Executive Summary

Evaluation of Phase II of the Voluntary Framework of Accountability Initiative:

Framework Development and Pilot Testing

December 2011

About the Voluntary Framework of Accountability

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), in collaboration with its partners the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) and the College Board, are developing the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA): a framework that contains accountability measures that are specific and appropriate to community colleges.

The VFA covers three broad areas: Student Progress and Outcomes (SPO); Workforce, Economic, and Community Development Outcomes (WECD) (inclusive of Career and Technical Education and Adult Basic Education/GED; and Student Learning Outcomes (SLO). Ultimately, the VFA will create and leverage data definitions that many community colleges will agree to voluntarily adopt to enhance transparency, improve student success, inform improvement strategies, and promote institutional effectiveness. VFA metrics will also help community colleges benchmark their progress and performance across groups of institutions. VFA metrics will also be informative for other stakeholders, including national and state legislators, the philanthropic community, accrediting agencies, and the general public.

Framework Development and Pilot Testing

The VFA Initiative has unfolded in different phases including planning, developing measures, and an upcoming building and rolling-out of the data system that supports the Framework. During planning (completed in the summer of 2009), AACC, ACCT, and the College Board reviewed recent research to assess the need for a common accountability framework among community colleges, to identify the needs of community colleges, and to design additional phases of the process. This laid the groundwork for Phase II, which took place from September 2009 to December 2011.

During the metric development phase, one Working Group for each set of metrics (SPO, WECD, and SLO), as well as a fourth Working Group on Communications and College Engagement (CCE), worked under the guidance of a Steering Committee to develop the VFA. Forty sites representing 58 colleges then pilot tested the VFA. Finally, the Working Groups and Steering Committee incorporated pilot-tester feedback, using this input to refine the Framework.

Why Evaluate The Metric Development Process?

From the beginning, AACC stewards of the VFA process understood the challenges inherent in developing a VFA. A formidable task lay ahead, and clearly a very high-quality development *process* was required in order to produce a high-quality *product.* AACC's goal was to design a development process that would yield the most important and relevant metrics for community colleges. Did AACC succeed in achieving that goal?

At the beginning of 2011, AACC engaged an outside firm to investigate the extent of its success. The evaluation focused on these questions:

- How effective was the metric development process, in terms of how it was able to contribute to a high-quality product?
- What specific *aspects* of the process (diversity of participants, participant engagement, AACC process management, facilitation, and Steering Committee guidance and input) supported an effective process?

The evaluation team collected data in two waves:

- In-depth interviews with a subset of eleven "VFA Metric Developers:" four Steering Committee members and seven Working Group members (two each from SPO, WECD, and SLO, and one from CCE); and
- A survey administered to metric developers *and* pilot testers (with some overlapping items, and some tailored survey items for each group). Out of 135 surveys sent, 96 were completed: 10 out of 18 Steering Committee members; 27 out of 36 Working Group members; and 66 out of 90 pilot testers. The overall survey response rate was 71%.

Capitalizing on the opportunity to interview and survey developers and pilot testers, the evaluation team leveraged the data collection to investigate some additional questions:

- What are the anticipated outcomes of the VFA, if it is adopted widely among community college institutions?
- What are the challenges that the VFA may face?
- What are some strategies to support adoption of the VFA?

This Executive Summary provides a high-level view of the evaluation results. For additional detail, please refer to the full report [available at www.aacc.nche.edu/vfa.

Effectiveness of the VFA Process

The results could not be more clear: developers were highly impressed with the VFA development process.

How would you rate the quality of the VFA development process *in terms of its ability to support the development of a high-quality framework*?

Good (44%)	Excellent (56%)

■ Poor　　■ Fair　　■ Good　　■ Excellent

How much did each of the following contribute to the development of a high-quality framework?

Selection of the right participants, from diverse colleges and with diverse perspectives.　　**Good process management (logistics, materials, etc).**　　**Strong engagement of participants.**　　**High-quality facilitation.**　　**Steering Committee guidance and input.**

■ No contribution　　■ Some contribution　　■ Significant contribution

AACC brought together a diverse group of developers who leveraged their various perspectives, designing metrics applicable to community colleges that range in size, geography, regulatory environment, and IR capacity.

AACC was intentional in selecting the VFA participants. There were developers from 44 colleges, representing 24 states; and they were from colleges small and large, urban and rural. For some states, where state offices (rather than individual colleges) would be required to report on the VFA, state office representatives participated. In addition to the 44 colleges, there were participants from five associations, two state-wide education systems, and four consultants. (With these additional participants, 28 states were represented.) In practice, such diverse representation meant that developers were able to speak to how the VFA would function in a variety of contexts. How did the metrics align with how a given institution approaches student learning? How would the technical requirements for extracting data function for a given data system? How did outcome definitions apply to a given student population? How feasible was it for

> The greatest strength was really that so many different types of colleges with representatives from middle management to CEO were able to sit down together and get common agreement on … a very complex issue.
>
> *Working Group Member*

an IR department of a given capacity level to work with the VFA? For states in which state offices would report on the VFA, how did the metrics work for these offices?
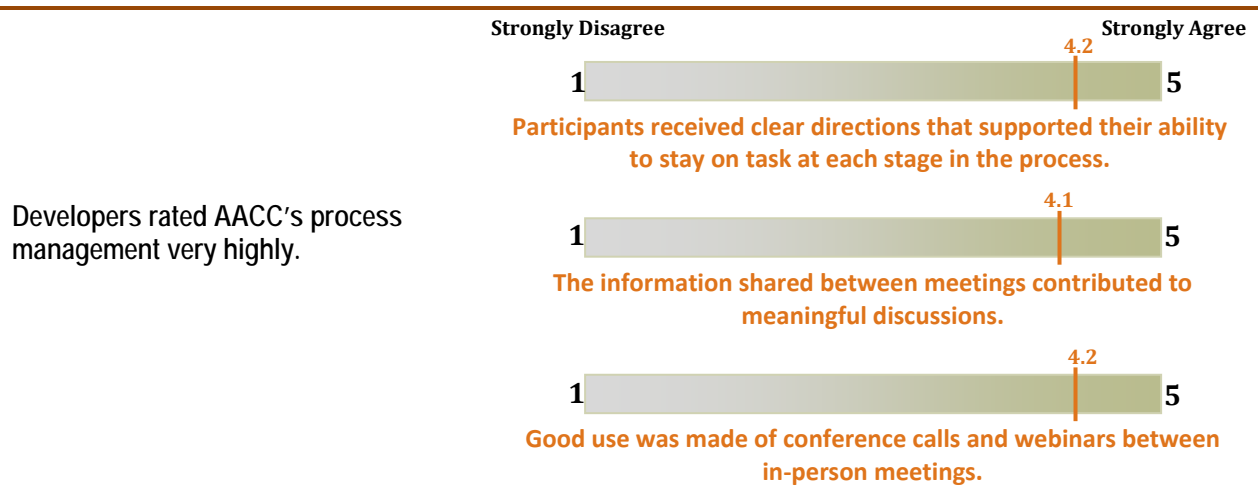
The VFA process also needed to include individuals representing different institutional positions within the colleges. It was critical to include people who play distinct roles within their college so that they can surface concerns visible only from their particular perspectives. AACC took care to bring in college Presidents and IR staff, and also individuals familiar with the academic side (who were experts in assessment and student learning), those from workforce divisions, and representatives from marketing and communications departments.
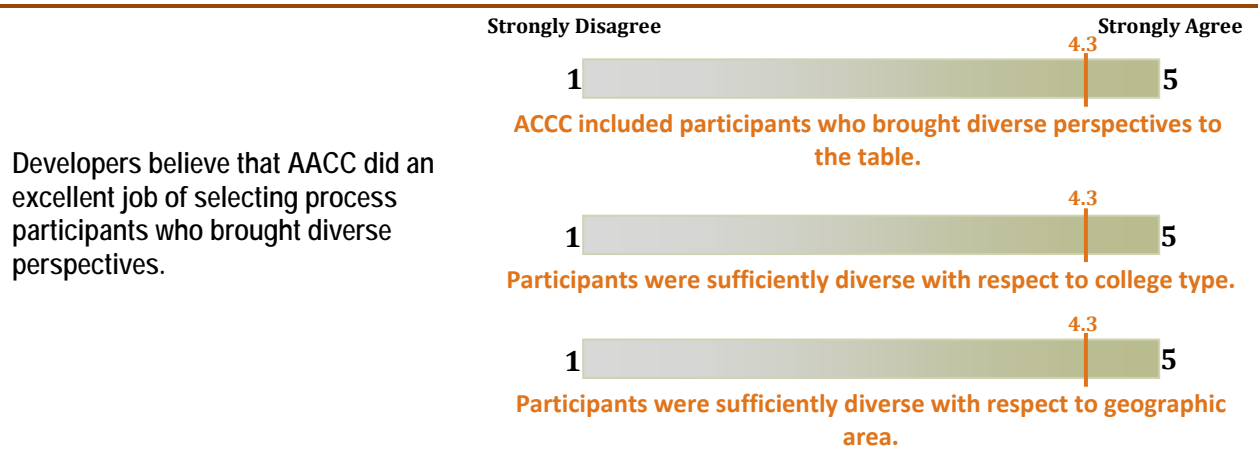
Developers believe that AACC did an excellent job of selecting process participants who brought diverse perspectives.

Strongly Disagree   **Strongly Agree**

4.3
1 [   ] 5

ACCC included participants who brought diverse perspectives to the table.

4.3
1 [   ] 5

Participants were sufficiently diverse with respect to college type.

4.3
1 [   ] 5

Participants were sufficiently diverse with respect to geographic area.

AACC managed the development process very well: the process managers were responsive, provided support to participants, designed productive meetings, and communicated effectively with developers between meetings.

The VFA development process was quite complicated, with its wide variety and number of stakeholders, and multiple moving parts. Even lukewarm ratings would have been impressive, given the complexity of the endeavor. AACC staff, though, clearly exceeded expectations: VFA developers who were interviewed gave effusive praise when asked about the quality of the process management. For example, one interviewee appreciated the process managers' ability to "process the input [they] got from us and provide it back in a coherent fashion even though the process of getting there was not always coherent."

Developers rated AACC's process management very highly.

Strongly Disagree   **Strongly Agree**

4.2
1 [   ] 5

Participants received clear directions that supported their ability to stay on task at each stage in the process.

4.1
1 [   ] 5

The information shared between meetings contributed to meaningful discussions.

4.2
1 [   ] 5

Good use was made of conference calls and webinars between in-person meetings.

High-quality meeting facilitation meant productive meetings, during which developers made good progress on the framework.

Developers interviewed were very complimentary about the facilitation. They observed that facilitators' skills were a significant factor in ensuring positive group dynamics and ultimately strong products. People were encouraged to voice their opinions, and when there were disagreements, facilitators handled those well. One interviewee remarked that facilitators were helpful in supporting the group to "come up with compromises and solutions that most feel good about."

Developers reported that facilitators supported a good process in which participants tackled challenging issues effectively.

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

4.3

1 ▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯ 5

Facilitators were able to lead productive discussions to address challenging issues.

4.3

1 ▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯ 5

Facilitators were able to help the group work through disagreements.

4.3

1 ▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯ 5

Facilitators were able to make participants feel their voices were heard.

AACC designed the process in such a way that participants were highly engaged.

Engaged participation is a critical ingredient for the success of the metrics. Interviewees spoke of the passion and commitment of other participants as well as their own. One Working Group member spoke of the way that "in my Working Group [there was] a high level of engagement. I can't think of very many calls or face-to-face meeting where 80 to 90 percent of participants were there, and that's really impressive [...] Everyone involved in the VFA … is committed to making it happen; we share a common purpose."
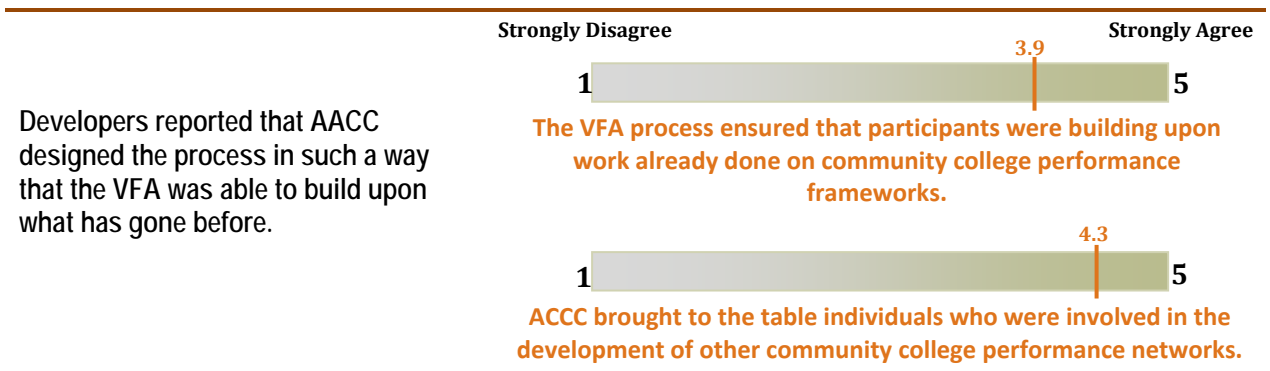
Developers also spoke of the ways in which AACC's management of the process facilitated their own participation. With their time being used efficiently, they were able to concentrate their efforts on the substance of the VFA development process.

Developers appreciated the ways in which AACC's process design contributed to the engagement of themselves and others.

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

4.2

1 ▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯ 5

Excellent project management made it easy to engage effectively in the process.

4.2

1 ▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯▯ 5

The process made good use of particular participants' specific expertise.

Due to the way that AACC laid the groundwork for framework development, the VFA aligns with and builds on other accountability frameworks.

From the beginning, AACC had designed the VFA process not to proliferate frameworks, but to build fruitfully on what had already been developed. According to *Principles and Plans: A Voluntary Framework of Accountability for Community Colleges*:[1] "Although there is currently nothing close to a national common accountability framework for community colleges, a tremendous amount of work has already been done in detailing what community colleges should be achieving. Accountability systems have been employed by several states, local governments, accrediting bodies, the federal government, researchers, and foundation-funded efforts.... [...] The task of the [VFA] project, therefore, is not to develop new measurements, but to sort through the plethora of community college evaluation items currently being deployed and develop a broad framework that includes most, if not all, of the significant activities of the nation's community colleges."

Developers reported that AACC designed the process in such a way that the VFA was able to build upon what has gone before.

Strongly Disagree   **Strongly Agree**

3.9

1   5

The VFA process ensured that participants were building upon work already done on community college performance frameworks.

4.3

1   5

ACCC brought to the table individuals who were involved in the development of other community college performance networks.

The pilot testing process, while not without its bumps in the road, made critical contributions to refining and improving the VFA.

The survey asked pilot testers to share what worked well and what could have been improved about the pilot testing phase. In terms of areas for improvement, some pilot testers brought up technical glitches with the tools that were provided to them, and several of them felt that the forums for reviewing materials or getting their questions answered did not work well. However, there were others who felt that the pilot testing was effective in *all* of these areas:
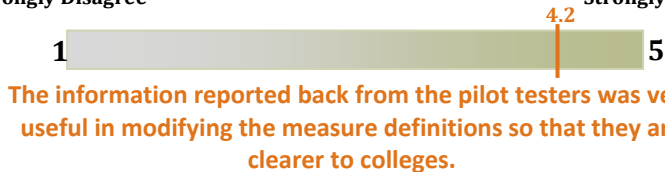
- There was frequent communication during the process – by conference call and webinar – that afforded participants an opportunity to both have their questions answered by AACC and learn from peers;
- AACC personnel were available to answer questions and discuss issues one on one; and
- The tool for inputting data was well-designed and the technical manual was thorough and helpful.

More importantly, however, the developers reported that pilot tester feedback was very useful in clarifying metric definitions. This is critical, as clarity of definitions increases their comparability across institutions and thus their utility. Developers also reported that the pilot-testing feedback significantly increased their confidence in widespread adoption of the VFA.

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[1] Authored by AACC, ACCT, and the College Board during the planning of the VFA initiative.

Developers' feedback on pilot testing indicates that this part of the process was critical in improving the framework and increasing its likelihood of adoption by community colleges across the country.

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

4.2
1 ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ 5

The information reported back from the pilot testers was very useful in modifying the measure definitions so that they are clearer to colleges.

4.1
1 ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ 5

Having heard the pilot tester feedback, I am more confident that we are developing the VFA in a way that increases the likelihood of widespread adoption.

The Anticipated Impact of the VFA on Community Colleges

If community colleges adopt the VFA, what will be the impact on individual institutions and on the community college field? Through interviews and surveys, VFA developers and pilot testers shared their views on where the value of the VFA lies. Key value is perceived primarily in two places. Developers and pilot testers expect that the VFA will support colleges to:

- Help community colleges to tell their own story; and
- Support continual learning at individual institutions.

> [The VFA will help us] make decisions on how we can advance and promote student outcomes and learning and how we can facilitate them completing their programs of study, so it helps us be a little bit more precise in terms of how we use data for program development and also to determine how successful we've been as an institution.
>
> *Steering Committee Member*

Developers and pilot testers reported believing that the VFA would be able to more effectively showcase the value that community colleges contribute to student learning, to their local communities, and to the workforce. They also perceived the usefulness of the VFA as a tool colleges can use to monitor their own effectiveness, enabling them to better support students along the educational pathway to a successful outcome.

Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree

4.1
1 ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ 5

The VFA will more accurately tell the story of community colleges than do current data collection systems.

4.1
1 ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ 5

Colleges will find the VFA very useful for supporting internal efforts at continuous improvement.
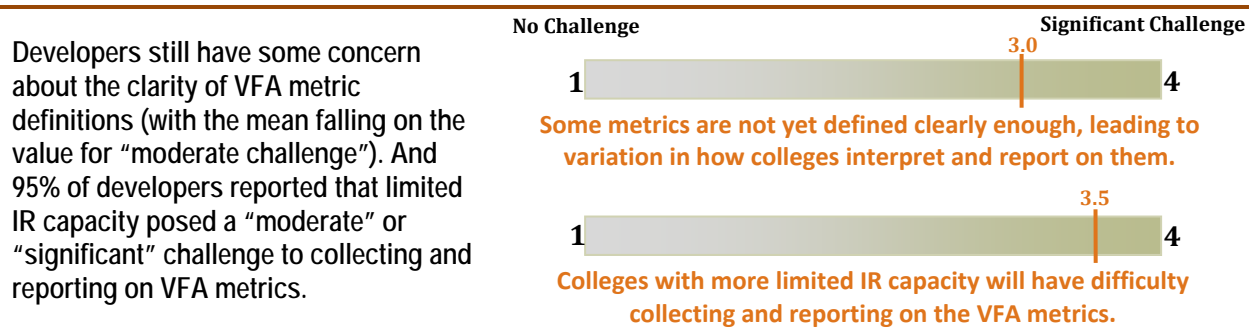
Challenges that the VFA may Face

Some metric developers were worried about the *clarity* of the VFA. Can the metrics be defined clearly enough so that diverse colleges can understand them, translate them into the "language" of their own data systems, and extract the correct data? Will colleges to be consistent with one another in their reporting? Although developers felt that clarity would greatly improved once pilot testing feedback is incorporated, they still believed that lack of clarity could pose a challenge.
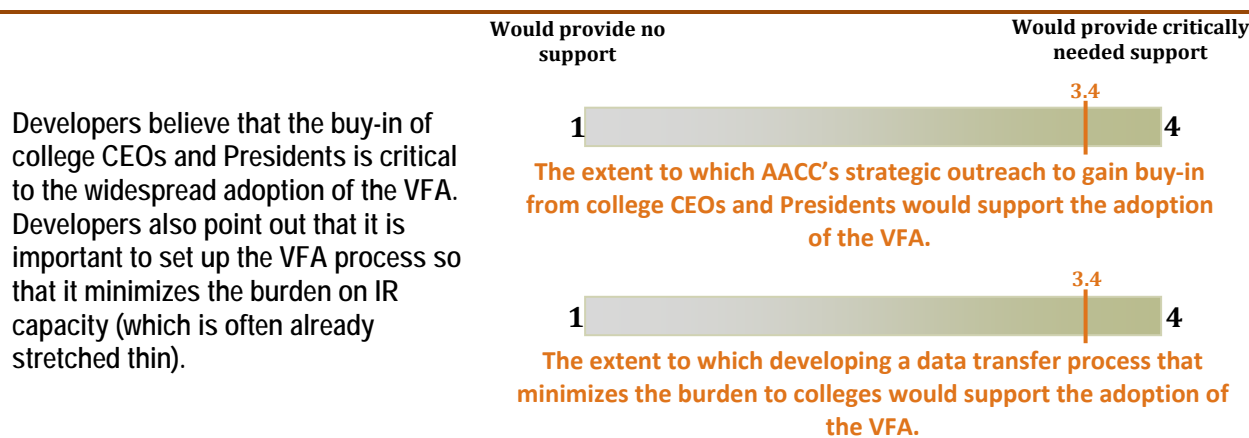
Developers exhibited another area of concern: the capacity of Institutional Research (IR) departments. They are keenly aware that IR capacity varies greatly among colleges. Colleges with fewer IR staff and lower levels of training may struggle with the requirements of completing the VFA, *especially* given the extensive internal and external reporting requirements that *all* colleges face.

Developers still have some concern about the clarity of VFA metric definitions (with the mean falling on the value for "moderate challenge"). And 95% of developers reported that limited IR capacity posed a "moderate" or "significant" challenge to collecting and reporting on VFA metrics.

No Challenge   **Significant Challenge**

3.0

1   4

Some metrics are not yet defined clearly enough, leading to variation in how colleges interpret and report on them.

3.5

1   4

Colleges with more limited IR capacity will have difficulty collecting and reporting on the VFA metrics.

Strategies to Support the Adoption of the VFA

Metric developers rated specific strategies for supporting the adoption of the VFA. Developers pointed to the critical need for support from college CEOs and Presidents, and also the need to minimize the reporting burden. Both of these strategies help to address the challenges of limited IR capacity. If the CEOs and Presidents get behind the VFA, they will need to allocate resources to IR departments, in order for IR staff to have the capacity that they need to report on VFA metrics. And a minimally burdensome process will create fewer challenges for colleges with limited IR capacity.

Developers believe that the buy-in of college CEOs and Presidents is critical to the widespread adoption of the VFA. Developers also point out that it is important to set up the VFA process so that it minimizes the burden on IR capacity (which is often already stretched thin).

Would provide no support   **Would provide critically needed support**

3.4

1   4

The extent to which AACC's strategic outreach to gain buy-in from college CEOs and Presidents would support the adoption of the VFA.

3.4

1   4

The extent to which developing a data transfer process that minimizes the burden to colleges would support the adoption of the VFA.

About AACC

Headquartered in the National Center for Higher Education in Washington D.C., AACC is the primary advocacy organization for community colleges at the national level and works closely with directors of state offices to inform and affect state policy. AACC supports and promotes its member colleges through policy initiatives, innovative programs, research and information and strategic outreach to business and industry and the national news media. http://www.aacc.nche.edu/

About LFA Group: *Learning for Action*

Established in 2000 and with offices in San Francisco and Seattle, LFA Group: Learning for Action provides highly customized research, strategy, and evaluation services that enhance the impact and sustainability of social sector organizations across the U.S. and beyond. We engage deeply with organizations as partners, facilitating processes to draw on strengths, while also providing expert guidance. www.LFAgroup.com