
VOLUNTARY SYSTEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY (VSA) PRELIMINARY OUTLINE FOR EXPANSION OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES REPORTING

Background

Beginning in summer 2011, the Voluntary System of Accountability gathered information from participating institutions and key stakeholders on the efficacy of its four-year student learning outcomes pilot project to determine the next steps for this signature element within the College Portrait. As part of the process, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was asked to conduct an independent evaluation and provide recommendations. NILOA drew on a variety of data sources for its evaluation, including focus groups, interviews with leaders from the policy arena and regional accreditation agencies, institutional surveys, analyses of results from the VSA-conducted survey of participating institutions, College Portrait database statistics and Google Analytics.

The major conclusion from the NILOA evaluation was that the VSA College Portrait student learning outcomes pilot was an effective response to the challenges that emanated from the Spellings Commission and related pressures for accountability, but is not sufficient in its current form going forward. The NILOA report recommended the VSA be transformed from a *“compliance focused vehicle to a platform through which institutions can speak to and engage their publics through evidence-based story telling.”*

Other recommendations and findings from the NILOA evaluation include the following.

- *“Should the VSA College Portrait be continued?”* With some exceptions, the overall response was affirmative, suggesting *“mend it, don’t end it”* regarding the value of the VSA and the College Portrait.
- Strongly recommended that the VSA College Portrait expand the range of accepted assessment tools and approaches. *“The standardized tests of student learning originally approved for inclusion in the pilot lack credibility and acceptance within a broad sweep of the higher education community and serves to undermine institutional participation in the VSA.”*
- The VSA College Portrait should be recast as a state-of-the-art electronic communication tool targeted for specific audiences. *“The student learning outcomes section attracts very few viewers. The information posted and the manner in which it is presented do not reflect the needs and interests of users.”*
- The VSA should consider expanding the types of institutions allowed to participate to include all postsecondary institutions, public and private, community colleges and others.

Using the information from the NILOA report, a technical work group of higher education assessment, institutional research, and measurement professionals was convened by the VSA in March and April of 2012 to consider alternative measures for reporting student learning outcomes and put together a set of recommendations for the VSA Board.

The Student Learning Outcomes Technical Work Group unanimously affirmed the importance of including student learning outcomes in the VSA; however, they or the group emphasized the importance of conveying to the public, legislators, and faculty that the ideal measure of student learning outcomes does not exist. An ideal measure would address the accountability concerns of

external audiences, provide practical and useful information for improving curriculum, and offer important information to consumers for college selection.

The VSA Oversight Board met on May 17-18 and endorsed the core recommendations of the Work Group. The VSA Board also discussed at length the audience and purpose of the VSA College Portrait and concluded that a shift in focus from a college search tool to a consumer information tool was desirable and necessary.

In July, a Communications Task Force and the College Portrait Support Team will meet to develop reporting templates for expanded options and strategies to more effectively display outcomes information to meet the needs of the intended audiences.

Summary of VSA Board Decisions

Purpose and Audience

The VSA College Portrait will continue to emphasize the straightforward, reliable presentation of institutional information for consumers – “*no rankings, no spin ... just the facts!*” The College Portrait will be re-focused from a “*college selection and recruitment tool*” to a “*consumer information tool for institutions to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of their educational programs.*” The primary audiences will be consumers (including students and families), state officials, policy makers, and accreditors.

Student Learning Outcomes Options

The options for the measurement and reporting of student learning outcomes within the VSA will be expanded in two primary areas.

- The number of instruments will be increased from the three current tests - CAAP, CLA, and ETS Proficiency Profile - to include the AAC&U VALUE rubrics and the GRE General Test.
- The reporting options for each of the instruments will be expanded to include both value-added and benchmarking.

The instruments and reporting methods approved by the VSA Board offer participating institutions new alternatives for fulfilling VSA requirements, not new requirements.

A. Approved Instruments

Institutions will select from one of the following instruments to fulfill the VSA student learning outcomes requirement beginning with the 2012-13 College Portrait data cycle.

1. CAAP (*current option*)
2. CLA (*current option*)
3. ETS Proficiency Profile (*current option*)
4. GRE (*new option; pending approval of the GRE Board*)
5. VALUE Rubrics (*new option*)
 - Written Communication
 - Critical Thinking

B. Approved Reporting Options

1. VSA institutions will pick one of the following options for reporting institutional outcomes based on the instrument selected from the list in B.
 - Report value-added (learning gains) between entering and exiting students as compared to other institutions. (*current option*)
 - Applicable instruments: CAAP, CLA, ETS PP
 - Report distribution of senior scores as compared to criteria/proficiency level benchmarks.
 - Applicable instruments: CAAP, ETS PP
 - Report distribution of scores as compared to normative distributions.
 - Applicable instruments: CLA, GRE ([pending approval of the GRE Board](#))
 - Report distribution of student scores across the common proficiency levels of the VALUE rubrics.

2. VSA institutions will be required to report additional contextual information within one or more of the following areas.
 - How do outcomes reflect institutional goals or benchmarks?
 - Applicable instruments: CAAP, CLA, ETS PP, GRE ([pending approval of the GRE Board](#)), VALUE rubrics
 - How has institutional performance changed over time?
 - Applicable instruments: CAAP, CLA, ETS PP, GRE ([pending approval of the GRE Board](#)), VALUE rubrics
 - Distribution of scores as compared to normative distributions
 - Applicable instruments: CAAP, ETS PP
 - How does the institution's outcomes compare to those of peer institutions?

C. Implementation Plan and Timeline

Timeline

June 2012	Preliminary recommendations announced at AIR Forum.
July 2012	Communications Task Force and College Portrait Support Team develop reporting templates and presentation formats.
September 2012	Official announcement of expanded options with detailed requirements. Template released for institutions to report results of pilot study.
January 2013	New options available as part of 2012-13 data cycle.

Implementation Plan for VSA Institutions (updated and simplified 7/27/12)

Common reporting mechanisms and templates will be developed by the VSA to simplify reporting and support the consistent display of information. Institutions will be encouraged to report outcomes using multiple instruments.

Step 1: For institutions that have not reported student learning outcomes test results on College Portrait during the 4-year pilot period.

- By end of 2011-12 data cycle: All institutions without test results will report: 1) its experience implementing (or attempting to implement) the CLA, CAAP, or ETS PP and/or why test results are not reported; 2) at least one example of other ways learning outcomes are being evaluated on campus; 3) an outline of future plans for implementing and reporting outcomes as part of the VSA. *A template will be developed with required elements by September 2012.*

For institutions that have reported student learning outcomes test results on College Portrait during the 4-year pilot period.

- By end of 2011-12 data cycle: institutions are encouraged to report their experiences implementing the CLA, CAAP, or ETS PP. *A template will be developed with requested elements by September 2012.*

Step 2: For all current VSA institutions: Institutions will post at least one option from the expanded menu by the publishing deadline of the 2014-15 data cycle (Spring 2015).

- No data/results from a learning outcomes assessment or instrument that is displayed on the College Portrait will be more than 3 years old.

For new institutions joining the VSA in 2012 or beyond, institutions will have a maximum of 2 years to post at least one option from the expanded menu.

- For institutions joining in 2012, the 2-year clock starts in January of 2013.
- No data/results from a learning outcomes assessment or instrument that is displayed on the College Portrait will be more than 3 years old.