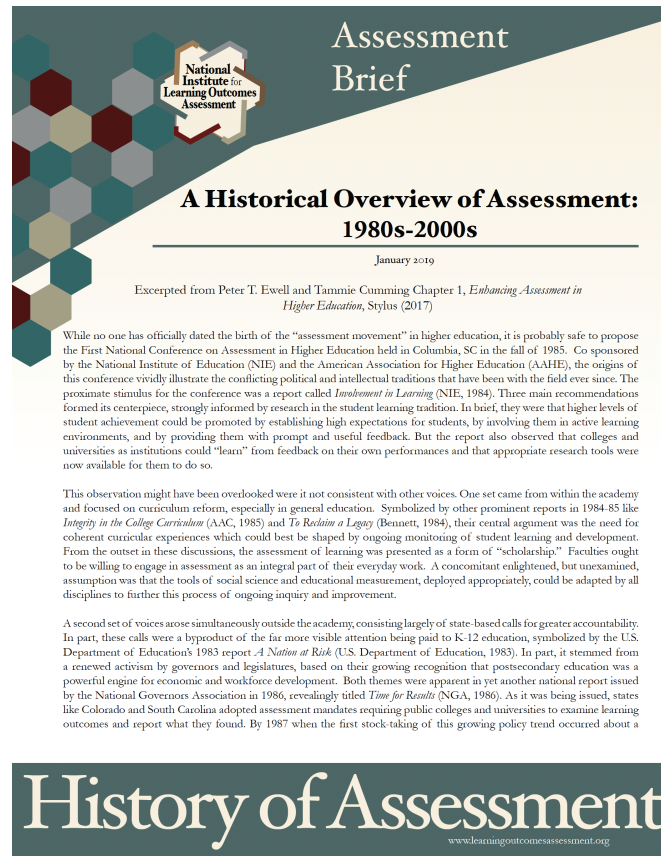

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Assessment Brief

A Historical Overview of Assessment: 1980s-2000s

January 2019

Excerpted from Peter T. Ewell and Tammie Cumming Chapter 1, *Enhancing Assessment in Higher Education*, Stylus (2017)

While no one has officially dated the birth of the “assessment movement” in higher education, it is probably safe to propose the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education held in Columbia, SC in the fall of 1985. Co sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE) and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), the origins of this conference vividly illustrate the conflicting political and intellectual traditions that have been with the field ever since. The proximate stimulus for the conference was a report called *Involvement in Learning* (NIE, 1984). Three main recommendations formed its centerpiece, strongly informed by research in the student learning tradition. In brief, they were that higher levels of student achievement could be promoted by establishing high expectations for students, by involving them in active learning environments, and by providing them with prompt and useful feedback. But the report also observed that colleges and universities as institutions could “learn” from feedback on their own performances and that appropriate research tools were now available for them to do so.

This observation might have been overlooked were it not consistent with other voices. One set came from within the academy and focused on curriculum reform, especially in general education. Symbolized by other prominent reports in 1984-85 like *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (AAC, 1985) and *To Revitalize a Legacy* (Bennett, 1984), their central argument was the need for coherent curricular experiences which could best be shaped by ongoing monitoring of student learning and development. From the outset in these discussions, the assessment of learning was presented as a form of “scholarship.” Faculties ought to be willing to engage in assessment as an integral part of their everyday work. A concomitant enlightened, but unexamined, assumption was that the tools of social science and educational measurement, deployed appropriately, could be adapted by all disciplines to further this process of ongoing inquiry and improvement.

A second set of voices arose simultaneously outside the academy, consisting largely of state-based calls for greater accountability. In part, these calls were a byproduct of the far more visible attention being paid to K-12 education, symbolized by the U.S. Department of Education’s 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). In part, it stemmed from a renewed activism by governors and legislatures, based on their growing recognition that postsecondary education was a powerful engine for economic and workforce development. Both themes were apparent in yet another national report issued by the National Governors Association in 1986, revealingly titled *Time for Results* (NGA, 1986). As it was being issued, states like Colorado and South Carolina adopted assessment mandates requiring public colleges and universities to examine learning outcomes and report what they found. By 1987 when the first stock-taking of this growing policy trend occurred about a

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