

Voluntary System of Accountability (VSASM) The College Portrait

Common Questions and Answers

When can an institution adopt VSA and put *College Portrait* on their website?

Beginning in December 2007, institutions could officially sign up to become VSA participants on the VSA website at <http://www.voluntarysystem.org/participants/signup.cfm>. The data entry template for the *College Portrait* is available to VSA participants any time after February 15, 2008, and participating institutions may start to display the *College Portrait* on their websites at that time. Initially, some sections of the template will not be fully populated and institutions will continue to add data to the template consistent with the VSA participation and reporting schedule.

What is the difference between VSASM and *College Portrait*?

The Voluntary System of AccountabilitySM, or VSA, is a program to provide greater accountability by public institutions through accessible, transparent, and comparable information and is jointly sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). *College Portrait* is the name of the web template designed to communicate the VSA data to the public.

Who is the intended audience for *College Portrait*?

The primary audience for *College Portrait* is prospective students and their families. There are two secondary audiences: 1) governing board members, legislators, policy-makers, and education agency administrators and 2) institutional faculty and staff.

How will *College Portrait* help prospective students?

College Portrait is a source of basic information about colleges and institutions presented in a common format using established data definitions and data collection conventions. It is not intended to be a marketing tool for institutions nor is it intended to be encyclopedic, but a trustworthy source of standard data. Institutions will continue to market themselves to students, and students will continue to visit campuses and to access college websites to understand the nuances of individual institutions.

How will *College Portrait* serve governing board members, legislators, policy-makers, and education agency administrators?

College Portrait has been designed to meet the needs of prospective students and their parents – an important constituency for board members, legislators, and agency administrators. A system that meets the needs of a key constituency group is in turn valuable to public officials. *College Portrait* responds to calls for accessible, transparent, and comparable data that have been voiced by legislators and other policy makers, particularly the public reporting of student learning outcomes.

How will *College Portrait* serve faculty and staff?

The data contained in the *College Portrait* will help to build a shared understanding of the institution on a broad scale. Faculty and staff often have detailed knowledge of what is

happening in their own program or department but are less familiar with overall view of the institution. Through the consistent and comparable information displayed on *College Portrait*, faculty and staff will not only have a better understanding of their own institution but how it compares to other colleges and universities.

The sections on student engagement and learning outcomes will allow faculty and staff to gain additional knowledge on student learning and student development at their institution. In particular, the learning outcomes results provide information on students' high level cognitive skills such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication; skills highly desired by employers and graduate schools. Used in conjunction with disciplinary assessments of content knowledge, the measurement of higher level skills provides insight into overall student learning gains at an institution. The use of similar instruments and methodologies by the VSA across institutions allow faculty and staff to compare how their institution's students perform as compared to other institutions with similar student populations. Thus, faculty and staff can begin to determine whether curricular or other change is needed to improve the ability of their students to succeed as employees or in graduate studies.

Can my institution revise *College Portrait* to better portray our strengths?

In short, no. For the template to serve its national purpose of providing transparent information in a common format, the template must be identical across all participating institutions.

However, the template provides a number of opportunities for an institution to tell its distinctive story. For example, several text blocks can be used to describe the institution and nine information buttons can be customized to link to topics that the institution believes will be helpful to students. The MORE links by many of the data elements can lead students to any information the institution believes appropriate – from catalog copy to admissions and financial aid applications to film clips. The MORE links also provide an opportunity for institutions to expand on information presented in the template.

A supplemental page can be included with the *College Portrait* template if it is clearly labeled as a page added by the institution. The supplemental page must be added after the last page of the *College Portrait*.

Why is there no place on *College Portrait* to describe my institution's graduate and professional programs, research accomplishments, business incubator, patents granted, outreach efforts or other key initiatives?

The information provided in the *College Portrait* is designed to assist prospective undergraduate students in their college search, so the content is focused on undergraduate education and the environment in which undergraduate education is delivered. However, the template does provide opportunities through the MORE links, the information buttons, the text description, and the supplemental page to highlight other types of information if an institution wishes to do so.

If an institution does not elect to become a VSA participant now, will it have the opportunity to join VSA in the future?

Enrollment for VSA will remain open.

When will an institution be permitted to withdraw from VSA?

An institution may withdraw from VSA participation at any time.

What is the fee for participation in VSA by an AASCU/NASULGC member institution?

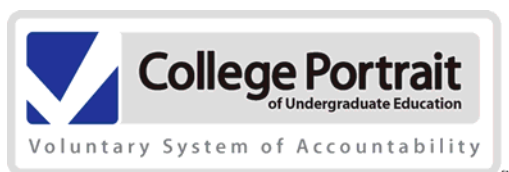
At present, there is no fee for participation in the VSA program. Development costs were covered by a grant from Lumina Foundation and in-kind contributions by member institutions and the two associations. A second grant from the Lumina Foundation will help defray the costs during the first two years of VSA operation. After that period, it is likely that a small fee will be assessed to cover the continuing cost of VSA.

My institution is not a member of AASCU or NASULGC. May we become a VSA participant?

Not at this time. One of the first agenda items for the VSA Governing Board will be to discuss this question and to decide the conditions, if any, in which nonmembers may participate.

How will students find our *College Portrait* web page?

Each participating institution will place the *College Portrait* icon below on their home page or on a logically alternate web page such as the admissions page. In addition, NASULGC and AASCU will maintain a VSA website (www.voluntarysystem.org) with a current listing of participating institutions and active links to their *College Portrait* web page.



Is there a central web site and search engine that can be used to search across the *College Portrait* pages of all VSA participants?

No. The *College Portrait* web pages will be hosted on individual institution websites not centralized in one location.

How much will it cost an institution to gather the data that is reported on the template?

Most of the items on the template are drawn from currently available data sources (e.g., Common Data Set or IPEDS) so there is no additional cost to an institution.

Direct Costs: There are four items included in the VSA that have potential direct costs for the institution: compiling the success and progress rate data, collecting data on the future plans of bachelor's degree recipients, measuring student engagement, and measuring learning outcomes.

- The data for the success and progress rate comes from the National Student Clearinghouse and the cost is dependent upon the type of services that an institution contracts with the Clearinghouse to provide. The annual cost ranges from \$0 to \$3,000 for an institution with an enrollment of 30,000 students (both graduate and undergraduate). Data on student success and progress must be updated annually.
- The cost for the student engagement surveys range from \$4,800 to \$15,500 at an institution with 20,000 undergraduates. Data on student engagement must be updated at least once every three years.

- The cost for the learning outcomes instruments range from \$6,200 to \$10,200. Data on learning outcomes must be updated at least once every three years

Thus, the direct costs over a three-year period for the three activities listed above would average approximately \$4,000 to \$12,000 per year for an institution of 30,000 students. The figures assume ongoing participation in the Clearinghouse and measurement of student engagement and learning outcomes every third year.

- The data for the future plans of bachelor's degree recipient comes from a single question that will be administered to graduating seniors. The direct cost is depends on how an institution administers the question (e.g., add the question to an existing senior survey or include the question as part of the application to degree process. Data on future plans should be updated annually. (*corrected 2/15/2008*)

Indirect Costs: Indirect costs include the time and effort of institutional personnel to compile the data and administer the testing/survey instruments as well as incentives used to encourage students to participate in the testing. The personnel costs may be an internal reallocation of resources representing an opportunity cost to the institution, but not necessarily an additional cost. The costs of student incentives vary substantially by institution. Some institutions have paid students from \$30 to over \$100 to take learning outcomes tests; others have given priority in course enrollment, passes to concerts and bookstore discounts; yet others have integrated the exams into freshmen survey and senior capstone courses to minimize costs and increase participation.

How were the components of *College Portrait* selected?

Over 80 higher education leaders from 70 public institutions were involved in the development of the VSA program. Seven task forces made up of presidents, provosts, student affairs officers, institutional research officers, and faculty members and headed by a member institution president worked over an 8-month period to identify and evaluate potential data elements. The task forces were aided by focus groups, feedback from the higher education community, researchers, and the research literature in designing VSA. At the end of the process, a Presidential Advisory Committee composed of current and former presidents reviewed the work of the task forces and made final decisions about the components included in VSA.

How will the *College Portrait* template be revised in the future?

At their annual meetings in November 2007, NASULGC and AASCU Boards established a VSA Oversight Board to regularly review VSA components and determine whether items should be added, modified, deleted, or revised.

Who will monitor or audit the data that is posted as part of the VSA *College Portrait*?

Each institution is responsible for the accuracy of the information that is reported as part of the VSA. The VSA program is designed to be as transparent as possible, using established data sources that are routinely published and providing details on collection methods and reporting conventions. This transparency makes it less likely that inaccurate or misleading data will be reported.

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Why is the measurement of learning outcomes called a “pilot project?”

Public institutions have not previously measured student learning outcomes on a large scale as recommended by the VSA. Given the lack of previous experience and limited knowledge, there are some in the academy with significant reservations about the utility of learning outcomes measurement. To give institutions adequate opportunities to become familiar with administration of outcomes testing and to determine how they might benefit from it, the VSA program permits participating institutions to take up to four years to conduct trial tests of learning outcomes measurement before they have to make a decision to publish test results.

If an institution determines at the end of the four years that their trial administrations of learning outcomes tests have not produced useful results, the institution may withdraw from VSA at that time without ever publicly reporting results of the tests. A decision to withdraw from VSA after conducting trial administrations of learning outcome measurements will be judged to reflect a good faith effort at measuring core learning outcomes.

The additional academic research on these measures that will occur during the next four years plus the collective experience of VSA participants with their trial administrations of these measures will add significantly to our knowledge about the tests. At the end of the first four years of VSA, the collective evidence amassed during this pilot effort should assure the public that we have been responsive to the request to thoroughly examine the use of outcome measures. The permanent VSA oversight board will continuously review new findings about learning outcomes testing and shape VSA based on this knowledge.

Will the results from one of the three learning outcomes tests be the only evidence about learning outcomes in *College Portrait*?

No. Institutions have the immediate and continuing opportunity to provide other evidence on learning gains such as program assessment reports, employer satisfaction with graduates, graduate school admissions success, licensing test results, etc.

Which of the three learning outcomes test options should my institution use?

The choice of the learning outcomes instrument is left up to the institution.

What are the sampling guidelines for the learning outcomes tests?

For VSA purposes, we have set basic, minimum standards for the sampling of students - a random sample of freshmen and a random sample of seniors. For sample size, we require that institutions follow the guidelines that have been recommended by the test developers. In general, ACT recommends a minimum sample size of 200 for the CAAP. A sample above 200 is clearly acceptable but you will want to get the test maker to agree that it is really representative of the underlying populations.

Is the VSA envisioning longitudinal reporting, such that the 1st-year students who are tested this year will be the seniors who are tested in the next?

At this point we are using only the cross-sectional methodology rather than the longitudinal method. The task forces made this choice because the cross sectional method is quicker, simpler, and less costly to implement and there was no evidence at this time that that the results from one or the other method was more valid or reliable. The test developers are still collecting data on any differences between the two strategies. If it becomes apparent that the longitudinal method is clearly superior to cross sectional method and well worth the additional resources, that decision will be revisited.

Can a student’s ACT or SAT score be used in place of a “pre-test” to compute the value-added score?

This option was considered during VSA development process within the technical work group and was discussed with test developers. The conclusion was that to accurately measure value-added, the same instrument needed to be used for both the pre and post test. The reasoning is that although the CAAP, CLA, or MAPP is highly correlated with the ACT or SAT that does not mean that both tests are measuring the same thing - e.g., reasoning or thinking or cognitive processing - in the same manner. In addition, the correlation between ACT/SAT and CAAP/CLA/MAPP, while high, is not perfect. There appear to be systematic variations between the two scores at some universities that might reflect recruiting or scholarship strategies the university uses to build its freshman class. Therefore, in order to get the most accurate measure of the gains in learning between freshmen and seniors we need to use the same instrument. While a financially tempting strategy, neither the test makers nor outside experts on the work group and task force recommended its use.

Which of the four student engagement measures should my institution use?

This decision is left up to the institution’s discretion

How will participation in VSA be used by regional accreditation agencies in the periodic reaccreditation?

A letter dated September 21, 2006, written on behalf the six regional accrediting agencies and reproduced below, addressed this point, saying in part:

“The regional accrediting commissions have all changed their accreditation standards to require that institutions engage in assessment of student learning and use the results of that assessment to continuously improve the quality of education offered by those institutions... The regional accreditors believe that the decisions about appropriate common assessment strategies are best made by institutions. The regional accreditors will certainly accept assessment strategies and data developed for purposes of the VSA project as part of an overall evidentiary portfolio when participating institutions undergo accreditation review.”

COUNCIL OF REGIONAL ACCREDITING COMMISSIONS

September 21, 2006

Middle States
Commission on Higher
Education

The Commission on
Institutions of Higher
Education,
New England Association
of Schools and Colleges

Higher Learning
Commission of
the North Central
Association of
Colleges and Schools

Northwest Commission
on Colleges and
Universities

Commission on
Colleges of the Southern
Association of Colleges
and Schools

Accrediting Commission
for Community and
Junior Colleges,
Western Association of
Schools and Colleges:

Accrediting Commission
for Senior Colleges and
Universities,
Western Association of
Schools and Colleges

David E. Shulenburg
Vice President for Academic Affairs
NASULGC, A Public Universities Association
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Washington, D.C. 20005-4722

Dear Dr. Shulenburg:

The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions appreciated the opportunity to discuss with you the NASULGC and AASCU paper, "Toward a Public Universities and Colleges Voluntary System of Accountability for Undergraduate Education (VSA)", at our meeting of September 9, 2006. The regional accreditors recognize that the ideas and plans in the report represent a significant commitment by public higher education institutions to improve the information available to students and other institutional stakeholders. We commend NASULGC and AASCU for initiating this work and hope, with you, that it is successful in demonstrating that there are valid and reliable common measures of student learning that can be used across similar institutions.

Accreditors examine information about student learning as part of the comprehensive evaluation of an institution. The regional accrediting commissions have all changed their accreditation standards to require that institutions engage in assessment of student learning and use the results of that assessment to continuously improve the quality of education offered by those institutions. However, the regional accreditors have not required specific assessment methodologies or instruments. Rather, we have asked each institution to identify meaningful assessment strategies in the context of its institutional mission and programs.

The regional accreditors believe that the decisions about appropriate common assessment strategies are best made by institutions. The regional accreditors will certainly accept assessment strategies and data developed for purposes of the VSA project as part of an overall evidentiary portfolio when participating institutions undergo accreditation reviews.

The Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions will appreciate a continuing dialogue with NASULGC and AASCU as this innovative project develops. Once again, thank you for the opportunity to discuss this project and best wishes to all of you engaged in it.

Sincerely,



Barbara A. Beno, Ph.D.
Chair