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Assessment in higher education: A case study on assessment of student learning in three states

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ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY
ON ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING
IN THREE STATES

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Educational Leadership
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education**

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ABSTRACT

ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY ON ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IN THREE STATES

by

Hyla Winters

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This study examined how state participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project changed higher education system policy and institutional practices on assessment of student learning. The purpose of this study examined state higher education implementation practices for assessing student learning outcomes in selected land grant and community colleges before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

The results of this study are limited to the states of Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. To determine the implementation of state assessment policy at the institutional level, this study's theoretical framework was implementation theory. The research questions which guided this research were:

1. What was the state higher education system's policy for assessing student learning before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

2. What practices of assessing student learning have been implemented at the institutional level following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
3. What are the similarities and/or differences in assessing student learning across the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

While the efficacy of establishing national benchmarks was not determined through this project, some of the outcomes of this include the identification of similar regional accreditation association standards on assessment. All institutions within each state were able to articulate a compliance with state policy requirements for assessment. Also similar, was the consensus among all community colleges that *Work Keys*© was not an appropriate assessment instrument for two year students. The states of Oklahoma and Kentucky identified the adoption of the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* to assess general education at the four year institutions. Oklahoma and Nevada offered financial incentives to faculty to conduct assessment, and only Oklahoma authorized institutions to assess student fees to support assessment activities. Officials in the states of Oklahoma and Kentucky indicated that participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project had resulted in a state wide effort to standardize assessment among all institutions within the state.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

One of the issues in higher education that is debated throughout the United States is whether students are learning. A college degree represents the collective efforts of many faculty, students, peers and staff. Colleges and universities make claims about this experience, and society regards this degree as a significant credential. Students, parents, trustees, politicians, and society at large have a right to expect that outcomes of higher education will be what are claimed and that there will be evidence of student learning.

This study examined the effects on higher education assessment policy and practice based on experiences learned from a project sponsored by the National Forum on College-Level Learning. The purpose of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, conducted in 2003 and 2004, was to determine the efficacy of national benchmarks to measure student learning. The participants in the project were the systems of higher education in South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nevada. Each state's two and four year colleges were represented in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

Background of Study

In 1989, President George H. W. Bush convened a panel of the fifty state governors to set education goals for the United States. Goal 6 applied to institutions of higher

education and stated “by the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (National Education Goals Panel, 1999, p. vi). Some of the objectives for Goal 6 included increasing the proportion of college graduates who demonstrate the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems. As a nation, the issue was what technique or instrument provided a benchmark measure on the assessment of student learning?

The impetus for states to establish processes to assess the outcomes of student learning started in the early 1990s. At that time, there was a national outcry for educational reform. The National Governor’s Association published a report on education. In the preface of the report, Task Force Chairman, John Ashcroft, then Governor of Missouri, defended state intervention into assessment by stating,

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. (cited in Nettles, Cole, & Sharp, 1997, p.11)

If higher education is to document whether National Education Goal 6 has been achieved, assessment is the key to providing the answer. The process of assessment provides a validation of student outcomes of learning. Assessment leads to process improvement which ultimately effects change in the institution. Allen (2004) asserts that “assessment, properly executed, is an ongoing activity, not one that emerges every ten years, and it is an intrinsic component of effective student development” (p. 20).

Palomba & Banta (1999) claim: “Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (p. 4). Volkwein (2003) is more specific: “Student outcomes assessment is the act of assembling and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative teaching and learning outcomes evidence in order to examine their congruence with an institution’s stated purposes and educational objectives” (p.4).

Assessing Higher Education

In an effort to provide some national benchmarks with which to assess state higher education systems, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2000) published *Measuring Up 2000*. The purpose of this publication was to provide consumers and stakeholders of higher education with information about the condition of higher education in each of the fifty states. The Center used publicly available data collected by federal agencies to provide a state by state comparison on selected performance categories. The performance categories which were selected by the Center for states to be graded were:

- Preparation – numbers of 18-24 year olds with a high school credential.
- Participation – numbers of high school graduates enrolling in college.
- Affordability – percent of income needed to pay for college expenses minus financial aid.
- Completion – number of students completing a bachelor’s degree within 5 years of high school.

- Benefits – value of an advanced degree (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000, Information Gap Section, ¶ 5).

Measuring Up 2000 established 30 quantitative indicators determined to be important in assessing the performance categories, which were collected regularly by public sources, were comparable across the 50 states, and were a measure of performance. The 30 quantitative indicators were then assigned a mathematical weight based on importance to the performance category, as defined by research and experience. State results on each indicator were converted to a scale of 0 – 100 using the top five states as the benchmark of performance. State scores for each performance category were then calculated from the state's index score and the indicators' weight. The sum of all the index scores on the quantitative indicators times the weights of the indicators became the raw performance category score for the state. The raw category scores were then converted to a scale of 0-100. Grades were assigned based on the performance category index scores using the grading scale (see Table 1). This same national ranking was again calculated and published in *Measuring Up 2002 and 2004*.

While the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education was involved in collecting and reporting this national benchmark data, there was an inability to report on the learning that was occurring in higher education. Margaret Miller (2002) stated “the information that states gather about collegiate learning is specific to each state; it cannot be used to compare performance relative to other states” (p. 70). Because of a void described by Ewell (2002) as the lack of national benchmarks for assessing student learning outcomes, *Measuring Up 2002* assigned a grade of incomplete to all states for the inability to assess student learning outcomes.

Table 1

Grading Scale

Grades	Percentage Points
A	93 and above
A-	90 – 92
B+	87 – 89
B	83 – 86
B-	80 – 82
C+	77 – 79
C	73 – 76
C-	70 – 72
D+	67 – 69
D	63 – 66
D-	60 – 62
F	Below 60

Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000, Grading Section, ¶ 1.

Ewell (2002) encouraged states to develop mechanisms to assess the educational level of residents (i.e., educational capital). Data on educational capital provided the support for continued investment in higher education in similar ways that national rankings in mathematics and science rally support to address deficiencies in these disciplines.

During the late 1990's and into the early 2000's, accreditation was the primary means by which colleges and universities assured students and the public that quality education

was being delivered (Eaton, 2000). In addition to assuring quality education, accreditation also served to render eligibility for federal funds, facilitate ease of student transfer among institutions, and engender public confidence in the higher educational institutions, particularly among employers of the institution's graduates (Eaton, 2000). The accreditation process required colleges and universities to conduct a self assessment to determine if and how well their institutional mission was being achieved. Since student learning is a principle mission of higher education, the process by which an educational institution assessed student learning was central to the accreditation process.

Regional accreditation associations publish standards establishing a minimal level of performance expectation for educational institutions. In preparation for an accreditation visit, institutions must conduct a self-study to assess their compliance with these standards. At least once every ten years, institutions are visited by a team of external reviewers who validate compliance with the standards. The accreditation process compels institutions to accurately assess and document their level of actual performance as compared to the expected level of performance. Assessment and measurement of student learning outcomes is a major focus of the accreditation process.

National Forum on College-Level Learning

After the release of *Measuring Up 2000*, an invitational forum of public policy, business and education leaders was convened by James B. Hunt, Jr., governor of North Carolina. The purpose of the forum was to advise the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education on the next steps to address the issue of student learning at the state level. The forum recommended that the National Center collect state by state comparative

information on student learning. The forum urged the National Center to develop a “demonstration project” to determine whether or not it was feasible to collect information on learning that would be helpful to state policy leaders (Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. iv).

In November 2001, the Pew Charitable Trust sponsored a National Forum on College-Level Learning to discuss the value of creating an infrastructure for assessing college student learning outcomes on a national basis. Dr. Margaret Miller, Professor of Education at the University of Virginia and President Emeritus of the American Association for Higher Education, convened a group of business, higher education, and state government officials to discuss methods of assessing learning outcomes. The National Forum on College-Level Learning identified two questions that needed to be answered by state policy makers:

1. What do the state’s residents know and what can the residents do that contributes to the social good?
2. How well do the state’s public and private colleges collectively contribute to that educational capital (Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. 3)?

With funding from Pew Charitable Trust, the National Forum on College-Level Learning created a project model to assess student learning. The key components of the model included:

1. Information from existing licensure and graduate admission tests (i.e. GRE and MCAT).
2. Results from the National Adult Literacy Survey.

3. Results of standardized tests of general intellectual skills administered to representative populations of students on the campuses of two and four year colleges and universities (Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. 4).

Five states (Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) agreed to participate in the project to test this model for gathering data to assess student learning in order to benchmark on a national level.

Between 2002 and 2004, the project team collected each state's data on the National Adult Literacy Survey and existing licensure tests. The state systems of higher education administered general intellectual skills tests to random samples of students at representative samples of public and private institutions within their states. The four-year institutions attempted (unsuccessfully) to collect information from graduates about their perceptions of their own intellectual skills (Miller & Ewell, 2005).

As a result of the five states' participation in this national project, each state received a grade of pass on college-level learning in *Measuring Up 2004*. The National Forum on College-Level Learning project intended to demonstrate that state policy makers could determine the value of their investment in higher education for their respective states. Since higher education consumes vast financial resources from the federal government, state legislatures, families, and students, the net effect of this project, sponsored by the National Forum on College-Level Learning, allowed state policy makers to compare outcomes of college level learning across state lines.

Purpose of the Study

In 2003 and 2004, the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was conducted to determine the efficacy of national benchmarks to measure student learning in state higher education systems. The participants in the project were the systems of higher education in South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nevada.

This study examined how state participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project changed system policy and institutional practices on assessment of student learning. The purpose of this study was to examine state higher education implementation practices for assessing student learning outcomes in selected land grant and community colleges before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

Research Questions

This study focused on policy change and implementation practices for assessing student learning based on the results from the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, therefore the research questions which guided this study were:

1. What was the state higher education system's policy for assessing student learning before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
2. What practices of assessing student learning have been implemented at the institutional level following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

3. What are the similarities and/or differences in assessing student learning across the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

Theoretical Framework

The research questions are linked to an analysis of state higher education policy and practice before and after participation in the national project. Therefore, implementation theory became the theoretical framework for this study. Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) state that implementation means “to carry out, accomplish, fulfill, produce, complete. Implementation implies that action has begun. Once a policy is initiated, implementation commences and the policy can then be evaluated” (p. xiii).

Implementation theory asks the question does policy shape implementation, or does implementation shape policy? Implementation is the process by which the policy is carried out. Implementation and policy operate on a continuum and are intertwined throughout the lifespan of the policy (Majone & Wildavsky, 1984).

Majone and Wildavsky (1984) offer two viewpoints on implementation. The top down approach views implementation as establishing control. Policy makers formulate policy that includes clearly stated goals, plans to achieve those goals, tight control, incentives and indoctrinations. This viewpoint supposes there is one way to implement policy and ultimately a beginning and end to the policy. Policy is dictated from the policy makers with little room for local adaptability.

Majone and Wildavsky (1984) also offer the option of looking at implementation as an interaction. This model provides a continuum of policy, implementation, assessment, and revision or affirmation of the original policy. This viewpoint of implementation

supports the notion that policy analysis is continual. Majone and Wildavsky (1984) state that

...it is more important to observe that keeping things going rather than getting things started is the ordinary condition of administration. We do not always decide what to do and succeed or fail at it: rather, we observe what we have done and try to make it consistent in retrospect. (p. 146)

Consequently, implementation theory is evolutionary. Evaluating the implementation of a policy allows us to learn from experience and to correct errors. Implementation helps to reformulate as well as validate original policy. Majone and Wildavsky (1984) provide a skeletal flow diagram of variables involved in the implementation process: tractability of the problem → ability of the policy to structure implementation → nonstatutory variables impacting implementation → stages in the implementation process (see Figure 1). Given the research questions, this researcher offered elements of each variable that could impact the implementation of assessment policy.

Tractability of the Problem

1. State policy on requirements to assess student learning
2. State policy on requirement to benchmark student learning
3. Clear objectives in the policy to assess student learning

Ability of the policy to structure implementation

1. Resources are provided to conduct assessment activities
2. Statewide agreement on what to assess
3. Common assessment instruments
4. Incentives are offered if performance exceeds benchmarks

5. Technological support to higher education to assess student learning

Nonstatutory variables impacting implementation

1. Media attention
2. Public support
3. Faculty buy-in at the institution
4. Commitment and leadership skill from implementing officials

Stages in the implementation process

1. State policy on assessment of student learning is developed
2. Documented evidence of compliance with state policy on assessment
3. Participation in national pilot project to benchmark student learning
4. Revision in state policy on assessment of student learning
5. New initiatives instituted as a result of performance in the national project

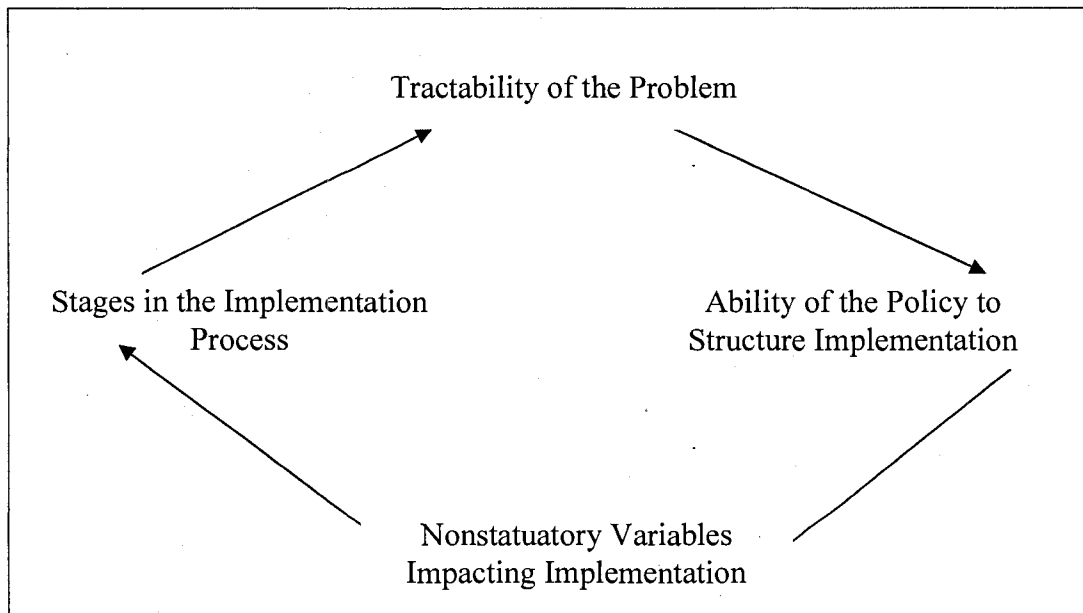


Figure 1. Conceptual framework diagram (Majone & Wildavsky, 1984).

The purpose for this study was to examine state policy on assessment of student learning before and after participation in the National Center on College-Level Learning project and given the elements of each variable just listed (see p. 11 & 12), the researcher believed that implementation theory was appropriate. The results of this study provided the verification that state policy on assessment was implemented at the institutional level. It also provided the opportunity for state policymakers to affirm or revise current assessment policy based on the state's performance as demonstrated by the National Center on College Level Learning. The researcher determined that each of the five participating states had existing policies on the assessment of student learning in higher education. If each of the states' policies has been effectively implemented, then the performance by each state in the national project should provide insight to state policy makers on the need to affirm or reassess existing policy. The practice of assessing student learning should also be evident at the institutional level within each state system of higher education. Implementation theory requires that policies be continually evaluated and this national student learning project allows such action to occur.

Significance of this Study

Palomba & Banta (1999) define assessment as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development" (p. 4). Learning outcomes describe the knowledge, skills, and values expected of the learner at any moment during the educational process. Allen (2004) asserts that assessment results of student learning can be benchmarked and thus compared to an empirically developed standard. The National Forum on College-

Level Learning project attempted to establish a national standard by which states can compare results of learning. Callan and Finney (2002) describe five reasons to focus on college level learning:

1. Heading off a crisis – Higher education cannot wait for national accountability standards to be instituted similar to the ones that occurred in the K-12 system.
2. Effective citizenship – The American electorate needs to be educated to make informed decisions about issues of stem cell research, technology, health care, and a myriad of other complex issues.
3. Personal opportunity and responsibility – A college education is becoming the entry level requirement for middle class.
4. Rewarding employment – As the American economy moves from production line to technology driven, the job skill requirement of the worker requires a measure of higher education.
5. Equity – Direct assessment of knowledge and skills among advantaged and disadvantaged groups will provide a picture of equity that is more relevant and use for policy decisions than college enrollment and completion. (p. 5-7)

As state policy makers and higher education administrators face the continuing call for accountability on student outcomes, this study of the states involved in the pilot study provided some evidence of best practices for the assessment of student learning. As society demands accountability, higher education must look for effective methods of providing the assurance that higher education is working. The No Child Left Behind federal legislation has brought accountability measures to the K-12 system of education.

Perhaps higher education will find a suitable measure of accountability before succumbing to federal mandates.

Definition of Terms

As used in this study, terms are defined as follows. Accreditation is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and higher education programs for quality assurance and quality improvement (Eaton, 2000, p. 3). Regional accreditation is a grouping of states into one private, non-profit organization designed for the purpose of conducting and granting accreditation to institutions located in those states (Ibid, p. 3). Refer to Appendix III for a comprehensive listing of the regional accreditation associations. Learning is the extent to which students' skills and abilities are improved as a result of states' policies for education beyond high school (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002, p. 20). Student learning outcomes focus on the identification of the expectations that students must demonstrate upon completion of a college degree/certificate or sequence of courses. Student learning outcomes focus on knowledge, skills and values (Allen, 2004, p. 28). Student learning outcomes answer the questions "what should students know; what should students be able to do; what should students value" (Allen, p. 28). Assessment of student learning is the collection of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4).

Limitations

This study sought to identify policy changes and institutional practices in assessment of student learning that have occurred in the five states who participated in the National Forum on College-Level Learning pilot project using standardized testing to assess collegiate student learning. This study did not offer an opinion on the validity of using standardized tests to assess student learning but rather, sought to identify the impact of the state's performance in this pilot project to the state's policy on assessment of student learning. Simply stated, based on the state's performance, was there a shift in the policy and practice for assessing student learning?

Summary

Since the conclusion of the National Center for College-Level Learning project, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), a nonprofit institution with a mission to advance quality and equity in education, authored a paper recommending to policymakers that a national initiative to collect data on evidence of student learning was needed. Dwyer, Millett, & Payne (2006) assert "as with other dimensions of student learning, it is essential to have a system of assessment that allows comparisons across various benchmark groups, including national, state, regional and peer groups" (p. 14).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

One of the issues in higher education that is debated throughout the United States is whether students are learning. A college degree represents the collective efforts of many faculty, students, peers and staff. Colleges and universities make claims about this experience, and society regards this degree as a significant credential. Students, parents, trustees, politicians, and society at large have a right to expect that the outcomes will be what are claimed and that there will be evidence of student learning.

Peter Ewell asserts higher education consumes vast financial resources from the federal government, state legislatures, families, and students (cited in Nettles & Cole, 2001, p. 199). Students enroll in colleges and universities seeking an education to prepare them for entry-level careers. Colleges and universities struggle with the challenge of determining whether students are learning and are able to function in the workplace based on the knowledge and skills acquired during the educational process. Mel Levine, writing in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2005, states “The most common learning disorder among undergraduates is incomplete comprehension” (p.11). Levine observes that today’s college students have difficulty understanding concepts, terminology, issues, and procedures.

Genesis of Assessment Policy

The involvement of states in assessment activities in higher education started in the mid 1980's. During this historical time, there was a national call for educational reform. The federal government had become a major provider of financial aid to students during the post World War II expansion into higher education. Likewise, state governments were becoming investors in higher education and investing larger percentages of state budgets in higher education. Peter Ewell, a prolific national authority on assessment, authored a paper in 1985 in which he stated "state governments should get involved in the assessment of undergraduate education because of states' significant financial investments in higher education and because successful higher education systems could contribute to other state policy objectives" (cited in Nettles & Cole, 2001, p. 199).

On a national level, the focus was beginning to move away from expansion to examine quality. In 1989, President George H. W. Bush convened a panel of the fifty state governors to set education goals for the United States. Education goal 6 applied to institutions of higher education and asserted that by the year 2000, "every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship" (National Education Goals Panel, 1999, p. vi). Some of the objectives for goal 6 included increasing the proportion of college graduates who demonstrate the ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems.

The impetus for states to establish processes to assess the outcomes of student learning started in the early 1990s when the National Governor's Association published a

report on education. In the preface of the report, Task Force Chairman, John Ashcroft, then Governor of Missouri, defended state intervention into assessment by stating:

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. (Nettles, Cole, & Sharp, 1997, p. 11)

The National Governor's Association formed task forces to examine educational policies including one whose assignment was to address college quality of learning. The Task Force on Quality made several recommendations that encouraged state policymakers to address the issue of assessment of student learning:

1. State officials should clarify the missions of each public institution and encourage the same for independent colleges.
2. State officials should re-emphasize the fundamental importance of undergraduate instruction.
3. 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.
4. State officials should adjust funding formulas to provide incentives to improving undergraduate student learning based upon the results of comprehensive assessment programs and encourage independent colleges to do likewise.

5. State officials should reaffirm their commitment to access to public higher education for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. (Nettles, Cole & Sharp, 1997, p. 11-12)

Concurrent with this national movement, the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) formed a Task Force on Program and Institutional Assessment. SHEEO published policy statements urging states to develop common definitions for graduation and retention to facilitate institutional comparison. SHEEO also urged state legislatures to fund assessment activities. This movement by SHEEO started activities in state legislatures to adopt statutes or statewide policies on assessment requirements for institutions of higher education.

Research on Assessment Policy

Early research on assessment policy addressed descriptive surveys on policies in all 50 states. The Education Commission of States, SHEEO, and the American Association of Higher Education conducted surveys in the late 1980's to establish a baseline on state higher education assessment policies. These initial research efforts were descriptive and did not allow across state comparisons of assessment policy.

In 1997 the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement launched a project to develop a framework to evaluate state policies on assessment. The model for this framework focused on an analysis of state assessment policy that examined policy context, policy type, and policy stage. Policy context consisted of three elements:

1. Historical inputs – The perceived need for assessment, if any, in a state, and prior policies, if any, which address that need.

2. Political inputs – The description of the original legislation, as well as any current legislation.
3. Policy description – The comparative dimension that features the overall findings of the research. (Nettles, Cole, & Sharp, 1997, p. 27 -28)

The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement also examined policy type and included the following typology:

1. Regulatory – Policy designed to encourage/ensure compliance with regulations.
2. Reforming – Policy designed to encourage/ensure reform of some type.
3. Quality assurance – Policy designed to assure quality.
4. Accountability – Policy designed to make institutions accountable to some higher authority. (Nettles, Cole, & Sharp. 1997, p. 28)

The policy stage was identified using the six stages established by Anderson and his colleagues in 1984 (cited in Nettles, Cole, & Sharp, 1997, p.29):

1. Problem formation – relief is sought from a situation that produces a human need, deprivation, or dissatisfaction.
2. Policy agenda – problems 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

The states who agreed to participate in the National Forum on College-Level Learning demonstration were the states of Nevada, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kentucky and South Carolina. Table 2 represents the policy type and stage according to the above definitions.

Table 2

Current State Assessment Policy Type and Stage

State	Type	Stage
Illinois	Quality Assurance	Evaluation and Reformulation
Kentucky	Accountability; Regulatory and Quality Assurance	Implementation
Nevada	Quality Assurance	Evaluation and Reformulation
Oklahoma	Accountability and Quality Assurance	Evaluation and Reformulation
South Carolina	Accountability; Regulatory; Quality Assurance	Implementation; 100% Performance Funding

Source: Nettles, Cole & Sharp, 1997, p. 32-33

This categorization of the five states' policy provided a framework for understanding the state system's policy on assessment.

While reviewing state assessment policies, the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement also evaluated whether states mandated common instruments for assessment and common indicators/or outcomes across their institutions.

The ultimate goal of this descriptive research by the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement was the "development of practical assessment policy models

for states to consider as they try to craft effective higher education assessment policy and legislation” (Nettles & Cole, 1999, p. 12).

Definitions of Assessment

The primary dilemma facing higher education is defining the product of education. A college degree represents the collective efforts of many faculty and staff spanning at least four years of a student’s full-time attendance. Colleges and universities make claims about this experience and society regards the degree as a significant credential. Students, parents, trustees, politicians, and society at large have a right to expect that the results will be what are claimed they will be.

The process of assessment provides a validation of learning. Palomba and Banta (1999) define assessment: “Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (p. 4). Volkwein (2003) is more specific: “Student outcomes assessment is the act of assembling and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative teaching and learning outcomes evidence in order to examine their congruence with an institution’s stated purposes and educational objectives” (p.4).

In an effort to provide guidance to institutions of higher education, the American Association for Higher Education (1996) described the nine principles of good practice for assessing student learning:

1. Assessment of student learning begins with educational values.
2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.

3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.
8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.
9. Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public (American Association of Higher Education, 1996, ¶1).

The National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (2001) surveyed 34,000 four-year college graduates who completed baccalaureate degrees between 1991 and 1994 to determine how confident they felt about doing the kinds of things a college education is supposed to prepare you to do. The results indicated that sixty-three percent of the college graduates felt confident in their ability to organize information and communicate its meaning to others; sixty-one percent felt confident in their ability to perform quantitative tasks and analyses; and, forty-eight percent reported confidence in their ability to find information.

In 1997, the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement conducted a nationwide survey of employers to evaluate how prepared graduates were for the workforce

(National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 2002). When asked to rate how well four-year colleges and universities prepared their graduates for the workforce, an overwhelming majority of employers said they were doing their jobs; ten percent rated their performance as outstanding; forty-six percent as more than adequate; and forty percent of employers said performance was adequate to satisfy current skills requirements (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 2002). The message is clear that higher education is accountable to stakeholders, such as students, parents, trustees, and policymakers, who make increasing demands in favor of demonstrating the learning that takes place at institutions across the United States. Assessment of student learning outcomes provides the vehicle through which higher education can be held accountable to these stakeholders.

Role of Regional Accreditation in Assessment

Accreditation is the primary means by which colleges and universities assure students and the public that quality education is being delivered (Eaton, 2000). Nationally, there are six regional accreditation associations; each of these associations being responsible for evaluating the colleges and universities within their respective geographical areas. Appendix III lists the accrediting associations and the states for which each is responsible.

In addition to assuring quality, accreditation also serves to govern eligibility for federal funds, facilitate ease of student transfer among institutions, and engender public confidence in the higher educational institutions, particularly among employers of the institution's graduates (Eaton, 2000). The accreditation process requires colleges and

universities to conduct a self assessment to determine if and how well their institutional mission is being achieved. Since student learning is a principle mission of higher education, the process by which an educational institution assesses student learning is central to the accreditation process.

Regional accreditation associations develop standards establishing a minimal level of performance expectation for educational institutions. In preparation for an accreditation visit, institutions must conduct a self-study to assess their compliance with the standards. At least once every ten years, institutions are visited by a team of external reviewers who validate compliance with the standards. The accreditation process encumbers institutions to accurately assess and document their level of actual performance as compared to the expected level of performance.

Each of the six regional accreditation associations requires, as a major focus of accreditation, the ability of colleges and universities to document their assessment and measurement of student learning outcomes. A comparison of the six regional association requirements to outcomes assessment is provided to substantiate this nationwide emphasis on assessment (see Table 3).

Table 3

Accreditation Association Standards on Assessment

Organization	Standard/Policy on Assessment
Middle States Commission on Higher Education	“Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning Assessment of student learning demonstrates that the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional goals and that students at graduation have achieved appropriate higher education goals” (Middle States Commission, 2002, p. xi).
New England Association of Schools and Colleges	“Standard 4: The institution develops the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program” (New England Association, 2005, p.7).
North Central Association of Colleges and Universities	“Criterion Three: Core Component 3a: The organization’s goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible” (North Central Association, 2003, p.49).
Northwest Commission on College and Universities	“Standard 2B:2: The institution identifies and publishes the expected learning outcomes for each of its degree and certificate programs. Through regular and systematic assessment, it demonstrates that students who complete their programs, no matter where or how they are offered, have achieved these outcomes” (Northwest Commission, 2003, p. 29).
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools	“Standard 3.3.1: The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assess whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results” (Southern Association, 2001, p. 22).
Western Association of Schools and Colleges	“Standard 2.7: In order to improve program currency and effectiveness, all programs offered by the institution are subject to review, including analyses of the achievement of the program’s learning objectives and outcomes. Where appropriate, evidence from external constituencies such as employers and professional societies is included in such reviews” (Western Association, 2001, p. 21).

As one compares the standards of these six regional accreditation associations, it is clear the requirement on institutions of higher education is to provide evidence that students are learning. Each of the regional accreditation organizations requires some form of evidence to support that students have achieved a level of learning at the institution. Unfortunately, what is unclear is whether there is any consistency between the regional accreditation associations about how assessment of student learning should be conducted. This lack of direction from the regional accreditation associations is documented in the Spellings Commission identification of an absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students (U. S. Department of Education, 2006).

Assessment Experiences

A review of the literature was conducted to determine previous research which encouraged state policymakers to compare student learning across state lines. Particular attention was paid to the research conclusions which reported on the efficacy of common measurement systems to allow interstate comparisons of student learning.

During the late 1990's, Larson & Wissman (2000) attempted to identify the critical academic skills which should be characteristic of Kansas community college associate degree holders. The methodology to identify these academic skills was the Delphi technique. The use of the Delphi technique was made to gain consensus where geography limited the practicality of face to face discussions and where anonymity was desired (Larson & Wissman, 2000). Twenty three academic administrators participated in the

data collection. Of the 23 administrators, 57% were community college faculty knowledgeable in curriculum and assessment.

Following the first round of the Delphi, 199 critical academic skills were identified. The 199 skills were reduced to 16 critical academic skills statements during round two. After the third round, consensus was achieved on five critical academic skills needed by community college graduates in Kansas:

1. Demonstrate the ability to clearly communicate thoughts, complex ideas, and questions both orally and in writing;
2. Demonstrate an awareness of cultural and social diversity and how cultural differences impact and influence assumptions, perceptions, and personal values;
3. Demonstrate the ability to think critically and make reasonable judgments by acquiring, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information;
4. Demonstrate the ability to add, subtract, multiply, and divide whole numbers, fractions, decimals, and percentages; and
5. Demonstrate the ability to work cooperatively with others and effectively as an individual. (Larson & Wissman, 2000, "Findings" section. ¶6)

Although the limitations of this study are significant in that the findings apply only to Kansas community college students, the researchers offered "the research may be of assistance to institutional policymakers in other states as they attempt to construct common data measurement systems within and across states" (Larson & Wissman, 2000, p. 55).

Ruhland and Brewer (2001) conducted a descriptive case study of the associate degree and technical diploma programs at Western Wisconsin Technical College.

Assessment efforts at this institution started in 1998 with faculty identifying program outcomes. Faculty were encouraged to write learning outcomes at level III or higher of Bloom's taxonomy. These levels represent the application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of knowledge (Bloom 1956). Using qualitative methodology, Ruhland and Brewer (2001) reviewed the program outcomes of 55 programs seeking to identify commonality among the outcomes, clustering of assessment measures and counting of average number of program outcomes for associate degree and technical diploma programs. The 55 programs were representative of the divisions of business, family and consumer science, health and human services, and trades and industrial education.

Based on the review of the 55 program assessments at Western Technical College, the researchers found there were 12 common program outcomes. The most common program outcome was the ability of the graduate to demonstrate (utilize) effective communication (oral and written) skills. The researchers concluded that the majority of the program outcomes were written in the cognitive domain at the application level of Bloom's taxonomy. The most common assessment measures identified were performance tasks and student exhibition of skills. The faculty utilized as measures of assessment, checklists, licensure exams provided by professional associations and performance tasks and exhibition for student performance.

Ruhland and Brewer (2001) reported that 625 (95%) of the program outcomes were achieved by 960 graduates. Ruhland and Brewer indicated the next step for future research was to create benchmarks for comparison purposes. These researchers asserted the need for colleges and universities to be able to compare and contrast assessment data from other like and similar institutions.

Assessment on a National Level

The research in Wisconsin and Kansas both addressed the need for states to be able to compare and contrast assessment data from other like institutions. In an effort to provide some national benchmarks with which to assess state higher education systems, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2000) published *Measuring Up 2000*. The purpose of this publication was an attempt to provide consumers and stakeholders of higher education with information about the condition of higher education. The Center used publicly available data collected by federal agencies to provide a state by state comparison on selected performance categories. The performance categories which were selected by the Center for states to be graded were:

- Preparation – 18-24 year olds with a high school credential.
- Participation – High school graduates enrolling in college.
- Affordability – Percent of income needed to pay for college expenses minus financial aid.
- Completion – Completing a bachelor's degree within 5 years of high school.
- Benefits – Value of an advanced degree (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000 Information Gap Section, ¶ 5).

Measuring Up 2000, 2002, and 2004 identified thirty quantitative indicators determined to be important in assessing the performance category, were collected regularly by public sources, and were comparable across the 50 states. The quantitative indicators were then assigned a mathematical weight based on importance to the performance category, as defined by research and experience. State results were converted to a scale of 0 – 100 and the top five states served as the benchmark. State

scores for each performance category were then calculated from the state's index score and the indicators' weight. The sum of all the index scores on the indicators times the weights of the indicators became the raw category score for the state. The raw category scores were then converted to a scale of 0-100. Grades were then assigned based on the category index scores using the grading scale referenced in Table 1.

National Forum on College-Level Learning Project

Because of a void described by Ewell (2002) as the lack of national benchmarks for assessing student learning, the *Measuring Up 2002* publication assigned a grade of incomplete to all states for their inability to assess student learning. *Measuring Up 2002* defined learning "as the degree to which students' knowledge and skills improve as a result of their education beyond high school" (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002, p. 29). Ewell (2002) encouraged states to develop mechanisms to assess the educational level of residents (i.e., educational capital). Data on educational capital would provide the support for continued investment in higher education.

In November 2001, the Pew Charitable Trust sponsored a National Forum on College-Level Learning to discuss the value of creating an infrastructure for assessing college student learning outcomes on a national basis. Dr. Margaret Miller, Professor of Education at the University of Virginia and President Emeritus of the American Association for Higher Education, convened a committee of business, higher education, and state government officials to discuss methods of assessing student learning outcomes. The committee decided the framework for assessing college student learning on a national basis needed to answer two questions:

1. What do the state's residents know and what can the residents do that contributes to the social good?
2. How well do the state's public and private colleges collectively contribute to that educational capital? (Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. 3)

With funding from Pew, the National Forum on College-Level Learning created a project model to assess student learning. The key components of the model included:

1. Information from existing licensure and graduate admission tests (i.e. GRE and MCAT).
2. Results from the National Adult Literacy Survey.
3. Results of standardized tests of general intellectual skills administered to representative populations of students on the campuses of colleges and universities. (Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. 4)

The identification and selection of the standardized tests was made based on the instrument's testing for validity and reliability. The overall design of the indicators was vetted by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. The demonstration model of the National Forum on College-Level Learning was also presented to the National Research Council's Board of Testing and Assessment. (Personal communication, March 14, 2005)

It was the desire of the organizers for the National Forum on College-Level Learning project to have participation from state systems of higher education which represented a geographical dispersion throughout the United States. Five states (Illinois, Kentucky, Nevada, Oklahoma, and South Carolina) agreed to participate in the project to test the model for gathering data to assess student learning. Between 2002 and 2004, the project

team collected information from the National Adult Literacy Survey and on graduate admission and licensure tests for the participating states. This national pilot project represented the first nation-wide attempt to develop benchmarks for assessing student learning and encouraged each of the five participating states to administer the following instruments to a random group of students: *Work Keys*© and the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*. *Work Keys*© tests were administered to representative samples of students in representative samples of the states' community colleges. *The Collegiate Learning Assessment* was administered to representative samples of students from representative samples of the states' four year colleges and universities.

Work Keys© is a system of assessment developed by American College Testing (ACT) to determine skills needed in the workplace. *Work Keys*© consists of a series of tests focused on general intellectual skills needed in the workplace (applied mathematics, reading for information, locating information, and writing). In developing this instrument, ACT consulted with employers, educators, and labor organizations to identify generic workplace skills. The skill areas measured by a *Work Keys*© instrument include reading for information, applied mathematics, listening, writing, applied technology, locating information, teamwork, and observation. The *Work Keys*© battery used in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project included reading for information, applied mathematics, locating information and business writing (Miller & Ewell, 2005). The results for each battery were reported separately.

The *Collegiate Learning Assessment* (CLA) is a performance based assessment of college students' general intellectual skills in the domains of the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and the workplace; it also includes a writing assessment (Miller & Ewell,

2005). The *Collegiate Learning Assessment* focuses on a set of common areas that comprise what is central to most collegiate education: critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication. The *Collegiate Learning Assessment* combines two types of testing instruments: performance tasks and writing prompts. The performance tasks require students to complete a “real-life” activity by using a series of documents that must be reviewed and evaluated. Writing prompts are then used to evaluate the students’ ability to articulate ideas, support ideas with reasons, sustain a coherent discussion, and use standard written English. The CLA battery used in the demonstration project consisted of two types of assessments: a set of four authentic tasks and a set of two writing prompts drawn from the Graduate Record Examination (Miller & Ewell, 2005).

Scoring the National Forum Project

The scoring for the National Forum on College-Level Learning project for reporting purposes was designed much as the *Measuring Up* indicators had been created.

Performance indicators were grouped and weighted:

1. Literacy Levels of the state population – Weight: 25% - Results from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey were updated based on the 2000 census. There were statistical limitations to the updating, and this data was not used in the final analysis from the National Center on College-Level Learning.
2. Graduates ready for advanced practice – Weight: 25% - This measure was the proportion of college graduates within each state who demonstrated readiness for

advanced practice through licensure examination, competitive admissions exam, and or teacher preparation exams.

3. Performance of the college educated – Weight: 50% - For this indicator, the *Work Keys*© and *Collegiate Learning Assessment* were used. (Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. 8-9)

This demonstration project used the national average on each measure. For those measures without a national average, the five state averages were used. It is best to remember that the intent of this National Forum on College-Level Learning project was to test for the possibility that a national benchmark to assess student learning was possible.

It was not the intent to test the reliability of either *Work Keys*© or the Collegiate Learning Assessment to be the national assessment tests for higher education. These instruments were solely selected for use in this national demonstration project.

Need for National Accountability

Since the conclusion of the National Center for College-Level Learning project and publication of the five states' performance, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), a nonprofit institution with a mission to advance quality and equity in education, published a paper recommending to policymakers that a national initiative to collect data on evidence of student learning was needed. At a minimum, ETS challenged state policy makers to seek evidence from higher education on workplace readiness and general education skills of students, domain specific knowledge of graduates, and soft skills of graduates. The workplace readiness assessment needed to be able to evaluate verbal

reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and communication skills, including writing. Domain specific knowledge assessment was available in areas of health, law and business; but specific knowledge in the arts and sciences needed to be addressed. Dwyer, Millett, & Payne (2006) assert “as with other dimensions of student learning, it is essential to have a system of assessment that allows comparisons across various benchmark groups, including national, state, regional and peer groups” (p. 14).

ETS recommended that the six regional accreditation associations be “charged with integrating a nationwide system of assessing student learning into their ongoing reviews of institutions of higher education” (Dwyer, Millett, & Payne, 2006, p. 24). Currently, the six regional accreditation associations require assessment to be demonstrated, but there is no consistent format or methodology for institutions of higher education to utilize which would demonstrate compliance with the assessment standards.

During the presidency of George W. Bush, there was growing concern about the future of American higher education. Where once the United States led the world in educational attainment, recent data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development indicated the United States was now ranked 12th among industrialized nations in higher education attainment (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. xii). Margaret Spellings, Secretary of Education, appointed a commission to consider how best to improve the system of higher education to ensure that graduates were well prepared to meet future workforce needs and were able to participate in the changing economy. The Commission members represented various stakeholders in higher education. The Commission found a lack of useful data to describe the outcomes of student learning. The Commission described a decentralized postsecondary system with

no comprehensive strategy to provide accountability information. The Commission noted that too many decisions about higher education were made based on institutional reputation rather than outcomes. Better data about real performance and lifelong working and learning ability was essential if we were to meet national needs and improve institutional performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 14).

The Commission adopted a set of goals that spelled out what was expected of American higher education:

1. We want a world-class higher education system that creates new knowledge, contributes to economic prosperity and global competitiveness, and empowers citizens;
2. We want a system that is accessible to all Americans, throughout their lives;
3. We want postsecondary institutions to provide high quality instruction while improving their efficiency in order to be more affordable to the students, taxpayers, and donors who sustain them;
4. We want a higher education system that gives Americans the workplace skills they need to adapt to a rapidly changing economy;
5. We want postsecondary institutions to adapt to a world altered by technology, changing demographics and globalization, in which the higher education landscape includes new providers and new paradigms, from for profit universities to distance learning. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. xi)

The Commission issued recommendations that directly address the need for accountability. To meet the challenges of the 21st century, higher education must change from a system primarily based on reputation to one based on performance. The

Commission urged the creation of a culture of accountability and transparency. The Commission also recommended the creation of a consumer friendly information database which would enable students, parents, and policymakers to weigh and rank comparative institutional performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 21).

The Commission recommended that postsecondary institutions measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes. Institutions were encouraged to use assessment data from instruments such as the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* or the *Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress*. Results of student learning assessment must be publically available. The collection of assessment data should allow interstate comparison of student learning. Accreditation standards should be established which allow comparisons among institutions regarding learning outcomes.

Summary

Assessment of student learning is a contemporary topic being debated in higher education. This literature review sought to provide evidence of the need to benchmark student learning on a national basis. As society becomes more demanding for accountability, higher education must look for effective methods of providing the assurance that higher education is working. The Spellings Commission identified higher education as a system lacking in data sufficient to compare the performance of educational institutions. The Educational Testing Service asserted that the regional accreditation associations needed to be proactive in the development of a national system of assessment of student learning. The literature reviewed for this study provided the impetus for the need to establish national accountability measures in higher education.

The National Center on College Level Learning created a demonstration project in early 2000's to determine if a national comparison of student learning could be accomplished. Using nationally normed assessment instruments, five states participated in the demonstration project. This National Forum on College-Level Learning demonstration project offered these states the opportunity to affirm or modify existing state policy based on the performance of the state's college students when compared with national averages or the five state averages.

The No Child Left Behind federal legislation has brought accountability measures to the K-12 system of education. Perhaps higher education will find suitable measures of accountability before succumbing to federal mandates which would require higher education to assess student learning against a federal standard.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

In 2003 and 2004, the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was conducted to determine the efficacy of national benchmarks to measure student learning in state higher education systems. The participants in the project were the systems of higher education in South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nevada.

This study examined how state participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project changed higher education system policy and institutional practices on assessment of student learning. The purpose of this study examined state higher education implementation practices for assessing student learning outcomes in selected land grant and community colleges before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

The research questions which guided this study were:

1. What was the state higher education system's policy for assessing student learning before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
2. What practices of assessing student learning have been implemented at the institutional level following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

3. What are the similarities and/or differences in assessing student learning across the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

Case Study Design

Case study methodology was selected for this study. Yin (2003a) defined case study as a “methodology which answers the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control” (p. 9). Stake (1995) encouraged case study methodology when the researcher wants to maximize an understanding of the case. Merriam (2001) suggested case study is useful when the researcher is more interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation than hypothesis testing. The end result of case study is a rich description of the context of the selected case or cases used as the basis of the research.

Yin (2003b) identified six types of case study based upon a 2 x 3 matrix.

The first dimension of a case study is whether single or multiple cases are to be studied. Single case study provides an in-depth analysis of only one case. A multiple case study involves two or more cases in the same study. The second dimension of case study is whether the case study seeks to be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. Exploratory case studies seek to discover theory and tend to be used as pilot studies. The descriptive case study covers the depth and scope of the case being studied. In descriptive case studies, there is a specific beginning and end to the phenomena being described. Explanatory case study is useful to test specific theories with a rich collection of data pertinent to the specific case. This study was a multiple case descriptive study. The

descriptive nature of this study sought to understand the assessment policy and practices in selected states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

Case Selection

The state systems of higher education volunteering to participate in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project were Nevada, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kentucky, and South Carolina, a sampling of three of these systems was conducted. Selection was made to ensure at least one state per regional accreditation association was included in the sample. The states of Nevada (Northwest Regional Association), Oklahoma (North Central Regional Association), and Kentucky (Southern Association) were selected as the units of analysis. The appropriate contact information for each of these states was provided by the project director of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

This study also focused on policy implementation practices. Assessment individuals in the land grant colleges of Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky were included. One community college in each of these three states was also selected. The appropriate community college participants were recommended by the state higher education assessment officials.

Institutional Review Board Approval

Application to the Institutional Review Board of the University of Nevada Las Vegas was made in July 2007 and approval was given on September 11, 2007. The overall risk of participation in this study was classified as minimal. The informed interviewees read

and signed a faxed copy of the informed consent for this study prior to their participation. The expedited review approval notice is included as Appendix IV.

Validity

Construct (internal) validity was provided by utilizing multiple sources of evidence, such as interviews, observations, and document reviews. Merriam (2001) defined this technique as “triangulation; using multiple sources of evidence” (p. 204). It is important for the case study researcher to validate results across a number of sources and this adoption of triangulation provided the basis for checking the validity of results. The document reviews gives the case study researcher a background on the systems of higher education and the institutions before the actual interviews. The document reviews provided the case study researcher an understanding of the policies and practices of assessment before the actual interview.

Table 4 highlights the document reviews conducted to provide triangulation of data collection.

Table 4

Documents Reviewed for Triangulation

Type of Document	Nevada	Oklahoma	Kentucky
Regional Accreditation Association Standards on Assessment	Table 2	Table 2	Table 2
State Policy Requirements	Board of Regents Handbook	Oklahoma Board of Regents Policy and Procedures Manual	2005-06 Kentucky Postsecondary Accountability Report
	NSHE Accountability Report 2006-07, 2004-05, 2003-04 NSHE Master Plan	Annual Student Assessment Report; Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education Website	Kentucky CPE Website
State Demographics	NSHE Database	Oklahoma Enrollment Information System	Kentucky CPE Database
Institutional Assessment	UNR Student Outcomes Assessment	TCC Annual Assessment Report 2006-05	UK NSSE Results; Kentucky Community Colleges Report
National Data	<i>Measuring Up 2000, 2002, 2004</i>	<i>Measuring Up 2000, 2002, 2004</i>	<i>Measuring Up 2000, 2002, 2004</i>

This process of reviewing documents allowed the researcher a baseline of understanding before entering into the interview. There was a sense, on the part of the researcher, to be somewhat familiar with what would be shared during the interview.

Credibility

Credibility in case study design is accomplished through the development of protocols and pilot testing (Merriam, 2001). The written protocol for this study included the questions that were asked of state system personnel; as well as institutional academic officers and/or assessment coordinators at each institution (see Appendix I & II). The protocol dictated that each person was to be interviewed in the same manner, questions were asked in the same sequence, and all answers were recorded. Each interview was recorded on a digital recorder and kept in a separate folder on the recorder. The recordings and transcripts were archived by the researcher.

A pilot of this protocol was conducted during the fall semester of 2005. The selected unit of analysis for the pilot was the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE). This case selection was made based on convenience. The NSHE officials with responsibility for assessment of student learning were the individuals selected to participate in this pilot. There was no attempt to determine implementation of state assessment policy at the institutional level during this pilot. Because the pilot of the research protocol only included the state system officials, the institutional assessment individuals were included in this study.

The first scan of document reviews involved the accreditation standards for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities which is the regional accreditation association for Nevada. The NSHE Board of Regents Handbook was also reviewed for evidence of policy statements on assessment of student learning. The web site for the NSHE was mined to obtain demographic information on the institutions of higher education in the NSHE. The NSHE web site was also rich with data on assessment

standards, accountability measures, and a general understanding of how higher education was organized and evaluated within the state of Nevada. The system officials responsible for assessment of student learning were identified. These individuals were contacted by email and agreed to participate in the pilot test. Telephone interviews were scheduled and conducted on November 18 and 21, 2005. The recordings and transcripts have been archived by the researcher.

Data from the interviews conducted to pilot test the case study methodology were coded according to Spradley's (1979) domain, taxonomic, and componential analysis. Level one domain analysis sought to discover categories from the transcribed interviews or observations that seem to fit together. Level two taxonomic analysis refined the domain categories to identify how things fit together within each of the domain categories. Level three componential analysis allowed the researcher to perform analytical generalizability of the themes common across the domain categories.

When reviewing the transcripts recorded from the interviews, the researcher assigned a coding scheme to each level of analysis. This coding system assisted the researcher in assigning recorded comments to each of the analytical categories. For purposes of this pilot project, the level one analysis identified the general characteristics on assessment of student learning outcomes. References for this level analysis as transcribed from the interviews were coded using a yellow marker. The level two taxonomic analysis described the characteristics of assessment policy in the Nevada System of Higher Education and the recorded transcripts were coded with a blue marker. The level three analysis predicted future assessment policy in the state of Nevada and was coded with a purple marker. An additional category labeled "Future Directions of Assessment"

emerged from the transcripts and those observations were underlined with a black felt tip marker.

Table 5 depicts this categorical analysis derived from the review of the transcripts. The level one domain was labeled “student learning outcomes.” The transcripts were reviewed and marked with direct quotes relevant to this category. Level two taxonomy was labeled “current assessment policy.” Again, the transcripts were coded for comments related to the interviewees’ interpretation of current assessment policy. The level three analysis was labeled “future assessment policy” and detailed the interviewees’ perceptions on the future of assessment policy in Nevada.

After reviewing the transcripts of the interviews, the subsequent category of future directions of assessment, in general, was suggested by one of the interviewees. The interview questions were amended to solicit this input from the remaining units of analysis.

Table 5

General characteristics of student learning outcomes, current assessment policy, future assessment policy and future direction of assessment in Nevada

Student Learning Outcomes	Current Assessment Policy	Future Assessment Policy	Future Directions in Assessment*
Driven by accreditors	Not specific	No demand from legislators	This project brings awareness to assessment
Has to be done for accreditation	Requires a report to the Board of Regents once a year	No impact from this National Forum pilot project	Keeps the momentum going
Needs to be made known to students	System wide performance indicators	Not financially and logistically feasible	Test in individual classes
Related to performance indicators	Institutional latitude	No change in Board of Regents policy	Need to motivate students to take the test and give it their best effort
Faculty driven	Grass roots effort	No legislative mandate	Required for graduation
Related to curriculum	Generalized measures	No budget to support assessment efforts	Assessment tool needs to be locally developed
Program specific	Accountability is to regional accreditation		Assessment tool needs to be locally supported
Integrated into daily life			No common agreement on a standardized test that faculty would use
Benchmarking			Faculty need to take assessment seriously Assessment can be used to create change

* New dimension added as a result of pilot study

The purpose of the pilot was to validate the methodology for this study. Conducting the pilot allowed the researcher the experience of surfing through a web site and looking for key data terms to locate appropriate and relevant demographic and policy information. As a qualitative research study, it was imperative that the researcher present a vivid picture on the current state of higher education in each of three states: Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky.

Data Collection

Based on input from the project director of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, the higher education system officials in Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky responsible for assessment were identified. These individuals were contacted by email to solicit participation in this study. Once they agreed to participate, an informed consent form was faxed to the individual and the date and time for the interview was scheduled. The informed consent is included in Appendix IV. At the scheduled interview time, the researcher called the participant, asked permission to record the interview, and the interviewee read the informed consent. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and the transcripts were reviewed by the interviewee to ensure content validity. Interview questions were written in advance and all interviewees were asked the same questions in the same sequence. The interview questions for these system officials are found in Appendix I.

In addition, the assessment coordinators and/or chief academic officers at the land grant institution and one community college in Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky were identified. These individuals were contacted by email to solicit their participation in this

study. Once they agreed to participate, the informed consent was faxed to the individual and the date and time for the interview was scheduled. This follow-up interview at the institutional level sought to validate the implementation of the state system of higher education policy on assessment of student learning. A separate set of interview questions were developed for this group of interviewees. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the transcripts edited by the interviewees. The interview questions for institutional assessment representatives are found in Appendix II.

Prior to the telephone interview, the researcher conducted a review of the state system's web site to determine demographics of the system and assessment activities required by the state system. The goal of this data mining was to provide the historical background and current assessment requirements for institutions of higher education in that state. The state system's web site was also mined to determine if assessment reports were available which documented the results of institutional assessment within each state. These state system policy requirements for assessment were also compared to the regional accreditation association requirements for assessment of student learning. Each state system's report card findings as published in *Measuring Up 2000, 2002, and 2004* was also accessed. The researcher also accessed the college's web site for demographic information on the institution as well as institutional assessment requirements and practices. The college's web site was reviewed to determine if assessment results were reported to faculty, staff, and the public.

Cross Case Synthesis

This research was a multiple case descriptive study. To provide a rich description of implementation policy and practices, narratives were written about each unit of analysis. In an attempt to answer the research questions, the template for a cross case synthesis was developed as Table 6.

Table 6

Cross Case Synthesis

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
Regional Accreditation Assessment Requirement			
Assessment policy before participation in the National Pilot Project			
Assessment policy after participation in the National Pilot Project			
New initiatives in the state			
Case 1 = Nevada System of Higher Education			
Case 2 = Oklahoma System of higher Education			
Case 3 = Kentucky System of Higher Education			

When the researcher asked the Nevada interviewees if there was anything else that should be examined across the states, one of the interviewees felt it would be relevant to

ask if any new initiatives grew out of the state's participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning's project. The interviewee suggested it would be of interest to report not only changes in policy, but also changes in practice. The researcher re-visited the interview questions and included a reference to changes in practice as a result of participation in the pilot project.

Summary

Case study was the appropriate research method for this study. The cases that were developed for understanding and comparison are the state systems of higher education in Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. Each of these states represented a different regional accreditation association.

Performing a pilot of the study proved to be beneficial. With the experience of conducting a review of documents and directing two interviews, this researcher felt more confident in the collection of appropriate and relevant data. It was beneficial to have the recommendation of additional questions to improve the richness of data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

OKLAHOMA SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Oklahoma System of Higher Education was created in 1941 by a vote of the people that amended the state constitution to provide for such a system. The state system is comprised of 23 colleges and universities, 10 constituent agencies, and one higher education center. The state system is coordinated by the Oklahoma Board of Regents and this Board determines the academic standards of higher education, the functions and courses of study at the colleges, recommends to the state legislature the budget allocations and tuition fees within legislative limits. The Oklahoma Board of Regents is appointed by the governor and members serve for nine year terms (Oklahoma State Regents For Higher Education, 2007). The mission of the Oklahoma Board of Regents for Higher Education is to “build a nationally competitive system of higher education” (Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 2007, Chapter 6). In an effort to provide some national benchmarks with which to assess state higher education systems, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education published *Measuring Up 2000*, *2002*, and *2004*. The performance categories which were selected by the Center included:

- Preparation – numbers of 18-24 year olds with a high school credential.
- Participation – numbers of high school graduates enrolling in college.
- Affordability – percent of income needed to pay for college expenses minus financial aid.

- Completion – number of students completing a bachelor’s degree within 5 years of high school.
- Benefits – value of an advanced degree (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000, Information Gap Section, ¶5).

The *Measuring Up* results for the system of higher education in Oklahoma are reported in Table 7. The passing grade for Oklahoma in the category of learning was a direct result of Oklahoma’s participation in the project conducted by the National Forum on College-Level Learning. The National Forum on College-Level Learning project reported the actual performance of students on standardized tests compared to the national average on each measure. The state systems in Nevada, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kentucky, and South Carolina participated in the project. Where the national average was not available, the five state averages were used. The standardized tests utilized for this national project were *Work Keys*®, administered to community college students; and the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*, administered to four year college and university students. The intent of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was to determine the appropriateness of using standardized tests to assess levels of student learning outcomes. Results from Oklahoma’s participation are reported in Figure 2.

Table 7

Measuring Up Results for Oklahoma

	2000 Results	2002 Results	2004 Results
Preparation	D+	D+	C-
Participation	C	C+	C
Affordability	B-	C	F
Completion	C-	C-	C-
Benefits	C-	C	C+
Learning*	I	I	P

Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004, p. xx

I = Incomplete; P = Pass

**Measuring Up 2000 and 2002* gave all states an Incomplete in student learning because there were no common benchmarks for student learning that would allow meaningful state by state comparisons (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002). The category of learning was defined as the degree to which students' knowledge and skills improve as a result of their education beyond high school and the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning were given a Pass in the *Measuring Up 2004* (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004).

According to the Vice Chancellor for Educational Partnerships, the Oklahoma System of Higher Education chose to participate because "we fit very well with this viable project. We were invested in assessment through the use of ACT" (Personal communication, October 4, 2007). The Vice Chancellor also reported that Oklahoma was using the Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS) which was a test offered

to eighth and tenth graders in the K-12 system. EPAS was a voluntary test of college readiness and was funded by the Oklahoma System of Higher Education. The Vice Chancellor stated “we have a 97% participation rate with EPAS and the Chancellor is committed to assessment. We also had 100% participation from the public institutions in the National Forum pilot project.” (Personal communication, October 4, 2007)

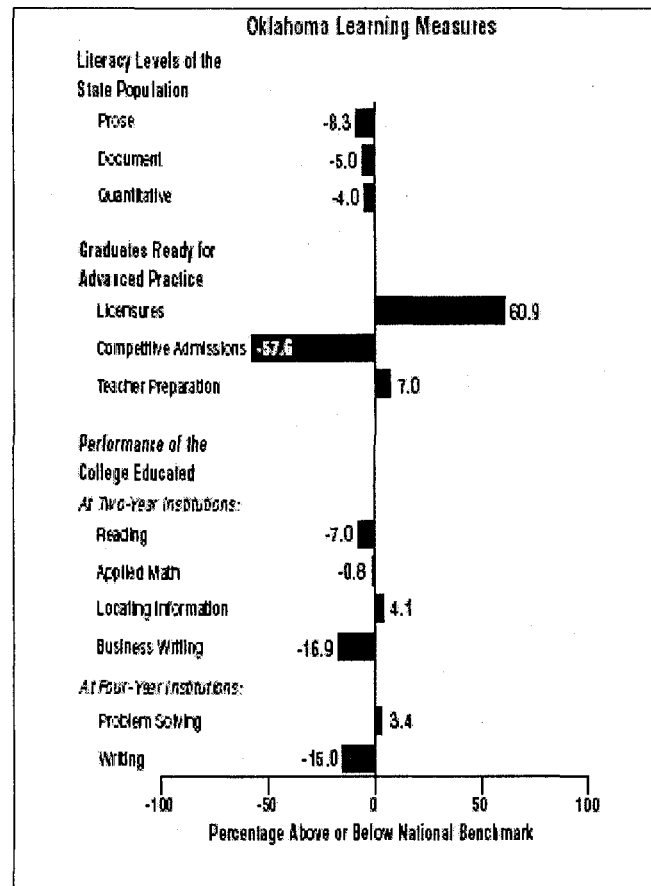


Figure 2. Results for Oklahoma in National Forum project

Source: Miller & Ewell, 2005, p. 15

State Policy on Assessment

The statewide assessment policy was adopted by the Oklahoma Board of Regents in 1991. The assessment policy required the systematic collection, interpretation, and use of information about student learning and achievement to improve instruction. The policy also addressed the need to demonstrate public accountability by providing evidence of institutional effectiveness (Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, 2007). The Oklahoma legislature supported the system's assessment initiatives and allowed institutions to charge up to one dollar per credit hour to support the assessment effort (Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, 2007).

The Vice Chancellor for Educational Partnerships at the Oklahoma System of Higher Education reported that

Each institution in Oklahoma must evaluate undergraduate students at four levels. Entry level course placement is based on ACT scores. Institutions, with prior approval, can utilize secondary assessment. General education is also assessed and there is some variability between institutions on assessment of general education and secondary assessment for course placement. Program outcomes assessment data is reported as well as the results of student satisfaction. (Personal communication, October 4, 2007)

The first level of assessment was at entry level and course placement. Beginning in 1994, institutions were required to use a score of 19 on the ACT in the subject areas of English, mathematics, science, and reading. Students unable to demonstrate this level of competency were required to be enrolled in remedial courses. The second level of assessment was mid-level and was designed to assess general education. Institutions were

required to assess in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and critical thinking. Mid level assessments occurred after 45 semester hours and prior to completion of 70 semester hours. For associate degree programs, mid-level assessments occurred halfway through the program or at the end of the program. The third level of assessment was program assessment at point of exit. Selection of an appropriate assessment instrument was the responsibility of the institution, but institutions were encouraged to give preference to nationally standardized instruments that supply normative data. The fourth level of assessment was student satisfaction. This assessment data could be obtained through focus groups, surveys, or interviews. Graduate student assessment was not required (Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, 2007).

Institutional Implementation

Land Grant Institution

The Director of University Assessment and Testing at Oklahoma State University (OSU), the land grant institution, was responsible for “implementing the institutional assessment plan which included entry level assessment, general education assessment, program outcome assessment within each of the academic programs, and overall student and alumni satisfaction” (Personal communication, October 11, 2007). According to the Oklahoma State System Higher Education’s Annual Student Assessment Report (2007), assessment results for Oklahoma State University were reported in a publicly accessible document. This annual assessment report indicated the entry level assessment scores established by Oklahoma State University for course placement. The mid-point, general education, assessment methodology included institutional portfolios, university-wide

surveys, and a general education course content database. In 2005-06, institutional portfolios were used to evaluate students' written communication skills and critical thinking skills as well as skills and attitude about diversity. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and OSU Alumni Surveys corroborated the evidence collected from portfolios. The web-based general education database was used to evaluate how well each general education course was aligned with expected learning outcomes for general education (Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, 2007). Program outcomes assessment included grade point averages in certain courses, exit interviews, capstone courses, surveys, research papers, graduate school application success, employment rates, licensing and certification exams, course evaluations and self studies (Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, 2007). Student satisfaction was assessed with undergraduate program alumni surveys.

Before participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, the faculty of Oklahoma State University had developed a mid-point assessment of general education and reported those results to the state system. The Director of University Assessment stated,

...we have a really strong assessment structure and one of the reasons is that we offer financial incentives to faculty. All of the fees assessed to students for assessment come to the Assessment Office. We pay faculty to engage to do the assessment of our general education learning outcomes during the summer. Last year, our Assessment Council approved for us to pay faculty stipends to actually conduct assessment within degree programs. (Personal communication, October 11, 2007)

In one academic year, approximately \$500,000 was received to support assessment functions throughout Oklahoma State University.

Oklahoma State University has established an institutional assessment council to oversee the assessment activities of the university. There was an assessment coordinator identified for each degree program and an academic college assessment coordinator identified for each of the six colleges. The Office of University Assessment and Testing supported one month's summer salary to encourage faculty to serve as the academic college level assessment resource person. This summer salary support was an ongoing activity at OSU.

Community College

At Tulsa Community College (TCC), the Assessment Analyst identified the required assessment findings reported to the State System of Higher Education to be

...entry level assessment measures. These entry level measures are used to place students into the appropriate courses. They (the state) also require what they call mid level assessment. And so we call it general education assessment, which is your broader skills, critical thinking, communication, those types of skills. And they also ask about program outcomes which each of our various programs and disciplines have that they anticipate the student in that program would fulfill. And so we report them. They (the state) also ask for student satisfaction outcomes. (Personal communication, October 24, 2007)

At Tulsa Community College, the Institutional Effectiveness Council was the administrative body for all student learning assessments. The placement instrument utilized by TCC was the Computerized Placement Test (CPT). According to the

Oklahoma State System of Higher Education's Annual Student Assessment Report (2007), TCC collected nine years of placement data and determined that the placement program in mathematics and reading was sound. The placement for freshman composition was adequate but may not be identifying all the relevant student needs for writing development. The assessment for mid-level, or general education, at TCC centered around one of the general education goals each year on a rotating basis. During the 2005-06 academic year, faculty assessed critical thinking using methods chosen by the faculty members. Program outcomes were reported using course embedded assessments, surveys, and course/instructor evaluations. The student satisfaction assessments included exit questionnaires, focus groups, and on-campus random assessment (Oklahoma State System of Higher Education, 2007).

Tulsa Community College charged \$1.50 per credit hour as an assessment fee. The money was used to purchase entry level placement tests as well diagnostic tests. The salary of the assessment analyst was paid from these revenues along with registration and travel fees for staff to attend assessment conferences.

Triangulation Review

The development of the case study for Oklahoma was assisted through a review of several documents and websites prior to the interviews with assessment officials. The North Central Association accreditation standards describing assessment expectations were reviewed and are included in Appendix III. The Oklahoma Enrollment Information System was accessed to determine the demographics of students within the Oklahoma system of higher education. In addition, the Oklahoma Board of Regents Policy and

Procedure Manual was reviewed to determine definitions and expectations of institutional assessment within the state. The Annual Student Assessment Report was accessed and reviewed before scheduling the interviews. This Assessment Report provided a compilation of assessment activities in all public institutions throughout the state. These system wide documents provided this researcher the basis of assessment policy expectation from the system level.

Prior to the interviews with the institutional representatives, the web sites of Oklahoma State University (OSU) and Tulsa Community College were reviewed. The OSU website contained the same assessment information as was published in the Annual Student Assessment Report for all institutions within the system. The Tulsa Community College made available on the college web site the Annual Assessment Report for 2005-2006. Reviewing these documents gave this researcher a basic understanding of assessment policy and practice before interviewing system and institution officials.

Outcome of Project

Based on Oklahoma's performance in the project (Figure 2), the Vice Chancellor for Educational Partnerships reported the state would

...attempt to standardize assessment even more. At the four levels of assessment, we will start to recommend instruments for assessment. The Oklahoma System of Higher Education does not anticipate making any changes to assessment policy. We will try to keep our pulse on national trends so that we can compare our performance nationally.

(Personal communication, October 4, 2007)

The Vice Chancellor served on the technical work group to establish the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) and the *College Learning Assessment* tool was selected by the VSA as one of the assessment tools. According to the Vice Chancellor, “the National Forum on College-Level Learning project provided us with experience using this instrument” (Personal Communication, October 4, 2007). The Vice Chancellor also reported that Oklahoma was participating in a national initiative, *Achieving the Dream*, to develop a culture of evidence. The *Achieving the Dream* initiative looked at student success from the standpoint of percentage of students who successfully complete developmental courses, who have successfully completed all other courses with a C or better, who have persisted from one semester to the next, and who have actually completed all of their coursework by way of graduation.

Oklahoma State University adopted the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* as the tool to assess general education. This decision was made based on experiences gained from the National Forum on College-Level Learning project as well as Oklahoma’s participation in the development of the Voluntary System of Accountability. The Director of University Assessment and testing stated:

The structure of assessment at OSU has not changed. But the content of what we are doing has changed. We have become much more directive on insisting/encouraging programs to really assess student learning. Some of our earlier assessment plans were not learning outcomes; but now we are encouraging faculty to engage in program outcomes assessment. In fact, we have incorporated assessment of student learning into the academic program review process. Programs now have to describe their learning outcomes, assessment they have done over the past five years, findings from that

assessment, and how they are using that information to guide their program. (Personal communication, October 11, 2007)

There were no plans at Tulsa Community College to alter the institutional policy on assessment of student learning. However, institutional practices were focused on long term initiatives to improve assessment of student learning. Tulsa Community College stated

...we have been engaged in more effectively trying to collect data on our students' learning. For the past six years we have collected data on student learning. What we are starting to see is that the data we collected is not necessarily useful and therefore may not be used as we had hoped. So what we're doing is we're trying to transition ourselves into the second phase of a product life cycle. (Personal communication, October 24, 2007)

In addition, Tulsa Community College is involved in the regional accreditation association's Academy of Assessment of Student Learning described as a

...four year project where we look at two or three assessment activities, keeping a portfolio of each. One of the activities we have is building a co-curricular assessment program where we can identify general education that has occurred outside the classroom. (Personal communication, October 24, 2007)

The faculty of Tulsa Community College are also re-examining their general education assessment process. TCC has also engaged in participation with *Achieving the Dream* initiative nationwide. This project will allow TCC to improve performance based on data.

Summary

The conceptual framework for this study was implementation theory. The evolutionary process of implementation started with the tractability of the problem, ability of the policy to structure implementation, nonstatutory variables impacting implementation, and stages in the implementation process (refer to Figure 1, p. 12).

The Oklahoma policy on assessment of student learning was adopted in 1991 and applied to all institutions of higher education. The policy clearly identified assessment required at the entry point into the institution, mid-point assessment of general education, program assessment of student learning, and exit assessment of graduate satisfaction. Within the state of Oklahoma, financial resources were made available to institutions through the assessment fee per credit hour paid by all students. The state policy clearly defined what was to be assessed and reported, but provided no commonality on assessment of general education instruments until after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. Faculty was engaged in assessment and the Director of University Assessment and Testing at the land grant institution and the Assessment Analyst at the community college reported over ten years of experience, collectively, in assessment. Their leadership of the assessment effort was evident through their experience.

The policy on assessment was established in 1991 and there was evidence of compliance with implementation at the institutional level. Based on the results reported in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, there was no change in policy; but adoption of a common general education assessment instrument, CLA, was initiated at the four year colleges and universities. Both the land grant institution and the

community college reported new initiatives instituted as a result of performance in the national project. The land grant institution adopted the CLA as an assessment measure of general education, and the community college joined the Academy of Assessment, sponsored by the North Central Higher Learning Commission.

In conclusion, institutional officials were able to articulate the system policy on assessment of student learning outcomes. It was evident at the institutional level that the practice of assessing student learning was fully implemented. The state, as well as the local institutions, demonstrated an understanding to develop assessment data to benchmark institutional performance locally as well as nationally.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEVADA SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) consists of eight institutions; two universities, one state college, four community colleges, and one research institute with two locations. Four of the eight institutions are located in rural communities; one university, state college, one community college, and one-half of a research institute are located in the metropolitan area of Las Vegas, Nevada. The other half of a research institution is located in the metropolitan area of Reno, Nevada. Governance of the NSHE is through an elected panel of 13 Regents who represent constituents throughout the state of Nevada. Much like a corporate board of directors, Nevada's Board of Regents governs the Nevada System of Higher Education. Elected to serve a six-year term, the 13 Regents set policies and approve budgets for Nevada's entire public system of higher education.

In an effort to provide some national benchmarks with which to assess state higher education systems, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2000) published *Measuring Up 2000*. The purpose of this publication was an attempt to provide consumers and stakeholders of higher education with information about the condition of higher education in each of the fifty states. The Center used publicly available data collected by federal agencies to provide a state by state comparison on selected performance categories. The performance categories which were selected by the Center included:

- Preparation – numbers of 18-24 year olds with a high school credential.

- Participation – numbers of high school graduates enrolling in college.
- Affordability – percent of income needed to pay for college expenses minus financial aid.
- Completion – number of students completing a bachelor’s degree within 5 years of high school.
- Benefits – value of an advanced degree (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000, Information Gap Section, ¶ 5).

The *Measuring Up* results for the state of Nevada are reported in Table 8. The passing grade for Nevada in the category of learning was a direct result of Nevada’s participation in the project conducted by the National Forum on College-Level Learning to investigate the feasibility of administering standardized tests to assess the outcome of student learning. The standardized tests utilized for this national project were *Work Keys*©, administered to community college students; and the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*, administered to college and university students. The intent of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was to determine the appropriateness of using standardized tests to assess levels of student learning outcomes.

Table 8

Measuring Up Results for Nevada

Grading Category	2000 Results	2002 Results	2004 Results
Preparation	D+	D	D
Participation	D+	C+	C
Affordability	B	D+	F
Completion	F	F	F
Benefits	C-	C-	C-
Learning*	I	I	P

Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004, p.xx.

I = Incomplete; P = Pass

**Measuring Up 2000 and 2002* gave all states an Incomplete in student learning because there were no common benchmarks for student learning that would allow meaningful state by state comparisons (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002). The category of learning was defined as the degree to which students' knowledge and skills improve as a result of their education beyond high school and the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning were given a Pass in the *Measuring Up 2004* (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004). Results from Nevada's participation are reported in Figure 3.

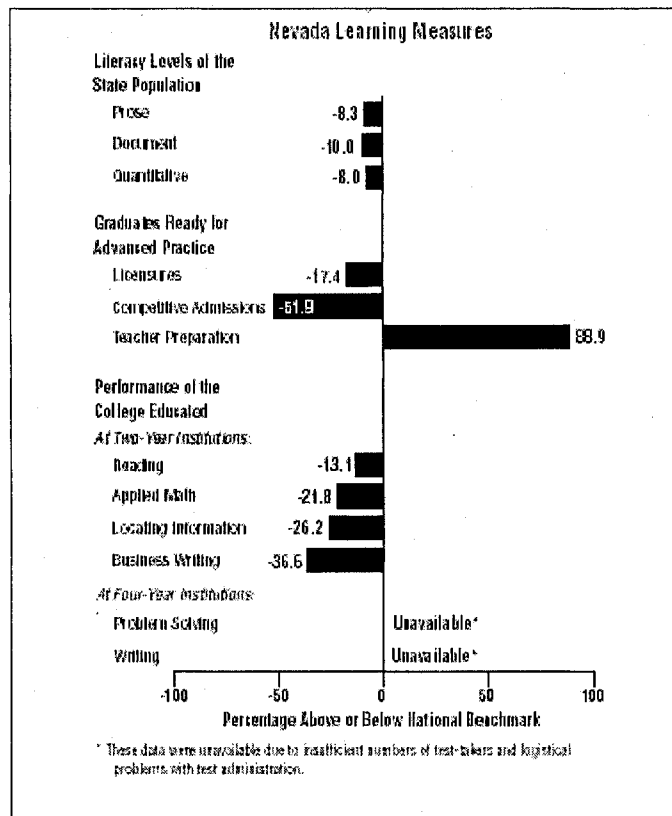


Figure 3. Results for Nevada in National Forum project.

Source: Miller & Ewell,, 2005, p. 14.

The NSHE was guided by a Master Plan revised in February 2005. The Master Plan had seven goals and addressed accountability for student outcomes in three of the seven goals:

1. Reputation for Excellence;
2. Quality Education – provide consistently excellent learning experiences for students;
3. Building Quality of Life – enriching the lives of Nevada’s citizens. (Nevada System of Higher Education, 2005, p. x)

The NSHE was committed to examining all operations of the institution to establish that every attempt was made to make the most efficient use of human, financial, and physical resources. In an Executive Summary of the Master Plan, NSHE stated “the Plan provides key concepts of an emphasis on continuous improvement over time according to established benchmarks, and a public accountability plan for student learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness” (Nevada System of Higher Education, 2005b, p. 2).

Nevada’s decision to participate in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was made based on the timing of the project and the Master Plan. According to the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning seemed

...like a gift from heaven because we didn’t have to pay for it. We had an opportunity to run a pilot project of actually doing some testing that could lead to a system wide look at student learning outcomes. (Personal communication, November 21, 2005)

State Policy on Assessment

The NSHE policy on assessment of student learning outcomes was found in the Board of Regents Handbook, Title 4, Chapter 14, Section 10 which required an appropriate plan of regular student educational assessment is developed by each institution. Plans were to be based upon institutional mission and should be developed with multiple assessment approaches. Among other activities, regular regional accreditation review provided an overall assessment of the institution. Plans were to reflect the mix of programs and types of students. Assessment approaches varied at each institution; however, the universities, state college, and community colleges were to work

together to develop common approaches, where appropriate (Nevada System of Higher Education, 2005a).

The Chancellor's Office, together with the institutions, developed appropriate measures of student persistence and performance, collected and monitored these data on a statewide basis, and made periodic reports to the Board of Regents. These measures were intended to measure the effectiveness of the entire system of higher education. In the NSHE Accountability Report 2006-2007, the accountability measures for college continuation, remediation, persistence, student diversity, student financial aid, distance education, participation rates, transfer, graduation rates, faculty characteristics, research and development, and workforce development of nurses were reported. The NSHE Accountability Report 2006-2007 further stated that

...campus faculty and administrators are responsible for the quality of their academic programs and overall institutional effectiveness. These assessments are shared cyclically with regional accreditation officials, professional and disciplinary associations, and with the NSHE Board of Regents. (p.3)

Institutional Implementation

Land Grant Institution

The Director of the Office of University Assessment at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) articulated that "the state says that each institution is responsible for designing an assessment plan, process and carrying it out and reporting on that periodically. Each institution will do that in accordance with their own mission." (Personal communication, October 24, 2007)

Assessment activities at the land grant institution had been ongoing for the past five years. The assessment plan for the land grant institution defined the data elements of institutional assessment as:

- Student outcomes assessment plans which were designed and implemented by each undergraduate, graduate and student services program.
 - Alumni surveys which were conducted by telephone one, three and five years after graduation.
 - Employer surveys which were implemented one year after graduation
 - National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which collected data on student behaviors correlated with academic success.
 - The Graduate Record Examination test scores for all graduates taking the exam.
- (UNR, Student Outcomes Assessment Plan, 2006)

Individuals with the UNR Office of University Assessment worked with faculty to develop, implement and report on assessment plans based on student performance. Additional assistance was provided to faculty to analyze assessment results to identify areas for program improvement and accountability. The Office also worked with the general education program to assess and report those results. Since the institution did not utilize any standardized testing to assess outcomes, each program was producing unique sets of data. According to the Director of the Office of University Assessment, the institution reported to the state “not a lot of data, but more summary descriptions of where we are and what we’ve accomplished.” (Personal communication, October 24, 2007)

Community College

The assessment experiences at the College of Southern Nevada (CSN) have been a recent phenomena. The assessment analyst at the community college joined the institution in 2006 and had been focused on conducting assessment summits to orient and train the faculty assessment coordinators for every degree and certificate program. These assessment coordinators reported the initial results of programmatic assessment in 2007. This represented the initial experience at the institution in systematic assessment reporting. At the time of this study, CSN had not developed an institutional assessment plan nor had they collected any appreciable assessment data.

In preparation for a regional accreditation site visit in 2006, CSN administered the *Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)* which served as the baseline for future assessment activities. In addition to CCSSE, CSN also conducted the *Noel Levitz Survey of Student Satisfaction*. Both of these standardized assessment activities were conducted to establish a foundation for student satisfaction so that future assessment activities can demonstrate areas of institutional improvement.

Triangulation Review

Prior to scheduling the interviews with the assessment officials in Nevada, the Northwest Commission on Accreditation of Colleges and Universities standards for accreditation were reviewed (refer to Appendix III). The Board of Regents Handbook as well as the Master Plan was read to determine assessment expectations at the institutional level. The Nevada System of Higher Education Accountability reports for 2003-04, 2004-05, and 2006-07 were also reviewed to determine the amount and content of assessment

data reported at the system level. This assessment data was not specific to institutions, but rather provided an overall assessment of the system. The demographics of the Nevada System of Higher Education were obtained from the system enrollment report repository.

The University of Nevada, Reno published a Student Outcomes Assessment Plan on the college's web site. This Assessment Plan did not contain evidence of assessment results, but provided direction to the reader on process of assessment. The actual results of assessment at University of Nevada, Reno were not evident either at the institution or the system. The College of Southern Nevada's web site provided no background information on results of assessment at the institution. The understanding of CSN's assessment activities was gained through interview only.

Outcome of Project

Based on the results from the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, the state system did not anticipate making any changes in the assessment policy. During an interview with the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, it was stated "Unless we are willing to make standardized assessment testing required for graduation or program completion, it would be very difficult for us to implement." (Personal communication, November 21, 2005) In addition, it was stated

We haven't had, in my opinion, the will of the Board or the mandate of the legislature or a budget item that would pay for it. That would be the three things that might make it happen. We have not had a board, legislative mandate and a budget that would pay for it. (Personal communication, November 21, 2005)

However, at the land grant institution, several new initiatives were being pursued. There was an attempt to redesign the assessment of the core curriculum. The institution had developed a classroom version of the *National Survey on Student Engagement* called the CLASSE (classroom survey of student engagement). This pilot project was being tested in an effort to describe and assess students at the classroom level. The land grant institution was also collaborating with the local school district, as well as their local community college (not the one in this study) to design a longitudinal tracking system to assess high school students through higher education to determine student success and persistence. The land grant institution also initiated collaboration with the excellence in teaching program to integrate assessment results into faculty development. Curriculum enhancement grants were offered to faculty who were interested in assessment and improving instruction. Faculty were eligible to apply for these grants and the stipends were meant to encourage faculty to innovate in the classroom with the intention of improving student learning. The Office of Assessment at the land grant institution published annual assessment findings and these reports were incorporated in the excellence in teaching faculty development program. This land grant institution made conscious efforts to collaborate assessment findings with faculty development within the institution.

At the community college, student learning outcomes were identified by program faculty for each degree and certificate program. The assessment coordinators for these programs conducted the assessment and reported the initial results of that assessment in June 2007. Recently, the institution launched an initiative to begin the process of assessing general education. The institution selected a standardized test to administer

starting fall 2007 which provided an assessment of general education. The standardized test selected by the community college was the MAPP (*Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress*). MAPP was an integrated test of general education skills and measured critical thinking, reading, writing and mathematics. Assessment results from MAPP will not be realized for the next two to three years. The applicability of *Work Keys*© as an assessment tool was not under consideration for adoption as a standardized assessment instrument. The assessment analyst at the community college felt that assessment was becoming embedded in the culture of the organization, but she acknowledged that assessment was in its infancy stage and it would take three to five years before meaningful assessment data was obtained and reported.

Summary

The conceptual framework for this study was implementation theory. The evolutionary process of implementation started with the tractability of the problem, ability of the policy to structure implementation, nonstatutory variables impacting implementation, and states in the implementation process (refer to Figure 1, pg. 12).

The Nevada policy on assessment of student learning was adopted in 2002 and applied to all institutions. The policy clearly identified assessment as the responsibility of each institution and should be based on institutional mission. The state policy relied on the regional accreditation association to provide an overall assessment of the institution. Within the state of Nevada, additional financial or technological resources were not made available to institutions to conduct assessment activities. The cost of assessment was included in the general operating budget of each institution. The state policy did not

clearly define what was to be assessed and reported and provided no commonality on assessment of general education instruments. Faculty were engaged in assessment and the Director of Office of University Assessment at the land grant institution and the Assessment Analyst at the community college reported over ten years of experience, collectively, in assessment. Their leadership of the assessment effort was evident through their years of work experience.

Both institutions articulated the state system assessment requirements for assessment and identified assessment practices that best fit the institutional mission. Both institutions recognized the responsibility of higher education to provide stakeholders with information on student performance. The state system of higher education in Nevada relied on the regional accreditation association to provide a review of the local institutional assessment policies and practices. The statewide accountability measures assessed the Nevada System of Higher Education rather than the individual institution. There was no evidence of intrastate or national institutional comparisons of these Nevada institutions.

CHAPTER SIX

KENTUCKY SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The system of post secondary education in Kentucky is consolidated into the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE). The Council on Postsecondary Education encompasses nine public institutions and several independent institutions. One of the nine public institutions is the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) which includes 16 community and technical colleges located on 65 campuses throughout the state. The Council on Postsecondary Education was initiated through passage by the state legislature of the Kentucky Postsecondary Education Improvement Act of 1997. One of the responsibilities of the CPE is to “develop and implement a strategic agenda for the postsecondary and adult education system that includes measures of educational attainment, effectiveness, and efficiency” (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2007, p. 7).

In an effort to provide some national benchmarks with which to assess state higher education systems, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2000) published *Measuring Up 2000*. The purpose of this publication was an attempt to provide consumers and stakeholders of higher education with information about the condition of higher education in each of the fifty states. The Center used publicly available data collected by federal agencies to provide a state by state comparison on selected performance categories. The performance categories which were selected by the Center for states to be graded were:

- Preparation – numbers of 18-24 year olds with a high school credential.
- Participation – numbers of high school graduates enrolling in college.
- Affordability – percent of income needed to pay for college expenses minus financial aid.
- Completion – number of students completing a bachelor’s degree within 5 years of high school.
- Benefits – value of an advanced degree (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000, Information Gap Section, ¶ 5).

The *Measuring Up* results for the state of Kentucky are reported in Table 9.

Table 9

Measuring Up Results for Kentucky

Grading Category	2000 Results	2002 Results	2004 Results
Preparation	C	C-	C-
Participation	D	C-	B-
Affordability	B	C	D-
Completion	C-	C	C
Benefits	D	C-	B
Learning*	I	I	P

Source: National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004, p.xx.

I = Incomplete; P = Pass

**Measuring Up 2000 and 2002* gave all states an Incomplete in student learning because there were no common benchmarks for student learning that would allow meaningful

state by state comparisons (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2002). The category of learning was defined as the degree to which students' knowledge and skills improve as a result of their education beyond high school and the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning were given a Pass in the *Measuring Up 2004* (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004).

The passing grade for Kentucky in the category of learning was a direct result of Kentucky's participation in the project conducted by the National Forum on College-Level Learning to investigate the feasibility of administering standardized tests to assess the outcome of student learning. The standardized tests utilized for this national project were *Work Keys*©, administered to community college students; and the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*, administered to college and university students.

Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education chose to participate in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project because they had been very involved in the initial formulation of the *Measuring Up* report card. During a restructuring of higher education in 1997, higher education officials were charged with the development of a strategic plan for higher education. As part of this strategic plan, the Kentucky system officials developed five public agenda questions which looked very much like the *Measuring Up* report card:

- Are more Kentuckians prepared for college?
- Is the Kentucky system affordable?
- Are more Kentuckians obtaining degree and credentials in postsecondary education?
- Are Kentucky graduates prepared for life and work?

- Are Kentucky communities and economies benefitting? (Personal communication, November 8, 2007)

Kentucky higher education officials were very interested in working identifying the indicators to answer these public agenda questions. During one of the interviews, it was stated “we thought by working with the Center on College Level Learning and the *Measuring Up* initiative, we would be able to create a triangulated index where we would be looking at direct measures of quality.” (Personal communication, November 8, 2007)

Results from Kentucky’s participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning are reported in Figure 4.

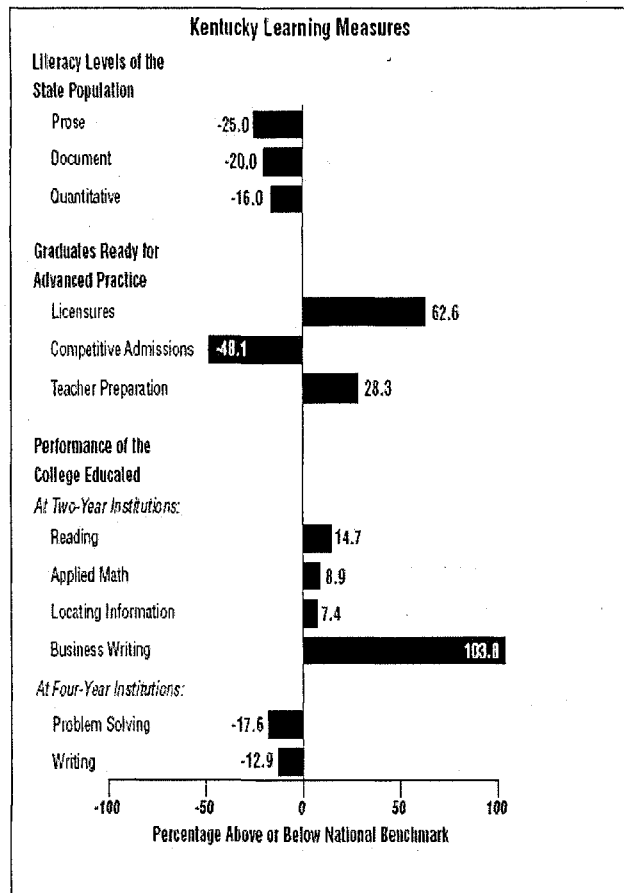


Figure 4. Results for Kentucky in National Forum project.

Source: Miller & Ewell,, 2005, p. 13.

State Policy on Assessment

Within the state of Kentucky, assessment of student learning in postsecondary institutions was based upon state and institutional level indicators of assessment. The state level indicators were results of student performance on statewide learning assessments administered in all institutions. Effective in 2001, the statewide learning assessment was the *National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)* at the four year colleges and universities. At the two year community and technical college level, the

statewide assessment tool was the *Community College Survey of Student Engagement* (CCSSE) which was implemented in the spring of 2006 (Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, 2007). In addition to NSSE at the four year level and CCSSE at the community and technical college level, the statewide indicators also included student performance on licensure and graduate school entrance exams. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education maintained a database of institutional performance on NSSE and has developed the initial year of institutional performance for the community and technical colleges. At the institutional level, it was expected that institutions would assess student engagement, civic participation and programmatic assessment of student learning outcomes.

Institutional Implementation

Land Grant Institution

Implementation of the state policy on assessment at the land grant institution was articulated through acknowledgement of the institution's participation in administering the NSSE. The Director of Assessment at the University of Kentucky understood that the state "wants institutions to be active in gaining information to document student learning outcomes and to identify units within departmental and college assessment plans."

(Personal communication, December 5, 2007)

In an effort to assess student learning at the program level, this land grant institution started a longitudinal study of student learning using the *Collegiate Learning Assessment*. This longitudinal study began in 2007 and the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* was

selected because of experiences learned through the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

In addition, this land grant institution had joined a national longitudinal study, called the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education to assess student learning outcomes with a cohort of 26 other institutions utilizing a myriad of assessment instruments. The goal of the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education was “to learn what teaching practices, programs, and institutional structures support liberal arts education and to develop methods of assessing liberal arts education” (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, 2008).

As a participant in the Wabash National Study, learning outcomes have been written for effective reasoning and problem solving, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, integration of learning, intercultural effectiveness, leadership, moral reasoning, and well-being. For each outcome, a different assessment instrument was selected. For example, to assess effective reasoning and problem solving outcomes, the *Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency* (CAAP) was administered. The Wabash National Study began in 2006 with assessments administered to 4,501 first year students. In spring 2007, 3,081 students from the first cohort returned for follow-up assessments and in fall 2007, the second round of assessments were administered to a new cohort of students (Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, 2008).

Community College

At the Jefferson Community and Technical College, implementation of the state policy on assessment of student learning was also articulated. In addition to CCSSE, this community college had developed a three year plan for student assessment at the program

level. Currently in the second year, the institution has implemented student learning outcomes for selected technical programs as well as selected general education departments. The Director of Institutional Effectiveness at this community and technical college has been engaged with faculty to develop a format for the reporting of programmatic student learning outcomes. Assessment of student learning was conducted by the faculty and the institution was developing a process for reporting the results of this assessment. This community college was also engaged with the local school districts to define exit competencies from high school and entrance competencies at college.

While results from the National Forum on College-Level Learning project were received, the institution had elected to develop local assessment instruments that were applicable to the institution. This community college utilized a standardized test from the University of Tennessee to assess critical thinking, and utilized parts of the *Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)* to assess reading. Participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project revolutionized personnel's awareness at this community college of the need to assess and report results of student learning. This community college identified assessment as a tool to communicate to the external community the value of their graduates.

Triangulation Review

Before the interviews were conducted with officials in Kentucky, this researcher read the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities accreditation standards on assessment (refer to Appendix III). The Kentucky Postsecondary Accountability Report, 2005-2006, was available on the Council on Postsecondary Education. The assessment

results for every institution in Kentucky were detailed in this report. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education also had available, through a database, the demographics of every institution in the state.

On the web site for the University of Kentucky, the results of the *National Survey of Student Engagement* for 2006 were explained. The Kentucky Community and Technical College System website contained assessment information on all the two year colleges in the state. Jefferson Community and Technical College's web site also provided an organization chart and timeline for assessment activities within the institution.

Outcome of Project

The Vice President of Academic Affairs at the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education indicated "the National Forum on College-Level Learning project did not provide anything that warranted a policy change" (Personal Communication, November 8, 2007). The Vice President acknowledged that Kentucky had launched a major initiative called *Double The Numbers*. This state legislative mandate required that Kentucky be at or above the education attainment level of the nation by 2020.

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education examined associate degree production and determined the system was on track to meet the goal. However, attainment of the baccalaureate degree was a different story. If Kentucky was to be at or above the national average in 2020, the number of college graduates living in Kentucky must grow from 400,000 to 800,000 and the current production would fall 200,000 short based on past trends. The current budget had incentives to reward institutions, increases anywhere from \$5,000 to \$15,000 per degree at each university. (Personal

communication, November 8, 2007) Participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project offered officials in Kentucky the opportunity to focus on quality as well as quantity.

Because of Kentucky's participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, the Council on Postsecondary Education was engaged in discussion with institutions to select and administer a direct assessment of learning. This assessment instrument had not been selected, but the potential assessment instruments being debated are either the CLA or the CAAP (*Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency*). The CLA was the instrument used in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project; but the CAAP was evaluated for adoption because of its linkage to ACT. Since all Kentucky high school students take the ACT, the Council on Postsecondary Education considered CAAP because adoption of CAAP as the assessment instrument would allow value added assessment from high school to postsecondary. Administration of CAAP would allow Kentucky to assess a student's performance at entry into higher education and then at exit from higher education. The Council on Postsecondary Education planned to assess colleges and universities during one year and the community and technical colleges the next year. The Council on Postsecondary Education felt this schedule would be logistically possible at capturing assessment data throughout all institutions of higher education in Kentucky.

Summary

The conceptual framework for this study was implementation theory. The evolutionary process of implementation started with the tractability of the problem,

ability of the policy to structure implementation, nonstatutory variables impacting implementation and states in the implementation process (refer to Figure 1).

The Kentucky policy on assessment of student learning was adopted in 1997 and applied to all institutions. The policy clearly identified assessment as the responsibility of each institution and should be based on institutional mission. The state policy identified system and institutional indicators of accountability. Within the state of Kentucky, additional financial or technological resources were not made available to institutions to conduct assessment activities. The cost of assessment was included in the general operating budget of each institution. The state policy defined NSSE and CCSSE as the assessment instruments required of all institutions. The land grant institution was involved in pilot projects aimed as assessment of student learning at the program level. The community college recognized assessment of student learning as a faculty driven process and adopted several measures of assessment.

In conclusion, assessment policy in Kentucky was standardized and implemented at the institutional level. Within the Council on Postsecondary Education as well as the local institutions, there was demonstrated a clear linkage of assessment to accountability. Officials in the state of Kentucky appreciated the need to provide accountability data to their stakeholders, rather than viewing assessment as only a requirement of accreditation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FINDINGS

Statement of the Problem

In 2003 and 2004, the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was conducted to determine the efficacy of national benchmarks to measure student learning in state higher education systems. The participants in the project were the systems of higher education in South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nevada.

This study examined how state participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project changed higher education system policy and institutional practices on assessment of student learning. The purpose of this study examined state higher education implementation practices for assessing student learning outcomes in selected land grant and community colleges before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

Review of the Method

The results of this study are limited to the states of Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. These states were selected as the units of analysis to ensure there was representation from different regional accreditation associations. To determine the implementation of state assessment policy at the institutional level, this study's theoretical framework was implementation theory. One land grant and one community college in each of the three states were included for data collection. This study focused on

policy change and implementation practices for assessing student learning based on the results from the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, the research questions which guided this study were:

1. What was the state higher education system's policy for assessing student learning before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
2. What practices of assessing student learning have been implemented at the institutional level following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
3. What are the similarities and/or differences in assessing student learning across the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning?

The principle data collection method for this descriptive multiple case study were interviews. To provide validity to the information gained during interviews, a review of various documents and web sites was conducted prior to the scheduling of the interviews. Regional accreditation association standards for assessment, system and institutional web sites, as well as various assessment reports were reviewed by the researcher. The table of documents reviewed to provide triangulation is in Table 3.

Findings

Chapters four, five and six of this study provided narratives to answer research questions one and two as they pertain to Oklahoma, Nevada, and Kentucky. This chapter provides a review of the findings to address research question three. In an effort to

establish a template for this data analysis, a cross case synthesis was developed and reported in Table 10.

Table 10

Cross Case Synthesis

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
Regional Accreditation Assessment Requirement	Institution identifies expected learning outcomes for each degree and certificate program	Organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program	Institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs
Assessment policy before participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning Project	Adopted in 2002 Accountability measures for state system, not institution Institution specific Heavy reliance on regional accreditation Cannot compare institutions intrastate	Adopted in 1991 Assess at admission Assess at midterm (general education) Assess at end of program Student satisfaction Ability to compare institutions intrastate	Adopted in 1997 Use of NSSE in four-year institutions Use of CCSSE in two-year institutions Ability to compare institutions intrastate
Assessment policy after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning Project	No change	No change	No change

Table 10 continued.

Cross Case Synthesis

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
New initiatives in the state	Pilot project with CLASSE at four year institution Use of MAPP at two year institution to assess general education Longitudinal study with public K-12 schools	Adoption of CLA to assess general education at four year institution Pay faculty stipends to participate in assessment Participation in national initiative – Achieving the Dream	Adoption of CLA to assess general education at four year institution Participation in national collaborative study to assess liberal arts general education Development of a three year plan to assess student learning at the two year college - targeted at technical degrees and general education

Case 1 = Nevada System of Higher Education

Case 2 = Oklahoma System of higher Education

Case 3 = Kentucky System of Higher Education

Each state included in this study represented a different regional accreditation association. All of the regional accreditation associations in this study have a level of expectation that institutions will identify learning outcomes for educational programs. The requirement for institutions to identify learning outcomes for educational programs was consistent across all cases.

Based on the effective date of statewide assessment policy, the states of Oklahoma and Kentucky demonstrated longer experience with assessment than the state of Nevada.

Oklahoma institutions of higher education had been participating in assessment more than a decade prior to the requirement in Nevada and six years prior to Kentucky.

The results of this study demonstrated there was no change in state policy for assessment following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project nor was there any intention of doing so. During the review of the system policies on assessment, the Nevada policy did not require any standardized assessment instrument to be utilized by the colleges within the state, nor did the state policy specify particular activities to be assessed. The Nevada policy did not encourage either interstate or intrastate comparison of learning outcomes by institution. The Nevada policy appeared to delegate the oversight responsibility for assessment to the regional accreditation association and was more focused on accountability of the system as a whole, rather than individual institutions. In fact, the only accountability data available on the system website pertained to the system, not specific institutions.

The Oklahoma system policy for assessment was very specific and all institutions within the state were required to assess at the same four levels. The Oklahoma system did not require standardized assessment instruments, but encouraged institutions to utilize nationally standardized instruments that supplied normative data. The web site for the Oklahoma System of Higher Education provided access to accountability reports on every institution within the state. The state Board of Regents also provided for the institutions to collect per credit hour fees from the students to support assessment activities at the local level.

The Kentucky System of Higher Education had a system policy that specified the requirement of all institutions to conduct assessment and report the results. Kentucky

adopted standardized instruments to be administered in all institutions that would allow for comparison of institutional performance within the state and against national norms. The Council on Postsecondary Education published an accountability report on an accessible web site which reported the results of assessment at every institution within the state.

This study reported some changes in assessment practice following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. The states of Oklahoma and Kentucky adopted the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* as the assessment instrument for the four year colleges based on experiences learned through participation in the project. The Nevada land grant institution had developed a classroom version of the *National Survey of Student Engagement* and intended to pilot this exam on their campus to assess general education. There were no community colleges who decided to adopt *Work Keys*® as an assessment instrument. The community college in Nevada had adopted the use of a standardized instrument to assess general education, but at the time of this study, there was no appreciable data to report. Each of the community colleges in these three states identified a renewed interest in assessment following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. The community colleges in Kentucky administered the *Community College Survey of Student Engagement*. The Oklahoma community college articulated a well defined plan to assess general education and the need to compare performance against other community colleges in the state and nationally.

In addition to standardized assessment instruments, institutions in Oklahoma and Kentucky recognized the benefit of participating in additional assessment initiatives and had selected appropriate national projects for each of their institutions. Oklahoma and

Kentucky expressed interest in participating on the national stage in the assessment arena and were committed to being able to compare institutional performance on a national basis.

The similarity that existed across these three states was the evidence of regional accreditation association requirements to perform assessment as well as a state system policy on assessment. There was also similarity in that the state policy on assessment was being implemented at the institutional level. There was evidence that institutions in all three states were providing financial incentives to faculty to conduct assessment and the institutions were supporting designated offices and officials responsible for assessment.

However, there were areas of difference across these states. The states of Oklahoma and Kentucky had adopted common assessment instruments to be used in all institutions; Nevada had not. Oklahoma and Kentucky were involved in other national assessment initiatives; Nevada was not. Oklahoma and Kentucky reported assessment results of institutions on a publicly accessed web site. Nevada only reported accountability measures on the system as a whole. Assessment of student learning in Oklahoma and Kentucky was measured not only among institutions within the state; but also nationally. Oklahoma and Kentucky seemed to appreciate the value of evaluating institutional performance against a national benchmark. Nevada articulated that until there was a state legislative mandate to compare performances of institutions, there would be no appetite for national comparisons.

Prior to participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, state assessment policy in Kentucky identified the NSSE and CCSSE as the standardized instruments for reporting assessment data. Although a standardized instrument was not

identified, Oklahoma's assessment policy was specific as to the timing and type of assessment data that needed to be reported to the state higher education agency. On the other hand, Nevada's policy delegated assessment to the institutional level without any specification as to the standardized instrument or timing of assessment data. There was a reported reliance in Nevada on the regional accreditation association to evaluate institutional assessment activities although typically those activities are not specified either. It was evident that the state systems of higher education in Oklahoma and Kentucky sought to compare institutions within the state; and where appropriate, benchmark institutions nationally. That comparative methodology was not evident in Nevada.

The importance of faculty involvement was also mentioned by all institutions in all three states. At the land grant institutions in Oklahoma and Nevada, there were identified financial incentives to reward faculty for participating in assessment efforts. Oklahoma provided stipends to faculty to assess general education over the summer and Nevada provided mini grants to faculty who were interested in incorporating assessment into professional development. None of the community colleges in these three states mentioned financial incentives to faculty. The state of Oklahoma was the only state authorizing institutions to charge an assessment fee to students in an effort to raise funds to support assessment at the institutional level.

It was evident that participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project did not alter state policy on assessment of student learning in either of the states. State system officials did not feel compelled to alter policies on assessment based on the results of this project. Two of the three state assessment officials commented that policy

change was not indicated based upon results from a pilot project as designed by the National Forum on College-Level Learning. In fact, one of the interviewees for this data collection stated “this project did not provide anything that warranted a policy change.” (Personal communication, November 8, 2007)

At the conclusion of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project, there were several initiatives launched based on the state’s results from participation. In two (Oklahoma and Kentucky) of the three states, the four-year institutions had adopted the *Collegiate Learning Assessment* (CLA) as the tool to assess evidence of student learning. These two states expressed interest in the CLA because of the experiences gained during the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. These same two states also acknowledged the ability of the state to benchmark institutional performance nationally through the utilization of the CLA.

None of the two year institutions in this study felt *Work Keys*© was a valuable tool. There was no consistency across the states at the two year level for assessing general education. Each state was choosing to do something different and only Oklahoma was participating in a national collaborative to assess student learning at the two year college level.

Since implementation theory was the theoretical framework for this study, it was evident that, at the institutional level in each of these three states, there was an understanding of the system policy on assessment. Each institution attempted to develop either local assessment instruments or utilize standardized tests to assess student learning. At the institutional level, all institutions in this study articulated the necessity to assess student learning and report that accountability information. Only the states of Oklahoma

and Kentucky articulated the need to benchmark institutional performance within the state and also nationally.

Summary

The third research question for this study sought to identify the similarities and/or differences in assessing student learning across the states before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. Based on the units of analysis for this study, one of the similarities was the requirement by the regional accreditation associations for institutions to identify expected learning outcomes. Also similar, was the consensus among all community colleges in all three states that *Work Keys*© was not an appropriate assessment instrument for two year students. Implementation theory was the theoretical framework for this study and all institutions within each state were able to articulate a compliance with state policy requirements for assessment.

Only the states of Oklahoma and Kentucky identified standardized assessment instruments which would allow comparisons of institutions nationally and within the state. The *Collegiate Learning Assessment* tool was adopted by the states of Oklahoma and Kentucky to assess general education at the four year institutions. Only Oklahoma and Nevada offered financial incentives to faculty to conduct assessment, and only Oklahoma authorized institutions to assess student fees to support assessment activities. It appeared that Oklahoma appreciated the financial burden to institutions to perform assessment activities and sought to provide some level of financial support.

While similarities and/or differences between each of the three states are evident, each state system of higher education, as well as the institutions, agreed that assessment

was important, valuable, and necessary. There appeared to be a commitment from all participants to seek the most appropriate means to assess student learning and communicate those results to all communities of interest. In fact, the states of Oklahoma and Kentucky indicated that participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project had resulted in a state wide effort to standardize assessment among all institutions within the state. State officials in these two states indicated that state policy makers would then be able to make intrastate and interstate comparisons of student learning.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Summary

In 2003 and 2004, the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was conducted to determine the efficacy of national benchmarks to measure student learning in state higher education systems. The participants in the project were the systems of higher education in South Carolina, Kentucky, Illinois, Oklahoma, and Nevada. The intended result of the National Forum on College-Level Learning project was to demonstrate that state policy makers could determine the value of their investment into higher education for their respective states. Since higher education consumes vast financial resources from the federal government, state legislatures, families, and students, the net effect of this project, sponsored by the National Forum on College-Level Learning, allowed state policy makers in one state to compare outcomes of college level learning across state lines.

This study examined how state participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project changed system policy and institutional practices on assessment of student learning. The purpose of this study was to examine state higher education implementation practices for assessing student learning outcomes in selected land grant and community colleges before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project.

The results of this study are limited to the states of Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. These states were selected as the units of analysis to ensure there was representation from different regional accreditation associations. The theoretical framework for this study was implementation theory. It was the intent of the researcher to determine the implementation of state assessment policy at the institutional level. Data reported in this study were collected from one land grant institution and one community college in each of these three states. This study focused on policy change and implementation practices for assessing student learning based on the participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. The research questions which guided this study were:

1. What was the state higher education system's policy for assessing student learning before and after participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
2. What practices of assessing student learning have been implemented at the institutional level following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?
3. What are the similarities and/or differences in assessing student learning across the states participating in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project?

The data collection methods included scheduled telephone interviews with the assessment officials at the state level as well as identified assessment officials at the land grant institution and the community college. Prior to the scheduled interviews, the researcher mined additional sources of information to gain a baseline understanding of

assessment policy and practice before conducting the interviews. The documents which were reviewed prior to the interviews are listed in Table 3.

Discussion

As we conclude this first decade of the 21st century, accountability for student learning remains a topic of debate in higher education. A college degree represents the collective efforts of many faculty, students, peers and staff. Colleges and universities make claims about this educational experience, and society regards this degree as a significant credential. Students, parents, trustees, politicians, and society at large have a right to expect that the results of higher education will be what are claimed and that there will be evidence of student learning. In the early 1990's, there was a national outcry for educational reform. The National Governor's Association published a report on education; and in the preface of the report, Task Force Chairman, John Ashcroft, then Governor of Missouri, defended state intervention into assessment by stating,

The public has a 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. (cited in Nettles, Cole, & Sharp, 1997, p. 11)

In 2006, United States Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings commissioned a review of the status of higher education in the United States. This review was predicated on the charge that the system of higher education in the United States needed to improve in dramatic ways. During the year long review, the Commission found an "absence of

accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. x). In the final report from the Commission, the panel members stated:

We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all the other reforms we propose. Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must be willing to share this information with students and families. This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 4)

One of the recommendations from the Commission was that postsecondary institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p.24). This Commission also recommended that institutions perform interstate comparisons of student learning and that the results of these comparisons be reported publicly.

The Spellings Commission was accused of confronting rather than engaging leaders in higher education. Secretary Spellings rejected that complaint stating “the Commission produced a very substantive body of work....developed through a very open, transparent, far-reaching process that has kick started a lot of initiative in the higher education community and a lot of awareness outside of the community” (Inside Higher Ed, October 6, 2008).

While the Spellings Commission was seen by some to be controversial, the fact of the matter is that higher education consumes vast financial resources from the federal government, state legislatures, families and students. In this century of declining sources of funding for education, the ability of higher education to be accountable to the public is paramount. Higher education remains one of the last standing industries seemingly not accountable for performance. The K-12 system of education is accountable to state and federal government, health care is accountable to third party payers and patients, publicly traded companies are accountable to shareholders, and private business is accountable to the customer. Almost every industry in the United States, except higher education, is accountable to the consuming public.

Why Should Assessment Matter?

As an activity, it should be apparent that assessment has stakeholders in the political arena. Central to this debate is whether assessment should be a state or federal issue. Officials in higher education should become proactive in developing strong assessment policies and practices to keep the issue at a local and state level and not succumb to a mandated federal activity. The regional accreditation associations have developed standards for assessment; but have been unable to provide any consistent framework for how to conduct assessment. It is thought that the regional accreditation associations will be revising standards to require more levels of accountability; but this lack of conformity among regional accreditation associations requires local institutions to become more involved, informed, and proactive in performing assessment at the institutional level.

Assessment is an activity that higher education institutions and officials should become passionate about. Higher education produces an excellent product. What are we afraid of? Why are we not able to tell our story about student success with hard facts? Why are we concerned about being compared to other benchmark institutions? We should want to get better data on how prepared our students are for the 21st century and the global economy. Assessment should be welcomed as an opportunity to evaluate and improve performance; rather than a dreaded requirement from some faceless political entity.

Assessment provides the opportunity for trend analysis to document improvement in policy and practices. Assessment provides the ability to benchmark institutional performance against other similar institutions, whether intrastate or nationally. Assessment activities need to be identified by state agencies and applied at the local level; rather than having to adopt a national assessment instrument which might not be relevant to the local institutional mission. Results of assessment provide assurance to the degree recipient that a level of learning has occurred, assessed, and validated against a standard. Higher education should be proud of their actions and seek ways to demonstrate that success to the public. As one of the interviewees for this study stated:

If we don't become defensive in higher ed, and we look at this data as educators who are concerned about learning and the success of our students, we should want to do something here. We should want to get better data at this level on how prepared our students are for the 21st century and the global economy. I think we have to do that, we have to be more transparent about it. I'm one of those who believe it should be used for continuous improvement. (Personal communication, November 8, 2007)

This study sought to increase awareness of assessment policy by studying the effects of assessment policy in states who participated in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. Assessment as part of an institution's culture is a fairly recent phenomena. Institutions of higher education struggle with the mechanics of conducting assessment within the institution. This study provides one baseline of experiences learned in the states of Oklahoma, Kentucky and Nevada. As sources of revenue become increasingly limited, higher education must be able to publicly state the outcomes of investment into their institution. This study helps institutions in all states learn from the experiences of these state institutions of higher education and better adopt an assessment methodology that works for their institutional climate.

As one of the interviewees in this study so aptly shared, "assessment of student learning has become central to the mission of colleges and universities." (Personal communication, October 24, 2007) Higher education officials can no longer hide from the reality that consumers of higher education want to know the value of their investment in higher education. Assessment of student learning within an institution validates that investment. Assessment, as an activity, whether voluntary or mandated, is destined to become part of the culture of every institution in higher education.

Recommendations for Further Research

From the experiences of this study, this researcher identified that the investment of time and money to travel to the states of Oklahoma, Kentucky, and northern Nevada would have added greater depth and value to the interviews. While the telephone interviews provided answers to the questions asked, being able to interview face to face

might have garnered a deeper understanding of assessment policy and practices. Some possible areas of future research of assessment activities are:

1. Evaluate progress within the next five years in the states of Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky to determine improved levels of student learning as compared to the results reported in the initial National Forum on College-Level Learning project.
 - a. Evaluate any additional assessment initiatives at the land grant institutions and community colleges in Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky.
 - b. Include the experiences in Illinois and South Carolina and evaluate the changes in policy and/or institutional practice following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project. Did the land grant institutions have similar experience? Did the community colleges have similar experiences?
2. Examine the validity of the assessment instruments for conducting assessment of student learning in both university and community colleges. Which ones work and which ones don't? Have there been any identified measures which assess student learning best?
3. What other national initiatives to evaluate assessment methodologies are in progress? What are the parameters of those national initiatives?
4. To what extent are faculty involved in assessment? What motivates a faculty member to get involved in assessment? What are faculty perceptions of assessment?

At the present time, the U.S. Department of Education does not mandate assessment, but it would behoove policy makers and stakeholders in higher education to become proactive participants and innovators in assessment. As society becomes more demanding for accountability, higher education must look for effective methods of providing the assurance that higher education is working. The No Child Left Behind federal legislation brought accountability measures to the K-12 system of education. Perhaps higher education will find a suitable measure of accountability before succumbing to a potential federal mandate, No College Student Left Behind.

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOL

STATE SYSTEM OFFICIALS

The standard set of interview questions asked is:

1. What is your job title?
2. What are your job responsibilities?
3. What is the state's policy on assessment of student learning?
4. How are you involved in assessment of student learning within the state?
5. What assessment data are institutions required to report to the State System of Higher Education?
6. Are standardized tests required by the State System of Higher Education? If so, which ones are used?
7. Why did the state consider participating in the pilot project of the National Forum on College-Level Learning?
8. Has the state received the results for the state? If so, are there plans to modify state policy on assessment? If so, what are the planned revisions?
9. Did any new state initiatives on assessment of student learning arise following participation in the National Forum on College-Level Learning project? If so, what are they?
10. Do you have any additional opinions about the future of assessment student learning in your state?

In closing the telephone interview, thank the interviewee for their time and offer to forward the transcript to them for editing.

APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOL
INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT OFFICERS

1. What is your job title?
2. What are your job responsibilities?
3. How are you involved in assessment within your institution?
4. What do you understand the state system's policy on assessment of student learning to be?
5. What assessment data is your institution required to report to the State System of Higher Education?
6. Are you aware of your state's participation in the pilot project of the National Forum on College-Level Learning during 2002 and 2003?
7. Have you reviewed the results for your state?
8. Are there recent plans to modify the institutional policy requirements on assessment? If so, talk about it.
9. Are there any recent initiatives (within the last two years) at the institutional level to support the state policy on assessment of student learning?
10. Do you have additional opinions about the future of assessing student learning in your institution?

In closing the interview, thank the interviewee for their time. Offer to forward the transcript to them for editing.

APPENDIX III: REGIONAL ACCREDITATION ASSOCIATIONS

Organization	Primary Region	Web Site
Middle States Association of Colleges And Schools	Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, Republic of Panama	http://www.msche.org
New England Association of Schools and Colleges	Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont	http://www.neasc.org
North Central Association of Colleges And Universities	Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming including Schools of the Navajo Nation	http://www.nca/higherlearningcommission.org
Northwest Association of Colleges and Universities	Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington	http://www.nwccu.org
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools	Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia	http://www.sacs.org
Western Association of Schools and Colleges	California, Hawaii, US territories of Guam and American Samoa, Republic of Palau, Federated States of Micronesia, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianna Islands, Republic of the Marshall Islands	http://www.wascweb.org

APPENDIX IV: SOCIAL/BEHAVIORAL IRB – EXPEDITED

REVIEW APPROVAL NOTICE



**Social/Behavioral IRB – Expedited Review
Approval Notice**



NOTICE TO ALL RESEARCHERS:

Please be aware that a protocol violation (e.g., failure to submit a modification for any change) of an IRB approved protocol may result in mandatory remedial education, additional audits, re-consenting subjects, researcher probation suspension of any research protocol at issue, suspension of additional existing research protocols, invalidation of all research conducted under the research protocol at issue, and further appropriate consequences as determined by the IRB and the Institutional Officer.

DATE: September 11, 2007
TO: Dr. Cecilia Maldonado, Educational Leadership
FROM: Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
RE: Notification of IRB Action by Dr. J. Michael Stitt, Chair *msl*
Protocol Title: **Assessment in Higher Education: A Case Study on Assessment of Student Learning in 3 States**
Protocol #: 0707-2413

This memorandum is notification that the project referenced above has been reviewed by the UNLV Social/Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) as indicated in Federal regulatory statutes 45 CFR 46. The protocol has been reviewed and approved.

The protocol is approved for a period of one year from the date of IRB approval. The expiration date of this protocol is September 10, 2008. Work on the project may begin as soon as you receive written notification from the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS).

PLEASE NOTE:

Attached to this approval notice is the **official Informed Consent/Assent (IC/IA) Form** for this study. The IC/IA contains an official approval stamp. Only copies of this official IC/IA form may be used when obtaining consent. Please keep the original for your records.

Should there be *any* change to the protocol, it will be necessary to submit a **Modification Form** through OPRS. No changes may be made to the existing protocol until modifications have been approved by the IRB.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond September 10, 2008, it would be necessary to submit a **Continuing Review Request Form 60 days** before the expiration date.

If you have questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at OPRSHumanSubjects@unlv.edu or call 893-2794.

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