

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

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State-Level Assessment Policy
Coordinating Board for Higher Education
December 8, 2005

DESCRIPTION

Policymakers throughout the nation continue to emphasize the importance of using evidence-based information as a foundation for high-stakes and continuous-improvement decisions to positively impact teaching and learning. The intent of this board item is to provide the board a context for discussion about Missouri's public policy framework for assessment of student learning.

Background

Missouri's experimentation with public policy on assessment of student learning dates back to the mid-1980s when then Governor John Ashcroft challenged higher education to demonstrate the value associated with a collegiate education. By design, Missouri used a consensus-building approach with institutions. At the same time, the Higher Learning Commission, the regional accrediting agency for Missouri, established expectations for institutions to design programs to assess student learning for institutional improvement. Missouri also encouraged institutions to increase assessment activity through a performance funding strategy, Funding for Results, which provided incentives to institutions for assessment, and eventually for evidence of student learning in general education and in the major. In addition, institutions are expected to identify how student learning will be assessed beyond classroom assignments in all new program proposals.

While institutions use student performance data as a basis for placement decisions at point of entry, there is extensive variation in institutional approaches. Furthermore, once students matriculate, the extent to which they are required to participate in assessment activities varies. Except for teacher education programs that have uniformity based on state-mandated entry and exit tests, assessment decisions at Missouri's institutions are largely decentralized. Institutions have full latitude to determine the type and number of assessment instruments, minimal standards, the extent to which sampling is used, whether results are linked with consequences for students, programs, and/or the institution, and types of design features incorporated, e.g., control for inputs or establishment of comparative groups.

Throughout the years, Missouri institutions have worked individually and collectively to develop assessment programs that are responsive to both external and internal constituencies. In addition, public institutions have participated in a grass-roots assessment consortium, the

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Missouri Assessment Consortium (MAC), since 1991 to promote good practice and share exemplary models.

Overall, the amount of assessment occurring at Missouri institutions has increased dramatically. Despite extensive activity, however, institutions constantly face challenges such as expense, competing design needs, and opposition from vested groups that thwart their ability to sustain and grow assessment efforts.

Missouri, along with other states, also continues to struggle with providing clear evidence of learning gains at a particular college or university and the relative value of the state's higher education system.

In response, 33 Missouri institutions formed a president- and chancellor-sanctioned assessment consortium, the Measuring Value Added Student Learning Consortium (MVASL) to forge state-level discussions about and experimentation with common assessment approaches. MVASL has membership from all postsecondary sectors (public, independent, and proprietary). Several MVASL members have been involved in a pilot project with the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) while others are experimenting with alternative approaches. From its inception, MVASL was designed to provide a context for informing statewide discussion about assessment policy.

Arguably, there has been a void in terms of a public policy framework guiding institutional assessment and ensuring the development of unified systems that serve all stakeholders, as well as developing progressively more sophisticated systems for analyzing learning gains. While most of campus assessment has evolved without the sanction of official state-level policy, it may be timely for the CBHE to initiate a process for the development of public policy guidelines which would influence the evolution of future institutional assessment agendas.

The MVASL, because of its cross-sector representation and official status, may be a suitable venue for synthesizing the work of many other individuals and organizations into recommendations for a comprehensive, workable public policy framework for assessment of student learning outcomes. A unified policy could establish major purposes for assessment, define central characteristics, and describe in broad terms the data products that would be created by program- and/or campus-wide assessments. Attached is a summary of ideas associated with each category.

Conclusion

Consortium institutions continue to implement a variety of strategies for campus-wide assessment. Institutions benefit from these experiences by developing flexible and workable assessments that meet a broad range of needs and by having faculty pool their perspectives as unique assessment systems evolve. The Coordinating Board has the potential to provide guidelines as a foundation for the continued development of campus-level assessment policies and priorities. The following questions are suggested as a catalyst for discussion:

- Is it desirable for Missouri to develop public policy assessment guidelines?

- If yes, what essential elements should be included in a public policy framework on assessment?
- Should learning gains be emphasized by the state in a public policy framework on assessment?
- What purposes should campus assessment products be intended to fulfill? What units of analysis should be primary?
- What should be the role of state policymakers in the development of institutional assessment programs?
- Can/should the CBHE define a process for guiding policy development in this area?

STATUTORY REFERENCE

Section 173.005.2(7), RSMo, CBHE statutory responsibility for gathering data from state-supported institutions

RECOMMENDED ACTION

This is a discussion item only.

ATTACHMENT

Brainstorming Session on State Assessment Policy