

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSASM)

Overview of College Portrait

The *College Portrait* reporting template is five pages in length. The data elements are organized into three sections: 1) consumer information, 2) student experiences and perceptions, and 3) student learning outcomes. Institutions may include a supplemental page after the last page of the *College Portrait* if it is clearly labeled as a page added by the institution. Following is an overview of each of the three standard sections. An example of the template can be found at <http://www.voluntarysystem.org>.

I. Consumer Information

The data elements in the first three pages of the *College Portrait* template address the question: “*What information would be most helpful to prospective students and their families in deciding which college or university best fits their educational wants and needs?*” Costs of attendance, degree offerings, living arrangements, student characteristics, graduation rates, transfer rates, and post-graduate plans are included.

There are two innovations of particular note – the student success and progress rate and the college cost calculator. The success and progress rate provides a more complete picture of student progress through the higher education system rather than focusing on the graduation rate from only one institution. Such a measure is increasingly valuable as the majority of students now attend more than one institution before they graduate. The college cost calculator is a tool for students and their families to more accurately estimate the net cost of attending a particular institution. Studies have demonstrated that many students, particularly low income students, do not consider attending college because they mistakenly believe the cost of attending is much higher than it actually is.

II. Student Experiences and Perceptions

The second section of *College Portrait* provides a snapshot of student experiences and activities and their perceptions of a particular college or university by reporting the results from one of four student engagement surveys. Links to other institutional evaluations of campus life are also provided in the top text box.

Institutions will select one of four student surveys to conduct at its campus and report results within six specified constructs that academic research has shown to be correlated with greater student learning and development: group learning, active learning, experiences with diverse groups of people and ideas, student satisfaction, institution commitment to student learning and success, and student interaction with faculty and staff. Under each of the six constructs, student responses to specific questions will be reported to maintain rough comparability across survey instruments.

III. Student Learning Outcomes

The third section of the *College Portrait* template reports evidence of student learning in two ways. At the top of the page, institutions provide a description of how they evaluate student learning. This description includes links to institution-specific outcomes data such as program assessments and professional licensure exams.

The second method is a VSA pilot project designed to measure student learning gains in critical thinking (including analytic reasoning) and written communication. An institution will select from one of three instruments to measure these broad cognitive skills. The skills are measured at the institution level across all academic disciplines and are intended to be comparable across institution types. It is a pilot project since many public institutions have not previously measured these broad cognitive skills at the institutional level and then analyzed the results to report learning outcomes in this manner.

Results are described on *College Portrait* template in two ways: as the learning gains between the freshman and senior years (or the value-added component); and as the actual average test scores for freshmen and seniors.

Learning gains or value-added scores reflect the difference between the actual and expected scores of graduating and entering students, taking into account the academic ability of the students. Each of the three testing organizations will use the same method to compute and characterize their learning gains or value-added scores for VSA purposes: *Well Above Expected*, *Above Expected*, *At Expected*, *Below Expected*, and *Well Below Expected*.

The reporting of the actual average scores demonstrates whether the average score of the seniors is higher than the average score of the freshmen. Since the range of scores varies across the three instruments, their results do not allow for direct comparisons between instruments.

Since the measurement of student learning at the institutional level is not widespread, many institutions will need a period of time to find the best methods of administration and to determine how to use the test results to improve their educational programs before making the results of the outcomes tests public. For a period of four years, institutions may choose not to publicly report test results. After the four-year period is concluded, institutions will report and update the results at least once every three years.