



AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES
THE COLLEGE BOARD

Principles and Plans: A Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) For Community Colleges

Introduction

For the last few years, pressure has been building for institutions of higher education both to improve outcomes for students and to provide greater accountability to the public and other stakeholders. This accountability movement was given sharper focus by the discussions and recommendations of U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which issued its final report in 2006. Partially in response to the Spellings' Commission, but also to respond to greater scrutiny from policymakers, other major higher education sectors (public four-year as well as independent colleges and universities) have developed common, voluntary standards of accountability and have publicly disclosed the resulting measures (VSA and UCAN). At the same time, there has been a growing concern among community college leaders that providing access to students is not enough; and that colleges must also assume responsibility for increasing the success rates for students. Furthermore, we must do a better job of educating the public about what we do. For these reasons, community colleges must begin the process of creating sector-appropriate reporting formats and measures.

Community college leaders have historically been willing to use data to improve institutional outcomes and to share those data publicly. Since 2002, nearly 800 community colleges have voluntarily agreed to have the results from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) posted on a public Web site with interactive data search and benchmarking capabilities. Nearly ninety community colleges are participating in the *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count Initiative*, which is predicated on the creation of a culture of evidence and the appropriate use of data to improve outcomes.

Community colleges need a transparent process through which they communicate data that depict the most accurate portrait of community colleges and their effectiveness in producing successful outcomes for a highly diverse student population. Like the collaborating partners whose work resulted in the voluntary systems of accountability of other higher education sectors, community college leaders also recognize the need for an accountability process—one that contributes to institutional improvement of community colleges and satisfies the expectations of external constituencies. While portions of the systems developed by the four-year sectors may be applicable to community colleges, the systems were designed by and for four-year colleges and universities and are not entirely appropriate for community colleges. Lack of

commonly accepted performance measures has often led to misperceptions of community colleges and frequently an underestimation of their effectiveness and contributions. It has also limited the ability of the institutions to identify problems and to set goals for improvement of outcomes.

The multiple missions of community colleges clearly complicate how institutional performance is appropriately measured. Students enter a community college for myriad reasons including, but not limited to: enrolling in just a single course or a full certificate program to upgrade a specific job skill, perhaps to earn a promotion; seeking a baccalaureate by completing lower-division courses at a community college and transferring to a four-year institution; or for personal enrichment alone. The varied needs and individual goals of community college students, which represent appropriate and vital aspects of the community college mission, are difficult to measure in meaningful ways. To create a voluntary assessment for community colleges, a number of questions must be addressed, such as:

- How can a voluntary framework of accountability be developed to provide a useful tool for public accountability as well as for college benchmarking and improvement?
- How can community colleges create an understandable metric that assesses their effectiveness in meeting the needs of students who come to college unprepared?
- In what ways can community colleges assess their success in serving the workforce development and training needs of local businesses in ways that are comparable across institutions?
- What is the appropriate basis for assessing student transfer readiness rates and success after transfer?
- How can community colleges best measure and report student progress as well as completion?
- How can student learning outcomes best be measured and reported?
- How can effective educational practice—that is, the means by which achievement of student outcomes—be measured and reported?

Current methodologies measuring higher education effectiveness very often do not accurately portray the work of community colleges or the success rates of their students. It is clear that more accurate and useful performance and accountability measures need to be devised for community colleges. The VFA initiative seeks to determine how best to measure community college effectiveness in ways that are appropriate and sensitive to the missions of these institutions, while also being relevant and rigorous in addressing the legitimate concern of lawmakers and the public interested in the performance of its higher education institutions. The VFA initiative should also provide a template for college leaders to use to assess and improve institutional outcomes.

Although there is currently nothing close to a national common accountability framework for community colleges, a tremendous amount of work has already been done in detailing what community colleges should be achieving. Accountability systems have been employed by several states, local governments, accreditors, the federal government, researchers, and foundation-funded efforts such as the *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* and *Bridges to Opportunity* initiatives. The task for the proposed project, therefore, is not necessarily to develop new measurements, but to sort through the plethora of community college evaluation items currently being deployed and develop a broad framework of accountability that is both transparent and useful, building where possible on extant measures. Given the diversity of community colleges—in terms of programs, students, resources, and operating systems—as

well as great diversity in data collection and analysis capability and focus, institutions will understandably want flexibility concerning the specific accountability measurements to be used. For example, the performance of community colleges in preparing students for the workforce will certainly be part of any framework. But institutions might be able to measure their performance in this area through different means, such as state wage data records, surveys of employers of recent graduates, skills certificates awarded, and licensure examinations passed.

Principles

Development of a VFA should be guided by principles that ensure both the framing of an effective, flexible, and usable instrument and buy-in on the part of community colleges and community college systems. The initiative must identify: a) the constituencies with the greatest interest in the effectiveness of community colleges; and b) the types of data that best illuminate the effectiveness and value of community colleges. Critical constituencies should include the institutions and systems themselves so that they may engage in ongoing quality-improvement; the public; federal, state and local leaders seeking assurance that community colleges are spending public dollars wisely; and prospective students and families needing reliable consumer information about discrete programs and comparative data about the effectiveness of institutions in specific geographic areas.

A. Community College Needs

- The VFA should focus on the improvement and advancement of the community college mission by providing data that allow leaders to assess the current effectiveness of their institutions and implement ongoing reforms (formative data) as well as provide information regarding the overall effectiveness of their institutions (summative data).
- Participating institutions and systems should control the collection, analysis, and use of data obtained for the VFA.
- To avoid duplication of effort and to minimize reporting requirements, the VFA should build on accountability systems that have already been implemented successfully at state and local levels as well as those that have been developed by foundation-funded projects. Reporting requirements of accreditation agencies must also be considered.

B. Federal, State and Local Needs

- The VFA should document the extent to which community colleges and systems are meeting their stated missions.
- The VFA should demonstrate the degree to which community colleges use public resources effectively and responsibly.
- The VFA should document the ways in which community colleges are responsive to community and business and industry needs.

- The VFA should reveal the extent to which community colleges are effective in instilling necessary skills, knowledge, and habits of mind in their students.
- The VFA should document the impact that community colleges have in meeting local and perhaps state and national workforce needs.

C. Public and Prospective and Current Student Needs

- The VFA should provide the public and prospective and current students and their families with descriptive information regarding community college programs and services, student costs, average class sizes, support services, availability of financial aid and scholarships, expected learning outcomes, success of transfer students, and market demand and starting salaries of program graduates.
- The VFA should provide appropriate student outcome data such as course completion rates (including remedial or developmental courses and programs), rates of academic progress to defined levels predictive of subsequent success, graduation rates, transfer rates, and job placement and advancement rates.

Challenges

Developing a VFA brings with it challenges that must be overcome before it can be implemented nationally. For example, the multiple and uncoordinated data gathering efforts mentioned earlier by states, accrediting agencies, and funded initiatives will likely be a barrier in developing a coordinated framework. On the other hand, that work also serves as a helpful starting place for the development of a VFA.

Smaller community colleges may lack the resources and the expertise to collect and analyze data for participation in a VFA. Limitations in institutional research capacity in community colleges have been well documented.

A third concern is whether buy-in on the part of colleges and systems would be sufficient to sustain the initiative. All community colleges or systems will eventually incur some costs to participate in a VFA. While the amount will vary by community college depending on the degree to which any given institution has already developed an accountability reporting process, administering the VFA will be an ongoing cost that all participating institutions will need to include in their overall operating expenses. Therefore, the colleges and systems will have to receive the necessary value added to encourage continued maintenance of the VFA.

Structure of the Initiative

The initiative will be led by a Steering Committee comprising community college and system leaders and trustees as well as accountability experts. The Steering Committee will address the challenges and barriers in developing the VFA as well as what the final products and continuing utilization of the VFA might comprise. Four working groups will be responsible for developing and recommending important components of the VFA to the Steering Committee: Data Elements; Business/Economic Development/Non

Credit; Accreditation Compatibility and Learning Outcomes; and Marketing. The Steering Committee will make appointments to each working group and will appoint a chair who will be responsible for convening the meetings, developing the recommendations, and reporting them to the Steering Committee.

The Data Elements Working Group will include college leaders as well as experts on state data systems. The group will also include experts and leaders who are familiar with the data elements of significant grant-funded initiatives such as *Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count* and *Bridges to Opportunity*. The group will have available an analysis of state data collection systems that was funded by Lumina Foundation for Education and the College Board and developed in the planning phase of the VFA initiative.

The Business/Economic Development/Non Credit Working Group will examine unique data needed to accurately assess the impact that community colleges have in preparing students for local, state, and national workforce needs. It will also analyze what information is needed to improve the relationships between community colleges and employers and what information about opportunities in the workforce should be provided to students, prospective students, and families.

The Accreditation Compatibility and Learning Outcomes Working Group will include community college and regional accreditation leaders. It is important that the VFA be as coordinated as possible with requirements of accreditation agencies so that the colleges do not have to develop different and costly reporting systems. Accrediting agencies have already expressed an interest in the development of the VFA.

The Marketing Working Group will focus on communicating the importance of the development of the VFA to secure the necessary buy-in from the field and to frame the importance of the work to the media and other external audiences. The group will also address challenges that institutions may encounter in participating in the VFA.

The development process will be as transparent as possible with progress reported in AACC and ACCT publications and through electronic communication channels. Open hearings will be held at AACC and ACCT meetings and conferences in order to gather information, respond to questions, and to assess the level of buy-in from the field.

The initiative will be managed by AACC with the cooperation and support of ACCT and the College Board. Other organizations will be appropriately included in the Steering Committee and Working Groups.

The initiative will require financial support to cover the costs of a project manager, support staff, and Web site development staff as well as to cover the costs of meetings of the Steering Committee and Working Groups and possible publications or electronic products and surveys.

Proposed Timeline

- April 2009: Steering Committee meets to map strategy and to develop assignments for the Working Groups

- July 15, 2009: Report on state data system study will be completed by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College

The following tasks and timeline are dependent upon securing adequate and timely funding for the initiative.

The Steering Committee will meet in person and by teleconference as necessary for the duration of the initiative.

- August 2009: Working Groups and chairs are appointed and assignments are made.
- September-November 2009: Working Groups meet.
- December 2009: Working Groups submit final reports to the Steering Committee.
- October 2009: ACCT holds open hearings in conjunction with its national congress.
- November 2009: AACC holds open hearings in conjunction with its Fall Meeting.
- February 2010: ACCT holds hearings in conjunction with its National Legislative Summit.
- March 2010: Steering Committee issues first draft of report.
- April 2010: AACC distributes the Steering Committee draft report and holds hearings in conjunction with its annual convention.
- June 2010: Steering Committee revises draft report and distributes it to community college leaders and others for review and comment.
- August 2010: Comments of community college leaders and others are integrated into a new draft of the report.
- September 2010: Steering Committee releases final report.
- November 2010: Products of the initiative are disseminated or launched (publications, Web site)
- November 2012: VFA will be evaluated for its utilization and usefulness.