

Making the VSA and the College Portrait Work for You

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Background

Higher education has begun to respond to increased expectations from many of its constituents, and certainly from its primary constituent – the student. More choices exist for students, shaped by rising costs, enhanced technology and increased access to information, as well as greater expectations for the portability of the credits students earn from academic institutions. Prospective students want more and better information, as they seek to maximize the educational value of their investment.

At the same time, the percentage of total allocations received by public higher education institutions from state funding has been declining for a number of years, and the recent economic decline has led to more severe cuts. As state support declines, public colleges and universities have resorted to tuition increases, placing more of the financial burden on students. This, in turn, can lead to a decrease in affordability, especially for lower-income families. Governing bodies seek more accountability from academia, to the point of instituting systems of performance agreements with public universities to assure that higher education maintains its focus on student learning outcomes, retention and graduation rates, and financial aid availability. Given this scenario, higher education is facing the choice of either developing its own accountability system, or accepting something proposed by the state or federal government.

Partly in response to these pressures, national and discipline-specific accrediting agencies have revised their review criteria over the last several years. They have expanded beyond “input” statistics, such as enrollment numbers and the types and breadth of available programs as key signs of quality in higher education, to a focus on outcomes. In addition to success rates related to student retention and graduation, the assessment of student learning has taken center stage. More than ever, the focus is on whether students are learning what we expect them to learn.

It is clear that there is an increasing demand for more public accountability and transparency regarding the information provided by academic institutions. Prospective students, state legislatures, governing bodies, accrediting agencies, and the general public seek to better understand the effectiveness of academic institutions. There is a need for information that is comparable so that students and families can make the best decisions regarding the choice of college. Until recent decades, universities shied away from formal comparisons across

institutions. More recently, U.S. media outlets have initiated such comparisons through rankings they have devised, which vary in criteria, but nonetheless influence the public's opinion of the perceived quality of institutions of higher learning and their programs. As a result, many universities have sought ways to elevate their status in such rankings. However, many are concerned that these rankings are weighted too heavily on perception of status by peers and input variables, rather than the value added by the institution. The criteria used in the rankings often do not include critical information about academic programs that students and families want to know. In most cases, the rankings do not show specifics on any programs, only general information. Consequently, such rankings simply reinforce reputations of institutions rather than assist prospective students in sorting through important characteristics of programs.

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) emerged over the past few years as a response to these forces. It was evident that there was a need for a better way to compare academic institutions, using information that included inputs, outcomes, and critical effectiveness indicators, so that students could make informed choices as to their future education. This paper will present the benefits of participating in the VSA process and our experience with using the CAAP tests as part of the assessment of student learning.

What is the Voluntary System of Accountability?

The VSA was developed and is sponsored by two national higher education organizations – the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). The VSA has four objectives (*About VSA*, http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm?page=about_vsa): (1) Provide a useful tool for students during the college search process; (2) Assemble information that is transparent, comparable, and understandable; (3) Demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public; and (4) Measure educational outcomes to identify and enhance effective educational practices.

Currently, 332 institutions participate in the VSA, supplying information to constituencies through a common web report – the *College Portrait*. The *College Portrait* (*About the College Portrait*, http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm?page=about_cp) uses a template that allows data from participating institutions to be displayed in a consistent and comparable format. The intention is to provide prospective students and their families with an accessible, transparent, and trustworthy source of data that includes indicators such as student and campus characteristics, success and progress rates, cost of attendance, campus safety, data related to the student experience on campus, class size, and student learning outcomes. All of the information is gathered through

common and currently available data sources, using established definitions and reporting conventions. The development and implementation of the VSA was funded by the Lumina Foundation, and continued funding for its on-going operation will be through dues from participating institutions. As an example, the College Portrait for Kansas State University (K-State) is available at <http://www.collegeportraits.org/KS/KSU>.

Why Participate in the VSA?

Broad and complete participation in the VSA by universities and colleges clearly offers benefits to prospective students and their families. Yet, the *College Portrait* is not intended to be a marketing tool. In fact, certain data included as part of the template on the website may present some institutions in a less-than positive light, or the data might be at variance with the common public perceptions of an institution. Such transparency is welcomed by some institutions, but may not be so welcomed by others. So, why should one participate?

The *College Portrait* offers prospective students with a common picture of participating institutions. When students can access and compare common data across institutions, they should be more satisfied with their college choice. Fears should be reduced about receiving misleading information or setting unrealistic expectations. Such transparency should improve retention rates. Certainly, institutions compete for students, especially high-quality students, and marketing plays a critical role in how institutions distinguish themselves from their competitors. The *College Portrait* does allow each institution to customize its website by highlighting up to nine specific university programs or features of its choice.

Each institution's *College Portrait* also includes cost of attendance and financial aid information. This provides prospective students with a more accurate estimate of the actual cost of attending a particular participating institution. Students often choose not to attend certain colleges or not to attend college at all due to the perceived high cost. The cost of attendance indicator and financial aid information should provide a more accurate estimate of the total cost students will pay at participating institutions, helping students to make more informed decisions.

In addition to serving prospective students and families, the VSA and the *College Portrait* also offers faculty of participating institutions clear indicators on which to compare their institution to others. They have access to more detailed information on student performance and learning, thus informing their decisions on curricula, programs, and assistance. The *College Portrait* reports only on undergraduate programs, but still can assist faculty in the development of graduate programs and their entry standards.

The VSA also provides a platform for academia to demonstrate its communication with and assistance to its major constituents. Rather than be subject to federal mandates that call for specific prescriptions applied to all higher education institutions, the VSA is a clear strategy aimed at increasing the transparency, integrity, and consistency of the data colleges and universities provide. Finally, the VSA provides data that can be utilized for many ground-breaking research studies. The data gathered across the numerous variables represents a very rich information source that includes a large diversity of participating universities.

Student Learning Outcomes and Test Selection

One of the major components of the VSA involves the assessment of student learning. Specifically, VSA requires all participating institutions to report on three core learning outcomes: critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication. In order for all institutions to report comparable scores, three national standardized tests were identified to measure the three outcomes. These tests are: (1) Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), produced by ACT; (2) Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), produced by CAE; and (3) ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly Measure of Academic Proficiency Progress {MAPP}), produced by ETS. Each participating institution selects one of the three tests to measure the core learning outcomes of first-year and senior students. Determining which test is the most appropriate for an institution is an important decision.

At K-State, our selection of the appropriate test was a group decision involving members of Faculty Senate, the Committee on Academic Policy and Procedures, the General Education Task Force, other faculty members, and the Director of Assessment. The group analyzed all three tests using a rubric with several factors for comparisons (e.g. cost, time to complete exam, paper vs. online format, test administration, sample size, use of results, and the need for incentives). Two of the deciding factors for K-State were how the exam would be administered and how much time the exam would take to complete. While the cost of the tests was not a determining factor, the potential cost associated with the need for incentives to encourage students to participate was an important consideration. The Director of Assessment believed it was important that the tests should be administered during class time to avoid having to recruit students and provide incentives for them to participate. It was also important that the results be used for more than simply reporting mean scores. Based on these factors, K-State chose to use the CAAP to assess the three student learning outcomes for the VSA. The CAAP can be administered in a relatively short time frame (40 minutes per module), and the results are useful in our existing student learning assessment processes.

Administration and Use of CAAP

The VSA requires that a sample of first-time first-year students be tested in the beginning of the fall semester and 'natural' seniors, those who began as first-year students at one's institution, be tested within six months of graduation. K-State administered the CAAP exam to 737 first-year and 708 senior students during the 2008-2009 academic year, and we are conducting a second year of testing in the current academic year to generate a baseline for future administrations. The tests are administered to the students by one of several trained proctors within the Office of Assessment. CAAP has available six different 40-minute paper and pencil modules, of which two, *Critical Thinking* and *Writing Essay*, are required for the VSA. The *Critical Thinking* module assesses both the critical thinking and analytic reasoning core learning outcomes of the VSA, while the *Writing Essay* module assesses written communication. K-State also is using the CAAP to assess two of our five university undergraduate student learning outcomes: critical thinking and communication.

Once students complete the tests, they are sent to ACT for scoring, and then summary data, as well as individual student score reports that can be shared with each participating student, are returned to the institution. Upon the completion of testing both first-year and senior students, ACT prepares a report for each institution which provides mean scores, the expected learning gains on the test administered (in our case, Critical Thinking and Writing Essay tests), and the mean ACT scores for each of the first-year and senior groups tested.

Our experience with the entire testing process has included some challenges. First, it is not always easy to identify courses that will provide equal and representative samples of either first-year or senior-level students. This will depend on the format of an institution's general education program, and the degree to which specific capstone courses exist across a representative sample of majors. We have support from the Provost and the Deans, as they recognize the importance of the exams, and they encourage faculty to offer a class period in their courses for inclusion in the testing process. Still, some faculty members do not participate because they do not feel they can afford to lose instruction time.

Second, the reports received from ACT are somewhat limited in the information they provide. To augment the ACT reports, our Office of Assessment gathers additional data (e.g. gender, ethnicity, ACT composite score, college) from our student information system for participating students. An enhanced report is generated, providing more detailed information and additional comparisons of the CAAP results. We have found these enhanced reports to be very helpful in the assessment of our students as well as our assessment of the use of the CAAP.

Third, one of the issues we have faced is how we can motivate students to try their best on these exams. Despite our efforts, it is evident that not all students have put forth their best efforts. Some students complete the exam in less than ten minutes, too quickly for a quality effort. Some of the minimum scores on each module are very low, and comparisons of a student's CAAP score to his or her ACT composite score clearly shows some variance between effort and potential. Some students simply report that their efforts were not their best.

We have discussed the possibility of adding an incentive to motivate students to do their best. The incentive might take the form of extra credit for students who take the test or score above a certain percentage, numerous small prize drawings, a few large prize drawings, or vouchers for items purchased at the university bookstore or in the Student Union. Some institutions have offered up to \$150 per student to participate in their standardized testing, but it remains unclear whether the incentives are successful in encouraging students to perform their best or to simply entice them to participate in the test. Unless performance on the exams carries more meaningful consequences (e.g. a minimum score for graduation), college students may not take the exams as seriously as the institutions.

In conclusion, the VSA and the College Portraits offer students a more transparent and meaningful window through which to view their prospective college choices. Participating institutions will need to carefully evaluate which standardized exam fits their specific situation and assessment needs. There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to each of the three standardized tests and the various ways in which they can be administered on campuses, but all three have been shown to produce equally valid results (VSA website). Our experience with the CAAP has created some challenges, but the lessons we have learned will enhance our future assessment efforts.

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