing many challenges in identifying an ideal approach. Policymakers are also signaling a possible trend of combining the K-12 and postsecondary sectors when making public policy decisions. Having a K-20 structure could mean greater difficulty for higher education in attracting funding. This trend of merging sectors was evident in New York and Florida.

SCOPE AND EFFECTIVENESS
There is a clear dissonance between state policymakers' expectations and institutional practices regarding student assessment. States have short-term needs and expectations about what is appropriate, and have established committees, task forces, and liaisons to coordinate assessment activities at institutions. However, in the long-term view, more cohesiveness between state leaders' goals for institutions and what is feasible and useful for institutions will be needed.

DATA
There are concerns that some of the data being generated is going unused for evaluation or improvement purposes. Failure to use data for improvement and decision making purposes renders assessment a public relations function and largely fails to provide significant qualitative enhancement to institutions, their management, or academic programs.

ENGAGEMENT AND COORDINATION
When institutions are proactive and engaged with political leaders assessment policies better reflect institutional needs. This study has shown that regional accreditation associations and state government agencies are not using similar processes and criteria when designing policies, and that the influence of the associations skips over states and goes directly to institutions. Also, there is evidence that the two entities do not communicate their preferences to one another and do not formally discuss assessment and accreditation processes to determine whether they could be combined.