Educational Quality, Outcomes Assessment, and Policy Change: The Virginia Example

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ABSTRACT

The higher education system in the Commonwealth of Virginia in the United States provides a case model for how discussions regarding educational quality and assessment of that quality have affected institutions' policy decisions and implementation. Using Levin's (1998) policy analysis framework, this essay explores how assessment of student outcomes has affected educational policy and change.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education systems around the globe have undergone deep structural changes, spurred by advances in technology, increased accessibility by a wider range of students, and expanded ideas about the purpose of higher education. Technological innovations have had a significant impact on postsecondary education by facilitating increases in online learning, by enhancing corporate-academic partnerships, and by increasing globalization and putting education within reach of more individuals around the world. These changes have resulted in the creation of new policies to guide education and new ways to judge the quality of that education. This paper examines aspects of one policy framework to look at a single state system in the United States as a case study to demonstrate the ways that educational policy, institutions, and governing bodies affect and define the "quality" of education.

In the United States, increased accessibility has been the result of the G.I. Bill of 1944 that provided educational funding and loans for returning WWII veterans; the bill provided a means to higher education in the 1950s and 1960s for previously denied groups, thus democratizing higher education in a way previously unknown in this country. Educational expansion has also been tied to increased economic growth and to a view of education as way to increase employment opportunities (Teichler, 2006) and to secure the place of a country in the world order

(Rising above the gathering storm, 2007). The Higher Education Act of 1965 continued this trend by providing to students in economic need financial assistance for postsecondary and higher education, thus opening the doors even wider for a more heterogeneous group of students. With increasing numbers of students entering higher education—in some countries, more than 50% of the age cohort (UNESCO, 2003)—have come concerns about access, diversity, and mobility. This "massification" of higher education (Guri-Rosenblit, Sebkova, & Teichler, 2007) has increased the heterogeneity of consumers of educational services and has raised questions of accountability and standards.

In numerous public and research reports, questions regarding the purpose and effectiveness of higher education have fed these concerns. In the United States, the December 8, 1975, cover article in Newsweek magazine, "Why Johnny Can't Write," argued that college graduates as well as graduates of law, business, and journalism schools had inadequate writing skills. The report of a federal commission created by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, "A Test of Leadership" (2006), reported more recently that "over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined." These pronouncements regarding the shortcomings of U.S. higher education can be found in several papers and reports over the last 20 years, among them the National Institute of Education's Involvement in Learning (1984), and the National Governors' Association (NGA) report, Time for Results (1986), and Rising above the gathering storm (2007). Among the seven questions addressed by the NGA was "How much are college students really learning?" Because of the close links between education and a dynamic workforce, as students graduate from colleges and universities and have difficulty finding jobs, policy finger pointing becomes more intense. In the last several years in the United States, there has been much political controversy about the job market, and figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Bartsch, 2009) provide contradictory numbers that indicate that labor force participation and earnings growth have increased for only select groups in the United States. Such ambiguous findings have been used by many to suggest that the link between education and the workforce has not been strong enough. Clearly, there seems to be a need for change.

Given governmental—both state and federal—influences on education, the increasing cascade of criticism would predictably result in changes and additions to policies that direct, either through inducements or mandates, changes in how colleges and universities approach the learning of their students (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2002; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). As Jones (1996) points out, "The public and other stakeholders in higher education" wanted students' abilities to improve so that they could "communicate effectively, think critically, and solve problems" to ensure a quality workforce and an educated citizenry. However, as Hearn and Holdsworth point out, in the U.S. particularly, the quality of education provided to students is only indirectly under the control of the government, in part because the focus has historically been more on controlling the forms of the orga-

nization rather than prescribing the educational content or pedagogical approach. In fact, decisions regarding education content, methods, delivery, and assessment are made locally (see Meyer, 1977).

With this piecemeal organization of the oversight of higher education in the U.S., it is difficult to systematically evaluate decisions made regarding curriculum and student learning. An evaluation of policy decisions and their effectiveness must incorporate all levels of oversight—local, state, and federal—particularly as they are channeled through accreditation standards and through the needs of employers. Complicating such an evaluation is the fact that many decisions in higher education are made without external oversight. This is not to say that centralized systems work better; there is, in fact, no empirical evidence that supports this approach as necessarily beneficial. However, it has been a conscious decision in the U.S. to create a hierarchical framework.

Levin (1998) provides a theoretical framework for the examination of policy decisions, particularly in the education arena. According to Levin (1998), six common themes cut across and define all educational policy decisions, but four are particularly pertinent to issues of student learning and institutional accountability. These themes, as posited by Levin, occur in a linear fashion, such that the demonstration of one theme leads to the next and so on. The first theme is the demonstrated or perceived need for change of the status quo. For some policy analysts, this stage is simply labeled as "problem identification" (Cheng & Cheung, 1995). Levin points out that educational change occurs "in the context of large-scale criticism of schools" (1998) and that governmental policies focus on how schools have failed to provide what they should, especially given the large sums of public money funneled into the educational enterprise.

Once the need for change is evident, then changes in governance are the next identifiable theme. In the U.S., both federal and state agencies have some authority over education. Furthermore, each state has different relationships with the colleges and universities in their systems. The governance system may include a consolidated governing board (a single statewide board that manages all public institutions), a coordinating board (an agency that coordinates many statewide policy functions), a planning agency, or an even more complicated mixed model (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2002). Naturally, these structures are fluid and may change based on a state legislature's perceived need to manage higher education institutions in that state. In 2003, 20 of the 50 states had a higher education governance structure characterized by a consolidated governing board (Gavlick, 2003).

The third theme posited by Levin is that increased monies do not accompany increasing policy efforts. In fact, some governments have had success in convincing their constituents that the problems of education are not solved by increases in funding and they have been able to "decouple" educational reform from funding issues. Education in most public discussions, except during political campaign speeches, is framed as a cost and not an investment. In addition, state support for higher education has been reduced (Many states cut money for higher educa-

tion, 2010). Budget cuts have affected most other segments, but in many states, higher education has even fallen down the ladder of priorities as well (Hearn & Holdsworth, 2002).

The fourth of Levin's themes is an increased emphasis on standards, accountability, and testing. Ideally, these might be key features of determining whether a change is effective; however, they are more often used to compare "us versus them," in order to illustrate how much better we are doing, even if we aren't sure how we got there. Internationally, rankings on the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement or the International Assessment of Educational Progress have been used to compare countries' educational systems. Even new instruments, such as the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE), are being used by schools to compare how their students respond to NSSE's five subscales with students from other colleges and universities. Margaret Miller, then former deputy director of the State Council for Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) and currently professor of education at the University of Virginia, has noted that much assessment work is good but has not asked, "compared to what?" (Lederman & Redden, 2007).

Using Levin's framework to analyze policy decisions and implementation provides a way to discuss how higher education has utilized (or not) the benefits of student outcomes assessment. An examination of how four of Levin's primary themes—perceived need for change, changes in governance, changes not accompanied by increased funding, and emphasis on standards and accountability—have played out in Virginia are illustrative on the broader world stage. Virginia provides a case study analysis for testing Levin's framework.

THE VIRGINIA EXAMPLE

The higher education system in Virginia provides a particularly good example of how a sharper focus on student learning and student outcomes can affect how education is viewed and how educational policies are affected. The Virginia system includes small liberal-arts colleges and large Research I institutions. Some institutions receive more money per student from the state than others; all of the institutions are accountable to their boards, members of which are appointed by the Governor; the institutions are accountable to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, which makes higher education policy recommendations to the Governor and to the legislative assembly of the state (General Assembly Commission on Higher Education, 1974). In addition, institutions and programs within those institutions are accountable to various national, regional, or specialized accrediting bodies, recognized by the federal government. In short, Virginia's system fully displays the complexity of internal and external structures faced by colleges and universities in the U.S. today.

In addition, Virginia was one of the very first states to embrace student outcomes as a way to reshape teaching and learning in its colleges and universities.

Through the policies formulated by SCHEV and through the networking efforts of the Virginia Assessment Group (VAG), assessment efforts have been a part of the workings of educational policy in the state for the last 25 years. This "community of practice" (Herndon, 2006) was situated in a larger national context that led to the initiation of the first Assessment Forum by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE). The forum was organized on the national level, much like VAG on the state level, to provide a network to connect practitioners and support assessment efforts in higher education.

In short, Virginia has a diversity of higher educational options, was an early entry into the assessment field, and built a level of expertise among practitioners that was unique, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s, among states in the US. Given these characteristics, Virginia provides an excellent test case for examining how educational quality and assessment are affected by the plethora of policy makers that have some authority over higher education in that state.

The need for change

Virginia often touts the high quality of its higher educational system, which consists of a diversity of institutions among the 15 public universities, eight of which are doctoral-granting, and 23 community colleges. Like many other states in the 1970s and early 1980s, the empirical measure of that quality was what Stufflebeam (1983) might have labeled as "inputs." Counts of number of PhDs on faculty, number of grant dollars obtained, number of classrooms, faculty-student ratio, and retention rates were the measures of the quality of the educational experience at these institutions. Such metrics provided a way to compare institutions with their missions, with each other, and with funding requests. When reports such as A Nation at Risk began to focus on not what the institution was providing but what students were taking away, little attention was paid by most university faculty and administrators in Virginia. Even a year later, with the NIE's Involvement in Learning and its emphasis on gathering evidence of students' cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking, nearly all university administrators failed to adjust to what would become, in Peter Ewell's words, "a movement" (2002). Academics did not tend to "see the educational revolution taking place before their eyes" (Ewell & Steen, 2003).

One institutional leader recognized and took advantage of the distant rumblings by lobbying the General Assembly in Virginia for money to begin a program called "Initiatives for Excellence and Accountability: A Five-Year Plan." Consequently, in 1985, the General Assembly appropriated $125,000 to James Madison University to conduct a comprehensive review of the curriculum and to explore ways to determine student achievement. Then, JMU identified four evaluation models they were to explore: (1) a discrepancy evaluation designed to allow faculty to set their own objectives, measure student achievement, and review gaps between the two; (2) a value-added approach, then used at Northeastern Missouri State University, which relied on comparisons to institutional peers; (3) the model

used at Alverno College, which emphasized diagnostic testing to guide student course selection; and (4) a student outcomes program based on the Tennessee Performance Funding Program, dependent on standardized and locally designed tests to evaluate student achievement. These frameworks and this early work in assessment was to frame the discussions about student learning in higher education in the state for the next 25 years.

As well as appropriating money to JMU for assessment of student outcomes, the General Assembly was prepared to take action that would affect all institutions in the state. In 1985, Senate Joint Resolution 125 directed SCHEV to "investigate means by which student achievement may be measured to assure the citizens of Virginia the continuing quality of higher education in the Commonwealth" (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1985). Subsequently, in a 1986 study report from SCHEV, David Potter, the Assistant Director for Academic Programs for SCHEV, and James McMillan, faculty member at Virginia Commonwealth University, proposed recommendations for measuring student achievement at Virginia's public college and universities. SCHEV responded to these reports and directives by outlining its first assessment guidelines in Senate Document No. 14, "The Measurement of Student Achievement and the Assurance of Quality in Virginia Higher Education" (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1986). In this document, SCHEV recommended that "all state-supported institutions of higher education establish procedures and programs to measure student achievement" and that these procedures and programs "recognize the diversity of Virginia's public colleges and universities, the tradition of institutional autonomy, and the capacity of faculty and administrators to identify their own problems and solve them creatively" (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1986). Further, the document calls for institutions to furnish "concrete, non-anecdotal and quantifiable information (i.e., quantitative, empirical) on student achievement to the Council of Higher Education" (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1986). The underpinnings of this document were evident with the opening statement: "measuring student achievement is an integral part of teaching and learning in higher education."

In response to SCHEV's report, Senate Joint Resolution 83 directed all public institutions in the state to "establish assessment programs to measure student achievement" (Commonwealth of Virginia, 1986). In early 1987, SCHEV worked with the academic vice presidents of Virginia's public colleges and universities to develop guidelines to assess general education. Leaving concrete definitions of general educational and specific procedures for the assessment to the individual institutions, the guidelines stipulated that each college or university could choose to employ either absolute assessment measures or those that demonstrate the value-added "contribution the institution has made to the student's development" (Final report, 2000). That year also marked the first time that the General Assembly provided a line-item appropriation to institutions for assessment of student outcomes. Incorporated into their respective base operating budgets, the appropriation was typically used by institutions to cover the personnel

costs associated with assessment.

Both SJR 125 and its ensuing guidelines framed the Commonwealth's approach to student assessment for the remainder of the twentieth century. Institutions evaluated the learning outcomes of students in the major and their general education core. Responding to the mandate from Senate Joint Resolution 83, and to the Governor's memo telling the institutions that they would not be eligible for a range of discretionary funding if they did not seriously begin the assessment process, institutions now began to take student assessment seriously. Suddenly, administrative positions in "student assessment" were advertised at most state universities and community colleges. The majority of state institutions can point to the end of 1986 and the beginning of 1987 as the first constructive beginnings of student outcomes assessment on their campuses. Old Dominion University and Radford University are just two examples of institutions that did not have campus-wide representation or oversight for academic assessment at their institutions until 1987 (Old Dominion University, nd; Radford University, 1992). SCHEV recognized that institutions seemed unprepared for these new mandates and so called a gathering of academic officers and newly minted assessment professionals for a day and a half meeting in Charlottesville. This meeting created a new network, subsequently called VAG—the Virginia Assessment Group—that provided members with support and with a network to deal with assessment issues related to their own campus and to state requirements. Though not directly a governance structure, the creation and extensive use of VAG by assessment practitioners in the state is an example of structural changes suggested by Levin's analytical framework.

In 1999, the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission to Evaluate the Needs and Goals of Higher Education in Virginia in the 21st Century affirmed this state-wide approach to student assessment and commended institutions for using the results of their assessment activities to improve student learning and inform academic program decision-making. As noted in Executive order No. 1 (1998), which created the Blue Ribbon Commission, "Virginia's higher education system faces many new and unprecedented challenges to maintain academic excellence, control costs and meet the educational needs of our students" (Final report, 2000). This statement raised two questions pertinent to Levin's framework: current needs are not being met (change is needed) and the determination of student needs will be made outside the academy (changes in governance). The charge of the Commission was to advise the Governor on how the institutions, administrators, and faculty that comprise Virginia's system of higher education can be made more accountable to their stockholders (the taxpayers, the parents, and the private contributors who finance the system) for the quality of the academic content and the outcomes accomplished through the investment of public funds. (Final report, 2000)

Such language brought to mind a business mindset focused on gains and losses as opposed to the traditional view of the learned academy, thus creating a firmer sense for the need for oversight and the changing of governance structures.

In addition, a concrete product of the Commission was the identification of six areas of knowledge and skills that cross the bounds of academic discipline, degree major, and institutional mission to comprise basic competencies that should be achieved by all students completing a degree program at a Commonwealth institution of higher education—namely, Information Technology Literacy, Written Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, Scientific Reasoning, Critical Thinking, and Oral Communication. Labeling them "areas of core competency" (Final report, 2000), the group recommended that institutions conduct regular assessments of these areas, the results of which would be shared with the general public. For most institutions, these six competencies were seen as part of their general education core requirements.

As presented in Levin's framework, the need for change was well documented through national reports and concerns in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Subsequently, as a result of this perceived need, change occurred through policies created by the General Assembly and the State Council of Higher Education.

Changes in governance

The second theme in Levin's schema is that once the need for change is identified and action begins to be taken, changes in governance will occur as a result. For institutions of higher education in Virginia, governing bodies include state-level entities, such as SCHEV, and federal-level entities, including federally-recognized accrediting bodies. The assessment process provided a concrete way for these groups to collaborate, as it did for constituencies within a campus (Culver & VanDyke, 2009), resulting in policy changes for all three groups.

   Relationship between SCHEV and institutions.

Although Virginia is regarded by some experts as having one of the less centralized systems of higher education governance, due in part to the diversity of its institutions, it has much in common with other states in terms of how its higher education system has evolved and is structured. Every state has one of two basic types of boards to carry out statewide coordinating functions: a coordinating board or a consolidated governing board. A coordinating board is concerned primarily with the state and system perspective, but does not direct the daily operations of institutions. In contrast, a consolidated governing board has the authority to provide direction and control the daily operations of institutions. Virginia is currently one of 20 states that have a strong coordinating board structure for higher education (Gavlick, 2003).

The Code of Virginia, section 23-9:6:1, describes the roles and responsibilities of SCHEV, the state coordinating board. In the Code, SCHEV is charged, in part, with developing in cooperation with institutions of higher education guidelines for the assessment of student achievement (Code of Virginia, 2005). SCHEV is to prepare reports of the institutions' assessments of student achievement in the biennial revisions to the state's master plan for higher education. Gor-

don Davies, through his strong executive leadership at SCHEV, easily filled the role of policy entrepreneur in educational innovations (Mintrom, 1997), an individual that serves to facilitate the types of changes in governance noted by Levin. By requiring institutions to do assessment, he and SCHEV suddenly acquired a power in the educational hierarchy that had not rested with SCHEV previously, having been held by the Governor and the legislature. By overseeing assessment at institutions, SCHEV was newly impinging on the autonomy enjoyed by Virginia's state colleges and universities; it was now an agency that could no longer be ignored by institutions (though one or two tried for a time).

The assessment program oversight that SCHEV developed was purposefully different from those implemented in other states. Instead of requiring that all Virginia public institutions of higher education adopt a uniform set of performance standards, SCHEV emphasized the development of individualized institutional assessment programs designed to stimulate instructional improvement and curricular reform. In utilizing this approach, SCHEV chose to focus on improving effectiveness of educational programs rather than focus on institutional accountability. This guiding philosophy has allowed SCHEV to work with campus leaders on assessment issues as student outcomes measures and data have evolved. It also didn't hurt that the political and economic circumstances enhanced SCHEV's ability to persuade and coerce institutional leaders. It has also allowed for individuals in VAG to provide advice and review of SCHEV policies in a collegial fashion. In fact, early reviews of institutional assessment reports in 1989 and afterward, included panelists from the Virginia Assessment Group.

Federal accrediting bodies.

In addition to changing relationships with SCHEV, institutions also faced changes in how they related to their accrediting bodies. For the last 100 years (Schray, 2006), a federal-level accreditation system in the United States has been used to define quality in higher education. The U. S. Department of Education formally recognizes accrediting bodies that meet all federal standards and the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a private, nongovernmental institutional membership organization, recognizes accrediting bodies and institutions that meet quality standards. Recognized accrediting organizations develop standards of quality that are approved by a central federal office. These accrediting organizations then serve as "gate keepers," because if institutions do not address these standards of quality in a satisfactory manner they may be threatened with the loss of billions of dollars in federal and state grants and loans. In this way, although the federal government does not have complete control over the educational system (Charles, 2007), the federal government nonetheless plays a significant if indirect role in assuring the quality of higher education services. This accreditation system, for instance, involves nearly 100 public and private organizations that accredit over nearly 6,500 institutions and over 18,700 programs (Charles, 2007). Thus, these accreditation processes have extensive reach.

Three types of accrediting bodies in the U.S. define the process: regional, national, and specialized or programmatic agencies. Six regional agencies (e.g., the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools—SACS), organized geographically, review whole institutions across the nation. National accrediting bodies also review entire institutions, including both those which are degree-granting and those which are non-degree-granting. Typically of national accrediting bodies are those that accredit single-purpose institutions, such as information technology. Finally, specialized agencies accredit programs in specific fields that are parts of an institution. Examples include ABET (formerly called the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology) and AACSB (the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business).

Accreditors were first required to look at student learning outcomes as a condition of recognition in the Department of Education rules established in 1989. However, these rules were not very explicit (Ewell & Steen, 2003). In the SACS guidelines for accreditation, Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2004), the association describes the accreditation process as "an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfillment of its mission, its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association, and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services."

Thus, the assessment process provided a tangible product, elements of which could be specified by the state, federal, or discipline or regional accrediting bodies. This process provided a focus for the interaction of these agencies in broader ways than had been historically possible (previously, institutional reporting was limited to filling in data points that were used to compare colleges and universities). Before, the university's Office of Institutional Research could take care of such reporting requirements (Saupe, 2005), but these new assessment mandates required the efforts of more than one office.

Changes not accompanied by increased funding

Another of Levin's framework elements argues that, as the need for change is identified and subsequent changes occur in structures and implementation activities, those changes may not be accompanied by increased funding. Despite small augmentations to budgets in the 1988-1990 biennial budgets in Virginia, those funds did not cover increased costs related to assessment, in part because institutions created and filled new administrative positions, some with accompanying support staff, to create and monitor the assessment process across their campuses. Though institutions requested these additional monies, there was little guidance as to how much assessment across a college or university would cost, and many institutions, while recognizing the size of the task, underestimated the costs in terms of buying testing materials, faculty time, and administrative time and personnel.

Emphasis on standards, accountability, and testing as key features

The last element of Levin's analytical framework focuses on the emphasis on standards and accountability. Given changes in policy, it would seem appropriate to gauge the effectiveness of those changes through empirical data. The focus of student outcomes assessment has followed this mindset. For example, in 1986, Senate Document No. 14, one of the six recommendations for measuring student achievement at Virginia's public colleges and universities was to administer tests to determine the entry-level skills of students whose high school performance might not be acceptable. Institutions were to identify a "minimum threshold of achievement" to quality for college courses (Final report, 2000). This new focus on measuring student achievement would lead to SCHEV's focus on the collection of empirical data to gauge student learning.

By 2007, SCHEV had set guidelines for educational institutions in Virginia that included using direct measures of student learning to enable demonstration of value-added. By "value-added," SCHEV meant

> measures that indicate progress, or lack thereof, as a consequence of the student's institutional experience; it is acknowledged that value added experience may be demonstrated through formal, orthodox value added instruments (i.e., strict pre-post tests) or through other instruments that may not be formally value added but have value added interpretations (e.g., locally developed assessment instruments). (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2007)

SCHEV asked that student progress should be measured using statistically valid samples and the same instrument or methodology between the two groups (typically, freshmen and seniors). Furthermore, a plan indicating the cycle by which SCHEV's core learning areas would be assessed over the next six years by each institution was to be part of the reporting process.

Also in 2007, a group of university leaders and two higher education associations proposed value-added assessment as a central element of measuring a university's efficacy. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) began the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) as a reaction to the public critiques of higher education (McPherson & Shulenburger, 2006). After the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, those associations felt they had to create their own system of accountability or have imposed upon them a federally designed accountability system in which they had no input. Currently, based on a recommendation from SCHEV's 2007 Task Force on Assessment, SCHEV's Instructional Programs Advisory Committee (IPAC) is monitoring the reporting protocols and success of the VSA approach and has initiated no policy encouraging or discouraging institutions from joining. As of May 2010, this author's review of the VSA website for reporting basic, comparable information for institutions (www.collegeportraits.org) showed only two of 39 public institutions in Virginia—Virginia Tech and Longwood University—to be

included. To date, none of these institutions have yet to report data from any of the three mandated VSA tests (e.g., the CLA, the PP, or the CAAP); in fact, fewer than 15% of VSA member institutions supplied such data for 2009-2010. Levin's framework suggests that, although the VSA organization may see that change is needed, institutions themselves may not be persuaded of such a need, and so they are not quick to follow the VSA's suggested timelines in terms of data collection and reporting.

CONCLUSION

One of the most interesting policy change areas in higher education in the last 30 years has been the movement toward student outcomes assessment. Assessment of student learning and outcomes has been widely seen as having the potential to provide more relevant and meaningful data on educational quality and effectiveness for its various constituents (Aper, Culver, & Hinkle, 1990). However, the focus of this process has typically been on what data will be collected, when it will be collected, how often it will be collected, and how it will be used. A broader concern, however, is the effect of this empirical student-centered approach to quality on educational policy and change. Levin (1998) posited a theoretical framework for the examination of policy decisions and four of his themes provide a unique lens to examine the case study of the development of the assessment process in Virginia.

Levin pointed out how the need for change becomes evident before policy change occurs. In the Virginia case, numerous national and international reports spurred the state legislature toward a change mentality. Levin also suggested that changes in governance become a fait accompli after a need for change is identified. In Virginia, the central coordinating board, SCHEV, was strengthened; an advisory group, VAG, grew from assessment practitioners; and the state legislature and governor used language that framed higher education in terms of a business model rather than the traditional view of the learned academy. Levin also noted that such changes in governance are not typically accompanied by increased funding. Though the Virginia case demonstrates that some small amount of funds focused on assessment were added to institutional budgets, generally the costs of assessment, added to diminished funding overall, lends credence to Levin's point. Lastly, Levin noted that change leads to an increased emphasis on standards and accountability. Certainly, efforts by regional accrediting bodies and the new governance agencies like the VSA suggest that assessment for accountability is a more common focus than assessment for improvement (Aper, Culver, & Hinkle, 1990).

As Aper and Hinkle (1991) have pointed out, a partnership between institutions of higher education and their public authorities might be one outgrowth of the assessment movement. However, Aper and Hinkle also observe that those two groups would need to address their "responsibilities to society at large as well as

to the core values of an independent and vigorous system of higher education" (Aper and Hinkle, 1991). The Virginia example demonstrates that those entities have indeed addressed more clearly what they are about through the changes in governance that Levin posited. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), for example, through its interactions with the diversity of higher education institutions in the Commonwealth, established regular reporting guidelines for gauging the quality of student learning. The regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), formulated a comprehensive that "the institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results" (the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2009).

Such mandates from external agencies have created new policies to guide how these agencies interact with institutions and how institutions operate within themselves. Policy analysis of these changes is particularly difficult in the arena of higher education because of overlapping areas of responsibility and large gaps in the supervision of colleges and universities. These gaps, and the resulting communication issues, may turn us in a recursive fashion back to Levin's first element and the recognition of the need for further change. It is interesting that the purpose of outcomes assessment has always been to make more explicit how students benefit from their college experience and from particular degree programs (Culver & VanDyke, 2009). It seems that the process has also served to make more explicit the relationships between universities and their external governing groups, just as Levin's framework provides a lens to view those relationships.

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