

The Voluntary Framework of Accountability

Developing Measures of Community
College Effectiveness and Outcomes



Voluntary
Framework of
Accountability

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is leading the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) in collaboration with two partner organizations:

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is a national organization representing the nation's 1,197 community, junior, and technical colleges and their more than 13 million students. Community colleges are higher education's largest and fastest-growing sector, currently enrolling close to half of all U.S. undergraduates. For more information and a listing of community colleges nationwide, see www.aacc.nche.edu. For daily news about community colleges and key issues affecting them, sign up to receive the *Community College Times* at www.communitycollegetimes.com.

Founded in 1972, the **Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT)** is the nonprofit educational organization of governing boards, representing more than 6,500 elected and appointed trustees of community, technical, and junior colleges in the United States and beyond. ACCT's purpose is to strengthen the capacity of community, technical, and junior colleges and to foster the realization of their missions through effective board leadership at local, state, and national levels. For more information, visit www.acct.org. Follow ACCT on Twitter at twitter.com/CCTrustees.

The **College Board Advocacy and Policy Center** was established to help transform education in the United States. Guided by the College Board's principles of excellence and equity in education, the center works to ensure that students from all backgrounds have the opportunity to succeed in college and beyond. Critical connections between policy, research, and real-world practice are made to develop innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges in education today. Drawing from the experience of the College Board's active membership consisting of education professionals from more than 5,900 institutions, priorities include college preparation and access, college affordability and financial aid, and college admission and completion.

AACC would like to thank the following organizations for making possible through generous grant support the development of the first-ever national framework to measure how 2-year colleges perform in serving their more than 13 million students.

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.

Lumina Foundation, an Indianapolis-based private foundation, is committed to enrolling and graduating more students from college—especially 21st-century students: low-income students, students of color, first-generation students, and adult learners. Lumina's goal is to increase the percentage of Americans who hold high-quality degrees and credentials to 60% by 2025. Lumina pursues this goal in three ways: by identifying and supporting effective practice, through public policy advocacy, and by using its communications and convening power to build public will for change.

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Contents

Foreword

Executive Summary

Introduction

National Context

The Community College Role

Sector-Appropriate Accountability for Community Colleges

A New System of Accountability

- Phases of Development
- Categories of Measures
- Rationale for the Development of the VFA
- The Need for a Focus on Community Colleges by Community Colleges
- The Creators of the VFA

Opportunities and Challenges Posed by the VFA

- Opportunities
- Challenges

Part 1: Development

Guiding Principles

Administrative Structure

The Imperative for Incremental Development

Progress to Date

- Phase 1
- Phase 2

Identifying Common Measures

Pilot Testing

- Surveying the Field
- Measuring Quality

Ongoing Development

- Placeholder Measures
- Development of Student Learning Outcomes

Part 2: Metrics and Measures

Student Progress and Outcomes

- Tracking Community College Students
- Defining Cohorts
- Defining Subcohorts
- Disaggregation Criteria and Categories of Measures

Workforce, Economic, and Community Development

- Tracking Workforce and Career and Technical Education Students
- Defining Cohorts
- Disaggregation Criteria
- Categories of Measures

Student Learning Outcomes

Part 3: Moving Toward Phase 3 and Implementation

Conclusion

References

Online Resources

Appendixes

A: VFA Developers and Participants

B: Technical Definitions of Measures

C: Student Learning Outcomes Approach



Foreword

As the largest and most accessible sector of American higher education, community colleges contribute significantly to the quality of life for both students and communities. That value is underscored by the fact that community colleges are a cornerstone of President Obama’s initiative to achieve the highest level of postsecondary educational attainment in the world by 2020. Moreover, legislators, foundations, and other key stakeholders recognize that community colleges are a linchpin in advancing national goals for college access and completion.

If our sector is to fully meet these expectations—as we know it will—we must continue and extend our work to define, assess, and benefit from better measures of institutional effectiveness, especially in terms of student achievement. Traditional measures address only a fraction of the ways students succeed in community colleges. To address this shortcoming, our sector has elected to develop its own measures—analytics that are appropriate to our mission and that will clearly show colleges and their leaders, as well as policymakers and other stakeholders, how community colleges are doing and what they can do to improve.

To that end, the American Association of Community Colleges, in collaboration with the Association of Community College Trustees and the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, is developing the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA). The VFA defines metrics that can be used to provide accountability and to gauge the effectiveness of community colleges in meeting their stated missions. The VFA provides sector-appropriate data definitions and is being developed to include the ability for community colleges to benchmark their student progress and completion data against similar institutions.

As the first and only national accountability framework designed *by* community colleges *for* community colleges, the VFA stands to provide our institutions with a fundamentally improved ability to assess their performance, identify areas for improvement, and clearly demonstrate their commitment to their academic mission. In short, the VFA will enable community colleges to diagnose their effectiveness and demonstrate to legislators, funders, and other key decision makers the considerable value they deliver to students and communities.

This report summarizes the significant progress that has been made to date in creating the VFA and maps where the initiative is headed in the future. We invite you to read about this important work and welcome your further thoughts about the VFA.



Executive Summary

The Need for Sector-Appropriate Accountability for Community Colleges

Society expects a great deal from colleges and universities. For that reason, higher education is subject to review and assessment by many stakeholders. Such scrutiny has intensified over the past decade in the wake of increased calls from many quarters that colleges be held more directly accountable for their students' outcomes and their colleges' practices, policies, expenditures, and general productivity. Colleges, meanwhile, seek tools that measure performance in ways that can help improve student performance as well as institutional effectiveness and efficiency.

Community colleges have begun using data more strategically and transparently in recent years to improve institutional effectiveness. Evidence of increased attention to accountability includes the voluntary participation by colleges in the Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count national initiative and in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. The National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) is providing a Transparency Framework that colleges are beginning to use to provide publicly evidence of student learning and components of student learning assessment. Through such work, community colleges are

solidifying a culture of evidence and identifying ways to use data appropriately to improve outcomes.

Recognizing that the sector must develop even more robust means of gauging institutional effectiveness, leaders of community colleges have shown a commitment to work to identify measures and benchmarks among peer institutions that will help point ways to improved performance. Such measures are imperative both as means to help individual institutions improve their performance and as tools to gauge more accurately how well colleges support students as they progress through their educational and career pathways. Leaders of community colleges also recognize that the sector as a whole must do a better job of educating the public about what community colleges do and how they do it. They know that developing a common set of markers of effectiveness will help key stakeholders better understand institutional performance.

It has been clear for some time that existing tools for measuring institutional effectiveness are inadequate for the community college sector. Existing measures simply do not reflect all of the services community colleges provide. They tend to overlook the crucial roles that community colleges play in providing developmental education, transfer opportunities, and workforce preparation. They do not adequately capture information that is relevant to actual community college students'

experiences and the institutions that serve them. In part that is because the performance indicators and accountability measures that are available now for colleges and universities were developed by the 4-year sector of higher education and are therefore more suited to measuring how well those institutions meet the objectives of their missions.

The need for a sector-appropriate framework is clear. Community colleges require a core accountability system that assesses institutional effectiveness that addresses what community colleges do and who they serve—including developmental or remedial education, collegiate courses, transfer to another college or university, and workforce preparation. A better assessment process, based on quality data, is needed to help community colleges improve completion strategies and focus their resources, and to provide college leaders, administrators, and faculty; funders; policymakers; and external stakeholders with a clearer understanding of community colleges' needs and effectiveness.

A New System of Accountability

In response to these challenges, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), in partnership with the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and The College Board, has managed the development of a new system of accountability for community colleges: the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA). The VFA is the first national accountability framework designed to measure community college performance more accurately and define

measures that best gauge institutional effectiveness in serving the sector's missions and students.

The VFA is managed by AACC and led by a steering committee composed of community college presidents, representatives from the three partner organizations, and experts familiar with accountability issues from within the community college sector as well as national associations and research centers. AACC has taken an incremental approach to building an accountability architecture that can measure an institution's effectiveness. An intentional multiphase approach was designed to ensure that the end product provides a sustainable, foundational accountability framework that can be used by all community colleges, indefinitely.

In VFA Phase I (fall 2008 to summer 2009), AACC completed a general inventory of existing approaches to accountability. A steering committee comprising individuals from the community college sector articulated principles to guide the development of an accountability system appropriate to the community college sector. Those principles were released in a joint statement by AACC, ACCT, and the College Board, "Principles and Plans: A Voluntary Framework of Accountability for Community Colleges."

In Phase 2 (fall 2009 to winter 2012), community college presidents, CEOs, trustees, deans, institutional researchers, and 40 pilot sites representing 58 colleges collaborated to define and test the initial core set of VFA metrics. At the conclusion of Phase 2 several important products were completed:

1. *The Voluntary Framework of Accountability Metrics Manual Version 1.0*, the first set of fully defined VFA metrics with instructions for calculation.
2. The schematic and technical requirements for building a data collection, display, benchmarking, and analytics tool for the framework.
3. A strategic implementation and roll-out plan based on market research and evaluation research.

Phase 3, which will continue through mid 2014 (contingent upon funding and the acceptance by the funders of the specific terms in the Phase 3 proposal), focuses on the development of a Web-based data collection and display tool. While AACC builds the VFA data infrastructure, a technical manual containing detailed definitions of the framework's metrics will be available on the VFA website for any community college or state system to review or use.

The VFA metrics are useful and relevant to the community college sector because they were developed by community colleges specifically to address their missions and the populations they serve.

The VFA currently addresses these core categories of institutional measures:

- Career and technical education (both credit and noncredit).
- Adult basic education and the general equivalency diploma.
- Student learning outcomes.

Also, the metrics are defined to enable community colleges to benchmark their data against those of appropriate peer colleges in order to help them more fully understand their efficacy, strengths, and challenges.

Categories of Measures

Student Progress and Outcomes

In general, the VFA cohort was defined to be very widely inclusive and to examine the progress and outcomes of all students who enroll at the community college. The VFA uses a retrospective cohort tracking method for measuring the progress (after 2 years) and outcomes (after 6 years) of a student population that includes all students who enter in the fall who are first-timers at that college and attend part time or full time. Additionally, the VFA looks at the progress and outcomes of a subcohort of students defined as those students who earned 12 credit hours by the end of the initial 2 years of the 6-year tracking period. The measures address developmental education progress, student milestones and progress, and relevant 6-year outcomes such as credential (degree or certificate) attainment, transfer, and persistence.

Career and Technical Education

One of the qualities that distinguishes the community college sector is a focus on workforce development, often linked directly to a college's mission to serve its community through workforce and community development. Community colleges are the leading providers of both Career and Technical Education (CTE) and workforce training. Nearly all community colleges offer some form of CTE, and some are solely devoted to this type of education and training. It was clear from the outset that the VFA would have to identify metrics that could capture the results of the CTE and workforce missions. The CTE measures examine enrollments in CTE classes and the outcomes of these students, such as licensure pass rates, employment, and wages upon exiting the institution having completed hours or a program (credit or noncredit) in workforce education.

Adult Basic Education and GED

Additionally, the VFA has incorporated measures to track the enrollments and outcomes of students who come to the community college for adult basic education (ABE) and GED courses or programs. The metrics in this area look at enrollments and transitions from ABE and GED course work or programs into further education or the workforce.

Student Learning Outcomes

For several decades, an important conversation has been taking place across the higher education community about how to best measure and assess the quality of student learning outcomes (SLO).

Along with other types of institutions of higher education, community colleges share a strong interest in becoming more transparent in their reporting of SLO results. Community colleges have been active participants in the national conversation on the topic and in efforts to improve the way SLO data are collected, analyzed, and reported. The sector recognizes, however, that its unique characteristics and student populations would be best served by measures and systems that are at least adapted to, and perhaps designed by, the sector itself.

To better assess the quality of learning experiences, the VFA needs to develop a method that is comparable across colleges and provides a consistent metric, while respecting the diverse nature of community colleges. The capacity to validate SLO against a national referent is necessary in an accountability framework. Further work will be required to accomplish that goal within the VFA.

As a first step in SLO accountability, the VFA will ask community colleges to be more transparent about their current efforts to assess SLO. VFA colleges are being asked to use the Transparency Framework developed by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) for reporting what they are doing. Participating VFA institutions will report their SLO process and assessments on their own college websites and submit the Web address to the VFA.

While the NILOA framework allows colleges to be more transparent in what they are currently doing,

it does not provide a mechanism for comparing institutions with one another or against a national external referent or benchmark. Therefore, in Phase 3, AACC envisions convening a focus group of SLO assessment thought leaders to examine the learning outcomes appropriate to associate degree education and to shape thinking about their operational definitions and assessment tools. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) will be used as a theoretical framework to further explore this topic. Using the associate degree as a starting point, the VFA developers plan to create operational definitions for learning outcomes, along with recommendations on assessment practices, that map to the associate degree-level competencies outlined in the DQP.

Rationale for the Development of the VFA

The rationale undergirding the VFA is straightforward. Community colleges seek data that depict the most accurate portrait of their institutions and their effectiveness in producing successful outcomes for a highly diverse student population with diverse educational goals. The ultimate goal of the VFA is to provide a way for community colleges to examine nationally accepted measures of student progress and completion and to be able to compare themselves with other institutions on these measures. VFA data will detail student progress or leakage points along the academic pathway, highlight student completion and transfer practices, and measure colleges' effectiveness in providing

CTE and preparedness. The framework will help identify obstacles that prevent students from earning meaningful credentials and guide colleges to better direct resources to improve student success. While helping community colleges fulfill the traditional access role, the VFA will reinforce strategies to ensure student success.

The VFA provides a valuable and significant starting point for community colleges to better understand practices and policies in ways that will suggest avenues for improving institutional effectiveness and efficiency. The VFA will demonstrate institutional effectiveness to legislators, government agencies, accrediting agencies, foundations, and other important stakeholders. It offers assurance to federal, state, and local policymakers that community colleges hold themselves accountable to their communities and stakeholders. The VFA can inform and influence discussions in policy circles, helping to influence the design of state data systems and cross-state synchronization of data collection and analysis.

Finally, the VFA will raise the visibility of the community college sector by drawing attention to its focus on quality outcomes, and the specific accomplishments of this diverse sector. These efforts are especially timely in light of the call from government and philanthropy for increased college completion and President Obama's spotlight on community colleges as drivers of economic recovery.



Introduction

National Context

The diverse system of higher education in the United States provides a breadth of educational opportunities that serve the distinctive needs of many different types of students. Colleges and universities invest in the nation's well-being by giving students opportunities to gain the experiences and skills they need to secure their own financial futures, to contribute productively in the workplace, and to enrich the quality of civic life. Society expects a great deal from higher education; therefore, it is subject to review and assessment by many stakeholders. National, state, and local scrutiny has intensified over the past decade in the wake of increased calls from many quarters that colleges be held more directly accountable for their practices, policies, cost, productivity, and outcomes.

The high visibility of the secretary of education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education during the George W. Bush administration (known as the Spellings Commission) prompted an important discussion about the educational outcomes produced by colleges and universities. Among numerous recommendations issued in 2006, the Spellings Commission called for institutions to be more intentional about documenting and publicizing student learning outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). More recently, the Obama administration

appointed the legislatively mandated Committee on Measures of Student Success, which was tasked by official charter with advising the secretary of education on "assisting two-year degree-granting institutions of higher education in meeting the completion or graduation rate disclosure requirements outlined in section 485 of the Higher Education Act of 2008" (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

At the state level, interest in accountability is increasing. Some legislatures have moved to link state appropriations for public higher education more directly to evidence about student outcomes—a concept often labeled under the umbrella term *performance funding*. States have also worked to develop better ways to measure institutional accountability for quality and education outcomes. In the community college sector, for example, the California Community Colleges system developed a set of measures to evaluate the performance of community colleges against a number of performance benchmarks, including ones that assess student academic achievement and course completion (see California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2011). Maryland, Washington, Florida, and many other states are also using progress and outcomes indicators to evaluate institutional performance.

The demand for accountability has focused important discussions at the national and state

levels on how accountability metrics can drive colleges and universities to improve performance. This demand coincides with and has been driven by federal government and philanthropic initiatives aimed at increasing the number of graduates that colleges and universities produce (“the completion agenda”), which is driven, in turn, by the need for the U.S. workforce to be adequately prepared to compete in the global marketplace. The national accountability conversation has heightened attention to essential questions that speak to the very heart of higher education’s purpose. Higher education institutions face increasing public demand to improve outcomes for students and to be accountable for outcomes and the return on investment for the cost of education, which is rising faster than the rate of inflation. The conversation about accountability has reinvigorated work by individual institutions of higher learning and has sparked reforms in accreditation standards and practices for colleges and universities, particularly in shifting the focus of measures of quality from inputs to results.

Several initiatives have been established to provide clearer perspectives on how to measure and make meaningful analysis of institutional and student performance and outcomes. One is the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), developed by public 4-year institutions. Through a partnership between the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the VSA seeks to clarify outcome measures that can help 4-year public institutions

measure, analyze, and report student outcomes. The VSA has developed online templates through which colleges and universities can provide clear, accessible, and comparable information on the undergraduate student experience to students, parents, and other important constituencies. Institutions are now sharing more details about their finances, practices, and policies (see APLU & AASCU, 2012).

Private colleges and universities have developed the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN; 2012), an online resource designed to give students and parents concise, consumer-friendly information on private institutions. The Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) has been working with a consortium of private institutions that are using Collegiate Learning Assessment as an evaluation tool for learning more about students’ cognitive growth (see CIC, 2011).

The Community College Role

Community colleges have also been engaged in efforts to gauge their effectiveness and to use data-driven evidence to improve performance and student outcomes. Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (ATD) and the National Community College Benchmarking Project (Johnson County Community College, 2011) are but two initiatives undertaken. At the same time, the Obama administration has spotlighted community colleges as a core driver of economic recovery. The administration has called for community colleges to graduate 5 million more students by 2020. The historic White House Summit on Community

Colleges in October 2010 (White House, 2010) was followed by several smaller virtual summits to continue finding ways to improve student success. The nation's community colleges have participated with avid interest in this recent national conversation and made commitments to the nation's completion agenda. This confluence of reform-minded initiatives underscores the growing recognition on the part of policymakers, education experts, and other influential stakeholders that community colleges are of critical importance in American higher education.

Recent reform efforts also reflect the broad conviction among community college leaders that, while maintaining access and ensuring that students complete educational and career goals, community colleges also must develop more robust means for gauging institutional effectiveness. Across the community college sector, trustees, presidents, administrators, faculty, and staff—as well as national experts—are committed to identifying benchmarks that will help point out ways to improve performance. Developing tools to more accurately gauge how well community colleges support and track students is key, and the VFA will provide those tools.

Community college leaders share a commitment that the sector as a whole must do a better job of educating the public about what community colleges do and how they do it. They know that developing a common set of markers of effectiveness will help stakeholders, including legislatures, better understand institutional performance. The national climate of heightened accountability in

higher education, the increased national push to raise student success, and the renewed focus on community colleges combine to create a fertile environment for productive change. Community colleges are capitalizing on these powerful factors to tackle a long-standing issue in the sector: that **current systems of accountability do not adequately measure the sector's performance.**

The sector has ambitious goals in this regard. It seeks nothing short of establishing an effective sector-wide, comprehensive accountability process—one that contributes to institutional improvement, nurtures student success, and meets the expectations of external constituencies for more accountability and does so using measures that are appropriate for community colleges.

Sector-Appropriate Accountability for Community Colleges

Over the past decade, community colleges have begun to use data more strategically and transparently to improve assessment of institutional effectiveness. More than 150 community colleges participating in ATD have committed to creating an institutional culture of evidence and to using data-informed decision making to improve outcomes. Since 2002, nearly 800 community colleges have voluntarily agreed for their results from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement to be posted on a public website with interactive data search and benchmarking capabilities (see www.ccsse.org). The National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has developed a Transparency Framework (NILOA, 2011) that

colleges are beginning to use to share information about how they collect and publicize data about student learning and outcomes.

From the outset of the national conversation about accountability, it has been clear that tools currently available for measuring institutional effectiveness are inadequate for the community college sector. Current measures do not capture information relevant to the actual experience of community colleges and the students they serve. For example, most colleges do not track

- Noncredit course or program outcomes.
- Licensure pass rates for program completers.
- Transitions of adult education and GED completers.
- Wage increases realized by students completing a community college course of study.
- Work performance of students who completed customized training programs for business and industry.

In short, vitally important community college student milestones and completions are not captured in ways that produce meaningful data that can be tabulated and used to improve outcomes.

Performance indicators and accountability measures currently available for colleges and universities are viewed through a 4-year sector lens, which is not surprising given that the 4-year sector heavily influenced the development of these indicators and measures. The measures do not reflect the multifaceted community college mission. The reality that benchmarks designed by and for

4-year institutions are not entirely appropriate for community colleges is not a trivial matter. It speaks to the fundamental missions that distinguish community colleges as a sector. Existing measures address only part of the community college mission. They overlook the colleges' crucial roles in providing developmental education, transfer opportunities, and workforce preparation—and they ignore the unique characteristics of community college students, who are more likely to attend college part time, take more time to earn a degree, and attend multiple institutions over a lengthy period of time. Performance assessed entirely by a graduation rate fails to account for the full breadth of the work being undertaken at community colleges, the varied intentional outcomes students seek, or the diverse characteristics and needs of the students attending community college.

A sector-appropriate framework is needed. Community colleges require a core accountability system that assesses institutional effectiveness in providing education that includes developmental or remedial education, collegiate courses, transfer to other colleges and universities, and workforce preparation. A better assessment process—based on quality data—is needed to help community colleges improve completion strategies, help focus resources, and provide funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders with a clearer understanding of community colleges' needs and effectiveness.

Measurements that can best gauge institutional effectiveness in community colleges are complex and nuanced. While the sector agrees on the appropriateness of many common measures,

questions remain unanswered about what constitutes the most appropriate ways to measure student success and institutional effectiveness in community colleges. The sector as a whole does not yet utilize a common approach. The multiple missions of community colleges and the widely varied goals of their students are difficult to measure in ways that would account for differences yet still present an accurate picture of accomplishment across the sector as a whole.

In spite of the use of local measures for student progress and outcomes, the absence of a common framework for accountability leaves the community college sector without core indicators to accurately portray their performance and contributions. More accurate and useful performance and accountability measures must be developed to establish national guidelines for measuring and reporting the institutional performance of community colleges. To meet that goal, continuing investigation is needed to clarify and, where possible, reach consensus around the best ways to track student progress and outcomes in

community colleges, including which data are appropriate to collect, how best to collect those data, and how best to analyze those data. A number of critical questions must be addressed:

- How can a voluntary framework of accountability be developed to provide a useful tool for accountability as well as for community college benchmarking and improvement?
- How can measures be developed that provide broad coverage of the missions of community colleges without creating too many measures for already over-burdened institutions?
- How can community colleges create understandable yet rigorous metrics that assess 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?

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- How can comparable measures be created that include the noncredit training and education mission of community colleges and that are consistent with for-credit, career, and technical education measures?
- What is the appropriate basis for assessing student transfer 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 as part of an institutional accountability framework?
- How can effective educational practice—the means by which student outcomes are achieved—be measured and reported?
- How will colleges be able to report metrics if the underlying data are not available?
- What can be done to ensure that colleges will participate in the VFA and use VFA metrics once they are developed?
- Communicates data that depict accurate portraits of the colleges and their effectiveness in producing intended outcomes for a highly diverse student population.
- Satisfies the expectations of external constituencies.
- Provides the foundation for analysis that can lead to institutional improvement.

The central challenge is for community colleges to develop a sector-appropriate framework for collecting, analyzing, and reporting accountability-related formats and measures.

Introducing a New System of Accountability

Phases of Development

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), in partnership with the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the College Board, has managed the development of a new system of accountability for community colleges: the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA). The VFA is the first national accountability framework designed to more accurately measure community college performance and define measures that best gauge institutional effectiveness in fulfilling the sector's missions and serving students. The development of the VFA is a multiphase process that encompasses several steps.

Across the community college sector, there is great interest in having guidance and clarity in addressing these issues and questions. Like the collaborating partners whose work resulted in the voluntary systems of accountability in other higher education sectors, community college leaders recognize the need for an accountability process that is

- Transparent.



In Phase 1, AACC completed a general inventory of existing systems of and approaches to accountability. In addition, a steering committee comprising individuals from the community college sector drafted principles to guide the development of an accountability system appropriate for community colleges. Those principles were released in a joint statement by AACC, ACCT, and the College Board, “Principles and Plans: A Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) for Community Colleges” (AACC, ACCT, & College Board, 2009).

In Phase 2, which drew to a close in December 2011, community college presidents, CEOs, trustees, deans, institutional researchers, and 40 pilot sites representing 58 colleges collaborated to define and test the initial core set of VFA metrics. At the conclusion of Phase 2, AACC and nearly 60 members of the VFA working groups and steering committee delivered several important products:

1. *The Voluntary Framework of Accountability Metrics Manual Version 1.0* (VFA Metrics Manual; AACC, 2011), the

first set of fully defined VFA metrics with instructions for calculation.

2. A strategic implementation and roll-out plan based on market research and evaluation research.
3. The schematic and technical requirements for building a data collection, display, benchmarking, and analytics tool for the framework.

Phase 3 focuses on the development of the Web-based data collection and display tool, which has been in planning and will be built throughout 2012. As AACC builds the data infrastructure of the VFA, the VFA Metrics Manual, containing detailed definitions of the framework’s metrics, will be available for any community college or state system to review or use. Ongoing development of the VFA includes further refinement of the workforce, economic, and community development metrics, as well as research in the area of student learning outcomes. Results from this work will inform continued improvements to the framework.

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1. ***The Voluntary Framework of Accountability Metrics Manual Version 1.0*** (VFA Metrics Manual; AACC, 2011), *the first set of fully defined VFA metrics with instructions for calculation.*
2. *A strategic implementation and roll-out plan based on market research and evaluation research.*
3. *The schematic and technical requirements for building a data collection, display, benchmarking, and analytics tool for the framework.*

Categories of Measures

The VFA currently addresses these core categories of institutional measures:

- Student progress and outcomes (including precollegiate work and transitions).
- Career and technical education (both credit and noncredit).
- Adult basic education and the general equivalency diploma.
- Student learning outcomes.

These measures are defined to enable community colleges to benchmark their data against those of appropriate peer colleges in order to more fully understand their own efficacy, strengths, and challenges. The benchmarking capability will promote effective institutional policies for increasing student success.

The strength of the VFA, or any accountability system, is rooted in its rigor and utility. VFA metrics are particularly useful and relevant to the community college sector because they were developed by community colleges specifically to address their mission and the populations they serve. A strategic development of measures that are inherently appropriate to community colleges will enable the sector to

- Better identify areas for improvement.
- Demonstrate effectiveness to local, state, federal, and accrediting agencies.
- Protect current, and seek future, funding.

- Reduce the burden on institutional research offices.
- Improve student outcomes.

Community college presidents, trustees, and internal stakeholders can make pragmatic use of the VFA. They will be able to use VFA data to improve institutional effectiveness in that the data will detail student progress or leakage points along the academic pathway, shine light on student completion and transfer practices, and measure college effectiveness in successfully providing career and technical education and preparedness. Beyond its internal institutional application, the VFA also offers value for federal, state, and local policymakers who seek assurance that community colleges are spending public dollars wisely, or who have as their agenda the desire to create measures of accountability for the sector.

Rationale for Development of the VFA

As a sector, community colleges have long focused on their open-door mission to increase access to higher education. Sometimes, however, that has resulted in an unintended lessening of attention to student outcomes and success rates. That is changing. Just as national interest in seeing more students complete college degrees and credentials has grown, community college leaders share a growing concern that simply providing access to higher education is not enough and that colleges must also assume responsibility for increasing student success rates. These trends come at the same time that pressure has been building for institutions of higher education to provide greater

accountability about their value to the public and other stakeholders. The VFA takes major steps forward in addressing all of these issues—in ways that are appropriate to community colleges.

The rationale that undergirds the VFA is straightforward. Community colleges seek data that most accurately depict their institutions and their effectiveness in producing successful outcomes for a highly diverse student population with a diverse set of educational goals. Such measures must provide benchmarks by which institutions can measure themselves against peer colleges, a process that will inherently improve quality outcomes across the sector. Moreover, the measures must provide information useful to public constituencies that seek more accountability from the community colleges they support.

To those ends, the measures within the VFA were developed by a broad array of community college leaders with expertise in research as well as administration and student services. Collectively, they are well equipped to determine how to measure community college performance in ways that are appropriate and sensitive to the missions of community colleges, while also being relevant and rigorous in addressing the legitimate interest of policymakers and local entities in the performance of institutions of higher education.

In a practical sense, the framework will help identify obstacles that stand in the way of many postsecondary students seeking to earn meaningful credentials—and will illuminate pathways to avoid those obstacles. The VFA will help community

colleges broaden their traditional emphasis on providing access to that of a deepened commitment to student success—to removing the revolving door. The VFA offers a significant step forward in addressing demands from governing bodies and accrediting agencies for increased accountability. The direct beneficiaries of this work are the current and prospective students at community colleges across the nation. The community college sector knows what community colleges do and who they serve. They need useful measures of institutional effectiveness to diagnose issues and create methods for improvement. It is only through appropriate, data-driven examinations of institutional practice and policy that community colleges can have continuous improvement.

The VFA aligns directly with national goals to provide more and better opportunities for job training, preparation for the jobs of tomorrow, and for individuals with measurable, differentiated, and credentialed skills. AACC's leadership in undertaking the VFA comes in tandem with a statement of commitment to increase student completion rates by 50% over the next decade. In April 2010, AACC, the Association of Community College Trustees, Center for Community College Student Engagement, League for Innovation in the Community College, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, and Phi Theta Kappa—organizations representing the nation's 1,200 community colleges, their governing boards, their faculty, and their 11.8 million students—signed a “Call to Action” pledge to this effect (see AACC et al., 2010). Individual institutions have

signed the pledge. AACC's board of directors has made accountability and student success the focal point of AACC's agenda and activities.

The multiple missions of community colleges have not always been well understood by policymakers and the public. As a result, the sector has suffered from misperceptions about its significance. A strong framework for accountability and commonly accepted performance measures will be of inestimable value in ameliorating misperceptions about community colleges. Without commonly accepted performance measures, the colleges' effectiveness will continue to be underestimated. One goal of the VFA, therefore, is to underscore and highlight the mission of community colleges and to demonstrate through a system of measurable results their extraordinary value to the nation.

The Need for a Focus on Community Colleges by Community Colleges

Discussions about the VFA often raise two fundamental questions: Why do we need the VFA? How does it differ from other accountability systems? The answers pivot on the fundamental tenet that community colleges need a system of accountability that is developed by community colleges, for community colleges. Historically, the community college sector has been subject to data definitions and accountability systems designed predominantly for 4-year institutions or based on traditional concepts of education and community. Current reporting mechanisms do not adequately capture critical components of the community college mission. Leaders within the sector recognize

the need to build a suitable accountability framework that in essence says, "This is how we should be measured."

In the absence of a framework that all community colleges can use to provide accountability, federal agencies, state legislators, national higher education bodies, the public, and external stakeholders will continue to impose their measures on the sector. Failure by those within the community college sector to build a valid alternative and to propose a solution will leave in place measures that do not fit community colleges and that perpetuate a misunderstanding of mission.

Community colleges need measures and approaches to document success in ways that fully account for the unique characteristics of community colleges and the unique educational and life experiences of their students. But until the advent of the VFA, community colleges had never undertaken the concerted national effort to provide a suitable accountability framework for and by community colleges. The development of the VFA marks the first time that community college leaders from across the country have collaborated in a focused way to define measures that align with their missions and, when done right, that will give colleges a way to show what they are doing well and where they might need to improve. The VFA reflects a concomitant recognition in and outside the sector that a more robust system of accountability for community colleges is necessary now—to not only measure effectiveness but also to help community colleges respond effectively to increasing societal demands of them.

The community college sector needs stronger tools for telling its own story more appropriately, tools that will fully inform legislators, funders, internal leaders, and other important constituents about the unique missions of community colleges and their success in fulfilling those missions. It is in the sector's best interests to develop an appropriate system of accountability before one is imposed upon them. This confluence of factors argues strongly that the time is right for the VFA.

The Creators of the VFA

AACC and its partner organizations are committed to providing community colleges with the metrics most appropriate for community colleges. By design, however, AACC is not the creator of this framework. That credit goes appropriately to volunteers from the sector who are collaborating to develop the VFA. The success of the VFA relies nearly entirely on the college professionals who created, tested, and will use the VFA.

From the onset, the process for developing the VFA has been methodical and inclusive. Participants in the formation of the VFA have sought to engage a wide range of perspectives and ensure that a broad range of expertise and opinions have informed the VFA's development. That broad engagement is reflected, for example, in the structure of the committees and working groups that have been established to guide and execute the development of the VFA. To ensure that the outcome of this initiative remained true to its goal—that is, an accountability framework that is sector-appropriate, rigorous, and highly useful—AACC populated the VFA steering committee, working groups, and technical definitions committee with a broad cross-section of individuals drawn from community college leadership. In addition to thought leaders from national community college organizations, the VFA developers include college CEOs, trustees, institutional researchers, and practitioners

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from community colleges. These individuals represent a variety of roles as well as a mix of small and large institutions; urban, rural, and suburban colleges; multidistrict and single-campus institutions; and those with both centralized and decentralized offices.

In addition to the nearly 60 people who have undertaken development of the framework, 58 community colleges pilot-tested the initial set of VFA metrics. Because an important question to answer in pilot testing the VFA was whether the institutions could calculate the metrics, institutions representing the full spectrum of types of community colleges were purposely included in the pilot group. The initiative's structure and pilot testing are discussed in Part 2 of this report.

A project of the scope and magnitude of the Voluntary Framework of Accountability offers both unique opportunities and inherent challenges, each of which merits discussion.

Opportunities and Challenges Posed by the VFA

Opportunities

AACC and its partners embarked on such a massive undertaking as developing the VFA because of the abundant opportunities that it offered. The wide array of opportunities includes the following.

- **The unique perspective of a framework.** The VFA creates a *framework* of accountability—a powerful architecture that, for the first time, enables administrators of community colleges and other interested parties to look beyond

single, isolated metrics. The VFA provides context. It provides a way to gain a better understanding of performance and effectiveness across the whole of an institution, as informed by a body of measures.

- **Development of a critical mass of standard measures.** The developers of the VFA are in the process of establishing a significant body of standard measures for community colleges that will influence processes, channels, and standards for reporting about community college performance data and make possible the synchronization of reporting across states.
- **Better use of metrics.** With the development of the VFA, individual community colleges, as well as the sector as a whole, will be able to create more effective benchmarks for accountability than those currently available. More informative metrics, for example, might help with understanding job placement rates, intermediate measures of student progression, or the effectiveness of workforce development programs and college transfer services.
- **Institutional benchmarking and peer comparison.** When fully operational, the VFA will provide meaningful benchmarks and benchmarking tools that will enable community colleges to assess their own outcomes against those of appropriate peer institutions.
- **Institutional and sector-wide improvement.** The potential inherent in the VFA to spark and nurture institutional improvement is limitless. As community colleges become more familiar

with the benefits of an accountability system designed for them, they can apply VFA-derived findings to make improvements in institutional policy, administrative processes, and teaching and learning. It is not overstating this potential to suggest that such improvements within individual institutions could be transformational for the sector as a whole. With this potential in mind, the VFA has been designed as a living, dynamic entity.

- **Creation of a community space for improving student outcomes.** As the community college sector becomes more familiar with the benefits of this accountability system, its use will expand exponentially. Potential future uses include sharing of promising practices, a collaborative accountability network for community colleges, data review and support services, and the integration of non-VFA data with national, state, and local data sources.
- **Meaningful national conversation about accountability.** By raising a host of interesting questions and elevating different perspectives that have not yet been heard, the VFA can enrich and expand the national conversation about accountability. It offers community colleges an opportunity to shape the definitions of the right measures to show how well they are fulfilling their missions, and where and how they need to improve. The VFA offers a sea change for community colleges—from merely responding to external requests for information to educating external stakeholders about what is truly essential in the community college sector. In short, the VFA will enable community colleges to educate interested parties about the questions they ought to be asking. It will influence state and federal reporting requirements, as well as evidence sought by local communities and accrediting bodies. Internally, the streamlining of data collection and reporting will benefit over-taxed institutional research offices and staff.
- **Highlighting the importance of quality data for decision making at colleges.** By focusing on data sets, the VFA raises important considerations about data collection and practices. Defining national metrics can help colleges determine which data are important enough to be included in internal data collections and analysis.
- **Informing policy.** Done carefully with sector consensus, the VFA measures being developed can help shape and influence local, state, and national policy. Indeed, the discussions that inform the development of VFA measures are likely also to inform policy discussions.
- **Amplifying of the community college voice.** The VFA represents an important contribution on the part of the community college sector to the national conversation about educational outcomes, access to college, and achievement in higher education. It provides an opportunity to cast an important spotlight on the sector and the unique dimensions of the community college mission.

Challenges

While the VFA offers abundant and significant opportunities for community colleges, its development and implementation has its share of hurdles. Challenges that must be addressed before the framework can be successfully implemented nationally include the following.

- **Alignment with existing data collection and synchronization with similar efforts.** While existing efforts to collect data about the efficacy of colleges and universities informed the development of the VFA, the existence of multiple, uncoordinated data-gathering efforts by states, accrediting agencies, and funded initiatives also pose potential barriers to the effective development of a coordinated framework for community colleges. Definitions used in state reporting, federal reporting via IPEDS, and reporting to regional accrediting agencies—not to mention other voluntary data-collection initiatives—do not align. Such disconnects make it imperative to make comparability of data a priority of the VFA. The VFA developers recognize that developers of other similar efforts are pursuing similar goals in the move to enhance accountability in community colleges. Finding ways to integrate the VFA with other systems is an important goal.
- **Increased pressure on institutional resources and institutional capacity.** Limitations in institutional research capacity in community colleges have been well documented. Colleges

may lack the resources and the expertise to collect and analyze data for participation in the VFA. Those limitations may be exacerbated in smaller community colleges or colleges without strong statewide data systems. In some instances, some of the VFA metrics are to be derived from data that are not readily available. The developers of the VFA felt it critical to include the measures, but they recognize that time and systemic changes are necessary to refine and mature the process of data collection. Another potential stumbling block in gaining widespread acceptance and use of the VFA hinges on the ability of individual institutions to collect data in ways that are in sync with the established framework. Perhaps as important is the ability of institutions to make meaningful use of such data, both as it is collected locally and in the context of data shared across institutions for benchmarking purposes. Some rural or underresourced community colleges, for example, may lack sufficient financial, technological, or institutional research capacity to have ample confidence that they can track and measure their own performance adequately. Part of the role of the VFA is to help institutions understand what capacity requirements they will need to effectively use the framework. Another goal of the VFA is to help ensure that, to the extent possible, various accountability measures are calculated from a college's existing data sources and can be created with minimal effort. It is expected that some colleges will need technical assistance in this regard.

- **Funding the VFA.** While significant philanthropic grants enable the creation of the VFA, a different funding model will be necessary to support the framework over time. Eventually, community colleges and systems will incur costs to participate in the VFA. Costs will vary by community college, perhaps depending on the size of the institution. Regardless of the exact pricing model, participating in the VFA will be an ongoing cost that institutions will need to include in their overall operating expenses.
- **Adoption and sustainability.** The double challenge facing any new venture of the scope of the VFA is ensuring sufficient constituent buy-in at the start of the program and sustaining it over time. The VFA must engage a critical mass of institutions from the onset, keep early adopters engaged, and encourage new participants to join.
- **Complexity.** The VFA's success hinges in part on its ability to reconcile a considerably complex set of factors. In a study of 10 states during Phase 1 of VFA development (Dougherty, Hare, & Natow, 2009), for example, researchers found that, while the states collect more than 140 indicators of institutional effectiveness, none of the measures are collected in the same way in every state. In fact, there was little consistency in how all 10 states report retention or graduation rates at the state level, although all report the same information to the U.S. Department of Education. A large part of the VFA work involves synthesizing diverse metrics in the most universally acceptable way as possible for community colleges. The metrics must be reasonably easy to calculate (using currently available student record data or calculated by creating cohorts to track students and using existing data) and must define measures that are meaningful at the institutional level.
- **Achieving consensus.** Apropos of the complexity of the VFA is the fact that its success depends on agreement across a diverse set of institutional and sector interests. Given the current political environment for higher education, in which institutions may fear unwanted intrusion by external decision makers, garnering widespread support and agreement from many different parties is of paramount importance. Finding consensus on differing perspectives from college to college, state to state, and in college–state relations may demand courageous political conversations. Working relationships already established in several states may mitigate the severity of this challenge. To that end, a mix of top institutional executives and institutional research staff from colleges and states served on the VFA working groups to help ensure that VFA data elements optimally serve the needs of diverse constituent groups. Broad information sharing and solicitation of input and feedback from many different stakeholders has been a cornerstone of VFA development from the start. While this process makes the development of the VFA more complex, it is of critical importance.

- **Exposure.** Revealing previously undisclosed data can be viewed as risky to some institutions. Frank and thoughtful discussions must inform decisions about how the VFA data will be displayed, who has access to it and how they receive it, and how to time the public release of data. This is a risk many colleges perceive, but once national data are released in a nonpunitive fashion, the risk factor can be ameliorated.



Part 1: Development

Guiding Principles

The developers of the VFA have deliberately taken an incremental approach. From the outset, AACC and its partners recognized the challenge of gaining consensus for the VFA from about 1,200 institutions. Some colleges are concerned that students' access to the colleges is at stake. Many colleges on board with the student progress and credential completion goal face internal culture changes such as retooling administrative practices and perhaps policies related to data collection. Simultaneously, community colleges must keep up with multiple reporting requirements from government and accrediting agencies. In addition, they often lack robust institutional research departments or staff or the technological and data warehouse capacity needed to track student progress and cohorts over time.

To mitigate these challenges, the VFA developers have sought to identify those accountability metrics, benchmarks, and data definitions most meaningful and valuable to community colleges. With the intent of designing a framework affording maximum breadth and utility, the metrics were designed to be rigorous but attentive to concerns about ease of data collection. Fundamentally, the VFA is built on the principle that information must be valuable, relatively easy to collect and share, and useful for helping community colleges achieve their own

institutional goals.

The VFA metrics do not necessarily capture everything that a community college can and does do for every single student. The framework is designed, rather, as a tool colleges can use to track key measures of student progress and relevant outcomes to identify areas for improvement. The framework addresses how well an institution is meeting its mission-critical objectives.

Administrative Structure

The VFA development was managed by AACC and led by a steering committee composed of community college presidents, representatives from three partner organizations, and experts familiar with accountability issues, both from within the community college sector and from national associations or research centers (see Appendix A for complete lists of developers and participants). The steering committee's charge was to provide broad conceptual oversight of the work being done, address the challenges and barriers in developing the VFA, advise on products that emanate from the VFA, and help envision the sustainability of the VFA.

Four working groups were responsible for developing core components of the VFA in key areas and for providing them to the steering committee for review.

1. The Communications and College Engagement Working Group was tasked with preparing a strategic plan to achieve widespread, voluntary adoption of the VFA and to inform the initiative's outreach efforts.
2. The Student Learning Outcomes Working Group was charged with examining student learning outcomes and assessment practices across institutions to recommend ways for institutions to report learning outcomes.
3. The Student Progress and Outcomes Working Group was charged with defining measures that capture beginning students' progress and outcomes, as evidenced, for example, by successful completion of developmental education; milestone progress and college-level course success; and completion of certificates, degrees, and transfers.
4. The Workforce, Economic, and Community Development Working Group was asked to define measures to better assess the workforce and economic development work of community colleges, as evidenced by successful completion of noncredit and credit workforce programs, licensure exam pass rates, job placement rates, and contributions to local economic and community development needs.

The 37 members appointed to the four working groups included community college presidents, accountability and effectiveness practitioners, trustees, and institutional researchers familiar with data collection and analysis. Care was taken

to ensure institutional diversity within each working group. For example, it was important that both large and small colleges were represented, as well as colleges in states with strong unit-record reporting systems and colleges where no such statewide system exists. Each group had an appropriate mix of institutional CEOs and non-CEOs. AACC assigned consultants who are subject-matter experts to facilitate each of the working groups.

Through a series of in-person, 2-day meetings and regular teleconferences and webinars, AACC led the working groups first in creating the conceptual framework for the VFA. Those initial concepts were refined with input from the steering committee and other working group members. AACC then appointed a few members from each working group to form a Technical Definitions Committee, which was charged with translating the conceptual model into draft data definitions with sufficient details for colleges to calculate each of the VFA metrics.

The Imperative for Incremental Development

Developing the VFA in an environment of increased focus on accountability and the completion agenda has required balancing the current sense of urgency about accountability with the need to invest the requisite time to develop a framework that is well conceived and sustainable. To address that challenge, AACC and the college leaders working to define the VFA measures adopted a staged approach through which a group of core measures could be introduced fairly

early, followed with the release of additional indicators as the VFA evolves. This strategy has enabled AACC to be responsive to the pressing immediate needs of community colleges for measures of effectiveness while also ensuring that the framework will remain appropriate over time for measuring progress and outcomes specific to community colleges.

An incremental approach is conducive to exploration and flexibility. It allows core metrics to be introduced in stages and additional indicators to be added over time, as appropriate or needed. The VFA's design ensures that the framework and its measures will evolve to best serve the needs of community colleges as changes occur in technology, data sources, college missions and services, and higher education in general. The incremental approach also has enabled AACC, the steering committee, and working group members to decide on the definitions of cohorts and progress and outcomes measures that could be used by the colleges now—and for which data are available now.

For other measures—particularly in the areas of workforce,

economic, and community development and student learning outcomes—a longer-term approach will be required. Defining appropriate outcomes in these areas requires continued examination of empirical research, the work of subject-matter experts and researchers, and input from people in the field. As the sector determines how better to define outcomes and collect data in areas such as noncredit course work, career and technical education, adult basic education, and economic and community impacts, the VFA will be adapted.

Progress to Date

Phase 1

The initial phase of VFA development was conducted with planning grant support from the Lumina Foundation for Education. Progress was reported in two publications. The first was a joint statement issued by AACC, ACCT, and the College Board (2009). Carefully developed by community college representatives, this statement included a rationale for an accountability framework, identified the needs of community



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colleges and other sectors in this regard, identified potential working groups that could explore types of information that could be reported as part of a common set of accountability measures, and suggested possible tasks that could advance relevant goals.

Another report, *Performance Accountability Systems for Community Colleges: Lessons for the Voluntary Framework of Accountability for Community Colleges* (Dougherty et al., 2009), was published by the Community College Research Center (CCRC). The College Board commissioned CCRC to identify performance measures that states were already using for their community colleges, explore how well those measures articulate with the data collected by IPEDS and the regional accrediting associations, and shed light on the experiences of state higher education officials and local community college leaders with the collection and use of state performance data. Careful analysis of findings in the CCRC report helped inform the development of benchmarks for accountability in the VFA and supported AACC's plan to lead community colleges in the development of an accountability framework that would be more specific to the sector.

Phase 2

In Phase 2, AACC, as the managing partner for the VFA, entered into a 2-year grant agreement with the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to lead community colleges in the development of the framework. Phase 2 had an initial budget of \$1 million for the 2-year period of September 1, 2009 to August

31, 2011. Through a no-cost extension, AACC has continued the development of the VFA into 2012. The two foundations shared equal funding responsibility for the project. ACCT and the College Board remained active partners during Phase 2.

Extending through the end of 2011, Phase 2 resulted in three primary deliverables:

1. Definitions of measures, pilot tested and published in the VFA Metrics Manual (AACC, 2011), and designed to provide instruction in the calculation of the metrics.
2. A blueprint and technical requirements for building a Web-based collection, display, benchmarking, and analytics data tool.
3. A strategic communications plan to bring the VFA to the field.

Under the first deliverable, the VFA performance indicators initially assess effectiveness in the areas of developmental education progress, student progress outcomes and completion, and job preparation and employment.

Analysis of current college and state data collection and accountability efforts continued throughout Phase 2. Although the VFA developers found nothing approaching a national common accountability framework for community colleges, they did find that a significant amount of valuable work had already been done to clarify measures for student progress and outcomes that have relevance for community colleges. Accountability systems have been employed by states, local governments, accreditors, the federal government, researchers,

and foundation-funded efforts such as the ATD and Bridges to Opportunity initiatives. One of the first tasks undertaken in Phase 2 was to compile information from institutions, systems, states, national organizations, and foundation-funded accountability initiatives that could inform the VFA's development and ensure the inclusion of the measures that were most appropriate for gauging the effectiveness of community colleges.

As development progressed, work transitioned from using the general information provided by the CCRC report and sector-led initiatives to using a more specific review of actual measures and definitions, cohort definitions, and supplementary data elements being used by community colleges for accountability reporting. To assess the applicability of existing measures to the VFA, AACC and the VFA working groups examined the data and data collection procedures used by the following:

- ATD Cross-State Data Group.
- System wide accountability models from Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Ohio, Washington, and others.
- The National Community College Benchmarking Project.
- The VSA.
- The U-CAN framework for private colleges.
- The common metrics developed by Complete College America (2011), also used by the National Governor's Association's Complete to Compete initiative.

Review of these definitions and practices revealed that many were congruent with the goals of the VFA, which, therefore, informed the VFA working groups' deliberations about definitions and measures chosen for inclusion in the VFA. Coupled with the experience and knowledge of the working group members, this review helped ensure that the VFA would include the most appropriate measures for community colleges while also aligning them, to the extent possible, with accountability systems already implemented at state and local levels, as well as those developed by foundation-funded projects and required by accreditation agencies.

Phase 2 yielded several important outcomes.

1. The VFA Metrics Manual (AACC, 2011).

AACC staff and the VFA Technical Definitions Committee wrote a technical metrics manual that identifies and defines the VFA's stage-one measures of student progress and outcomes (including progress in developmental education; credit accumulation; and transfer, certificate, and degree completion) and defines the cohorts of students that will be tracked by measures in this area. The manual defines both the common measures and the necessary data elements needed to calculate each metric. The manual also instructs colleges on how to calculate the metrics from student record systems. Anticipating the future, the manual includes information on metrics that colleges may not yet have data capacity to calculate, and its design makes it also appropriate for use by states or other constituencies interested in seeking common accountability measures. Additionally,

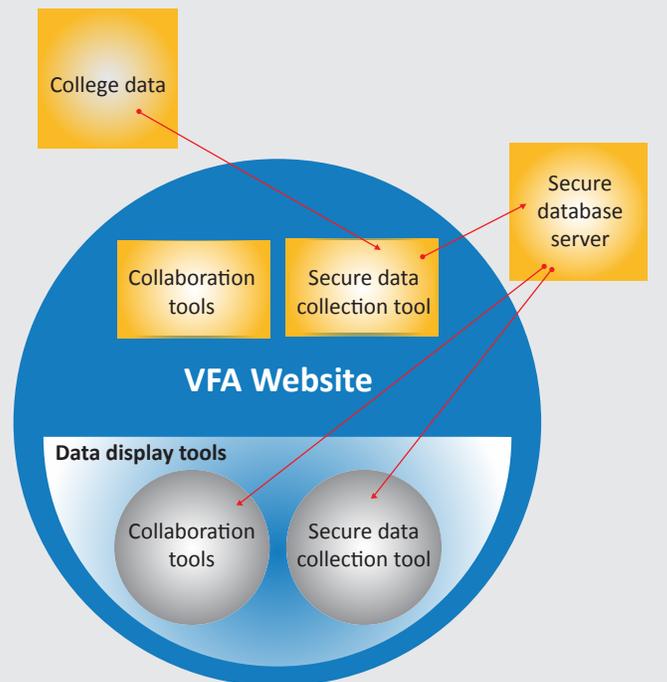
the manual defines measures of workforce and economic contributions, including employment outcomes, licensure attainment, and workforce enrollments. One key feature of the VFA is that the distinct design prongs can be applied separately to measure quality and progress across the wide variety of types of programs and institutions that constitute the diverse sector of community colleges. (Each category is discussed separately in Part 2 of this report.)

- 2. A conceptual model for a data tool to collect, display, benchmark, and analyze data.** AACC staff and subject-matter experts worked to produce a conceptual model of a Web-based collection, display, and analytics tool—in the style of a wireframe or storyboard. The storyboard demonstrates the user interface and shows colleges how the data they submit to the VFA will be available for both institutional use and more general accountability reporting (see Figure 1). This model demonstrates how colleges will be able to select peer institutions (comparative or aspirational peers) from participating colleges to determine how well their institution is doing relative to similar institutions. Along with the data tool concept and schematic, AACC prepared the technical specifications for this infrastructure to solicit time and cost estimates for building the VFA data tool. AACC, along with the VFA Communications and College Engagement Working Group, presented the concept to working group participants, members of the sector, and the VFA Steering Committee. Based

on discussion and feedback, consensus was reached on the broad operational parameters of the tool and the functionality it should provide.

- 3. Pilot testing the VFA metrics at colleges.** The purposes of pilot testing were twofold: (1) to assess the user’s ability to use the technical metrics manual to calculate and report the VFA metrics, and (2) to receive feedback on the utility and perceived value of the VFA metrics. There had been considerable qualitative, anecdotal interest expressed in the VFA, but a willingness to pilot test the measures provided another, perhaps more serious, indication of the VFA’s perceived value.

Figure 1.
Preliminary Schema for VFA Data Collection and Display



4. Outreach and formal market research to determine engagement and reaction to VFA from the field. The goals were to make community colleges aware of the work and activities of the VFA. AACC and its partners gave presentations at a wide variety of venues and conducted focus groups and surveys to gather input from the field about the receptivity of the recommended common measures and about incentives that would encourage community colleges to use the VFA. The outreach included discussions of the metrics developed for the VFA, as well as presentations detailing VFA goals and purposes and demonstrations of the proposed data collection, analytics, and reporting tool. More formal market research has included the collection of feedback via interviews and surveys conducted by an independent evaluation firm and a research and public relations firm. (The complete evaluation report is available online; see LFA Group, 2011). The Communications and College Engagement Working Group helped to integrate findings from the market research, pilot testing, and lessons from other groups to make the case for VFA. Feedback has informed the strategic plan for engagement and communications that will be implemented as the VFA is built.

Identifying Common Measures

As developers began building the VFA, they first recognized the need to reach consensus on what were the most appropriate measures to show

institutional effectiveness and accountability in community colleges. VFA committees and working groups initially took a conceptual approach to identify measures, focused on the following question: What data are most useful to gauge community colleges' effectiveness, considering the various populations we serve, with a variety of needs, through multiple programs and resources? That conceptual frame did not give the specifics of the definitions, but instead identified key metrics needed to measure the broad array of important outcomes for community colleges in each of three areas of interest: student progress and outcomes; workforce, economic, and community development; and student learning outcomes.

The working groups began to shape the VFA, and agreement was reached on the definitions of certain cohorts and measures that are commonly used by community colleges and for which data are probably available at individual campuses. At the same time, it was abundantly evident that appropriate measure of other metrics that define outcomes—particularly in the area of workforce, economic, and community development—would require ongoing examination, including empirical study, further research by subject-matter experts, and input from further pilot testing in the field. The intentionally phased approach to VFA development allowed for the first group of measures to be introduced while work continued on defining sector-appropriate outcomes and on data collection in areas such as noncredit course work, career and technical education, adult basic education, and economic and community impacts.

Having outlined a conceptual framework, the working groups moved to define the cohorts and metrics in a technical way in the VFA Metrics Manual, which describes each of the common measures and defines the necessary data elements needed to calculate each metric. Providing the central operational definitions of the accountability framework, the manual is designed to provide participating colleges with information needed for them to calculate the metrics based on data in colleges' student record systems. Similarly, it is designed to enable states or other constituencies to use these definitions and metrics for developing local accountability measures.

As noted, the metrics and current components of the framework were based on a conceptual model that asked "What do colleges need to know and measure to show institutional effectiveness?" Therefore, the VFA Metrics Manual also includes metrics that colleges may not yet have the data or capacity to calculate. These mission-critical indicators are included as placeholder measures.

Pilot Testing

Surveying the Field

One of the most essential components of Phase 2 was pilot testing the metrics and measures at community colleges. The questions posed to the pilot sites and the core reasons why AACC asked colleges to test the metrics were to determine to what extent a measure could be calculated using existing data on community college campuses and whether the measure would be useful for gauging

institutional effectiveness. With these objectives, pilot sites were asked not only to calculate and submit data, but also to respond to an extensive feedback survey that asked them to provide information on the utility of each of the measures to the internal and external stakeholder, the clarity of the definitions, the degree to which colleges could readily produce the metrics in the VFA using existing student record data systems, and the extent of the institutional burden to create these metrics. The survey also sought recommendations for improvements. Pilot colleges also gave feedback on the extent that the measures would be useful as benchmarks.

AACC and the VFA developers were committed to ensuring a high level of feasibility and utility before expending resources to transition into building a system to collect and display the data in Phase 3. Based on the pilot testing data and survey feedback from 40 pilot sites that submitted 58 data sets, community colleges have largely endorsed the VFA's student cohort and outcomes measures as appropriate ways to tell the community college story and best gauge the effectiveness of these institutions. Not surprisingly, challenges highlighted by the pilot testing included lack of clarity with some operational descriptions, insufficient availability of data—particularly in the noncredit, workforce, and adult basic education arenas—and limited institutional research capacity to compile, calculate, and submit data.

Pilot sites reported that the measures in the area of student progress and outcomes are clearer and more consistent than the measures in other areas.

Those metrics are more traditional measures for which the sector has a common understanding and language, and for which there are quality data available. In the area of career and technical education (workforce), community colleges know what outcomes are important to measure, but the data are difficult to obtain and variances across institutions make it necessary to establish baseline definitions of workforce terms before creating rigorous and consistent metrics.

To address the challenges with measuring workforce and economic outcomes, VFA developers identified and included placeholder metrics. These are the metrics that are relevant and important enough to the sector that they are to be included in the framework regardless of the ability, at present, to collect and report these data. This roadmap of measures will guide the ongoing research and development objectives of the VFA. Identifying the data that colleges need to collect will also inform work directed at improving national data sets.

Pilot institutions also reported that compiling data for the VFA challenged the limited resources of the institutional research departments, particularly the smaller pilot institutions. However, direct feedback from the pilot sites indicated that the perceived benefits of using the VFA cohort and metrics definitions largely outweighed the burden of reporting these outcomes. The pilot institutions also indicated that as the VFA is refined and after its initial implementation, the framework would be easier to use and data quality would improve as colleges develop methodology and data collection protocols based on the VFA.

The VFA data tool will also streamline the process for data collection and analysis, thus easing the burden on staff. As community colleges and state community college systems agree that the measures are the right measures, it is hoped that state systems will adopt the VFA for their own accountability reporting. The ability to leverage the data for multiple purposes (internal improvement, as well as external accountability) will further mitigate the burden on overly taxed staff.

Measuring Quality

One of the greatest challenges in establishing an institution-based accountability framework is creating metrics that address the quality of the education experience. In order to address the topic of student learning outcomes, for example, working group members examined a variety of potential approaches and gathered feedback and information from the pilot colleges. Primarily, the pilot sites were asked to report what it is that their colleges do to assess student learning outcomes. The colleges submitted the names of national, normed assessment instruments or surveys that they use to understand learning efficacy. They were also asked to recommend criteria or parameters for the sector to consider when devising an appropriate VFA approach to student learning outcomes.

Pilot testing showed that much work is needed to understand what the community college sector means when talking of learning outcomes. Due to the wide variety of reasons why students attend community colleges, an appropriate learning outcome is hard to define. Even more

challenging is developing assessments that are valid and comparable across institutions. Feedback from the pilot colleges helped elucidate the array of opinions, definitions, and constructs surrounding the meaning of student learning outcomes and assessments. A significant part of ongoing development will focus on gathering information and building a better approach to assessing and reporting in this area.

Ongoing Development

Across the community college sector, there is overarching agreement on the types of measures that are important, but agreeing on how to measure institutional effectiveness is extremely challenging and nuanced. Creating comparable, rigorous, and transparent measures of performance that are useful requires consensus building, compromise, and evidence from the field of what works. Additionally, knowing what community colleges ought to measure often does not align with being able to get the right data for measurement.

Placeholder Measures

Indicative of the challenges inherent in the development of the VFA, many of the metrics created are not necessarily easy to calculate due to limitations in data availability and colleges' institutional research capacity. AACC and its partners ensured that these measures were included in the framework as stage-one measures, understanding that not all colleges will be able to report or calculate them at this time. But the

measures are important, and the VFA has included them in the framework as placeholders.

Specific examples of challenges in the area of career and technical education include a lack of consensus on the basic definitions of commonly used terms such as *workforce programs*, *noncredit*, or *training*. Also, obtaining data on outcomes is difficult. State data and employment information are widely varied in coverage and content and are often not available to the institution. Information about and outcomes of the participants in adult basic education and general equivalency diplomas programs are housed in entirely separate databases, if kept at all. Some important workforce and economic development activities (such as workforce course enrollments or number of businesses receiving contract training) are challenging to convert into rates that would show usable outcomes or provide a comparable measure of institutional effectiveness across institutions. Because these outcomes are critically important, the VFA will continue to research and determine the most appropriate ways to define and capture them.

As noted earlier, the staged approach to VFA development allows measures to be added or refined when the community determines how best to technically define outcomes and when data become more readily available. The working groups and VFA participants recognize that the measures being proposed for inclusion in a later stage are essential components of community colleges' missions. It would, however, be detrimental to rush measures to the field that are not useful or that are poorly defined. Two such areas of measures are as follows.

- **English as a second language (ESL).** There is a need to determine how best to measure outcomes for ESL students who come to a community college with varying levels of education and competencies. ESL students may enroll seeking only to learn English, or they may seek education or training that can range widely from developmental and adult basic education to program and degree completion.
- **Contributions to the community.** Community colleges make considerable contributions to their local communities, but quantifying them can be difficult. Defining outcomes and rates that show effectiveness, rather than inputs and numbers, is particularly problematic. Establishing relevant measures would depend on identifying a specific service area and getting data about the people and businesses in that service area. Some colleges and state systems have implemented

different methods for establishing service areas, but great inconsistencies exist across institutions. Local geography, economies, and community dynamics vary so greatly across the country that defining broad measures of contributions to local communities requires much more exploration. As a starting point, VFA working group members have examined some measures used at many community colleges, such as market penetration as defined by community participation in cultural activities, public meetings, and sporting events and measures of credit and noncredit activities for a range of purposes including professional development and skill development.

Development of Student Learning Outcomes

In addition to a focus on a relatively comprehensive set of metrics that address the many missions of the community college, one of the VFA's guiding principles is that it will include

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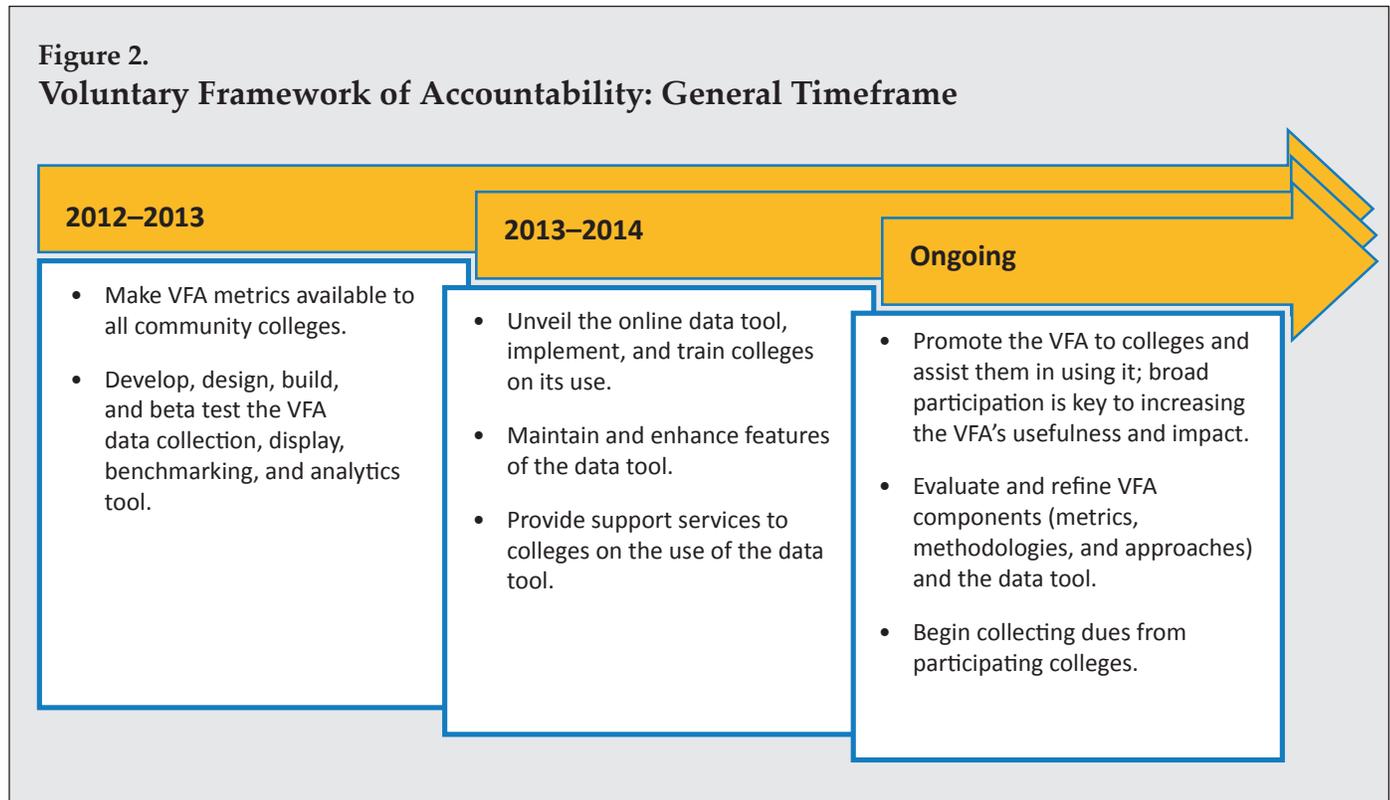
Due to the wide variety of reasons why students attend community colleges, an appropriate learning outcome is hard to define. Even more challenging is developing assessments that are valid and comparable across institutions. Feedback from the pilot colleges helped elucidate the array of opinions, definitions, and constructs surrounding the meaning of student learning outcomes and assessments.

measures of the quality of the educational experience. While the VFA currently includes metrics for assessing student progress and outcomes, it does not provide for measuring the quality of the learning experience based on an outside metric.

As the working groups constructed the framework and developed the VFA Metrics Manual, many questions arose about what would constitute the

most effective examination of student learning outcomes. The VFA's guiding question—What are the most appropriate measures for community colleges?—applies to this issue. The first version of the VFA Metrics Manual details a process for reporting and sharing a college's learning outcomes, but it is just a precursor. Proposed Phase 3 work will include focus on defining, operationalizing, and assessing learning outcomes aligned to the associate degree (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Voluntary Framework of Accountability: General Timeframe





Part 2: Metrics and Measures

Student Progress and Outcomes

Tracking Community College Students

Within the VFA, student progress and outcomes (SPO) measures are designed to track and assess the progress and outcomes of all students who enter a college at a specific point in time—a cohort. Such measures are designed to identify (1) incremental outcomes, also referred to as momentum or progression points, based on research that suggests meeting these outcomes are predictive of continuing success and longer-term outcomes, and (2) 6-year outcome measures, to provide more information about achievement than the measures currently in existence. A critical part of any longitudinal framework is determining who—which students—should be followed. The VFA working groups invested considerable time on this important question before defining the cohorts.

One fundamental construct of the VFA is the intent to measure the progress and outcomes of a student cohort that represents all students who start at the college at a given time. The notion of a cohort at a community college, however, differs rather substantially from a cohort in a 4-year college or university, where students typically enroll as first-year students shortly after completing high school and remain at a single institution for four years (or so) until they earn an undergraduate degree.

By contrast, students enter community colleges at many different ages and stages of life, may accumulate credits toward their credentials from multiple institutions, and may drop in and out of college over sometimes lengthy periods of time.

The federal government currently measures the performance of community colleges in the same way that it measures performance for 4-year institutions. In a report by Jobs for the Future (JFF) and the ATD Cross-State Data Work Group, *Test Drive: Six States Pilot Better Ways to Measure and Compare Community College Performance*, the authors stated,

The result is an incomplete and inaccurate picture of community college performance. For example, the survey does not track outcomes for part-time students, even though large proportions of community college students start their postsecondary education part-time, as they juggle the demands of school, work, and family. Among states participating in this study, part-time students account for one-third to one-half of initial enrollments. For states interested in evaluating their community colleges and helping them improve performance, understanding the achievement these students is vital. (Jobs for the Future & ATD, 2008)

Moreover, the report notes that the federal Graduation Rates Survey does not even count transfer to a 4-year institution as a successful

outcome—although that outcome is of course a goal of many community college programs.

Defining Cohorts

The difficulty of defining the right student cohort for the VFA is one of its most significant challenges. What is the most appropriate common denominator? Community college students enroll for a multitude of reasons. One may seek to take a single personal enrichment course, while another might want to pursue the highest credential offered by the community college, perhaps with an eye toward transferring to another institution for attainment of a higher-level degree. Because any outcome along this spectrum is possible, the VFA affords examination of the percentage of students reaching all possible outcomes along this continuum, for all the students that enter community colleges. Wrestling with this issue, VFA working groups considered it important for the VFA to track a broad cohort, which includes all new students starting in the fall who are attending either full time or part time.

For most measures associated with the VFA, colleges will be asked to report outcomes for student cohorts, tracked over various points of time. Longitudinal cohort tracking methodology allows colleges to report on outcomes of a group of students after a specified period of time, which can lead to a better understanding of what happens to students who attend a college. The VFA measures were designed to minimize the need for establishing and tracking multiple cohorts of students, but due to the nature of the

different measures included in the framework, a single cohort approach was not feasible. The VFA developers suggest tracking two separate retrospective cohorts: a 2-year cohort for progress measures and a 6-year cohort for outcomes measures. VFA working group members ultimately decided on this cohort definition so that the data would show what happens to a great majority of community college students. A largely inclusive cohort was deemed important to show that colleges were concerned with the progress and outcomes of all students who attend.

To meet the goals of a broadly inclusive cohort that is comparable across institutions and provides reasonable metrics, the following considerations shaped the final VFA cohort definition.

- **Including part-time students in the cohort.**

It is critical that colleges factor all students into their accountability reporting. In that as many as 85% of students at some community colleges start their studies by enrolling part time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011), an accountability framework for community colleges cannot overlook this large population of students. Additionally, a greater proportion of part-time students are also from low-income families. Including part-time students in the analysis and tracking low-income students for whom a community college degree or certificate is often the entryway to higher education and the job market is therefore of vital importance (Jobs for the Future & ATD, 2008).

- **Extending the timeframe for tracking students.** The 6-year tracking timeframe proposed by groups such as ATD's Cross State Data Working Group has yielded an increase in graduation rates reported (double for full-time, triple for part-time students). A 3-year timeframe (150% of normal time for full-time students, the current federal methodology) does not afford sufficient time to fully measure student progress, particularly for students beginning in developmental education or enrolled less than full time. Additionally, community college students often switch between full- and part-time status and need to balance family, life, and work while pursuing their academic goals (Jobs for the Future & ATD, 2008).
- **Excluding students still in high school.** Dual enrollment in high school and concurrent postsecondary classes is an increasingly common practice in community colleges. However, due to the unique nature of this population and different education goals,

the working group decided that including them in the cohort would jeopardize comparability too extensively. However, credits earned while a student was dually enrolled are included in the calculation of metrics where appropriate.

- **First time in college.** Although there is added value in, and the preference would be for, determining whether a student in the cohort is attending college for the first time, many community colleges cannot easily and accurately identify "first-time in college" students. The burden is high for community colleges to find out whether the student ever attended college, and the likelihood is low that this could be done accurately. The alternative is to define the student population by "first-time at *this* college." The VFA cohort is defined this way so that false assumptions are not made about the cohort population, which ultimately would skew the data and any conclusions drawn about the cohort.

The difficulty of defining the right student cohort for the VFA is one of its most significant challenges. What is the most appropriate common denominator? Community college students enroll for a multitude of reasons. One may seek to take a single personal enrichment course, while another might want to pursue the highest credential offered by the community college, perhaps with an eye toward transferring to another institution for attainment of a higher-level degree. Because any outcome along this spectrum is possible, the VFA affords examination of the percentage of students reaching all possible outcomes along this continuum.

Defining Subcohorts

A consistent challenge in interpreting outcomes for community college students is determining which outcomes match student learning and training goals. For example, many students come to community colleges not to earn a degree or credential, but to take classes to gain specific knowledge or skills for their personal enrichment or for advancement in their jobs or careers. The working group decided that a subcohort of credential-seeking students would provide an opportunity to measure outcomes for students who more appropriately can be defined as seeking an award.

In addition to reporting student progress and outcomes measures for the VFA cohort, institutions participating in the VFA are being asked to report these same measures using a subpopulation of students who have earned 12 credit hours (or the equivalent) of course work by the end of year 2—a “credential-seeking” subcohort. It could be argued that a student’s stated intent might be a more ideal measure of credential seeking, but research has shown that statements of student intent collected by colleges prove to be unreliable indicators. Several states (e.g., Florida, Maryland, and Washington) have accountability systems that use student behavior, such as credits attempted or earned, or enrollment in critical courses, as a proxy for student intent to earn a credential. The criterion of completed 12 credit hours is one way to use actual student behavior to determine whether a student intends to seek a certificate or degree. Identifying a certificate or degree-seeking student by his or her course-taking behavior has become a more common practice at

community colleges and can be viewed as a reliable indicator of student intent and goals.

Throughout the VFA’s testing, implementation, and expansion, participating institutions will continue to monitor how the criterion of “earned 12 credit hours” affects the percentage of students excluded from the cohort and the percentage of students achieving relevant outcomes. The rationale behind this approach (identifying intent by behavior) is varied, but it reflects several important factors: financial aid policies that limit aid to degree- and certificate-seekers; registration and class admittance policies that favor degree- and certificate-seekers; and application and enrollment processes that differ for degree- and certificate-seekers compared with those not seeking degrees or certificates. Another factor is that students may enroll in an institution with the intent of earning a degree or certificate but have little understanding of what that entails and may change their intent very early in their academic career. In general, a student’s stated intent overestimates the number of students who are “seriously” credential seeking, especially at colleges with many financially needy students, because students must self-identify as credential-seeking in order to collect financial aid.

Using student behavior to determine intent eliminates the need to rely on the less reliable and transient nature of stated intent. A student’s attempt to earn a certain number of credits within a specified timeframe is a much more reliable indicator of a student’s intent—based entirely on observable behavior—to complete a degree, certificate, or program. Other reasons to define a

subcohort in this manner and to examine progress and outcomes include the following.

- The definition eliminates, in a very simple and straightforward way, students who are taking only a few courses for enrichment or job skills. Students who have completed 12 hours are most likely truly degree-seeking students. They have shown by their behavior that they are serious about earning a credential.
- Credit hours completed is a straightforward data element that all states and institutions track and define the same way. The VFA definition clarifies the inclusion of developmental courses and other specifics to provide guidance, but credit hours completed is a basic element of data that is easily understood. A typical problem with data available at community colleges is that institutions may be using the same measures but employing different definitions and methodologies, resulting in useless cross-institution comparisons and perpetuating

confusion. From institution to institution, student intent and goal questions vary depending on terminology, collection methods, timeframes, and methods of update used. The problematic nature of making cross-institutional comparisons based on these inconsistencies is a strong argument for not permitting institutions to use their own locally defined cohorts. The practice is unacceptable if the VFA is to have credibility. Part of the VFA's appeal is the ability to benchmark against peers—thus the need for a standard national definition. Without a consistent identification of the cohort, all measures would be based upon different populations and would not be truly comparable.

- The outcomes of the subcohort can be examined next to the outcomes of the initial, broad cohort of all students.

One criticism of using a behaviorally defined cohort is the elimination from the cohort of all students who have not yet completed the minimum number of credit hours, with no way to determine what happened to this



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population. How would a college account for students who are left out of the cohort? Another issue is that some colleges and states that have employed this method report an increase in graduation and transfer rates, indicating that the method favors the student population that is most likely to be successful in either completing a degree or credential or transferring to another institution. To address these challenges, the VFA tracks the same progress and outcomes measures for its subcohort as it does for the broader VFA cohort. The VFA cohort includes all students starting in the fall, so the question of what happens to those left out of the behaviorally defined cohort is resolved by showing progress and outcomes for both populations.

Disaggregation Criteria and Categories of Measures

The VFA views the ability to disaggregate data as essential. Within the VFA, each SPO measure will be disaggregated and separately reported by race/ethnicity, gender, age group, Pell status in the first term, initial enrollment status (part-time or full-time), and college readiness status. This specific set of disaggregation criteria was chosen to allow colleges to better understand the outcomes for student populations of particular interest or that have historically had different outcomes. By disaggregating the data, colleges can see how well different groups of students are doing at their own institutions and can benchmark the outcomes of specific groups against similar peer institutions.

In general, SPO measures are intended to capture a student's pathway from entry through to

completion or exit from the college. SPO measures are organized by three broad categories as follows.

1. Developmental education progress

measures are designed to capture the percentage of students who require developmental education, successfully complete developmental education, and become prepared for college-level work. Nationally, more than 60% of students who enter community colleges require at least one developmental education class to be fully college ready. Developmental education is a vital part of what community colleges do, and these metrics will provide national benchmarks for colleges to determine how well they are serving students who need to be prepared for college-level work.

- 2. Student progress** measures are intended to capture successful completion of milestones along the pathway to degree or certificate completion or transfer to another institution. Research has indicated that the behaviors of students captured by those measures are the factors that are related to successful student outcomes, such as transfer or degree or certificate completion. Many colleges, state community college systems, and national initiatives have begun tracking intermediate progress of student success (also known as "milestones," "momentum points," "success indicators," and "progress points"). Recent studies show that students who engage in certain behaviors or who reach specific academic achievement points are more likely

to complete a degree or certificate or to transfer successfully (e.g., Offenstein & Shulock, 2010).

3. **Outcomes** measures enable colleges to determine the end result for students in the total cohort after a period of time. These measures quantify student outcomes, such as the completion of an academic program that leads to the awarding of a certificate or degree, the transfer of a student to another institution for completion of study, persistence in the current institution, or departure with academic experience.

Workforce, Economic, and Community Development

Tracking Workforce and Career and Technical Education Students

One of the qualities that distinguishes the community college sector is a focus on workforce development, often linked directly to a college's mission to serve its community through economic and community development. Community colleges are the leading providers of both career and technical education (CTE) and workforce training. Nearly all community colleges offer some form of CTE, and some are solely devoted to this type of education and training. It was clear from the outset that the VFA would have to identify metrics that could capture the results of the CTE and workforce missions.

Defining Cohorts

VFA developers recognized that the same measures that could be applied to assess SPO would not

necessarily translate as measures of effectiveness for workforce and economic or community development. Some of the differences are ones of nuance, but other variances are substantive. A fundamental difference is that the data focus on measures outside of the college, such as employment status after the student completes his or her education. Using the entering cohort of students as a frame of reference for these metrics did not make sense, so another approach was required. Students being tracked in the area of workforce education are those who complete a workforce credential or exit the college having received a substantial amount of CTE training.

The CTE approach is different from the approach used to examine the SPO measures in that it begins with students leaving the institution and seeks to assess what happens following their departure, with or without a formal award. In essence, the SPO measures account for student progress at stages through an educational pipeline, whereas the CTE measures account for what happens after leaving the educational institution and moving into employment or further training.

Disaggregation Criteria

Measures of effectiveness for workforce, economic, and community development (WECD) essentially shift the focus of metrics from an entering cohort of students to a different student population, one that exits the community college after attending specifically to gain training, work-related educational experiences, or credentials for jobs. Effective measures of these workforce outcomes require meaningful

workforce data—such as a student’s wage increases or job placement—that are not always readily available to colleges. When such data are available, they typically are not reported in consistent forms from source to source or do not adequately encompass all relevant information about students who have received CTE training. Historically, this is an area for which data are woefully insufficient. A good case in point is the absence of data about noncredit courses. For CTE students, the VFA will be reporting on both credit and noncredit students. It is often not possible to get information by which to disaggregate data for noncredit students, as student-level information many times is neither maintained for noncredit students nor housed in the same systems as for credit students.

Unlike measures of student progress derived from information in the institution’s own data systems (with the exception of student transfer data), the source of workforce data is external, and colleges are less comprehensive in collecting what is available. When workforce outcome measures are identified, they rely on matching institutional data with data from external sources. Assuming such data are collected, they may or may not exist in a usable form and may not be accessible to the institution. Yet another issue arises when institutional data systems related to workforce are completely separate from those related to student progress and outcomes and when they are structured in a way that prevents content from being cross-referenced or disaggregated. This divide is another example of the internal silos between academic and workforce programs.

A similar challenge arises in attempts to measure noncredit CTE courses and programs and those taken for personal enrichment. And a serious disconnect pertains to the broad lack of uniformity in definitions and outcome measures for certificate and credential programs that community colleges offer or sponsor in conjunction with specific businesses or trades. All of these impediments make gathering and analyzing such data fundamentally more difficult.

Clearly, attempts to provide clarity in determining metrics for WECD are taking place in murky waters. The VFA seeks to codify outcomes that heretofore have not been measured well or consistently—or measured at all—at individual institutions and for which dissonance exists (institution to institution, system to system, and state to state) about what data should be captured for what reasons. In this environment, the VFA is attempting to develop a framework and a vocabulary to enable community colleges to talk about their WECD outcomes—and collect data systematically—in a way that parallels the vocabulary being used now to talk about measuring SPO. The VFA is attempting to develop common language and ways of defining measures of effectiveness useful across institutions that use varied approaches to tackle workforce development.

One of the overarching questions in the CTE arena is simply, “What workforce measures are most relevant and helpful given the realities of the student and community college experience in today’s world?” One answer might be the

need for nationally consistent definitions and a consensus about how best to measure what is meant by “noncredit program,” “CTE leavers,” and “substantial CTE experience short of formal award.” A common vocabulary of metrics is needed, for example, that is accessible and useful to a college offering noncredit EMT certification and training as well as the colleague institution that offers its EMT program solely on a for-credit basis. Common language and metrics could assure students and employers that EMT credentials from both programs reflected attainment of the same skill levels.

There is more work to be done to encourage and foster partnerships between community colleges and business and industry to define the specific benefits of community college credentials and certificates in the workplace. Clarity about the value of credentials and certificates would contribute to finding better ways to measure student outcomes and would likely encourage more students to pursue such study. The VFA is driving and helping frame a much-needed conversation in the community college sector

about workforce definitions and outcomes that can bring uniformity across the sector and create meaningful national measures where none have existed before.

Categories of Measures

The VFA developers offer the following operating principle to guide the inclusion of metrics in the workforce area:

The stage-one measures in the areas of workforce and economic development will be those measures that the VFA working groups and Technical Definitions Committee can fully define, regardless of whether all institutions are able to report the data at this juncture.

This means that while the VFA pursues ongoing work to develop good indicators in the workforce area, placeholder metrics can stand as meaningful proxies. To that end, the VFA is asking colleges to report on measures organized into the following four areas.

- 1. Basic workforce enrollment data.** This data point, while not a rate metric, will be important for providing



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contextual information about an individual college as well as colleges nationally. By providing 2 years of data, colleges will be able to assess change over time.

2. **Career and technical education.** Measures in the area of CTE will examine outcomes for students who complete (graduate from) a credit or noncredit CTE program or leave an institution after having successfully completed 90 contact hours or more of credit or noncredit CTE (leavers). These outcome measures will apply to students who graduate or leave the institution during an academic year. The concept of capturing “leavers with a minimum number of CTE credit hours” addresses the technical and vocational community college’s need to report outcomes for CTE students who leave the institution prior to completion or graduation, but who have attained significant training and start employment, or who enter the institution for CTE and skills upgrading without an intent to earn a certificate or degree.
3. **Noncredit CTE course work.** Measures in the area of noncredit course work will track enrollees in noncredit CTE courses or programs. Currently, there is no single place to find information about the extent of noncredit CTE training in community colleges. The VFA’s goal is to provide a critical contextual element for better understanding noncredit course activities in community colleges.
4. **Adult basic education (ABE) and general equivalency diploma (GED).** Measures in these areas are intended to track ABE and GED

students separately from the initial VFA cohort or CTE student populations. These measures need to be included in the VFA because ABE and GED preparation are important missions of many community colleges.

Student Learning Outcomes

For several decades, an important conversation has been taking place across the higher education community about how to best measure and assess the quality of student learning outcomes (SLO). Along with other types of institutions of higher education, community colleges share a strong interest in becoming more transparent in their reporting of SLO results. Community colleges have been active participants in the national conversation on the topic and in efforts to improve the way data about student learning outcomes are collected, analyzed, and reported. The sector recognizes, however, that its unique characteristics and student populations would be best served by measures and systems that are at least adapted to, and perhaps designed by, the sector itself.

To better assess the quality of learning experiences, the VFA needs to develop a method that is comparable across colleges and provides a consistent metric, while respecting the diverse nature of community colleges. The capacity to validate SLO against a national referent is necessary in an accountability framework. Further work will be required to accomplish that goal within the VFA.

To that end, AACC is proposing a pathway through which community colleges can better

assess and report SLO, based on a nationally defined set of criteria and assessments of institutional SLO benchmarked against externally normed criteria. The VFA is at the threshold of this work. But colleges are working diligently to assess the quality of learning, and the opportunity to make their work more transparent is a necessary first step toward defining appropriate learning outcomes for the community college and informing the sector's work on how best to assess and report them.

In some respects, the SLO challenge in the community college context mirrors the challenge in other sectors of higher education. Community colleges are wrangling with definitions of student learning outcomes themselves, debates about the efficacy of specific assessment practices for measuring learning, and even ongoing discussions about the fundamental purposes of assessment. For example, is assessment more appropriate for institutional accountability or for classroom and program improvement? Other debates wage between those who prefer normed standardized assessment of SLO and those who would rather opt for local assessment practices at the institutional or program level.

Some of the inherent differences that distinguish the community college sector in higher education also affect discussions about SLO. Steeped in longstanding commitment to access to higher education, community colleges today must determine ways to measure degree and certificate completion outcomes—in other words, how to ensure not only access to but also the quality of a

degree. Community colleges need SLO assessment practices that take into account the sector's heterogeneity, as evidenced by the wide variety of motivations and educational behaviors among students as well as the colleges' complex missions and array of programs. The multiple missions of community colleges raise fundamental questions about assessment focus: Is it appropriate to focus on general education or liberal arts outcomes only when the colleges also fulfill other mission-critical educational goals? The sector seeks a set of SLO measures that can be comparable across types of community college programs, that is, traditional college course work or programs focused on workforce economic development.

A core purpose of the VFA is to help community colleges define sector-appropriate learning outcomes. The VFA also seeks to review institutional practices for SLO assessment at community colleges and thinking about SLO, with the goal of moving toward consensus on how to evaluate the quality of the educational experience. As a first step in improving student learning accountability, the VFA will ask community colleges to be more transparent about their current efforts to assess SLO. VFA colleges will use NILOA's (2011) Transparency Framework for reporting what they are doing. Participating VFA institutions will report their SLO process and assessments on their own college websites, using a transparency framework template designed to achieve the following.

- Share more publicly the college's efforts in assessing SLO.

- Help establish some common understanding of assessing and reporting SLO.
- Inform conversations on earning outcomes appropriate for community colleges and how the sector might develop usable, valid, and possibly common assessments.
- Demonstrate how SLO assessments are being used to improve programs and student learning.

While the NILOA framework allows colleges to be more transparent in what they are currently doing, it does not provide a mechanism for comparing institutions with one another or against a national external referent or benchmark. The transparency framework approach is, however, consistent with what colleges are already doing for regional accreditation, and it will make review of current SLO work more available. It will not, however, provide a consistent and comparable set of metrics, benchmarks, or rubrics for colleges to use to compare themselves with their peer colleges.

Moving forward, AACC envisions convening a focus group of SLO and higher education assessment thought leaders to examine the learning outcomes appropriate to associate degree education and to shape thinking about their operational definitions and assessment tools. The first step will be to evaluate the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), developed with funding by the Lumina Foundation (2011) as a theoretical framework to further explore this topic. Using the associate degree as a starting point, the VFA plans on trying to create operational definitions for learning outcomes, along with assessment practices, that map to the associate degree-level competencies outlined in the DQP.



Part 3: Moving Toward Phase 3 and Implementation

Engagement in the VFA continues to build at a considerable pace. Community college leaders, institutional research experts, and other critical stakeholders are helping to shape consensus on the VFA metrics being tested and fine-tuned. Evidence is growing that they are the right metrics at the right time. Further development is expected to reinforce this interim finding.

The next steps for the VFA initiative in the near term will be the work labeled as VFA Phase 3, which begins in earnest in the first quarter of 2012 with a seamless transition from the close of Phase 2. This next phase entails building the data tool and implementing the VFA. Development and outreach strategies underway will help to coalesce the body of participating institutions into a critical mass that will scale the framework into what promises to be a principal entity in the higher education landscape.

Operationally, AACC will build and test a data infrastructure for community colleges to share accountability data with their stakeholders and benchmark their data against appropriate peers. The infrastructure will include three critical components:

- Data collection tools.
- Data storage capacity.
- Web-based tools to view, analyze, share, and compare data.

Concurrently, AACC will develop a password protected, Web-based data collection and analytics tool for colleges to use to submit their VFA data, along with the technical hardware and platforms to store that data securely. A Web-based data tool will be built to allow participants to view accountability data; a second Web-based data tool will enable colleges to analyze, compare, and benchmark their data against those of peer institutions. This third phase of the VFA will focus on the building and national implementation of the Web-based data collection, analysis, and display tool. Phase 3 is estimated to last through the middle of 2014.

In addition to physically building the VFA data tool, AACC's next work on VFA includes plans to:

- 1. Rollout and implementation of VFA to the field,** which includes making the framework available to colleges, along with logistical support to ensure that colleges have the necessary tools, can establish processes, and can budget appropriate resources to start using the VFA.
- 2. Marketing and strategic engagement,** which entails the implementation of the marketing and strategic plan developed during Phase 2 from market research.

Future development of the VFA also will encompass:

3. **Support of the VFA data collection and display tool**, including technical support for colleges to use the data collection tool (by submitting data) and the data display tools; website development; data integrity checks; and benchmarking functionality enhancements.
4. **Research and development**, to include additional and ongoing development of the VFA and modifications and additions to metrics; data tool enhancements and increased functionality; incorporation of social networking and community-building applications; further development and refinements in the areas of workforce, economic and community development and student learning outcomes; and development of a Web-based collaboration space in which to share promising practices in the use of accountability metrics for institutional improvement.

The operational components of Phase 3 are predicated on the Phase 2 outcomes, and smart, sustainable implementation of the VFA rests on the following work products:

- Wireframes, technical specifications, and estimated costs to build the Web-based data collection, display, and analytics tool.
- A business model to support the VFA after the launch of the Web-based tool.
- Market research to determine the community college sector's awareness, understanding, and needs of the framework and to inform implementation of the strategic plan developed to drive participation.
- Metrics that are tested and defined sufficiently enough for calculation.

In keeping with the incremental approach of the VFA initiative overall, a firewall of sorts was created between the developmental work of Phase 2 and the rollout of the framework that is targeted for Phase 3. The intent is to provide ample time to ensure that the development benchmarks are the right ones and that a critical mass of institutions becomes part of the national VFA initiative.



Conclusion

The ultimate goal of the VFA is to provide a way for community colleges to look at nationally accepted measures of student progress and outcomes and then to compare themselves with other institutions on these measures. Why? Because accountability and comparability serve institutional improvement goals and help advance student success. However, the mere act of comparison is not sufficient.

The VFA provides a valuable starting point for colleges to understand more clearly which areas need immediate and long-term attention at the institutional level to reach student success and completion goals. To this end, AACC plans for the VFA website to serve as a clearinghouse and discussion board where colleges can collaborate on promising practices and share ways to be more effective.

That is the essence of the VFA—to be the principal accountability framework to measure community college effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. It aims to drive robust conversation about quality across the whole of the community college sector. It is intentionally designed to be a home, so to speak, for frank discussion and honest review of vital issues; to foster agreement on core measures of quality and success; and to serve as an incubator for fresh ideas to meet pressing problems.

The VFA is intended to build consensus by identifying the accountability measures that are of the highest value to the community

college sector. Building that consensus will be fundamental to the VFA's sustainability. AACC will continue to work strategically to involve a variety of professionals and types of institutions in the VFA. AACC will build momentum by sharing, presenting, and discussing the framework in a variety of venues to a variety of audiences and from integrating the VFA work with other initiatives and organizations focused on institutional accountability and student educational completion. The VFA's sustainability is contingent upon the development of a funding model that will migrate from current external grant support to a model in which financial support comes from the institutional partners who benefit from participation.

AACC stands ready to do all that it can to ensure that the VFA meets its full potential. As part of that commitment, AACC has agreed to serve as an independent repository of the institutional data that will be collected through the VFA, a critical role that will be necessary to ensure data privacy and to protect proprietary information.

The VFA is organic. It will change to address emerging issues and evolving community college needs. Future developments could include the addition of new program components, even better tools for benchmarking and peer comparison functionality, and expansion of the VFA's capacity to foster conversation, networking,

and community-building around the issues and opportunities central to the community college mission. The community college sector needs the VFA's focus for ongoing dialogue about workforce preparation and career and technical education.

It is hoped that the VFA can inform and shape discussions in policy circles and that it might help influence the design of state data systems and cross-state synchronization of data collection and analysis. The VFA will raise the visibility of the community college sector—first by drawing attention to the sector's focus on quality inputs and outcomes, and then by spotlighting specific accomplishments of this diverse sector.



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Online Resources

Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count

www.achievingthedream.org

Achieving the Dream (ATD) is a national nonprofit dedicated to helping more community college students succeed, particularly students of color and low-income students. Built on the values of equity and excellence, ATD advances community college student success through work on four fronts: transforming community colleges, influencing policy, developing new knowledge, and engaging the public.

Collegiate Learning Assessment

www.cic.edu

Complete College America

www.completecollege.org

Complete to Compete

www.nga.org/ci

Community College Survey of Student Engagement

www.ccsse.org

The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) provides information on student engagement, a key indicator of learning and, therefore, of the quality of community colleges. The survey, administered to community college students, asks questions that assess institutional practices and student behaviors that are correlated highly with student learning and student retention.

National Community College Benchmarking Project

www.nccbp.org

Responding to requirements for inter-institutional comparisons, Johnson County Community College established the National Community College Benchmark Project (NCCBP) with other colleges from across the United States to standardize a nationwide benchmark reporting process.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

www.learningoutcomeassessment.org

Established in 2008, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) assists institutions and others in discovering and adopting promising practices in the assessment of college student learning outcomes. Documenting what students learn, know, and can do is of growing interest to colleges and universities, accrediting groups, higher education associations, foundations, and others beyond campus, including students, their families, employers, and policymakers.

University and College Accountability Network

www.ucan-network.org/

Voluntary System of Accountability

www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm





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Appendix B: Technical Definitions of Measures

Student Progress and Outcomes Measures

A. Developmental Education Progress Measures (for all referred students in the fall 2005 6-year cohort)

1. Percentage of students referred who attempted their first developmental math, English, or reading course.
2. Percentage of students referred who completed the highest-level developmental math, English, or reading course.
3. Percentage of students referred who completed any college-level developmental course in math, English, or reading.
4. Percentage of students referred who completed all developmental education.

B. Two-Year Progress Measures (for all students in the fall 2009 2-year cohort and for the students in the credential-seeking subcohort of the fall 2009 2-year cohort)

1. Percentage of credit hours successfully completed in the first term of the cohort (fall 2009).¹
2. Percentage of students who reached credit thresholds by the end of the second year (24 credits completed by part-time students; 42 credits completed by full-time students).
3. Percentage of students who were retained from the fall (term one) to their next academic term or who completed a formal award.

4. Percentage of students who reached year 2 outcomes as follows:
 - a. Completed a certificate or degree.
 - b. Transferred to a 2-year or 4-year institution.
 - c. Were still enrolled at the initial institution.
5. Percentage of credit hours successfully completed at the end of year 2.¹

C. Six-Year Outcomes Measures (for all students in the fall 2005 6-year cohort and for the students in the credential-seeking subcohort of the fall 2005 6-year cohort)

1. Percentage of students who earned an associate degree—without transfer.
2. Percentage of students who earned an associate degree—with transfer.
3. Percentage of students who earned an award of less than an associate degree (certificate)—with transfer.
4. Percentage of students who earned an award of less than an associate degree (certificate)—without transfer.
5. Percentage of students who transferred to another postsecondary institution with no degree or certificate.
6. Percentage of students who were still enrolled during the sixth academic year.
7. Percentage of students who left the institution without an award and without transfer having earned 30 or more semester credit hours (or equivalent).
8. Percentage of students who left the institution without an award and without transfer having earned less than 30 semester credit hours (or equivalent).

¹ This is not a student-based measure, but rather a measure of credit hours to show the total percentage of credit hours that were successfully completed by the cohort minus the number of credit hours passed by the cohort and divided by the number of credit hours attempted by the cohort.

Career and Technical Education Measures

A. Career and Technical Education Measures

1. Number of CTE awards.
2. Licensure exam passing rates.
3. Percentage of CTE students who completed a program (credit or noncredit) or earned 90 contact hours and are employed with a livable wage.
4. Median wage growth of CTE students.

B. Noncredit Workforce Courses

1. Noncredit workforce course enrollments.
2. Number of state- or industry-recognized credentials.
3. Percentage of noncredit CTE students who transitioned from noncredit to credit courses.

Adult Basic Education and GED Measures

A. Adult Basic Education and GED Measures

1. Percentage of students who completed ABE or GED.
2. Percentage of ABE or GED students who enrolled in additional courses.
3. Percentage of ABE or GED students who gained employment.



Appendix C: Student Learning Outcomes Approach

Colleges will be asked to share their current Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) assessment activities on their college websites (sharing the URL with the VFA) based on a Transparency Framework developed by the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). VFA staff will be developing templates and guidelines for colleges to facilitate their use of the NILOA framework for reporting, and all VFA participants will be expected to use this framework for reporting SLO activities. The NILOA framework has 6 primary areas colleges will be expected to report.

1. **Student learning outcomes statements.** Student learning outcomes statements clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education.
2. **Assessment plans.** Campus plans for gathering evidence of student learning might include institution-wide or program-specific approaches that convey how student learning will be assessed, the data collection tools and approaches that will be used, and the timeline for implementation.
3. **Assessment resources.** Assessment resources encompass information or training provided to faculty and staff to help them understand, develop, implement, communicate, and use evidence of student learning.
4. **Current assessment activities.** Current assessment activities include information on a full range of projects and activities recently completed or currently underway to gauge student learning, make improvements, or respond to accountability interests.
5. **Evidence of student learning.** Evidence of student learning includes results of assessment activities. This may include evidence of indirect (e.g., via surveys) and direct (e.g., via portfolio) student learning as well as institutional performance indicators (e.g., licensure pass rates).
6. **Use of student learning evidence.** This component represents the extent to which evidence of student learning is used to identify areas where changes in policies and practices may lead to improvement, inform institutional decision making, problem identification, planning, goal setting, faculty development, course revision, program review, and accountability or accreditation self-study.

This approach is consistent with what colleges are already doing for regional accreditation and will help make current SLO work more transparent. It will not, however, provide a consistent and comparable set of metrics, benchmarks, or rubrics for colleges to use to compare one another.

The ultimate goal of the VFA is to develop a more common understanding of broad-based institutional measures of learning achievement that colleges can use to demonstrate not only the progress and outcome of students, but also the quality of those learning experiences. To that end, the VFA team will continue to explore ways to reach this goal that are appropriate for community colleges. The first step will be to evaluate the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), which was developed with funding by the Lumina foundation, as a theoretical framework to further explore this topic. Using the associate degree as a starting point, a team will be assembled to begin defining expectations for what an associate degree recipient would be expected to have in each of the five key dimensions outlined in the DQP.



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