Transparency & Accountability:
An Evaluation of the VSA College Portrait Pilot

Natasha A. Jankowski

Stanley O. Ikenberry

Jillian Kinzie

George D. Kuh

Gloria F. Shenoy

Gianina R. Baker

March 2012

Table of Contents

The VSA College Portrait demonstrated that public universities are committed to greater transparency of information and a willingness to respond to calls for accountability through assessing and reporting learning outcomes.

Executive Summary

Transparency & Accountability: An Evaluation of the VSA College Portrait

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) is a vehicle for public four-year universities to report comparable information about the undergraduate student experience via the College Portrait, a common web reporting template. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was asked by the VSA to evaluate the effectiveness of the student learning outcomes pilot project within the College Portrait. The evaluation was conducted over a five-month period, October 2011 through February 2012, drawing on a variety of data sources. These included focus groups, interviews with leaders from the policy arena and regional accreditation agencies, institutional surveys, and analyses of results from the VSA-conducted survey of participating institutions, and College Portrait database statistics and Google Analytics.

Major Findings

Our review found widespread agreement that the launch of the VSA in 2007 was a necessary response to the demands of the time. Accountability demands and public interests are transitory in nature and while the press for transparency persists, the environment in which the VSA exists is different from when it began. While seen as "necessary," many observers also expect the VSA to continue to evolve.

Even though participation by public universities is widespread, one third of eligible institutions do not participate in the College Portrait. Moreover, nearly half of participating institutions have not yet met the VSA stated expectations for the student learning outcomes pilot. One major concern is that the student learning outcomes section of the College Portrait attracts very few viewers. Several reasons may elucidate this shortfall, one of which is that the information posted and the manner in which it is presented do not reflect the needs and interests of users.

We also found that 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 which, in turn, serves to undermine institutional participation in the VSA. Institutions participating in the VSA and other non-participating institutions would like to expand the number and nature of the student learning measures in order to more accurately portray student attainment and provide more useful and meaningful information for multiple audiences.

Recommendations

Given this mixed picture, we asked, "Should the VSA College Portrait be continued?" With some exceptions, the response was affirmative, suggesting "mend it, don't end it" regarding the value of the VSA and the College Portrait. We recommend the VSA College Portrait be recast as a state-of-the-art electronic communication tool targeted for specific audiences, including prospective and current students, parents, and guidance counselors; alumni; faculty and staff; trustees; employers; accreditors; public policy makers; and media.

We also urge that information presented on the College Portrait be presented around questions of particular interest to students and other relevant audiences to tell a contextualized, institution-specific, evidence-based story - possibly incorporating video or other media. To reach intended audiences, it will be necessary to design and implement strategies to draw traffic to the College Portrait website to increase viewership and access to information. A market-test of the next-generation College Portrait template would help confirm the language used is "consumer friendly" for respective audiences.

Given the limited confidence and acceptance in available standardized tests as a means to provide evidence of student learning, we strongly recommend that the VSA College Portrait expand the range of accepted assessment tools and approaches. Such steps may also include an educative role to advance the development and utility of alternative methods of assessment. An additional dimension not yet explored is to create a space on the student learning outcomes section of the College Portrait where institutions can provide practical examples of how student learning evidence is being *used* to make decisions to improve student learning and enhance quality and performance.

Finally, to expand viewership of the College Portrait, we recommend consideration be given to the creation of a College Portrait template that could be adapted and used by all postsecondary institutions, public and private, community colleges and others. A common template for all of higher education, while challenging to achieve, would serve as one access point for the public and thereby attract increased viewer traffic to the site.

Conclusion

The College Portrait student learning outcomes pilot was an effective response to the challenges emanating from the Spellings Commission and related pressures for accountability. However, it by no means will be sufficient in its current form going forward. The demand for evidence of student attainment will likely increase, along with the need to reach and better educate the public. Perhaps the single most important step APLU and AASCU can take is to transform the VSA from a compliance-focused vehicle to a platform through which institutions can speak to and engage their publics through evidence-based story telling.

Transparency & Accountability: An Evaluation of the VSA College Portait Pilot

Introduction and Purpose

The Voluntary System of Accountability, or VSA, was launched in 2007 by public four-year universities to supply comparable information about the undergraduate student experience through a common web reporting template – the College Portrait. The VSA is a partnership between the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Originally supported by Lumina Foundation for Education, the VSA is now sustained through institutional membership dues ranging from $500 to $2500 based on institutional enrollment.

The VSA has three primary objectives:

1. *To provide a mechanism for public institutions to demonstrate accountability and transparency, particularly in the areas of access, cost, student progress, and student outcomes.*

2. *To provide a streamlined college search tool for students, families, and high school counselors by presenting clear, accessible, and comparable information on the undergraduate student experience through the College Portrait website (http://www.collegeportraits.org).*

3. *To support institutions in the measurement of student learning outcomes through original research and by providing a forum for collaboration and exchange (http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm)*

The College Portrait was developed by a task force of university presidents, provosts, and other administrators. A particularly noteworthy feature of the College Portrait, and the focus of this evaluation, is the student learning outcomes page, conceived as a four-year pilot project for participating universities to gain experience in obtaining and publicly reporting information regarding student learning gains (value-added) at the institutional level using what are considered three comparable measures: Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the ETS Proficiency Profile (ETS PP). Further information and background on the VSA, the College Portrait, and the student learning outcomes pilot project is located in Appendix A.

In September 2011, VSA asked the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) to evaluate the effectiveness of the student learning outcomes pilot project within the College Portrait. The NILOA effort was designed to capture available evidence to determine the extent to which the student learning outcomes pilot achieved the purposes articulated by its founders. While we tried to maintain a sharp focus on the student learning outcomes pilot, some focus group participants and personnel from policy-oriented organizations we interviewed shared broader views about the VSA initiative and the College Portrait in general. Believing that APLU and AASCU leadership would see these views as instructive, we have included them in our evaluation. The evaluation utilized a variety of data sources including the following:

- Focus groups with over 150 APLU and AASCU members
- Interviews with 10 leaders from the policy arena and regional accreditation agencies
- A survey of institutions that withdrew participation in the VSA
- A survey of institutions eligible to participate in the VSA that decided not to join
- A survey of guidance counselors and admissions personnel
- An analysis of data from a VSA-conducted survey of participating institutions
- An analysis of Google Analytics on College Portrait website traffic
- An analysis of the College Portrait database statistics

Appendix B contains additional information about the evaluation methodology including data collection and analysis.

Findings

> ### 1. Both VSA-participating and nonparticipating institutions generally agree that the launch of the VSA in 2007 was a wise, timely, useful, and necessary response to the accountability and transparency demands of the time.

Virtually every constituency viewed the VSA as a politically astute, proactive response to issues and concerns raised by policy voices at the time. The VSA College Portrait is credited with demonstrating a commitment to greater transparency of information and a willingness to respond to calls for accountability through assessing and reporting learning outcomes. Those with whom we talked saw the VSA as a coordinated, collective response by higher education to an immediate public policy challenge. The VSA College Portrait was deemed to have encouraged more public reporting of information and to have drawn attention to the assessment of learning outcomes among America's public universities.

While there was general agreement that the VSA College Portrait was a necessary development, focus group participants and other observers agreed that it was not sufficient to quell public cynicism or to fulfill an immediate but constantly changing demand for accountability. Policy issues and public concerns are transitory, and the precise focus and nature of accountability interests and demands shift over time as events unfold and as actors and conditions change. The environment in which the VSA exists currently is different from when it began and while seen as a necessary response to the accountability climate when created in 2007, many observers also expect the VSA to continue to evolve.

Thus, while the VSA College Portrait, or something akin to it was and is important, those we talked to cautioned that it is far from sufficient and that a sustained effort is required to build transparency and earn the public trust.

> ### 2. Many eligible institutions, about one third, do not participate in the College Portrait and nearly half of the participants have not yet met expectations set forth in the College Portrait student learning outcomes pilot.

Six out of ten (62%) of eligible APLU and AASCU institutions presently participate in the VSA College Portrait.[1] *As of February 2012, 320 institutions were participating or had participated in the VSA, while another 171 institutions eligible to participate had not done so.* Most institutions joined the VSA initiative in 2008 (Figure 1), with 75% of currently participating institutions signing on that year. Since 2007, 25 institutions have withdrawn from the VSA.

---

[1] In the NILOA survey of non-participating institutions, 8% stated they had not been aware of the VSA and were now considering joining.

The VSA is a voluntary initiative which provides research, support, and an online template called the College Portrait for participating institutions to use to assemble and disseminate information and demonstrate accountability. http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm

The VSA's College Portrait is a website created to provide readily accessible transparent, comparable information. http://www.collegeportraits.org/ Relevant information from each participating institution is housed on the College Portrait website. This information includes results from the student learning outcomes assessment pilot.

In this report, "VSA" refers to the larger project that hosts the College Portrait website. "Individual institutional College Portraits" refers to the institution-specific College Portraits available on the VSA College Portrait website.
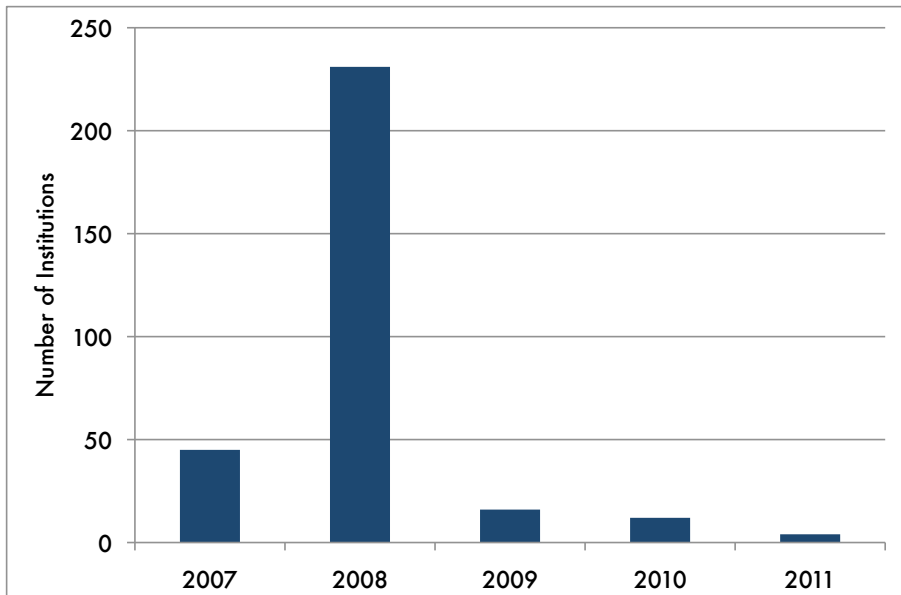
Figure 1. Number of Institutions Joining VSA by Year of Membership

Of VSA participating institutions, substantial numbers do not publish a College Portrait online each year:

- 45 institutions (16%) did not publish a College Portrait in 2008
- 27 institutions (9%) did not publish a College Portrait in 2009
- 54 institutions (17%) did not publish a College Portrait in 2010
- 58 institutions (18%) did not publish a College Portrait in 2011

More than half (55%) of participating institutions that do publish their College Portrait have yet to post student learning outcomes information (Figure 2).

The College Portrait student learning outcomes pilot allows institutions up to four years to report the results from one of the three approved value-added measures administered to first-time first-year students and then to senior students. Thus, results from the majority of VSA institutions, which joined in 2008, should be posted by December 31, 2012 at the conclusion of the pilot. In addition, analysis of the results of a survey of VSA-participating institutions indicates the majority of institutions that have yet to post results have—in fact— administered one of the three approved tests and are now waiting for the results; in some instances, schools have only tested first-year students or seniors and are waiting to test the second group.

Among the 144 institutions that have posted standardized test results on their institutional College Portrait, 86% administered the CLA, 9% administered the ETS PP, and about 5% administered the CAAP.

"We are still in the process of assembling the data required for the Portrait. The first time we administered the test we did not have enough participants - we have since given it a second time and have not yet received the results. We intend to post after an internal review of the results once received."
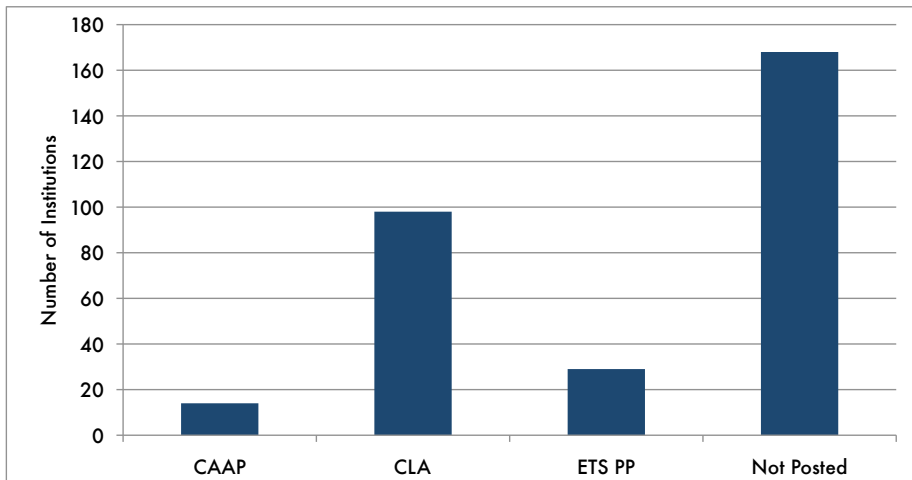
Focus Group Participant

Figure 2. Number of Institutions Posting Standardized Test Results on the College Portrait

In addition to posting the value-added standardized test results on the student learning outcomes page, the VSA requires institutions to include a link to institution-specific learning outcomes data and provides space for a narrative description of assessment activities on the College Portrait. In NILOA's review of individual College Portrait sites, only two thirds of participating institutions provided the required links, and several of these were inoperative. Links that were working sent viewers in a variety of directions, some to program-level assessment activities, others to summaries of NSSE or CLA results, or to pages describing institutional research or assessment office information. The narrative information of institutional assessment activities appeared on roughly two thirds of participating institutions' College Portraits and varied in length and detail.

By and large, the narratives of learning outcomes information, including the interpretations of test scores, were suitable for internal audiences familiar with the lexicon of student learning outcomes assessment and continuous improvement.

As a result, College Portrait viewers not directly involved with or knowledgeable about assessment themselves would likely be hard-pressed to comprehend the provided information and understand its implications for student learning. Overall, only a minimal amount of information was posted on institutions' College Portrait student learning outcomes pages. What did appear typically lacked helpful explanatory or contextual material that would aid the viewer in understanding what the results of the standardized tests meant or in deriving meaning from the display.

3. The student learning outcomes section of institutional College Portraits attracts little traffic.

Considerable investment of time and resources is required by an institution to gather and enter the information for the College Portrait including administering the student learning outcomes test, placing these data on the website, and contextualizing and communicating results. For this reason it is impor-

tant to know whether potential users are viewing the information presented there—especially, given the purposes of this evaluation, the student learning outcomes section of the template. In both the focus groups with institutional VSA participants and in conversations with public officials, concern was expressed that too few people know that the student learning outcomes site exists.

Google Analytics provides information about website traffic in terms of the number of visitors to specific pages as well as the average time users spend on a page. NILOA obtained access to the College Portrait Google Analytics from the VSA, and using time spent on a page as a proxy for interest, website traffic was examined across the entire College Portrait site as well as for individual College Portraits from October 2009 through August 2010 and from February 2011 to December 2011.

The analytics from the 2011 time period for the entire College Portrait site showed that very few visitors looked at an institutional student learning outcomes page; many more users viewed college cost information (Figure 3). More specifically, of the 1,157,520 unique page views of the College Portrait site as a whole, 43% were of the College Cost Estimator, while only 1% of the entire page views (a total of 15,862 unique pages views) were of the student learning outcomes page.
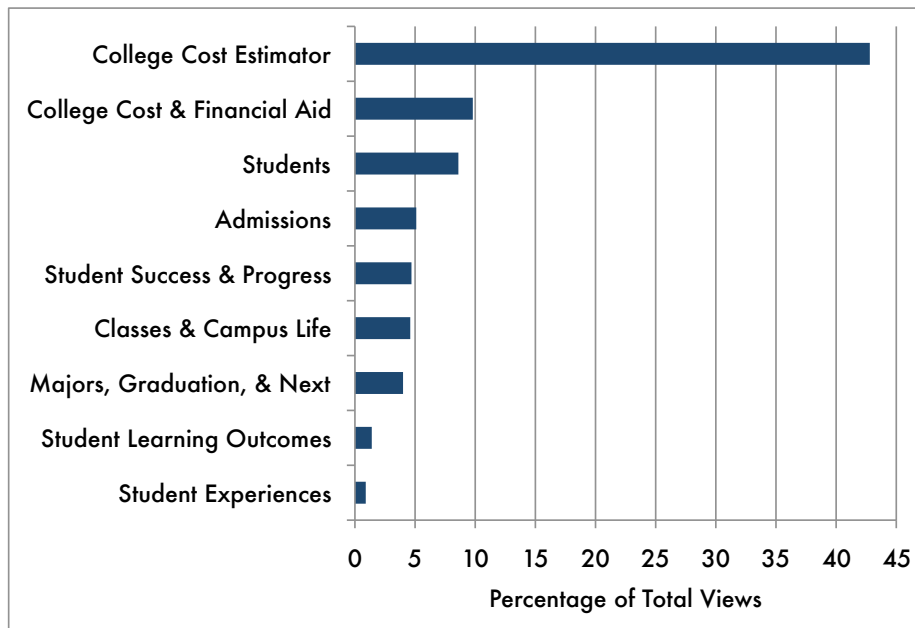
Figure 3. Percentage of Total Views of the College Portrait Website by Information Category

Both the number of views of the student learning outcomes page of individual College Portraits of the 320 participating institutions and the time spent on the learning outcomes page were low. About 82% of participating institutions had traffic on their student learning outcomes page in 2009–2010 and 2011; however, *almost one in five of participating institutions did not have a single visitor to their student learning outcomes page during either time period.* People from several of the participating institutions mentioned in focus groups that they review their individual College Portrait analytics or ask at orientation or during admissions meetings if anyone viewed the College Portrait site. In most cases, few hands are raised.

The length of time users spent on the individual College Portrait student learning outcomes page ranged from a 17-minute visit at one institution's site to several sites where users spent no time at all. In 2011, the longest amount of time spent on a student learning outcomes page was roughly four minutes. Figure 4 shows the range of time spent on the student learning outcomes page.
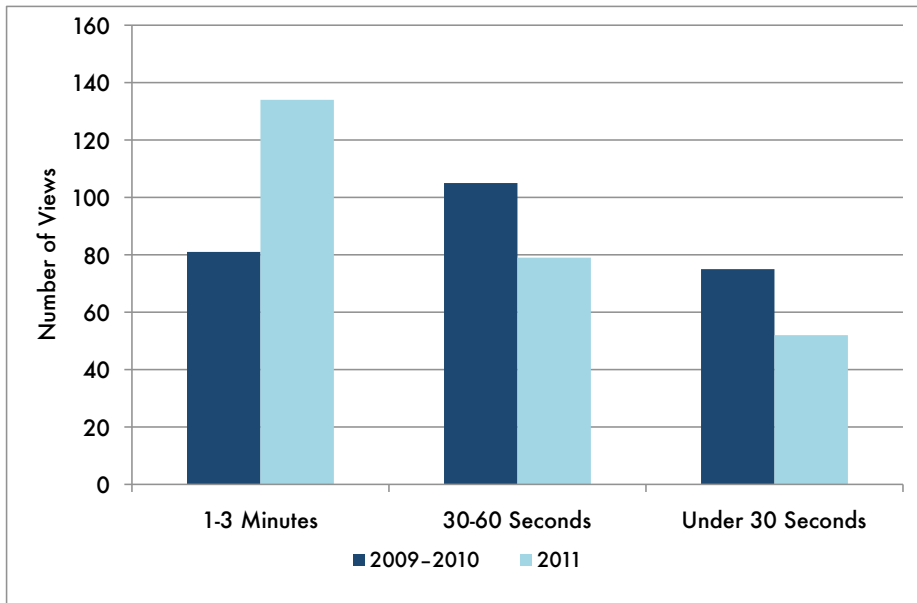
Figure 4. Number of Views of the College Portrait Student Learning Outcomes Page by Length of Time Spent on Page by Year

The number of people who visited an individual College Portrait site and then viewed the student learning outcomes page was minimal, with a slight decrease in 2011. Of the total number of users who came to an institution's College Portrait in 2009–2010, only 9% examined the student learning outcomes page for an average of 2 minutes and 17 seconds. Only 7% of users who came to an institution's College Portrait site in 2011 examined the student learning outcomes page for 23 seconds—substantially less time than the year prior.

Institutions receiving the highest number of views on the student learning outcomes page tended to link their institutional College Portrait to their home or admissions page, which is the link required in the participation agreement of the VSA. The agreement states that participating institutions will include the College Portrait logo on the institution's home page or another appropriate page that is viewed frequently by prospective students and not more than two clicks away from the institution's home page (http://www.voluntarysystem.org/participants/signup.cfm). Another NILOA study (Jankowski & Provezis, 2011) found that three quarters of VSA-participating institutions mentioned their participation in the College Portrait somewhere on their institutional website; however, the majority of these posted the information on their institutional research or assessment page, while only 9% referred to the VSA on their home or admissions page.

Some campuses include information on their College Portrait that goes beyond basic VSA requirements. The California State University System, for example, displays a California Public Good page. Since that page has been available, 10% of users who view one of the participating California institutions' College Portraits also visit the Public Good page and view it for an average of one minute.

The relatively low level of viewer traffic to the College Portrait information prompted some respondents to ponder whether the amount of time required to gather the necessary data and populate the College Portrait was worth the effort. At some institutions much of the information about student learning already appears on institutional websites or is contained in reports to state agencies. In addition, many respondents were concerned that the student learning outcomes information required for the College Portrait did not adequately represent the actual assessment work underway at institutions. Some respondents suggested that if the College Portrait could be populated by the VSA drawing information from other reporting requirements and institutional websites, it would reduce redundancy, lower costs, and not unduly burden institutions.

Focus group participants wondered whether the College Portrait could serve a clearinghouse function whereby multiple sources of information could be consolidated in a user-friendly format that appeals to diverse audiences. Several respondents suggested that the VSA, as opposed to institutions, consolidate or "pull" relevant information from state-required accountability reports. Others suggested the VSA consider creating a report on higher education from the College Portrait information utilizing peer comparison, similar in form to the Wisconsin accountability reports including comparison to selected peers (see http://www.wisconsin.edu/opar/accountability/). The University of Wisconsin System accountability reports also suggest the potential for aligning VSA more closely to state reporting requirements or for making the VSA a repository for state accountability data.

In short, traffic to the College Portrait and the learning outcomes section has been distressingly low. Addressing that reality presents a major challenge to the VSA going forward.

> 4. The information posted on the College Portrait may not reflect the needs of prospective students and families or provide the information they actually seek to make decisions about where to attend college.

Many participating and nonparticipating institutions as well as others with whom NILOA spoke shared the view that the student learning outcomes information on the College Portrait is not user friendly. In large part, this is because the learning outcomes page of many participating institutions is blank or contains very little information. As noted earlier, the information is typically couched in language familiar to insiders rather than pitched to the needs and interests of prospective students and the public. Results of the standardized tests that are posted on the College Portrait, for example, are not often explained in layperson terms or contextualized in a meaningful manner.

Institutions report results of student learning so that prospective students and their families will consider the information when deciding where to go to college and, consequently, make better-informed decisions. This is because it is thought policy makers, parents, and prospective students want simple, comparable indicators. "Simple" quickly becomes complex, however, given the diversity of campuses, missions, and programs, as well as the varied needs of students and the public. Student college choice experts agree that more

"We report on measures to our board, to state agencies, and to others. We wish there were ways that VSA could download available data and then ask institutions for data they could not get from other available sources to lower cost and redundancy for institutions."
Focus Group Participant

information is needed to help students make informed college choices (Long, 2007; Manski & Wise, 1983) due to the variety of factors shaping these decisions such as geographic location, institutional fit, campus setting, distance from home, and cost (Ewell, 2009; Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004; McCormick, 2010; McDonough, 1997). On the other hand, the assumption that information must be comparable across similar institutions to facilitate student choice may or may not have advanced comparability, but it clearly appears to have limited the richness of information that might have been of potential use to students and the public.

Achieving public understanding of test scores on the three different VSA-approved measures is a major challenge. While the VSA validity study showed that the three tests measure similar constructs (Klein, Liu, & Sconing, 2009), it is less clear how results from these tests can be used by students to inform college choices. Because we know so little about what students and parents believe they need to know regarding student learning when selecting a college, it is difficult to know what evidence to include on the College Portrait that would respond to their needs. What is clear, as noted earlier, is that few people are looking at this information as currently presented.

> 5. The authorized standardized test measures of student learning outcomes lack broad credibility and acceptance in the higher education community, undermining institutional participation and engagement with the VSA and campus faculty and staff support of the VSA initiative.

It is commonly understood in assessment circles that no single test or measure can capture the full range of student learning or the impact of college on other aspects of the student experience. To address this issue at the outset, VSA leaders evaluated 16 potential learning outcomes tests and recommended three as options for use in the VSA (Shulenburger & Keller, 2009), offering institutions the opportunity to choose from among the three instruments the one best suited to their particular campus. As noted earlier, the three approved instruments are the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and the ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly MAPP).

In a survey of participating institutions including those that have yet to post results on their College Portrait, 82% reported having administered one of the three tests, with the CLA and ETS PP being the most popular choices, at 41% and 39% respectively. However, as noted earlier, the majority of institutions have not yet reported results, with fewer than half (45%) listing results on their College Portraits, and with most of those being CLA results.

Survey respondents and focus group participants raised numerous concerns about displaying the results of standardized tests. The primary criticism was the inability of campus personnel to understand what the test scores represent. Critics questioned precisely what the tests measure—initial ability of incoming students or learning gains as a result of the college experience. In addition, many with whom we spoke lacked confidence in the reliability and

"We should not be using nationally-normed standardized tests. They have many serious drawbacks as measures of actual student outcomes. Only 10% of students self-reported that they gave the test their best effort. It makes me wonder just how worthwhile it would be for comparison purposes with other institutions."

Survey Respondent

validity of the results, in interpreting the scores, and in using the test results to improve student learning. This is because the information from the tests was not sufficiently disaggregated to identify what part of the course sequence or curriculum needed revision or improvement. Most respondents on this topic said that program and course embedded assessments were better approaches than the standardized tests. One respondent described particularly well what many expressed:

> We see no value in administering any of these tests other than for VSA compliance. They are costly and do not give us reliable information that can be used to either represent or improve learning at the institution. We would prefer to have VSA require a balanced and accountable use of these sorts of methods [a variety of approaches] rather than requiring one of the three big tests.

Survey respondents and focus group participants expressed concern about campus-to-campus variations in the procedures used to select student participants and to administer the test. Moreover, in many instances the tests are completed by numbers of students too small to draw conclusions and point to steps institutions can take to improve student learning. In addition, the motivation of the students and the time they spend on the test (Hosch, 2010) may influence the test results. The VSA survey of participating College Portrait institutions found that many of the institutions had difficulty acquiring a representative sample of enough students to sit for the test. These and other concerns raise questions about data quality. One respondent spoke for many:

> We faced considerable challenges in getting a reasonable sample of students to respond and doubted, based on our observations, that students performed to the best of their ability on the test. We are not completely satisfied that the test is a satisfactory measure of student learning, or that testing conditions can be managed in ways that will yield meaningful results. We don't know what the results represent, but we do not believe they are representative of learning gains by undergraduates at our institution.

In a survey of institutions that withdrew from the VSA, similar concerns were raised with 40% stating they withdrew *because of the standardized test requirements.*

- Four fifths (81%) of survey respondents said that the student learning outcomes pilot requirements did not align with their assessment processes at the program level and that the test results were not usable for campus improvement efforts.
- A third (35%) of the nonparticipating institutions reported they would join if some flexibility were introduced to the reporting of student learning outcomes.
- 11% of institutions administer the standardized tests for alternative purposes, such as a rising junior-year assessment tool.
- A quarter of institutions (24%) frequently expressed concerns and fears over the potential misuse of the results. As one respondent put it, "We do not think it is appropriate to list numbers without explanation of results."

"We have successfully crafted several assessment instruments that are tailored to our student learning objectives. We are not interested in adopting an external testing mandate that is not in alignment with our student learning outcomes and established assessment practice."

Survey Respondent

All this said, despite widespread concern and angst among institutions, the sentiments of most with whom we spoke indicated that current participants in the VSA College Portrait may be inclined to continue to administer one of the tests as long as they are required.

> 6. Participating institutions generally agree that expanding the number and nature of the student learning measures will produce more accurate portrayals of student attainment and more useful information for campuses, and will make the information more meaningful for all audiences.

In late 2011, the VSA board voted to expand the range of student learning outcomes assessment options. Several potential items for expansion of the learning outcomes section of the College Portrait were offered by focus group participants and survey respondents. For each of the potential items, respondents stated that they wanted "to tell our student learning outcomes story with measures appropriate to us"—an issue particularly important for institutions with large numbers of transfer students. Universities wanted to ensure that their distinctiveness could be expressed through other reporting options including authentic measures of learning, and that student performance at the program level could be represented. Some items for consideration mentioned by respondents include the following:

- Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) VALUE rubrics
- Alumni surveys
- Licensure pass rates
- Accreditation information
- Program-level assessment
- Portfolios

The VSA survey of participating institutions offered other insights into the types of assessment approaches and tools institutions consider useful (Figure 5):

- The most commonly mentioned were the AAC&U VALUE rubrics (38%) and the ETS Major Field Achievement tests (42%). Respondents deemed both of these useful to their institutions.
- Among survey respondents from institutions eligible for but not participating in the VSA, 35% indicated that the addition of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics as an option to report student learning outcomes would positively influence their decision to join the VSA.

"There is a political accountability issue where course-level assessment that we do does not meet the public accountability we are talking about. The course-level assessment does not provide the value-added for the public that they need for accountability, but it should."
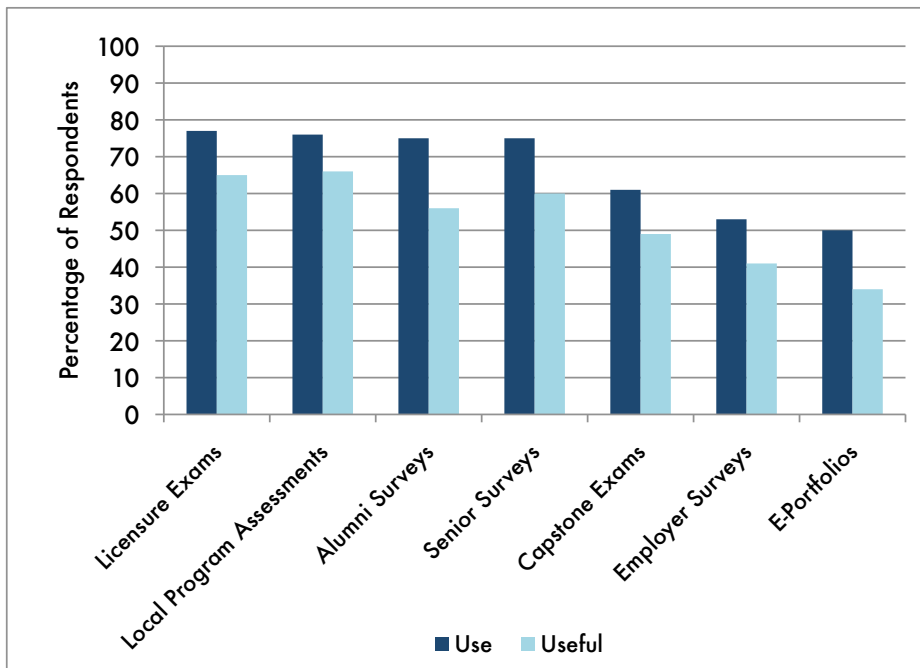
Focus Group Participant

Figure 5. Percentage of Respondents Claiming to Use Assessment Approaches and the Percentage That Find Them 'Useful'

Another theme that emerged was the suggestion to broaden the College Portrait to include program-level information and to disaggregate results according to different types of students such as transfer, associate, and baccalaureate degree students (23%). The use of student learning outcomes information by the public and policy makers presents special challenges—including that of helping various publics distinguish between student learning outcomes evidence and other performance indicators such as graduation rates, retention, and job placement statistics. All are relevant and yet, at times, confusing. One survey respondent expressed the idea this way:

> It's important to educate outside audiences about the variety of appropriate methods for evaluating student learning outcomes instead of relying on external tests that provide little actionable feedback and discredit the expertise of our faculty. Instead, the VSA could give us a way to highlight the value our faculty bring to evaluating the work of their students.

Some respondents also suggested opening up participation in the VSA to all public and private institutions. Because there are multiple templates in use now, the industry and our various constituents could be better served with a single template. As one interviewee stated, "For all the good the VSA has accomplished, the level of institutional participation has not reached the needed scale to address public cynicism." Expanding membership as well as the range of measures conveys a sense that a broader focus on student learning would address the deeply rooted and widely shared concern that the standardized tests do not accurately reflect learning that occurs at the program and course levels and would allow for the presentation of a more comprehensible picture to the public. Such an approach could be an effective means for various stakeholders to learn information about higher education institutions—perhaps in collaboration with other projects like the Delta Cost Project (now administered by American Institutes for Research)—and state reporting requirements.

"It has been a pilot program and whoever gets it right in the first couple years? We need to answer the question: What is the long-term outcome we want to see?"

Focus Group Participant

Conclusion and Recommendations

Public universities understand and support the value of the VSA College Portrait and view it as a creative, constructive, politically astute response to the accountability pressures at the time it was developed. "Should the VSA College Portrait be sustained," we asked? With some exceptions, the response was a resounding "yes," suggesting a "mend it, don't end it" view from the field. Even though the College Portrait student learning outcomes pilot seems to have been an effective response to the challenges emanating from the Spellings Commission, by no means will it be sufficient going forward. As noted earlier, while the interests and pressures of government and policy makers shift over time, the need for evidence of student attainment is not likely to abate. To be sustainable and to weather changing interests, the VSA could transform from a compliance-focused vehicle to a platform through which institutions can speak to and engage their publics through evidence-based story telling.

The development and implementation of the VSA College Portrait was prompted by external forces. If the VSA College Portrait is to be "mended" and sustained, APLU and AASCU would be well advised to find ways to modify the purposes, foci, and use of the College Portrait to make it more congruent with the actual needs and interests of the multiple audiences it is meant to serve. The College Portrait must become a medium through which participating institutions organize and share information in meaningful ways—ways that are responsive to the legitimate interests and concerns of various audiences including students and parents/families, the media, policy makers, trustees, employers, and other higher education stakeholders.

Perhaps the single most important step APLU and AASCU can take is to transform the College Portrait from a compliance-focused vehicle to a platform through which institutions can speak to and engage their publics through evidence-based story telling. Public trust in most societal institutions is at a low ebb. There are indications that the public's appetite for accountability is more about gaining trust in what we say to them than it is about the statistics we offer. Coupled with this is skepticism within the academy about using test scores as the primary vehicle to build public trust. Numbers standing alone out of context can be manipulated in ways that obfuscate rather than illuminate (Johnson, Rochkind, & DuPont, 2011).

Toward this end, we offer the following recommendations. As noted earlier, our comments extend in some instances beyond the student learning outcomes pilot effort to reflect the broader views of those with whom we talked during the course of this evaluation.

1. *Recast the VSA College Portrait as an effective communication tool using state-of-the-art design technologies targeting specific audiences.* The relevant information should be organized around the documented interests and questions of specific audiences. This will likely require a template with portals tailored to specific audiences: prospective and current students, parents/families, and guidance counselors; alumni; faculty and staff; trustees; employers; accreditors, public policy makers, and the media. In its current form, the meaning and implications of the information on the template are not self-evident, especially for those outside the academy. It is difficult to imagine a single display or page that can adequately support the information needs and interests of all audiences. Focusing on specific audiences, framing questions carefully, and presenting information meaningfully and in context should be the prime challenge of the next version of the VSA College Portrait.

APLU and AASCU would be well advised to find ways to modify the purposes, foci, and use of the College Portrait to make it more congruent with the actual needs and interests of multiple audiences...

2. *Contextualize the information presented in the College Portrait and—where possible—frame the information around questions of interest to the specific intended audience.* Ideally, the information will be assembled and interpreted to tell an evidence-based story, possibly aided by video or other media. The next version of the College Portrait template needs to be market-tested to be sure it uses consumer-friendly language for the respective audiences. For some audiences, even the phrase "student learning outcomes" may be puzzling or off-putting. Perhaps other College Portrait pages can include prompts encouraging viewers to visit the student learning outcomes page. Further, information regarding academic quality and performance should be available throughout the College Portrait, especially in areas of higher traffic. Whatever the ultimate solution, it is not helpful to campuses or the larger public to populate and maintain such sites if the target audiences routinely ignore them.

3. *Expand the range of assessment tools and approaches institutions can use to provide evidence of student learning and to serve an educational role in advocacy for alternative methods of assessment.* One goal of the VSA was to encourage universities to measure and report student learning outcomes using local institutional research. The VSA Board's decision to ease the required administration of a single standardized test and posting of results on the College Portrait is a step in the right direction. Not only has this provision discouraged institutional participation in the VSA, it is not clear that the test data have provided tangible benefit to the intended publics. Equally important, restricting the reporting of student learning outcomes to a test score may have led campuses to ignore the many other relevant indicators of student learning that might have been shared. The design of the next version of the College Portrait template should serve an educational and advocacy role for alternative assessment methods that use authentic student work to make judgments about the quality of student learning.

4. *Design and implement strategies to draw traffic to the College Portrait website to increase viewership and access to information.* Where information is featured on websites makes a difference. In addition to participating institutions posting the College Portrait logo on their institution website, the VSA could broaden marketing efforts to raise general awareness of and bring traffic to the College Portrait site. According to the VSA participation agreement:

> The institution will include the VSA/College Portrait logo on the institution's home page or another appropriate page (e.g., admissions page) that is regularly visited by prospective students and not more than one or two clicks off the institution's home page. An active link will be maintained from the logo directly to its College Portrait http://www.voluntarysystem.org/docs/SignUp/VSAParticipationAgreement.pdf.

Because a substantial proportion of participating universities do *not* adhere to this agreement, we urge the VSA Oversight Board to ponder how this sensible criterion for membership can be faithfully followed by member institutions.

5. *Create a space in the student learning outcomes section of the College Portrait where institutions show examples of how student learning evidence is being used to make decisions and to improve student learning and institutional performance.* Such examples will not only increase the awareness of faculty and staff of the possibility and desirability of data-informed improvement, but they will also demonstrate to

The next version of the College Portrait template needs to be market-tested to be sure it uses consumer-friendly language for the respective audiences.

The design of the next version of the College Portrait template should serve an educational and advocacy role for alternative assessment methods that use authentic student work to make judgments about the quality of student learning.

external audiences that public universities are not complacent about or satisfied with the status quo and are taking concrete steps to improve.

6. *Consider developing a College Portrait template that can be adapted and used by all postsecondary institutions.* It is difficult enough for the public—especially those who have never worked in a college or university—to understand and appreciate the learning outcomes campuses expect students to attain. When this information is presented in multiple formats using different terms for the same concepts, no wonder few users take the time to master the complexities. Expanding institutional membership and participation in the VSA College Portrait will both serve the aims of the VSA and the greater public interest as well as increase traffic to and use of the site. Ideally, every public university would participate in the VSA College Portrait. Inviting participation by non-APLU/AASCU members such as private colleges and universities and community colleges should be explored as well. The more widely used the College Portrait, or some comparable format, the more accessible it will become to the general public and target audiences. Competing formats and brand names are not helpful to the public or to the academy. Achieving consensus around a common format of information may be beyond the reach of the higher education community. Still, if we are to reach the American public, coming together around a common template would greatly expand access and improve communication.

"Student learning and how to show it is not an irrelevant thing to be working on and thinking through, and it is not easy. But, we have to get this right."

Focus Group Participant

Appendix A:

Voluntary System of Accountability: An Overview

Calls for accountability and improved student learning in recent years have challenged colleges and universities to be more transparent in terms of student and institutional performance. These calls have become more insistent as access to higher education has increased, state support has declined, the national economy has faltered, and graduation rates have remained unacceptably low (Borden & Young, 2008; Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006; McPherson & Shulenburger, 2006a, 2006b; Provezis, 2010). Taken together, these circumstances have made efforts to be transparent about institutional performance and to compare the performance of institutions even more important. One initiative that has emerged in response to these concerns is the Voluntary System of Accountability, or the VSA.[1]

The VSA was founded in 2007 in response to the deliberations of the 2006 Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education and the looming 2008 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Originally supported by Lumina Foundation for Education and now sustained through institutional membership dues ranging from $500 to $2500 based on institutional enrollment, the VSA is a voluntary initiative for public four-year colleges and universities that provides information to students, families, policymakers, campus faculty and staff, the general public, and other higher education stakeholders. The information about student learning and institutional performance was intended to (a) facilitate college student choice; (b) inform institutional decision-making for improvement; and (c) respond to accountability demands. The VSA evolved through a partnership between the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) (McPherson & Shulenburger, 2006a, 2006c; Miller, 2008). Oversight for the VSA is provided by a VSA Oversight Board made up of senior officials from APLU and AASCU institutions. According to its website, http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm, the VSA has three primary objectives:

1. To provide a mechanism for public institutions to demonstrate accountability and transparency, particularly in the areas of access, cost, student progress, and student outcomes.
2. To provide a streamlined college search tool for students, families, and high school counselors by presenting clear, accessible, and comparable information on the undergraduate student experience through the College Portrait website: www.collegeportraits.org.
3. To support institutions in the measurement of student learning outcomes through original research and by providing a forum for collaboration and exchange.

To serve these objectives, a task force of university presidents, provosts, and other administrators helped develop the College Portrait—a common web-reporting template that communicates information on the undergraduate student experience. The College Portrait is designed to 1) demonstrate accountability and stewardship to the public; 2) measure educational outcomes to identify effective practices; and 3) assemble information that is accessible, understandable, and comparable (http://www.collegeportraits.org/about).

The College Portrait is composed of a variety of informational pages including:

- *Students*—Information on the characteristics of students who attend
- *Admissions*—Information on the number of students who applied, were accepted, and enrolled
- *College Costs & Financial Aid*—Information on cost and financial aid
- *College Cost Estimator*—A cost calculator
- *Classes & Campus Life*—Information on professors, student housing and campus safety
- *Student Experiences*—Information on NSSE results
- *Majors, Graduation & Next Steps*—Information about majors and graduates
- *Student Success & Progress*—Information on degree completion and time to degree
- *Student Learning Outcomes*—Information on what learning gains to expect in critical thinking, writing, and other important subjects

---

[1] The VSA was not the only response, other web reporting templates include Transparency by Design (TbD), University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), and the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA).

When the College Portrait was developed, it was determined that the student learning outcomes information presented would take the form of a pilot project to be reevaluated in 2012. Access to the student learning outcomes assessment information required in the pilot project is located on the right-hand side of individual College Portraits, at the bottom of the list of additional options (see image from the website below).
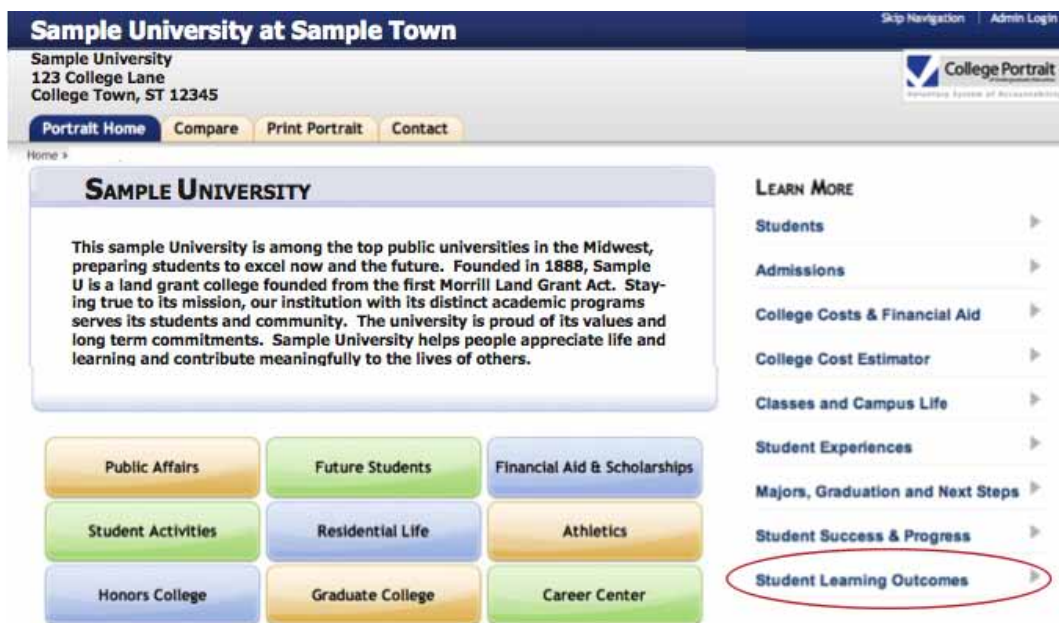
If desired, institutions may also include a clearly labeled supplemental page located after the student learning outcomes page option on the College Portrait. Several institutions have utilized this opportunity, including the California State University (CSU) system with its inclusion of a section on public good—a common CSU page where CSU campuses communicate their value to the public. For example, see CSU's postings at http://www.collegeportraits.org/CA/CSU-Bakersfield/content_page and http://www.calstate.edu/fyi/2011/FYI_May2011.pdf or the College of New Jersey's consumer information report option at http://www.collegeportraits.org/NJ/TCNJ/content_page.

Since its inception, the College Portrait website has undergone several changes including the addition of a college cost calculator and an overall new visual design in December 2011. The revised College Portrait website makes it possible to compare institutions side by side on a variety of quality indicators and cost. However, student learning outcomes assessment information is not part of the comparison information at this time.

Participation Agreement

As part of the process of becoming a member of the VSA, institutions sign a participation agreement stipulating they will follow the reporting requirements, conditions, and timelines set by the VSA (http://www.voluntarysystem.org/docs/SignUp/VSAParticipationAgreement.pdf). Issues addressed in the agreement include VSA membership dues, provisions regarding withdrawal from the VSA, and conditions for maintaining the accuracy of data reported on the College Portrait website. The agreement also specifically outlines what is expected of member institutions during the student learning outcomes pilot project. These requirements, found in the Measurement and Reporting of Student Learning Outcomes section of the agreement, state that institutions must

16. Link to institution-specific learning outcomes data within three months. The data reported may include, but is not limited to, reports on program assessments, employer satisfaction with graduates, licensing exam pass rates, etc.
17. Participate in the VSA pilot project to measure student learning outcomes by selecting one of three tests to measure student learning gains:

     a. Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)—two modules: critical thinking and writing essay;

     b. Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)—including performance task, analytic writing task;

     c. ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly known as MAPP)—two subscores of the test: critical thinking and written communication; either the standard or the abbreviated form can be used.

18. Administer the selected test to random samples of first-time freshmen and seniors who entered the institution as freshmen (based on their student population, institutions may alternatively elect to measure student learning gains for incoming transfer students and seniors who entered as transfers). The institution will follow the guidelines of the test maker in selecting the sample.

19. Report the results of the pilot project on the College Portrait no more than four years after becoming a VSA participant and update results at least every three years.

20. Provide a link to information on the test administration, sample, and response rate.

Validity Studies

An important activity undertaken by the VSA, the Test Validity Study (2009), was to determine the degree to which the three student learning measurement tools approved for use in the College Portrait measured, at the institutional level, similar proficiencies related to broad cognitive skills (critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication). The three approved instruments are the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and the ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly the MAPP). The Test Validity Study examined if these three tools measured the same cognitive abilities through the value-added approach. The value-added approach was based on the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) administrations of the CLA instrument. Value-added scores (student learning gains) are calculated as the difference between the actual and the expected scores of graduating and entering students after controlling for academic ability. Even following the Test Validity Study and several other studies of the standardized tests, concern has remained over the validity of the tests as an accurate measure of student learning and as a measure of institutional effectiveness.[2] Further, there have been concerns that the tests are not comparable and that the results presented from them are difficult to understand—thus further obscuring differences between institutions (Kelly & Adelman, 2010).

---

[2] For additional information see the Test Validity Study report (2009), the Rand study on the CLA (Hardison & Vilamovaska, 2009), the study by the Education Sector and the American Enterprise Institute (Kelly & Adelman , 2010), and the critique by McCollum (2011). Of potential interest on the use of results are publications of the Council of Independent Colleges' (CIC) consortium on the CLA involving liberal arts institutions, which provide information on institutions that used the results to improve student learning (CIC, 2008; Paris, 2011).

Appendix B: Methodology

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) conducted an evaluation of the student learning outcomes pilot project of the College Portrait. This evaluation, to determine the efficacy of the student learning outcomes pilot project, gathered information and feedback from institutional leaders and various higher education stakeholders about the overall effectiveness and relevance of the pilot. The evaluation also reviewed and analyzed existing literature and College Portraits, institutional websites, and data obtained from previous NILOA studies. The evaluation utilized a variety of data sources including

- Focus groups with over 150 APLU and AASCU members
- Interviews with 10 leaders from the policy arena and regional accreditation agencies
- A survey of institutions that withdrew participation in the VSA
- A survey of institutions eligible to participate in the VSA that decided not to join
- A survey of guidance counselors and admissions personnel
- An analysis of data from a VSA-conducted survey of participating institutions
- An analysis of Google Analytics on College Portrait website traffic
- An analysis of the College Portrait database statistics

The evaluation of the student learning outcomes pilot project for the College Portrait sought to address the following main question, with several related subquestions:

- How effective and relevant is the VSA approach in supporting the measurement and reporting of student learning outcomes, and what modifications hold promise for improvement?
  - o What were the initial aims, objectives, expectations for the student learning outcomes pilot? What critiques have arisen? What effect has the display of learning outcomes results had on demonstrating accountability?
  - o How has the literature, discourse, and policy environment of accountability, improvement, and measurement changed since the start of the pilot? How useful are the initial principles or elements guiding the student learning outcomes pilot? What modifications would increase its utility?
  - o How many institutions are involved in the student learning outcomes pilot and what is their level of participation (e.g., have they administered one of the tests, posted results, provided links to additional information)? To what extent are currently participating institutions meeting the participation agreement?
  - o What do we know about other institutional quality assurance data, instruments, or material utilized by participating institutions to measure student learning? How would the student learning outcomes pilot look if it were aligned with what institutions are already doing to gather evidence of student learning and with what policy makers expect to address accountability concerns?

To examine effectiveness of the student learning outcomes pilot project, the NILOA evaluation focused on the College Portrait as it relates to a) promoting institutional improvement of student learning and use of evidence of student learning; b) providing information to consumers in an understandable, meaningful, and usable format; and c) meeting demands of accountability. To examine the relevance of the student learning outcomes portion of the College Portrait, the evaluation examined how student learning outcomes information is used and understood by institutions and external constituents, focusing on three essential constituent groups:

1. *Institutions*—a) those participating in the VSA; b) those eligible but not participating; and c) those that have participated but no longer do so
2. *External "consumer"*—guidance counselors and admissions personnel member organizations
3. *External "policy"*—regional accrediting agencies, SHEEOs, NCSL, ECS, Congressional staff, higher education federal relations staff, and other relevant staff

Prospective students and their families are constituent groups that were not included due to the difficulty in attaining access and determining a meaningful sample. Google Analytics provides some insight into the pages viewed by different audiences, which may well include prospective students and their families, thus, potentially serving as a proxy for information interest.

Data Collection and Analysis

Where possible, data were analyzed for themes across multiple data sources to present an evidence-based story or representation of responses from surveys, focus groups, and interviews.

Focus Groups

A series of focus groups took place at national meetings with over 150 participants. Focus groups included representatives from VSA-participating institutions, nonparticipating institutions, and institutions that withdrew participation. Focus groups included representatives from the AASCU Committee on Undergraduate Education, the APLU Council of Presidents, the APLU Executive Committee of the Council on Academic Affairs, and government relations officers. Occasions for conducting focus groups included national conferences of AASCU, APLU, and the AAC&U. Focus groups met for roughly an hour to an hour and a half to discuss the VSA, the College Portrait, and the student learning outcomes pilot project. These focus groups were semi-structured in that the NILOA staff leading them posed several questions to prompt discussion but allowed the focus groups to explore issues that emerged. Questions addressed within the focus groups were drawn from the following list:

1. What prompted your institution to participate, to decline to participate, or to withdraw from the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)?

2. What has been your experience with the VSA?
    a. Has it met your expectations?
    b. Is the exercise practically relevant and useful?
    c. What have you learned from participating?
    d. What do you consider to be the role or purpose of the VSA?

3. What do you see as the value of participating in the VSA when you joined? Do you think it has "taken the heat off" institutions? What do you consider to be the value of continuing to participate in the VSA?

4. What changes in the student learning outcomes requirements would be instrumental to your institution continuing or rejoining the VSA?

5. How have you used the College Portrait? How have you used the results of the student learning outcomes pilot (i.e., one of the three selected tests)? How useful are the results?
    a. Are results communicated on campus, beyond the campus, and to which groups? What was the feedback or consequence?
    b. How were value-added calculations used and to what extent were these found to be useful on and off campus, especially with legislative, coordinating, planning boards, or the general public?

6. Are there barriers in the student learning outcomes pilot process for institutions (e.g., putting information on the College Portrait, administration of the test, acquiring a representative sample of students)?

7. What other assessment activities are you doing? Do they align with the student learning outcomes pilot requirements?

8. Do you think student learning outcomes information should be comparable across institutions?

9. Should results of student learning be presented differently on the College Portrait?

10. In what areas does the College Portrait excel regarding student learning outcomes? In what areas could it improve?

11. In your opinion, what would a second generation of the student learning outcomes portion of the College Portrait cover, and what would it look like?

NILOA focus group leaders took notes during and wrote summaries following the focus groups. Focus group responses were summarized, coded, and analyzed across groups as well as within groups to determine any emerging themes or trends. In the report, focus group participant responses are presented in the aggregate, as there was much consensus among the focus groups and no within-group trends emerged as differing from those found across the groups.

Interviews

Interviews with 10 policy organization staff members and personnel from regional accreditors were conducted in person or via phone. Interviews lasted from 30 to 40 minutes, were semistructured, and included one or more of the following questions:

1. Are you familiar with the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)? Have you looked at the College Portrait, specifically the section on student learning outcomes?

2. Has the VSA met your expectations for accountability and transparency regarding student learning?

3. How important is it to accountability and transparency that evidence of student learning be comparable? In your opinion, is the College Portrait information comparable?

4. In what areas does the College Portrait excel regarding student learning outcomes? In what areas could it improve?

5. What more would you like to see the College Portrait be able to do?

Interview data were summarized, coded, and analyzed to determine themes or trends. NILOA interviewers wrote summaries of the interviews. Themes and trends were then compared with the focus group findings for purposes of triangulation.

Surveys

Snap/flash surveys were utilized to illicit information from groups such as guidance counselors and admissions personnel, from institutions that withdrew from participating in the College Portrait, and from institutions that are eligible to participate but do not do so. Snap/flash surveys are short, 3- to 5-question surveys, generally sent via membership list-servs.

Guidance Counselors

Invitations to participate were sent to guidance counselors and admissions personnel via two national member listservs – one for guidance counselors and one for admissions personnel. The survey was open for three weeks, and reminder emails were sent at regular intervals. The survey asked the following questions:

1. Are you familiar with the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), an initiative by public four-year universities to supply relevant information to prospective students and other stakeholders through a common web-reporting template—the College Portrait?

2. Have you looked at the College Portrait website?

3. When viewing a university's College Portrait, did you look at the section on student learning outcomes?

4. Was the information presented on the College Portrait clear, understandable, and usable for your purposes?

5. Did the information on the College Portrait influence your perception of participating colleges or universities? If "yes," in what ways?

A total of two people responded to the guidance counselor and admissions personnel survey. Both respondents were familiar with the VSA, but neither had looked at the student learning outcomes information presented on the College Portrait. Outside of these two respondents, there was general confusion among guidance counselors around the VSA. NILOA received several phone calls and emails (from a total of 20 different guidance counselors) asking how the VSA differed from the Virginia Counselors Association (VCA) or if the organization we had meant to identify was the VCA or the VSCA (another Virginia-based school counselor association). Furthermore, there was some confusion among guidance counselors contacting NILOA as to if we have meant a previous organization for vocational guidance counselors that used to have a website displaying college information. Based on the general lack of response to the survey and the evident confusion among potential respondents, it is reasonable to suggest that the guidance counselor group is not familiar with or aware of the VSA and the opportunities it may provide for students seeking additional information about college options.

Withdrawal Institutions

Survey invitations were sent to the provosts of all institutions that had withdrawn from participation in the College Portrait. The survey was open for three weeks and one reminder e-mail was sent. The survey had a response rate of 53%, with 14 of the 25 institutions responding to the following questions:

1. Did the student learning outcomes requirements of VSA influence your decision to withdraw participation from the College Portrait? If "yes," what aspects of the student learning outcomes requirements were problematic?

2. What changes in the student learning outcomes requirements would be instrumental to your institution rejoining the VSA?

3. Does your institution report results of student learning outcomes assessment online to external audiences?

Two institutions that did not respond to all of the questions were removed from the analysis. Of the three questions' possible responses, two (items 1 and 2) were open-ended text response and two were "yes/no" (first part of item 1 and item 3) response. The frequency of "yes/no" responses to the first part of item 1 and all of item 3 were examined using Microsoft Excel. All text responses were coded and examined for themes as well as their relationship to the focus group, interview responses, and other surveys. Due to the small number of institutions surveyed, no further analysis was conducted beyond frequencies. Findings from this survey are presented as representing responses from institutions that withdrew participation.

Nonparticipating Institutions

Survey invitations were sent to provosts of all institutions that were eligible to participate in the VSA College Portrait but that had not chosen to do so. The survey was open for three weeks, and one reminder email was sent. The survey had a response rate of 42%, with 72 out of 171 institutions responding to the following questions:

1. Your institution is eligible to participate in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), but does not. Please briefly tell us why you have chosen not to participate.

2. If your decision not to participate in the VSA was due in part to the measurement and reporting of student learning outcomes requirements, what changes in this aspect of the VSA would influence your institution to participate?

3. Does your institution report results of student learning outcomes assessment online to external audiences?

Three institutions that did not respond to all of the questions or did not provide coherent, typed responses were removed from the data set before the data was analyzed. Of the three questions, two (items 1 and 2) were open-ended text response items and the third was a "yes/no" response item. All text responses were coded and examined for themes as well as for their relation to the focus group comments, interview responses, and data from other surveys. The frequency of "yes/no" responses to the third item was examined utilizing Microsoft Excel. Due to the small number of institutions surveyed, no further analysis was conducted beyond frequencies. In the report, findings from this survey are presented as representing responses from eligible nonparticipating institutions.

Analysis of VSA Participating Institution Survey Data

NILOA was given a copy of the responses to the VSA-administered survey of VSA-participating institutions concluding in August 2011. The survey was administered in such a way that multiple people within an institution could respond. Because several people responded to the survey at some institutions while only one person responded at others, sorting the data by institutional response was not possible. Nor was it possible to collapse survey responses into one institutional response, because responses were not always consistent between different institutional respondents. Further, because not all survey respondents stated their position within the institution, analyzing data based on the responding person's position—such as faculty, staff, provost, or institutional researcher—was not possible.

In total there were 248 responses to the survey, of which 39 were missing significant amounts of data, leaving 209 responses to the survey that were utilized for analysis. Of these 209 responses, 87 were multiples, meaning that more than one person at an institution submitted a response. Therefore, it is important to note, the survey data discussed throughout this report reflects the individual responses of those who responded to the survey—not VSA-participating institutions as a whole. Survey responses were analyzed in SPSS only for frequency. Further statistical analyses were not conducted due to the questionable nature of some of the responses. In some instances, respondents did not complete two-part questions, for example, 1) if an assessment activity was utilized at an institution, 2) was the activity found to be useful to the institution. On questions where respondents were able to rate the usefulness of additional assessment options, data were analyzed based on affirmative responses to the first part of the question—as it is unlikely that a respondent who had not used an assessment activity could accurately respond to a question about the activity's overall usefulness for the institution. The analyses and findings from this survey are identified in this report as those from the VSA-participating institutions that responded to the VSA-administered survey. These findings were compared with the NILOA-administered surveys, focus group responses, interview responses, and what NILOA researchers found on institutional College Portraits.

Google Analytics

Google Analytics provides information about website traffic in terms of the number of visitors to a specific page as well as the average time users spend on a page. Using time spent on a page as a proxy for interest, NILOA examined Google Analytics from two time periods: the first from October 2009 through August 2010 and the second spanning February 2011 to December 2011. The time periods were divided based on all available analytics up to December 5, 2011 when the College Portrait website changed to the new format. The break in Google Analytics from August 2010 to February 2011 was due to the analytics data not being available from the College Portrait site. The analytics were examined specifically for user activity on the student learning outcomes page of the College Portrait as well as generally across the College Portrait site as a whole. Individual College Portraits in which any user viewed the student learning outcomes information were included for analysis in both time periods. From each of the selected time periods, we exported all the pages viewed from Google Analytics into Excel spreadsheets for further analysis. Each individual institution's College Portrait main page was matched with their student learning outcomes page on unique pages views, bounces, and time spent on site. From this match, we were able to compute for each individual College Portrait as well as across College Portraits the percentage of viewers who went to an institutional College Portrait main page and then clicked on the link to the institution's student learning outcomes page. Time spent on the student learning outcomes page was figured as an average across all student learning outcomes pages viewed in each time period.

In addition to the individual College Portrait pages and views, we analyzed the top 500 most-viewed pages on the entire College Portrait website. For the 2009–2010 period, two of these were the student learning outcomes pages of individual institutions.[1] In 2011, no student learning outcomes page made the top 500, but 90% of the top 500 pages viewed were cost-estimator pages. Also, using Google Analytics, we examined traffic to the entire College Portrait. Through the existing analytic structure we looked at the unique page views of the entire College Portrait website in 2011 to determine which pages users were visiting. Data across the entire College Portrait website for 2011 is included in this report.

Several focus group respondents mentioned the additional California Public Good page in the College Portrait as an additional means to provide information to consumers. We pulled the Google Analytics for activity on this page into a Microsfot Excel file from two time periods: the first from February 2011 through December 2011 and the second covering a one-month period between January and February 2012. This was done to compare numbers from each time period to ensure we had an accurate picture of traffic. Since the California Public Good page became available, 9% of users who visited a participating California institution's College Portrait main page also went to the institution's Public Good page and spent an average of one minute there. While a low frequency overall, this was higher, by about 2%, than the frequency of user visits to student learning outcomes pages.

College Portrait Statistics

College Portrait statistics were analyzed using data in two formats: 1) a copy of a snapshot of the College Portrait database; and 2) a web scan of College Portrait sites in early February 2012. The VSA provided NILOA with a copy of its College Portrait database as it related to the student learning outcomes information up to November 2011. This information included the year an institution joined and whether results of a standardized test, along with the name of the test, were posted on the institution's College Portrait. Database information was analyzed for frequency of institutional compliance with the participation agreement.

In addition to the database information, the institutional College Portrait of every individual participating institution was examined, at www.collegeportrait.com, using the map feature to determine state by state which institutions had active College Portraits and which did not. Individual College Portrait student learning outcomes pages were examined to see if institutions were meeting the VSA Participation Agreement—which states that institutions should post results of one of the three standardized tests, should include an institutional link to additional institutional information on assessment of student learning, and may provide a narrative on institutional assessment activities. Compliance or noncompliance with each of these three parts of the VSA Participation Agreement was captured in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and frequencies as well as content were analyzed.

---

1 The two student learning outcomes pages were for Clemson University (ranked 355) and the University of Maryland at College Park (ranked 386).

References

Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU). (2011). Retrieved from www.aplu.org

Borden, V. M. & Young, J. W. (2008, fall). Measurement validity and accountability for student learning. *New Directions of Institutional Research, 2008,* (Assessment Supplement 2007), 19-37. doi:10.1002/ir.259

Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education* (A report of the commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf

Council of Independent Colleges (2008). *Evidence of learning: Applying the collegiate learning assessment to improve teaching and learning in the liberal arts college experience.* Washington, D.C.: Council of Independent Colleges. Retrieved from http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/CLAreport.pdf

Ewell, P. T. (2009, November). *Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension* (NILOA Occasional Paper No. 1). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/PeterEwell_005.pdf

Hardison, C. M., & Vilamovaska, A. M. (2009). *The collegiate learning assessment: Setting standards for performance at a college or university.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. Retrieved from http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2009/RAND_TR663.pdf

Hosch, B. J. (2010, June). *Time on test, student motivation, and performance on the Collegiate Learning Assessment: Implications for institutional accountability.* Paper presented at the Association for Institutional Research Annual Forum, Chicago, IL. Retrieved from http://www.ccsu.edu/uploaded/departments/AdministrativeDepartments/Institutional_Research_and_Assessment/Research/20100601a.pdf

Jankowski, N., & Provezis, S. (2011). *Making student learning evidence transparent: The state of the art.* Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/Transparencyofevidence.htm

Johnson, J., Rochkind, J., & DuPont, S. (2011). *Don't count us out: How an overreliance on accountability could undermine the public's confidence in schools, business, government, and more.* Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda. Retrieved from http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/dont-count-us-out.pdf

Kelly, A. P., & Adelman, C. (2010, March). *False fronts? Behind higher education's voluntary accountability system.* Washington, DC: Education Sector and American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved from http://www.aei.org/papers/education/higher-education/false-fronts/

Kinzie, J., Palmer, M., Hayek, J., Hossler, D., Jacob, S. A., & Cummings, H. (2004). *Fifty years of college choice: Social, political and institutional influences on the decision-making process.* Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.

Klein, S., Liu, O. L., & Sconing, J. (2009, September). *Test validity study (TVS) report.* Washington, DC: Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Retrieved from https://cp-files.s3.amazonaws.com/26/TVSReport_Final.pdf

Kuh, G., & Ikenberry, S. (2009). More than you think, less than we need: Learning outcomes assessment in American higher education. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/MoreThanYouThink.htm

Long, B. T. (2007). *Using research to improve student success: What more could be done?* Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative (NPEC), National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success.

Manski, C. F., & Wise, D. A. (1983). *College choice in America.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

McCollum, D. L. (2011, March/April). The deficits of standardized tests: Countering the culture of easy numbers. *Assessment Update, 23,* 3-5.

McCormick, A. (2010, November/December). Here's looking at you: Transparency, institutional self-presentation, and the public interest. *Change: The Magazine of Learning, 42*(6), 35-43. doi:10.1080/00091383.2010.523406

McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

McPherson, P., & Shulenburger, D. (2006a). *Improving student learning in higher education through better accountability and assessment*. Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. Retrieved from http://www.voluntarysystem.org/docs/background/DiscussionPaper1_April06.pdf

McPherson, P., & Shulenburger, D. (2006b). *Elements of accountability of public universities and colleges. Washington, D.C.: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges*. Retrieved from http://www.voluntarysystem.org/docs/background/DiscussionPaper2_July06.pdf

McPherson, P., & Shulenburger, D. (2006c). *Toward a voluntary system of accountability program (VSA) for public universities and colleges*. Washington, DC: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. Retrieved from https://www.uni.edu/chfasoa/nasulgcaugust2006.pdf

Miller, M. A. (2008, July/August). The voluntary system of accountability: Origins and purposes. *Change: The Magazine of Learning, 40*(4), 8-13.

Paris, D. (2011). *Catalyst for change: The CIC/CLA consortium*. Washington, D.C.: Council of Independent Colleges.

Provezis, S. (2010, October). *Regional accreditation and student learning outcomes: Mapping the territory*. (NILOA Occasional Paper, No. 6). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/occasionalpapersix.htm

Shulenberger, D., & Keller, K. (2009). *Interpretation of findings of the test validity study conducted for the voluntary system of accountability*. Washington, DC: Voluntary System of Accountability. Retrieved from https://cp-files.s3.amazonaws.com/24/VSAabstract_TVS.pdf

Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). (2011). Retrieved from http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website went live on February 11, 2009.
  www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

NILOA Staff

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

Stanley Ikenberry, *Co-Principal Investigator*

George Kuh, *Co-Principal Investigator and Director*

Peter Ewell, *Senior Scholar*

Pat Hutchings, *Consulting Scholar*

Jillian Kinzie, *Associate Research Scientist*

Natasha Jankowski, *Project Manager and Research Analyst*

Staci Provezis, *Research Associate*

Gloria Shenoy, *Research Analyst*

Gianina Baker, *Research Analyst*

NILOA Sponsors

Lumina Foundation for Education

The Teagle Foundation

NILOA Mission

NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

A Special Report from the
National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
for the Voluntary System of Accountablity

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
340 Education Building
Champaign, IL 61820

learningoutcomesassessment.org
njankow2@illinois.edu
Fax: 217.244.3378
Phone: 217.244.2155