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### **State policies matter to assessing student learning in higher education**

Findings from two national surveys—one at the state level and one at the institutional level—show that when states make assessing student learning outcomes a priority, institutions in those states are more likely to do so. The first survey, conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), was administered to provosts at all degree-granting institutions of higher education in the U.S. and asked about the methods used to assess student outcomes, the reasons for engaging in assessment activity, the uses made of the resulting information, and perceived challenges to engaging in assessment (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). The second survey, conducted by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), was administered to state higher education executive officers in all 50 states and addressed specific policies, mandates, and requirements regarding student outcomes assessment put in place by state authorities (Zis, Boeke, & Ewell, 2010).

The NCHEMS study found that eight states that were unusually active with respect to student outcomes assessment: Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Comparing the assessment activities of institutions in these eight “assessment active” states as reported by provosts on the NILOA survey with their counterparts in states reporting less policy attention to assessment revealed some notable statistically significant differences:

- Institutions located in the eight “assessment intensive” states were more likely to use general knowledge and skills measures such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, or ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly MAPP). Fifty eight percent of public institutions in the eight states reported doing this compared to only thirty eight percent in the other states. Similar differences were found as well between private institutions in the eight states and those located elsewhere.
- Institutions in the eight assessment intensive states were also much more likely (83 percent) to use valid samples to represent the whole institution when administering national student surveys than other states (58 percent). Again, these differences held for both public and private institutions.
- Departments at institutions in the eight states were more likely to use employer surveys (76 percent compared with 62 percent) and employer interviews (57 percent compared with 47 percent). Once again, results for private institutions mirrored those obtained for their public institutional counterparts.

- Finally, institutions located in the eight “assessment intensive” states were somewhat more likely (83 percent) than those located in other states (76 percent) to have a common set of student learning outcomes that applied to all undergraduate students.

Taken together, these results strongly suggest that aggressive state policies related to student learning assessment will likely induce institutions to do more of it. This finding would be unremarkable, if reassuring, to state policymakers if it applied only to public institutions. But the fact that differences of similar magnitude and direction occurred for private institutions is worth noting. Evidently, state policies on assessment have an important indirect effect on institutional behaviors as well, probably through such mechanisms as public communication by state leaders, statewide assessment consortia sponsored by state authorities, and conferences and workshops open to all institutions.

According to Peter Ewell, NCHEMS Vice President who was involved in both studies, “It’s not often that a link between state policy and institutional action can be actually demonstrated. But it seems to be true for assessment. If states pay attention to assessment, institutions--both public and private--seem to do more of it.”

Unfortunately, state policies do not seem to have had an impact on whether institutions post assessment information on their websites, according to another NILOA study (Jankowski & Makela, 2010). In contrast to the strong correlation between state mandate and institutional assessment practices, state policymakers in the eight “assessment intensive” states may not be fully getting what they want because their institutions are not reporting information to the public in a way that is more accessible than institutions located in less active states.

All told, these findings suggest that state policy—acting directly or indirectly—can indeed influence what institutions do in the realm of assessing student learning outcomes. But these findings should not be taken to support proactive state engagement without careful consideration of a given assessment policy’s intentions. The eight states singled out for consideration, for example, vary a good deal with respect to the kinds of outcomes they decided to assess and the uses to which the resulting data are to be put at both the state and institutional levels. Intentional choices were made about these two questions in each of these states. They should be in other states as well.

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The NILOA Report, “Connecting State Policies on Assessment with Institutional Assessment Activity,” may be retrieved in pdf form at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/NILOAstatestudy2010.htm>. For more information, contact Staci Provezis, [sprovez2@illinois.edu](mailto:sprovez2@illinois.edu). NILOA web site: [www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org).