State Policies for Assessing Student Outcomes: A Case Study with Implications for State and Institutional Authorities

Jeffery P. Aper, Dennis F. Hinkle

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Introduction

Since the late 1960s concerns have been articulated in various forums over the quality and public accountability of institutions of higher education. Journal articles, state and national commissions, educational organizations, and agencies, public as well as private, have asserted the need for colleges and universities to provide clear and broadly acceptable measures of what they do and how well they do it [3, 34, 62, 71, 83].

In the 1960s and 1970s accountability tended to be strongly influenced by efforts to systematize and measure the resources committed to institutions of higher education and subsequently to analyze quantitative indicators of productivity, such as ratios of income or expenditure per full-time equivalent student, program productivity (in numbers of graduates), or faculty workload and productivity [13, 50, 53, 82, 84, 85]. Accountability was closely identified with efficiency as a function of institutional productivity at a defined level of resource investment [9, 83, 95]. As described by Bowen, "the efficiency of the system is measured by comparing the outcomes with the resources employed . . . accountability is achieved when the outcomes, as well as the resources used are identified and measured" [8, p. 7].

In the 1980s such interests did not abate but shifted toward obtaining evidence of the quality and effectiveness of colleges and universities in educating students [35, 43, 49, 78]. Although institutional quality in

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higher education has long been associated with available resources and academic reputations, the 1980s witnessed rising interest in finding new measures of student development and outcomes that more directly relate to the educational mission of colleges and universities [4, 52].

Such concerns with quality seemed to rise in tandem with growing demands on public resources, creating an environment in which a sense of need for evidence of both budgetary efficiency and educational effectiveness became compelling to officials in many states [6, 56, 62, 77, 83, 84, 86, 91]. As a result, by early 1990 over forty of the states have adopted or plan to adopt policies of various kinds under the broad umbrella of assessment that are intended to enhance institutional accountability, provide impetus for the reform and improvement of educational practice, or both [5, 10, 11, 37].

The variance among states in terms of their approaches to student assessment reflects and highlights the variance in their political culture, socioeconomic circumstances, and traditional relationships with higher education. State assessment policies vary from those that have mandated statewide testing of students to those that have sought to encourage institutional reporting on a variety of indicators of effectiveness as part of a general review process [10, 14, 37].

Purpose and Data Sources

Just as assessment policies have varied widely from state to state, the responses to such policies have varied both within and among institutions of higher education. State and institutional responses to the assessment movement have also been shaped by regional and national organizations and events. Thus, assessment policies and processes must be evaluated as they fit into the overall context of public policy and higher education and the balance between institutional autonomy and responsiveness to public concerns for effectiveness and accountability.

Within this context, the purposes of this study were: (1) to trace the development of the state of Virginia's policy for assessment of student learning and eductional outcomes; (2) to determine the intentions and expectations of Virginia policy makers with regard to assessment policy; and (3) to explain the implications of the Virginia experience for other states in varying stages of assessment policy development and implementation.

Primary data for the study were gathered from: (1) document sources, including official State Council of Higher Education for Virignia (SCHEV) reports, legislative commission reports, and reports and manuals of executive agencies; and (2) interviews with public officials, includ-
Assessing Student Outcomes

The Origins of Assessment Policy in Virginia

A critical factor that colored Virginia's approach to student outcomes assessment was the almost parental pride taken by many state officials, and legislators in particular, in Virginia's institutions of higher education. The institutions were seen as constituting a diverse and generally healthy system with a positive and growing national reputation. They were also valued highly for their contributions to economic development in the state [12, 54, 68, 94].

Although Virginia higher education has historically been characterized by strong and autonomous institutions and a relatively weak coordinating board, expectations within the legislative and executive branches since the early 1970s were high for the State Council of Higher Education (Virginia's coordinating agency for higher education) to provide broad policy guidance [45, 69]. Thus, the Council sought to be clearer in formulating a policy agenda for Virginia higher education and more assertive in promoting this agenda with the legislature and particularly with the institutions themselves [24, 70]. In supporting assessment policy, the state legislature placed primary responsibility on SCHEV to develop and oversee the process statewide [20, 21].

While Virginia officials have long expressed support for institutional diversity and autonomy, there was also a history of state efforts to carry out more searching reviews of institutions. From its inception, the State Council had declared the need for attention to institutional effectiveness [80, 81, 83, 84, 86]. Over the years, legislative budgetary processes have included informal comparisons of colleges and universities as well as part empirical and part intuitive assessments of institutional quality [7, 29, 57]. More specific programs in the 1970s and 1980s that were initiated and ultimately abandoned included: a comprehensive institutional data reporting system [1, 32, 60, 76]; a program budgeting system that would have included comprehensive evaluation as part of the budgetary process for institutions [22, 32, 41, 60, 75]; and statewide higher education program reviews [26, 70]. Each of these efforts for more information about the process and products of higher education were, however,

This study coincided with the research of Ewell and Boyer [38], which investigated assessment policy in Colorado, South Dakota, Missouri, and New Jersey, as well as Virginia.
ultimately affected by traditions of institutional autonomy and confidence in the overall quality of most of the state's colleges and universities.

Thus, the genesis of assessment in Virginia did not occur as a sudden reversal or aberration in state policy. Nor were institutions completely unprepared to address the issues raised by a formal assessment policy. James Madison University had begun its own assessment program as early as 1984, and other institutions were involved in ongoing efforts at review and evaluation that fit under the broad umbrella of assessment [17, 48, 65, 93].

The emergence of assessment as an identifiable national movement in the mid-1980s provided SCHEV with a mechanism through which to press institutions to address a key item on its policy agenda — review and reform of the undergraduate curriculum [26, 70, 87]. Although there was only moderate interest in assessment in the state legislature and somewhat more interest in the Governor's office after Gerald Baliles assumed that post in 1986, it was enough to give SCHEV the opportunity and support to negotiate an institution-centered policy that evolved from 1985 to 1989 through a series of legislative actions [18, 19, 20, 21].

The news of a formal mandate for institutions to plan and conduct assessment activities fueled various "theories" about the "real" state agenda. Most obviously, assessment seemed a state response to a national movement that sought a greater degree of accountability to public officials on the part of higher education. But there was speculation that assessment developed as part of a plan by an entrepreneurial institutional president and the director of SCHEV in a "quid pro quo" arrangement to enhance the institution's status and competitive position in seeking state resources. Simultaneously, this arrangement would potentially increase SCHEV's influence vis-à-vis the institutions of higher education. There was also speculation that assessment was adopted to provide output measures as part of the application of a general state evaluation model [92], which would produce data to answer questions regarding institutional efficiency and effectiveness. Finally, some believed assessment was adopted in order to obtain "damning" information on some of the state's weaker institutions in order to justify decisions to close or reduce support for one or more of them. Speaking strictly on condition of anonymity, some policy makers' staff members, and a former executive agency officer thought this the

The research showed that whereas the first two "theories" about the state's assessment policy (that assessment grew out of a national movement and was influenced by the merging of institutional and state agendas for reform) were warranted, the latter two (that assessment was to
become a quantitative input/output evaluation mechanism or provide justification for closing weak institutions) did not appear to be. Assessment in Virginia did emerge primarily as a combined result of the national movement and SCHEV's interest in promoting a reform agenda. The situation was clearly influenced by the efforts of a regional institution to use assessment as a vehicle to support requests for additional resources for curricular review, faculty development, and refinement of the image and substance of the university. This institutional agenda dovetailed with the state agenda outlined by SCHEV and did help set the stage for the development of statewide guidelines for institutional efforts.

When initial plans for Virginia's assessment policy were being made in 1985, the primary models for state assessment policy were those of Florida and Tennessee, both emphasizing the use of standardized testing to measure student learning. From the beginning, Virginia's approach to assessment differed markedly from such an emphasis on standardized measures [19, 47].

Assessment Expectations of State Officials

Interviews revealed that although the faith of most Virginia state officials in higher education was not blind, it was certainly guided by limited criteria for judging the efforts and outputs of colleges and universities. Their expectations were aptly summarized by SCHEV director Gordon Davies, who asserted that what policy makers wanted to know was that institutions were "examining their assumptions and their results. They do not want to establish the criteria for accountability. They want to know that institutions are behaving responsibly. . . . I believe that the institution, in order to warrant this grant of responsibility, should be willing to assure the public that it maintains a thoughtful and questioning stance toward its own standards" [26].

Though legislators did not indicate interest in specific data or issues of accountability, they were interested in institutional efforts to support the generally held belief that higher education is a good investment and produces a good "product" [7, 60, 68, 70]. Further borrowing from the lexicon of the marketplace, both legislative and SCHEV staff referred to assessment as providing important "consumer information" to prospective students and their parents. Executive officials similarly held that assessment did not expand because of suspicion that something was wrong in higher education, but rather that Governor Gerald Baliles and key legislators saw assessment as a means by which to maintain the quality of higher education in Virginia. The prevailing attitude within the executive
branch was described by former Secretary of Education Donald Finley, who argued that "the results [of assessment] are going to be more long term and better if we try to build a mechanism that allows the faculty and students to do it themselves, under a very decentralized model, and trust them to carry forth. . . . [T]hat . . . will be much more productive than trying to drive something home . . . out of Richmond" [41].

The Virginia Mandate and Regional/National Standards

Virginia's assessment policy was developed and implemented in the years immediately following the 1984 adoption of new standards for institutional effectiveness by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the southeast's regional accrediting body. The activities of SACS and other regional accrediting bodies were given further impetus by pressure from former Secretary of Education William Bennett. Beyond Bennett's rhetorical challenges to colleges and universities to be more self-critical and attentive to undergraduate education, the Department of Education in 1988 sought to issue regulations pertaining to criteria and procedures for the secretary's recognition of postsecondary accrediting agencies. These regulations would have placed strong emphasis on assessment as a component of review of the educational effectiveness of institutions of higher education [40].

SACS was the first of the regional accrediting associations to adopt standards explicitly calling for evaluation of conditions beyond such traditional accreditation criteria as faculty and student quality, physical plant, and institutional resources, to include "the evaluation of the results of education and plans for the improvement of the institution's programs" [2; 77, p. 6]. Although particular approaches to addressing effectiveness issues were not specified by SACS, the agency did recommend that institutional processes for planning and evaluation "should include":

1. broad-based involvement of faculty and administration;
2. the establishment of a clearly defined purpose appropriate to collegiate education;
3. the formulation of educational goals consistent with the institution's purpose;
4. the development of procedures for evaluating the extent to which these education goals are being achieved;
5. the use of the results of these evaluations to improve institutional effectiveness [77, p. 9].
SCHEV staff members were well aware of the SACS criteria for institutional effectiveness when they were laying the groundwork for assessment in 1985 and 1986. They intended that institutional assessment activities would also satisfy SACS’ new and more explicit criteria for effectiveness [25, 28]. In addition to its influence on policy in states under its jurisdiction, SACS played a leading role among the regional and professional accrediting associations in the assessment movement, as its sister organizations followed suit [2, 44].

At the national level, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) in 1988 responded to the continued expansion of state assessment efforts by promulgating seven guiding principles regarding assessment practices in the states. These principles followed the institution-centered philosophy of assessment policy in advocating recognition of institutional autonomy and development of standards and practices by institutions themselves. Specifically, they urged that assessment policies should be:

1. focused on the effectiveness of academic programs and the improvement of student learning and performance;
2. promoted by incentives rather than regulations or penalties;
3. developed in collaboration with the faculty;
4. appropriate to institutional missions and goals and consistent with state-wide objectives and standards;
5. carried out with multiple methods of measurement;
6. fiscally conservative, and avoid imposing costly evaluation programs on institutions or agencies;
7. linked to comprehensive strategies for planning or program review that encourage change and improvement [61].

There was considerable overlap in the principles outlined by SACS and NASULGC. Both emphasized the importance of faculty involvement in the development of assessment plans for institutions and suggested the importance of establishing clear purposes for assessment efforts consistent with institutional mission and systemwide standards.

Whereas SACS statement number 4 referred only to the need to develop procedures for the evaluation of institutional goal achievement, NASULGC statement 1 was more specific in suggesting that assessment should focus on academic program effectiveness and improvement of teaching and learning. From the point of view of many state policy makers in Virginia and across the country, all were key reasons for doing assessment [35]. Additionally, the NASULGC principles emphasized the use of multiple methods of assessment, which has been encouraged by
state agencies [19, 63, 89], accreditation guidelines [66, 77], and institution-based researchers [33, 90].

Both SACS and NASULGC highlighted the connection of assessment activities, institutional planning, and program review and improvement. In Virginia, SCHEV and other state officials repeatedly asserted that a primary purpose of assessment was to provide internal feedback on the effectiveness of the institution for the purpose of program improvement [26, 41, 51, 58].

The NASULGC principles also described the ways in which assessment should be promoted by states. Virginia followed a "carrot and stick" approach, providing for budgetary penalties and incentives to stimulate institutional action on assessment, but has been far from the performance funding mechanism of Tennessee or the budgetary penalties established by Colorado. However, in 1987 Virginia governor Gerald Baliles made institutional eligibility for initiative funding programs contingent upon the preparation of SCHEV-approved assessment plans, clearly a penalty of some potency for noncompliance with the state mandate [39, 46]. Since then, the state has sought to support assessment by attaching incentives to the process, including assurances of substantial funding for strong and well-planned assessment programs, incentive monies targeted at assessment-related proposals, and repeated assertions that assessment would help provide a more substantive basis from which to request increases in state support for campus educational priorities [26, 58, 96].

Finally the NASULGC principles called for fiscal restraint in the development of assessment programs. Beyond the obvious costs of assessment for instruments, planning, and administration are opportunity costs — the time and other resources spent on assessment that are necessarily taken away from investment in other activities [90]. But in Virginia state officials were not hesitant to provide additional funding for institutional assessment efforts and in 1988 found the state's costs for assessment minimal at $4.5 million [73].

Whether more expensive evaluation programs will follow in the wake of assessment remains to be seen. In Virginia, SCHEV officials have indicated that institutions will at some point be expected to develop further evaluation processes (of graduate education, for example). Historically, however, Virginia has shown some reluctance to place costly or complex reporting burdens on institutions [1, 41], and other states have been criticized for constructing complex reporting systems for colleges and universities [16, 64]. Furthermore, the massive budget shortfalls experienced
in Virginia since late 1989 suggest that additional funding in support of assessment activities is unlikely, a blow to those institutions (particularly community colleges) that did not receive significant funding in the previous biennium, because established expectations for assessment probably will not decrease concomitant with available resources to do it. Many states have shown some reluctance to invest a great deal of money in activities that many public officials believe institutions should have been doing all along as a matter of course [36, 90].

The principles for assessment policy and process established by SACS and NASULGC provide a context within which both state and university officials can review the quality of such efforts in their own states. As the 1990s dawn, judging from the activities of other states and the framework established by national and regional organizations, the Virginia model for assessment policy is in many ways typical of state mandates of the late 1980s that sought more in terms of evidence of institutional commitment to self-review and responsiveness to state needs and less in terms of concrete, quantitative evidence of achievement of certain specified goals [35].

However, strong emphasis on institution-centered assessment policy and practice has not eliminated expectations of evidence that institutions are indeed committed to substantive processes of self-evaluation and improvement. These expectations emphasize demonstrations of good-faith review of both student outcomes and the processes by which those outcomes are fostered by the institution. The communication of careful attention to quality in both “product” (students) and “process” (the ways in which the institution achieves the stated goals of its mission) is emphasized to a greater extent than is the provision of concrete, empirical data substantiating the achievement of specified products or outputs. The focus on assessment as a critically important process, coupled with very general and limited reporting requirements, suggests an essentially symbolic form of accountability to state authorities.

Although the path followed by Virginia has by no means been without barriers and even recrimination between some institutions and SCHEV, it has been characterized by few overt schisms in the system and has been generally accepted as “better than most states” even by highly skeptical faculty and administrators within the institutions [59, 74]. This “institution-centered” approach has been applauded by leaders in higher education but places great demands on institutions to take the issue seriously enough to justify the flexibility granted them by state officials.
Implications and Conclusions

The Virginia case study is instructive in that it provides insight into the emergence and initial development of an assessment policy that characterizes the expectations of officials in the majority of states that now call for assessment [36]. While the specifics of institutional responses are subject to the interaction of unique qualities and needs of institutions and states, broader suggestions for the emergent and as yet incompletely realized development of assessment as policy and practice are offered.

The long-term political consequences of assessment are proportional to the degree to which the process is adopted and adapted into the traditional relationship between the state government and institutions of higher education. This is predicated on a variety of factors, including the criteria by which institutions and programs are judged, the credibility of the process with constituencies at the state and institutional levels, and costs of the required activities [79]. In each state there is a partly implicit, partly explicit "social contract" between the state and higher education. It is within this often turbulent environment that the political implications of assessment ultimately will be articulated and resolved.

Virginia again provides a case in point. The overt confidence of Virginia policy makers in the state's public colleges and universities provided institutions with opportunities to shape assessment as a tool for the improvement of environments both within and beyond their campuses. Yet poor communication between institutions and SCHEV was an ongoing impediment to constructive interaction between state and university officials [26, 27, 39, 46, 58]. Institutional officials, initially troubled at the prospect of prescriptive policy, found themselves discomfited by very general and relatively vague requirements and expectations. While the lack of clarity of state expectations seemed to give institutions a great deal of flexibility in designing their responses to assessment requirements, the same situation left it quite unclear, beyond the personal assurances of propriety of SCHEV officials, how or under what circumstances assessment data might be used.

Most states have not been very clear in specifying how assessment information is to be generated or used [35]. Although the potential uses and benefits of assessment programs have been discussed widely, the expectations behind many state policies which purport to emphasize assessment as a tool for improvement have not been adequately communicated to institutions. This lack of clarity has placed institutions in a rather ironic dilemma in developing response strategies. While such vagueness could be interpreted to mean that institutions have been given
the opportunity to “customize” assessment policy to local needs and priorities, the absence of explicit criteria makes it difficult for institutions to know how their assessment programs will be judged and how resulting data will or might be used.

Because institutions have been uncertain of the ways in which assessment data might be used by state officials, many have avoided the collection of data that might be potentially damaging politically. There has been a sense of need for institutional self-justification because assessment mandates seem to imply that something is wrong with the institution and needs to be corrected. If assessment is to become an effective tool for improvement, data thus generated must not be used to support negative decisions or mixed with faculty evaluation procedures [67, 72], because such applications build in powerful disincentives to be candid in examining programs and outcomes.

In situations where elected and institutional officials are engaged in adversarial interactions, assessment is at worst seen as a threat to the appropriate autonomy of colleges and universities and at best limited in its potential benefits because of misgivings on both sides about the activities and intentions of the other [46, 55]. Virginia provided a most telling case in this regard. Assessment fomented substantial discord both within one of the major state universities and between that institution and the State Council. A prolonged period of sometimes acrimonious exchanges was relieved only by a summary change in the personnel responsible for preparing the university’s response to the assessment mandate, the university president’s public support for and clarification of the purposes of assessment, and repeated personal assurances from SCHEV staff to university faculty that the purpose of assessment was institutional self-review and improvement. Clear communication can help avoid such impasses, but the value of assessment as a vehicle for better communication of state expectations and needs as well as institutional activities and priorities has been realized in few cases.

Assessment does potentially provide institutions with regular opportunities to communicate their dedication to publicly approved ideals of teaching, learning, and scholarship as cornerstones of public higher education. Thus, activities undertaken under the banner of assessment can be opportunities to “provide a common language from which to reaffirm and solidify ties with outsiders through symbol management, consistent articulation of common vision, and interpretation of diverse actions in terms of common themes” [23, p. 3]. The role of symbols in political exchanges and policy making is a powerful one, and recognition of the important political symbolism associated with assessment in no
way suggests that the activities involved are somehow frivolous or insubstantial, although, ironically, this symbolic function is probably most effective when it is not acknowledged [30, 31, 42].

Political leaders in many states have embraced assessment as a means of asking colleges and universities to demonstrate concretely the value of what they do and to use what they find to improve their practice. This information is in turn expected to help policy makers evaluate and justify large public expenditures on higher education. Unfortunately, some of the most valuable outcomes of an education are not easily measured, and to focus exclusively on what is most easily measured will obviously distort educational values and undercut the integrity of the curriculum — quite the opposite of what many supporters of assessment have claimed is needed for the improvement of higher education.

Be that as it may, assessment challenges higher education to find ways to make clear that the most obvious benefits assumed to result from postsecondary study do indeed accrue to students. If institutions adopt stances toward assessment that reduce it to a process of administrative reporting, opportunities to maintain institutional discretion in the process may be undermined. Poorly planned and executed strategies for assessment that aim at a minimum level of acceptable reporting may result in impacts undesired by institutions and at least initially unintended by state policy makers, potentially making institutional fears of standardization and escalating state intervention a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, while institutions must be responsive to social needs and concerns, they are also responsible for maintaining control over the "academic core" of the academy. This core has been defined as including what is taught and researched, who teaches and conducts research, how research is conducted and its results communicated, who is admitted to study, what academic standards are maintained, as well as how academic performance is assessed [6, 15, 64, 88].

Assessment may mark the beginning of an era of genuine partnership between public authorities and institutions of higher education, but only if institutions and state policy makers creatively address their responsibilities to society at large as well as to the core values of an independent and vigorous system of higher education [64, 91]. Although assessment is by definition a descriptive process, the issues raised by state assessment policies are normative, and as such touch on fundamental beliefs and expectations of the public and its representatives in government and of those within colleges and universities as to the nature and responsibilities of higher education in American society. Assessment, then, highlights the necessity for elected and institutional officials to find a common language through which to express and make manifest that vision.
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