

Today's News

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State-University Association Adopts a Voluntary Template for Accountability Measures

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In one of the most sweeping responses to calls for accountability in higher education yet, a public-university association has adopted a template, called the College Portrait, that will give institutions the ability to share with outsiders similar data about such matters as students' academic progress.

Use of the portrait will be voluntary, but its approval on Sunday by the Board of Directors of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges marked the beginning of a formal effort by the association, known as Nasulgc, to encourage institutions to use it. The board's action came during the group's annual meeting here, and the portrait was later discussed in a public session.

As use of the system spreads, prospective students, parents, state legislators, and others will be able to more easily compare the undergraduate experience among institutions and examine institutional performance and costs, according to officials of the association, which developed the system in partnership with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

"This will give us greater credibility and confidence to those who fund us," said Charles B. Reed, a member of Nasulgc's board and chancellor of the California State University system, which has already agreed to use the template. The University of North Carolina system, the University of Wisconsin system, and some other state institutions have also agreed to start using the College Portrait.

Mr. Reed said state legislators in California had been thinking of imposing accountability measures on public colleges there, but the institutions had suggested using the College Portrait, and legislators agreed to the voluntary system. "We went to them instead of them doing it to us," he said.

A [Web site](#) describing the College Portrait provides an overview of the system and links to sample reports from several institutions that tested a pilot version of the template.

The five-page form includes some information, such as degree offerings, that are standard fare in any college guide. But Nasulgc officials say the template also includes some innovations, such as a college-cost calculator that will allow students to accurately understand how much their education will cost, and a way of measuring student success that will be more helpful than graduation rates and that will get around the usual problem of measuring academic achievement in the face of frequent transfers among institutions. The "Student Success and Progress Rate," as the measure is called, will use data from the National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit organization that verifies diplomas and student enrollments,

but that is broadening the data that it collects.

"We are particularly proud of the cost calculator and the progress-rate measure," said David Shulenburg, vice president for academic affairs at Nasulgc, in a written statement. He said students from disadvantaged backgrounds had often been scared off from going to college by misperceptions about the cost.

The College Portrait will also measure student experiences and students' views of the colleges they attend, using one of four student-engagement surveys.

In the last and most controversial section of the portrait, colleges will report on what students have actually learned in college. Critics of the accountability movement say that improvement in traits such as critical thinking or citizenship cannot be effectively measured.

Institutions will have some options in reporting on "learning outcomes" and can use either institution-specific data, such as students' success on professional licensing examinations, or results from national standardized tests. They will have up to four years before they make the results of measurements of learning outcomes public.

Many institutions are still adjusting to the idea of the College Portrait. "I'm not 100 percent comfortable," said Mary E. Sias, president of Kentucky State University, "but I am in the high-80s area."

Peter McPherson, president of Nasulgc, said the new system was still a work in progress, but he said he was proud of the association's quick response to politicians' calls for greater accountability. "Too often we say let's get it perfect before we put our toe in the water," he said.