



**POLICY  
MATTERS**

# State-Level Assessment of Student Learning

*As our nation faces increasing competitiveness in the global economy, policymakers need effective ways to assess and increase our “educational capital” at the state and national levels.*

What knowledge and skills do our nation’s college graduates have? What contributions do our colleges and universities make to the development of these skills? In recent years, policymakers, the business community, and education leaders have been asking crucial questions about our most important product of higher education—student learning.

Despite the growing urgency of these questions, answers have been hard to come by. In higher education, there has never been consensus as to what knowledge and skills we ought to be producing, nor have there been sufficient tools to measure higher learning. There has not been a collective political will to undertake the task, nor the resource commitment to accomplish it. But after two decades of effort, we are finally moving closer to finding some answers.

## **Observations**

**An “assessment movement” emerged in the mid-1980s, based on concern about the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. But the underlying belief was that it is the role of departments and institutions, not the state, to evaluate student learning.**

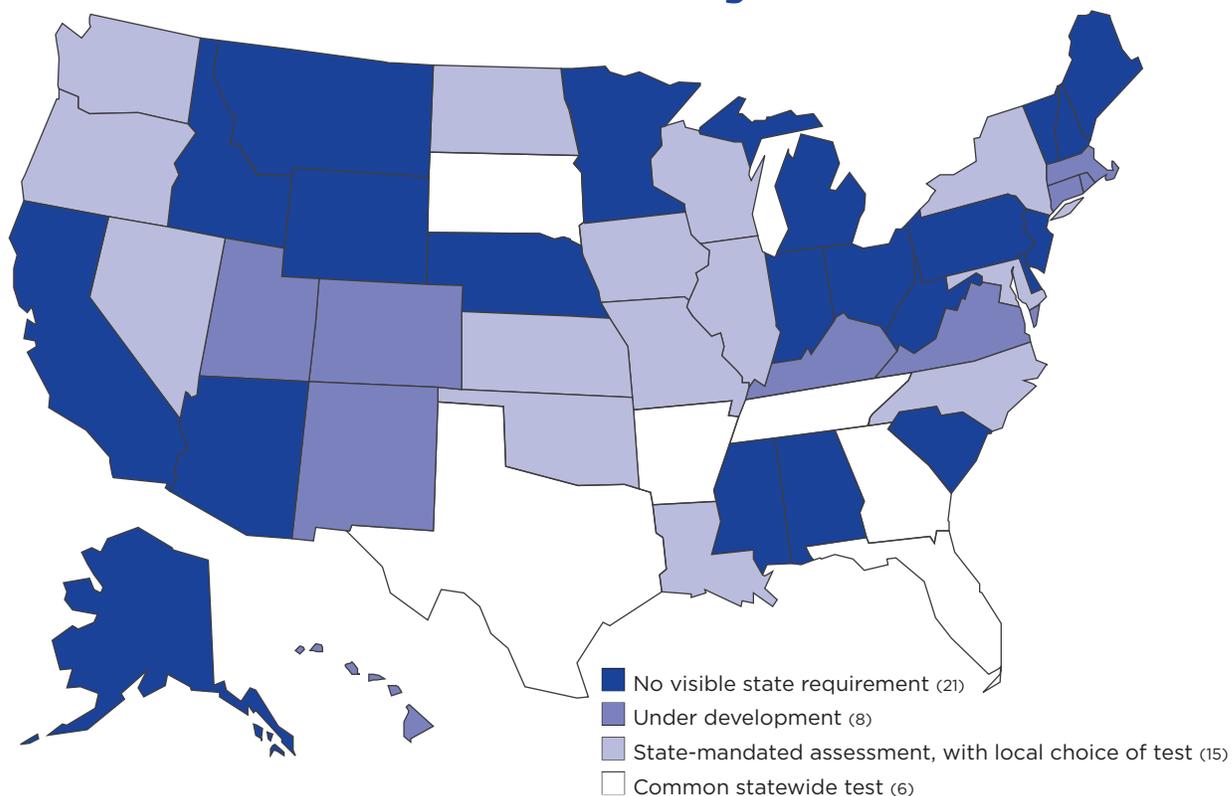
This movement stimulated growth of an assessment industry. Assessment experts began to define student learning outcomes in general ways and to develop tools to assess and improve student learning.

**An “accountability movement” emerged in the 1990s, focusing attention on a broad array of public policy issues such as access and affordability. For the most part, however, it missed the boat on student learning.**

This movement spurred the development of state report cards. These compared institutional performance on various issues, but states rarely tackled the difficult subject of student learning—except to collect information on licensure pass rates on professional exams. This occurred, in part, because of widely held beliefs that no single set of outcomes would apply across diverse programs and institutions and that state legislatures should not intrude into academic matters.

**By 2000, a number of states had established programs for measuring student learning— for purposes of certification of individual students, institutional improvement, or accountability. However, because of the variability of instruments**

## State Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes: 2000



**Source:** "Assessing Student Learning Outcomes: A Supplement to Measuring Up 2000," by Peter Ewell and Paula Ries, December 2000.

### **within and between states, the nation was no closer to having answered key public policy questions.**

Only six states used a common test to assess student learning across institutions, and these included both nationally-normed as well as state-developed tests. Fifteen states mandated assessment, but allowed local choice of tests. Eight states were in the process of developing a common approach to outcomes assessment, and twenty-one states had no visible state requirement for assessing student learning outcomes. (see map)

### **National policymakers have addressed these issues as well, calling for better information on college-level learning.**

When the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education issued its first national report card

on higher education (*Measuring Up 2000*), it graded all fifty states "Incomplete" on student learning due to lack of comparable national data. In response, the Pew Charitable Trusts sponsored the National Forum on College-Level Learning in 2001, which produced consensus that we need a way to measure our "educational capital" in a comparable way across states.

Since then, the National Governors Association has described student learning as our most critical accountability measure and is supporting efforts to integrate student learning data into statewide accountability systems. Regional accrediting associations are increasingly insisting that student learning be demonstrated for accreditation purposes. Also, in the proposed reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (H.R. 4283), Congress is calling for a study of "the best practices of States in assessing

undergraduate postsecondary student learning, particularly as such practices relate to public accountability.”

**Assessment experts continue to respond to the call, with many innovative projects to define what we need to know about postsecondary student learning and developing instruments for accomplishing the task. But their efforts do not add up to a clear set of indicators for statewide assessment.**

Described under Resources below, recent efforts include attempts to develop student learning outcomes in specific disciplines, to measure the institutional contribution to student learning or the value added, to measure effective educational practices, and to examine institutions’ impact on their graduates’ subsequent lives.

**Most recently, a feasible approach to state-level assessment of student learning has emerged, offering comparable learning data across five states. The opportunity is there for more states to become involved.**

The National Forum on College-Level Learning did more than raise awareness. By 2002, it had developed a prototype for measuring student learning at the state level and since then, has conducted a five-state pilot study. With assistance from the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), it developed a set of standard statewide indicators of student learning and the results were presented in *Measuring Up 2004*.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that pressures will increase on higher education to document the learning outcomes of college graduates. The stakes have risen and the lens has shifted, with a new focus on state-level performance and policy responses to improve student learning. But we need to develop tools that not only answer state and national accountability

demands, but simultaneously support institutional improvement efforts. Increasingly, institutions will have the opportunity to participate in state-level discussions and to examine their performance in light of state benchmarks. This should provide useful information to help understand what colleges and universities are doing well and not so well, and how to improve their teaching and learning practices. There has never been a better time to get involved and to make the extra effort.

## Resources

**National Forum on College-Level Learning**—The National Forum developed a model to measure across states what college students know and are able to do. Results of a recently completed pilot study make it possible to assess both the intellectual capital available to states and the contributions their colleges and universities collectively make to it. [collegelevellearning.org](http://collegelevellearning.org)

**National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education**—The National Center produces a biennial national report card on higher education, *Measuring Up*. The 2004 edition presents, for the first time, data on student learning from the five-state pilot project conducted by the National Forum on College-Level Learning. [highereducation.org](http://highereducation.org)

**Quality in Undergraduate Education (QUE)**—QUE is a national project of faculty at selected institutions who are developing discipline-based standards or student learning outcomes for six undergraduate majors. It is sponsored by the Education Trust and the National Association of Systems Heads (NASH), in association with Georgia State University. [gsu.edu/~wwwque](http://gsu.edu/~wwwque)

**Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)**—The Council on Aid to Education (CAE), in partnership with RAND, has undertaken the CLA project, an initiative to assess the quality of undergraduate education by measuring the value added, or the institutional contribution to student learning. [cae.org/content/pro\\_collegiate.htm](http://cae.org/content/pro_collegiate.htm)

**National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE)**—NSSE, headquartered at Indiana University, and CCSSE, at the University of Texas at Austin, measure empirically confirmed “good practices” in undergraduate education—behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college. These offer indirect measures for institutional quality. [indiana.edu/~nsse](http://indiana.edu/~nsse) • [ccssee.org](http://ccssee.org)

**American Association for Higher Education (AAHE)**—AAHE promotes effective approaches to assessment and holds the annual Assessment Forum. Currently, AAHE has joined with NSSE on the Documenting Effective Educational Practice project (Project DEEP), an initiative to examine 20 effective colleges and universities to learn what they do to promote student success.

[aahe.org/initiatives/assessment.htm](http://aahe.org/initiatives/assessment.htm) • [aahe.org/DEEP](http://aahe.org/DEEP)

**Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)**—AAC&U's assessment activities include the Project on Accreditation and Assessment (PAA). This project aims to influence revisions of accreditation standards to place greater emphasis on student achievement, and has worked to build consensus among regional and national accreditors and higher education associations on outcomes for, and methods of, assessing liberal learning. [aacu.org/issues/assessment](http://aacu.org/issues/assessment)

Collegiate Results Survey (CRS)—CRS, designed by Robert Zemsky at the University of Pennsylvania, measures the contributions institutions make to the academic achievement and subsequent lives of their graduates. [stanford.edu/group/ncpi/unspecified/students\\_parents\\_toolkit/cr.html](http://stanford.edu/group/ncpi/unspecified/students_parents_toolkit/cr.html)

National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI)—NCPI at Stanford University (Calif.) has conducted research on assessment of student learning and its relationship to public accountability systems and regional accreditation. [stanford.edu/group/ncpi/index.html](http://stanford.edu/group/ncpi/index.html)