Refining the VSA

A quest for authentic ways to measure learning outcomes characterizes the continuing development of the Voluntary System of Accountability.

By Stephen G. Pelletier
A s a bold, proactive means to address public calls for more transparency from higher education, as a tool for institutions to learn more about the value they add, and as an example of the good that associations can do, the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) is a remarkable achievement. The VSA maps a viable path through the thorny challenge of measuring and reporting student learning outcomes.

Not a static process—or one entirely free from controversy—the VSA’s development most recently has been defined by a set of refinements designed to make it even more relevant and useful. But to understand those changes and how the VSA got to where it is today, we have to go back to the beginning—which, in this case, is about 10 years ago.

**Back to Bush II**

Take yourself back to the mid-2000s. George W. Bush is president. Margaret Spellings heads the Department of Education. The public and politicians alike are growing more insistent that colleges and universities be more transparent in their fiscal dealings and accountable for their educational results. And suspicion abounds in the higher education community that the government wants to mandate the way colleges and universities report performance measures like graduation rates and student learning outcomes.

M. Peter McPherson, then the relatively new president of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), testified before the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (informally known as the Spellings Commission). McPherson surprised the panel by arguing that government intervention was not the right pathway. Instead, he proposed that higher education develop its own ways to measure performance, effectively saying, “Let us put together a system ourselves that demonstrates that we are in fact being good stewards of public funds and moving students toward graduation and ultimate success.”

In his testimony, McPherson essentially suggested what would become the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), a vehicle through which four-year public colleges and universities could report comparable evidence about the student experience—a joint effort of APLU and AASCU.

“By the time I testified to the commission, these ideas were not fully developed,” McPherson says, “but the broad concepts were in place. So the Spellings Commission didn’t create the initiative. What it did was give it a strong impetus, because it certainly became evident to many people that this would be a productive response to what Spellings was talking about.”

Both AASCU and APLU knew that higher education needed to be more accountable in order to address the growing clamor among the public and policy makers for more transparency about university performance. But just as importantly, they saw that developing better metrics for assessing how colleges add value to those they educate would help strengthen institutional performance.

**Time Had Come**

Officially launched in 2007, the VSA can be said to be one of those proverbial notions whose time had come. It offered well-reasoned ideas, developed by experts in higher education, to proactively address the growing demand for more institutional accountability that has defined much of the conversation in higher education over the last decade. Within its first two years of operation, the VSA signed more than 300 AASCU and APLU public institutions as participants.

The VSA seeks to serve as a consumer information tool that communicates comparable information about the undergraduate student experience to legislators and state officials, students and their families, and the general public. It provides a public channel for public universities to demonstrate accountability and transparency in areas such as access, cost, student progress and student outcomes. It also seeks to help institutions analyze educational outcomes in ways that can improve institutional quality.

The heart of the VSA is the College Portrait, a Web-based template and website that summarizes student and campus characteristics of participating institutions, including the cost of attendance, success and progress rates, campus safety, class size, student experiences on campus, and student learning outcomes.

Christine M. Keller, executive director of the VSA, says several qualities make the VSA unique. One is the VSA Success and Progress rate. In contrast to the federal graduation rate, which tracks completion of first-time, full-time students at just one institution, the VSA rate enables a more comprehensive accounting by including students who transfer across institutions.

Keller also cites the College Affordability Estimator built into the VSA, developed by the University of Texas System, which she notes was created before such a calculation was federally mandated.

A third significant characteristic is that the VSA includes information on student experiences beyond the classroom, with input drawn in part from the National Survey of Student Engagement. “We thought it was important to include the co-curricular aspects of an education, as well as academic student learning,” Keller says.

Perhaps the VSAs most defining feature, though—and the focus of no little controversy and discussion—is that it tackles head-on the difficult task of finding meaningful, effective ways to measure student learning outcomes.
One of the specific criticisms of higher education that came out of the Spellings Commission was that there was the absence of "a common source that provided evidence of what students were learning," Keller says. While data were available, they were not assembled in ways that were comparable across institutions, or in a form that would demonstrate the value added by institutions in a way that could be understood by the general public. The VSA sought to fill those gaps in information and comparability.

Three Instruments

Initially, experts on the task forces who helped shape the VSA chose three different instruments to measure learning outcomes: the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly MAAP). "All three instruments look at what students know when they come into the institution, measure what they know when they exit, and then [examine] the learning gains that happened while they were enrolled," Keller says.

"The choice of instruments was critical for institutions," Keller recounts. "The notion of having one test that measured the diversity of our institutions wasn't acceptable." But using multiple tests challenged the VSA to compare findings from the different instruments in ways that would effectively compare institutional results. As summarized by George Mehaffy, AASCU's vice president for academic leadership and change, "The sticky wicket from the beginning was twofold: measuring learning outcomes and comparing institutions."

Given that value-added itself methodology is still fairly new, the VSA has been intentional about supporting and participating in research that can help test and verify the VSA's philosophy and design. With support from a FIPSE grant, for example, VSA took a close look at how well the three test instruments correlated. "They appeared to be measuring the same things, but we didn't have any research to support that," Keller says. The VSA's study confirmed that "there were no systematic differences in outcomes based on any of the three tests," she reports.

Still, dissent continued about VSA's approach. Apart from some general dissatisfaction with the VSA's three chosen test instruments, some institutions complained that the way that VSA measured student learning outcomes did not mesh well with how they were conducting assessment on their campus. Other institutions protested that it was difficult to use VSA results—pegged as they are to improvement at the institutional level—to make more granular improvements, such as in the curriculum.

Another hitch came when initial funding from the Lumina Foundation ran out and the VSA started charging institutions for participation, which had been free. Institutional participation saw some attrition—from a high of 333 institutions to the roughly 300 that take part today. Keller says
Evaluating Effectiveness

Taking stock in the fall of 2011, VSA asked the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) to evaluate the effectiveness of its pilot efforts to test student learning outcomes.

The NILOA study found widespread support for the VSA—and pinpointed some ideas for reform. “Public universities understand and support the value of the VSA College Portrait and view it as a creative, constructive, politically astute response to accountability pressures,” NILOA analysts wrote. They urged, however, that the College Portrait be refined “to make it more congruent” with the needs and interests of the audiences the VSA sought to serve.

“In a nutshell, the evaluation recommended that we do a better job of targeting our audiences and meeting their needs in terms of presenting information in ways that would be meaningful to them,” Keller says.

Recognizing “the limited confidence and acceptance in available standardized tests” for providing evidence of student learning, the report also recommended that the VSA expand the range of tools and approaches that it would encompass to inform the College Portrait.

The VSA is actively pursuing both recommendations. A technical work group was tasked with considering alternative measures for reporting student learning. A second panel is helping determine how the VSA can better communicate with its target audiences.

One significant and sweeping reform has already been instituted: The VSA board authorized that in addition to the CAAR, the CLA and the ETS Proficiency Profile, schools can now report results using Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics for critical thinking and written communication developed by the Association of American Colleges & Universities. Moreover, reporting options were expanded to include both value-added and senior-only benchmarking. In effect, users of the VSA now have eight options for reporting student learning outcomes.

The addition of the VALUE rubrics was particularly important, Keller says, in part because that tool “takes some of the work the students are doing within their classes and integrates that nicely with student outcomes already being measured on campus, and allows it to be reported at the institutional level.”

Richard H. Wells, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, and a member of the VSA Oversight Board, says that as the VSA progressed, it became clear that “we had to come up with more ways that were acceptable for institutions to be able to document or demonstrate some sense of value added.” In the language of social scientists, he says, “you need to triangulate your methodology. You can’t depend on just one factor to determine educational outcomes for students.”

“Institutions need to demonstrate in word and practice their commitment to outcomes and to improving their outcomes,” Wells says. The changes that the VSA adopted, he suggests, enable that to be done “in a more nuanced and thoughtful way.”

Make Your Institution Better

“What I like about VSA is that it really is trying to incentivize institutions to do the right thing,” Wells says, “So if you get some findings on your outcome metrics that suggest you are not doing as well as you should, it is actionable. You can change in a way that is going to make your institution better.” Another AASCU leader who has served on the VSA board and was instrumental in its development, Linda L. M. Bennett, president of the University of Southern Indiana, says, “I see the newest developments as a healthy evolution, in terms of having worked through the first generation of what was put together to begin this process of transparency and reporting out.”

“The latest iteration of VSA is the result of a very careful listening process,” in terms of what would help institutions, Bennett says. She notes that the board particularly sought to understand “what would work to help institutions strengthen their programs and help their internal conversations about accountability and what learning is taking place and how students progress.” In addition, she says, the process focused on how the VSA could best add tools that could help institutions improve the way they perform and fulfill their missions.

Bennett says the VSA is important not just to help institutions address outside calls for transparency and accountability, but also as a means to spark campus conversations that “can deepen our own understanding of our field, of how students learn, and what we must do to engage students in the learning process.”

“We know that there are flaws to standardized testing,” Bennett says. “There are flaws to qualitative measures as well. There are flaws to any measure. But that doesn’t mean you don’t measure. Grappling with this, and with how to know that students are learning, is as important as anything else that we do.”

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