

REPORT OF SCHEV'S 2007 TASK FORCE ON ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The assessment of student learning outcomes is not new to the Commonwealth's system of higher education. For more than two decades, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) has collaborated with Virginia's thirty-nine public colleges and universities on assessment as an integral component of a larger, shared commitment to institutional effectiveness and public accountability.

In 1985, Senate Joint Resolution 125 directed SCHEV to "investigate means by which student achievement may be measured to assure the citizens of Virginia the continuing quality of higher education in the Commonwealth." SCHEV responded by outlining its

first assessment guidelines in Senate Document No. 14, "The Measurement of Student Achievement and the Assurance of Quality in Virginia Higher Education." In this document, SCHEV recommended that "all state-supported institutions of higher education establish procedures and programs to measure student achievement" and that these procedures and programs "recognize the diversity of Virginia's public colleges and universities, the tradition of institutional autonomy, and the capacity of faculty and administrators to identify their own problems and solve them creatively." Further, the document called for institutions to furnish "concrete, non-anecdotal and quantifiable information on student achievement to the Council of Higher Education."

Building on this landmark work, in 1987, SCHEV worked with Virginia's public colleges and universities to develop guidelines for assessing general education. Leaving the specific procedures for the assessment to the individual institutions, the guidelines stipulated that each college or university may choose to employ either absolute assessment measures or those that demonstrate the value-added "contribution the institution has made to the student's development." The year also marked the first time that the General Assembly provided a line-item appropriation to institutions for assessment. Incorporated into their respective base operating budgets, the appropriation was typically used by institutions to cover the personnel costs associated with assessment.

Both SJR 125 and its ensuing guidelines framed the Commonwealth's approach to student assessment for the remainder of the twentieth century. Institutions evaluated the learning outcomes of students in the major and the general education core, reporting the results to the State Council.

In 1999, the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Higher Education affirmed this state-wide approach to student assessment and commended the colleges and universities for using the results of their assessment activities to improve student learning and inform academic program decision-making. The Commission further identified six areas of knowledge and skills that cross the bounds of academic

discipline, degree major, and institutional mission to comprise basic competencies that should be achieved by all students completing a degree program at a Commonwealth institution of higher education—namely, Information Technology Literacy, Written Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, Scientific Reasoning, Critical Thinking, and Oral Communication. Terming them “areas of core competency,” the group recommended that institutions conduct regular assessments of these areas, the results of which would be shared with the general public.

SCHEV subsequently adopted these six areas of core competency and established a timetable for institutional reporting, with two areas to be reported on biennially so that all six competencies would be cycled through within a four-year span. Four-year institutions and Richard Bland College submitted their initial reports in 2002 and their final reports in 2006. The Virginia Community College System began its cycle in 2003 and finished in 2007.

In 2005, as the Council anticipated completion of the first full round of reporting on the six areas of core competency by four-year institutions, it established the Assessment of Student Learning Task Force (ASLTF). The ASLTF's charge was to work directly with the Council's Academic Affairs Committee on reviewing the experiences of institutions with the core competencies and developing guidelines for improving the process through the next cycle. This collaborative effort led to the following conclusions:

1. An important strength of the Commonwealth's higher education system lies in the diversity of its institutions, which affords Virginians a wide range of distinctive learning experiences. This strength must be preserved and nurtured.
2. Each institution should continue to be responsible for implementing an assessment program that is congruent with its mission and goals; provides the kind of data needed for informed decision-making about curricula; and

offers both policymakers and the general public useful information on student learning.

3. Assessment should continue to *fit*, rather than *drive*, the institution. It should be reasonable in its requirements for time, resources, and personnel and should, ideally, be integrated with the institution's larger framework for continuous improvement and public accountability. It should also employ both valid and reliable measurements of student learning and educational experiences.
4. Assessment should continue to focus on the improvement of learning while providing meaningful demonstration of accountability. It should continue to employ the six core areas and explore options to address the Council's preferred "value-added" approach that speaks to demonstrable changes as a result of a student's collegiate experience.

In Fall 2006, as SCHEV began to develop guidelines for the new cycle of assessment to begin in Fall 2007, the Council of Presidents asked to take a deeper look at the complexities of incorporating value-added elements meaningfully into the institutional assessment of student learning and offered to collaborate with the Council's Academic Affairs Committee on a new set of assessment guidelines that could be implemented in Fall 2008.

As a result of this overture, the Council passed a formal resolution establishing the 2007 Task Force on Assessment and charging it with developing "process-oriented" guidelines for "incorporating value-added methods and interpretations into institutional assessment programs." More specifically, it delineated the task force's charge as follows:

The overarching goal of the Task Force is to steward a system wide approach to assessment that is focused on improvement while also demonstrating accountability; builds on successful value added aspects of

current assessment practices; is meaningfully related to institutional missions, practices, and educational aspirations; and will be sustainable into the future.

The Council also asked that the task force make recommendations on such implementation considerations as timetable, cost, external review, and publication of results.

GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

The centerpiece of the task force's work is *Guidelines for Assessment of Student Learning*, a document that is intended to serve as an institutional resource for implementing value-added assessment in Virginia's colleges and universities. As such, *Guidelines for Assessment of Student Learning*:

- Clarifies the relationship between “competency-based” assessment and “valued-added” assessment, suggesting that, while different, the two are not mutually exclusive.
- Frames an institution's assessment plan within the operating conception of value-added assessment as indicating “progress, or lack thereof, as a consequence of the student's institutional experience.”
- Affirms the six core subject areas established by the 1999 Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission as the general parameters for conducting value-added assessment—namely, Written Communication, Quantitative Reasoning, Scientific Reasoning, Critical Thinking, Oral Communication, and Information Technology Literacy—giving institutions the option of substituting an emergent institution-specific subject or of performing a purely competency-based assessment for the last area.

- Recognizes that, in the words of the Council's charge to the task force, "assessment should focus on outcomes, student progress, and academic program improvement rather than on single or common standards for all students and/or institutions."
- Affords institutions, again in the words of the Council's charge, "the flexibility to establish outcomes and concomitant methods of assessment that are appropriate to their student bodies and programmatic missions."
- Delineates the differing value-added assessment approaches, data collection methods, and strategies for measurement—all of which have their own sets of advantages and challenges, and each of which responds to a slightly different question.

In short, for the task force, the document stands as an enduring statement that Virginia higher education is committed to the assessment of undergraduate learning both with a methodological rigor and in the full light of public accountability. A copy of *Guidelines for Assessment of Student Learning* is appended to this report.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

With *Guidelines for Assessment of Student Learning* as the blueprint for implementing value-added assessment in Virginia's colleges and universities, the task force considered the key practicalities of implementation—specifically, timetable, cost, external review, and publication of results.

Timetable

As a general frame for implementing value-added assessment, the task force recommends that the Council adopt the following timetable:

PRE-ASSESSMENT	CORE AREAS	POST-ASSESSMENT (no later than)
AY 2007-08	Written Communication or Quantitative Reasoning	AY 2010-11
AY 2008-09	Written Communication or Quantitative Reasoning AND Scientific Reasoning	AY 2011-12
AY 2009-10	Critical Thinking AND Oral Communication	AY 2012-13
AY 2010-11	Information Technology Literacy or Institution-Specific Emerging Issue	AY 2013-14

The task force further recommends that, with approval of SCHEV staff, an institution be given the option of a different schedule should its analytical approach and methodology warrant it. It would fall to the institution to provide the appropriate justification for the exception.

The above timetable would put an institution's "pre-assessment" in the fall semester of each year, commencing in 2007-08 and concluding in 2010-11. With the exception of the Virginia Community College System, all of the institutions have already begun to incorporate a value-added component into their respective assessment plans via this schedule. The VCCS will follow the same schedule, only shifted forward by one year, with its pre-assessment commencing in Fall 2008.

External Review

For Fall 2007, Council staff employed a three-layer process for reviewing institutional assessment plans. More specifically, each of the colleges and universities received feedback on their respective plans from two in-state peer reviewers, SCHEV staff, and an out-of-state reviewer. The process appeared to work well, generating valuable feedback to assessment directors on the campuses while offering an objective evaluation of the institutional plans themselves. The task force recommends that Council continue to employ such a review process.

Publication of Results

Now more than ever, the responsibility falls to higher education for educating its multiple stakeholders about the enterprise itself. Policymakers, students and their families, donors and investors, the business community, the media, and the general public—each is demanding a kind of public accountability that crosses the bounds of institutional type and mission. What is the *value* of a college degree—for both the individual and society? Where is the *value-added* of the collegiate experience itself? And how does higher education collectively *measure up* in the global marketplace?

Add to this external cry for heightened public accountability the demands internally for a mountain of statistical data and reports that inform decision-making on everything from the adequacy of an institution's base operating budget or physical infrastructure, to the competitiveness of its faculty salaries, to its standing on any number of indicators for student success. When is too much data more harmful than helpful? What are the safeguards against the misuse and abuse of data? What information falls under the public's "right to know" and who decides and how is it accessed? Is there any information that is purely "need to know" and, if so, what is it? Who is the gatekeeper? Who is the public conscience? Are the data collected, in fact, the data needed?

To the point, more work needs to be done on both the use and public dissemination of information on the effectiveness of Virginia's system of higher education. The task force recommends that Council direct its staff to conduct a comprehensive audit of (1) the means employed for reporting and disseminating such information to higher education's multiple stakeholders, and (2) the means employed for using such information for policy development and strategic decision-making. It further recommends that staff make use of external reviewers when conducting the audit, drawing from both the institutions as well as recognized communication experts from outside the Commonwealth.

Cost

As with most initiatives of grand import, taking Virginia's assessment program to a higher level is not cost neutral. Value-added assessment will require an additional investment of state resources. Indeed, the task force grappled most with the reality of this implementation consideration.

For the past six years, colleges and universities have framed their assessment plans via the six core learning areas advanced by the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on the Future of Higher Education and ultimately adopted by the State Council. Collectively they have provided 102 reports to SCHEV on their individual assessment efforts, only eleven percent of which have employed a value-added approach. Equally important, no institution has employed a value-added assessment approach in all six of the core subject areas. Furthermore, by its very nature, value-added assessment in most instances will involve pre- and post-assessments per core subject area versus the single assessment employed by most institutions to date. The bottom line is that incorporating a value-added component into the assessment plans of all 39 of Virginia's colleges and universities is certain to incur incremental costs in the areas of both personnel and instrumentation.

On the personnel front, colleges and universities typically involve a cross-section of administrators, faculty, and staff who develop learning standards; design, plan, and

implement assessments based on them; analyze their results; and initiate changes within the institution based on those results. For example, The College of William and Mary has been successful in engaging faculty, staff, and administrators in its assessment process for several years—so much so that the process is now embedded in the fabric of the institution. A review of 2005-06 AY expenditures reveals that William and Mary spent an estimated \$887,500 on assessment-related activities, with the majority of the costs derived from personnel expenditures, i.e., faculty and staff time. While the addition of a value-added component would not necessarily cause a doubling of those costs, it would surely cause a significant increase in them. In fact, William and Mary has already begun to see such cost escalation as it incorporates a “value-added” component into its portfolio-based assessment in Fall 2007. Here, the university has focused its assessment on how the curricular experiences of over 1,000 students impact their competence in quantitative reasoning skills, adding a value-added component that samples another 750 students who are enrolled in twenty-three Math classes.

Instrumentation is the other main area of cost escalation. Externally developed instrument expenses are fairly easy to quantify, as costs are typically based on a per-instrument price. At the same time, such expenses are affected by the size of the institution, the cost of individual instruments, and the size of the sample selected by the institution. For example, Norfolk State University spent some \$6,300 to administer the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to 100 freshmen and another 100 seniors. The Virginia Community College System incurs an annual expense of some \$40,000 for an “off-the-shelf” instrument that pre-assesses two of the core subject areas across all twenty-three of its community colleges. Adding the post-assessment instrument would roughly double the cost for those two core areas.

Again, taking Virginia's assessment program to the next level is not cost neutral. Value-added assessment will require an additional investment of state resources. The task force recommends that Council make an appropriation request for the 2008-10 biennium to support the increased costs associated with implementing value-added

assessment. The justification for such a request should employ a model that takes into account sample sizes, instrument types, and likely personnel expenses associated with implementing the new assessment requirements.

The task force makes this recommendation in full realization that, for years, colleges and universities have made significant investments to build model, competency-based assessment programs that are fully embedded into their institutional mindset and culture. Any attempt to build on this, no matter how well-intentioned, must be done as truly a “value added” to what already is in place and at the highest level of quality. Moreover, the task force believes that, with a comparatively small investment to support value-added assessment, the Commonwealth will be promoting a quantum leap in the accountability and analytical rigor with which institutions demonstrate their actual contribution to students’ intellectual growth. Funds to support this effort may well turn out to be one of the best per-dollar investments in higher education quality and accountability that could be made.

A Note of Caution

That said, a cautionary note seems in order: Virginia’s colleges and universities simply cannot afford to take on another unfunded mandate.

The institutions have already absorbed the additional cost of the recent revisions to their external regional accreditation standards. And there has been no system-wide addition to institutional base budgets for assessment since the late 1980s. Add to this backdrop the recently released news on the state budget shortfalls and the resultant call for spending reduction plans of 5 to 7.5 percent from every college and university, the latter of which are certain to take their toll on the institutions in the foreseeable future.

The task force urges Council to exercise strategic caution when considering both the appropriation request to implement value-added assessment and, frankly, the implementation itself. Virginia’s colleges and universities can afford neither another

unfunded mandate nor an inadvertent competing with institutional priorities in the midst of budget reductions.

VOLUNTARY SYSTEM OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In response to the criticisms levied against higher education for a more transparent accountability in the report of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC) launched a Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) initiative. Following a national nomination process, 82 individuals were appointed to serve on several work groups that were charged with developing the substance of what is to be reported, how it is to be reported, and a visual template for reporting the information to the public.

At this time, the substantive development of the VSA reporting protocols has been completed. The AASCU and NASULGC boards will act on the recommendation of the Presidential Advisory Committee at their respective annual meetings in November of this year. The task force considers the VSA to hold some promise in addressing the national concern for information transparency, comparability, and availability but recognizes that the system is still in the early stages of development. It recommends that Council direct its staff to collaborate with SCHEV's Instructional Programs Advisory Committee (IPAC) on monitoring the initiative.