The New VSA

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In a climate where state funding is declining and public trust is waning, higher education institutions have a growing need to use benchmarking data for institutional planning and accountability and to produce evidence that demonstrates the value of higher education to society and key stakeholders. In this age of big data and analytics, there is an abundant amount of higher education data that can be used to gauge national trends within the industry and amongst peers so that institutions can create and implement targeted strategic initiatives to improve student success and to meet institutional goals.

Nationally, there are numerous metrics that demonstrate institutional effectiveness and show progress on student success—for instance, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) retention and graduation rates, IPEDS outcome measures, and the Student Achievement Measure (SAM). While there is no shortage of reporting requirements, missing from this framework are benchmarking data and standardized metrics. While IPEDS provides some data for comparison purposes, these data have limitations and the tools available for institutions to use are not utilitarian.

Amidst the growing desire for standardized metrics and benchmarking tools, the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) created a new framework for strategic planning, assessment and accountability. The VSA offers an analytical tool for institutional benchmarking using national data sources, an opportunity for institutions to be recognized for their excellence in assessment through a rigorous review process, and a collaborative experience in building a valuable resource for institutions.

With an advisory board and a technical users group, the VSA is built by institutions for institutions. Input and feedback from institutions will help guide the development of future VSA products. The Excellence in Assessment (EIA) designation, for example, is an opportunity for institutions to use the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment's Transparency Framework to demonstrate excellent assessment practices. Applications are evaluated by a set of independent reviewers who then determine which institutions will be recommended for the EIA designation. To date, 20 institutions have received the EIA designation.

The heart of the VSA is the VSA Analytics—an analytics tool that provides subscribers with reports on key performance metrics. The basis of the VSA Analytics is an integrated dataset that combines four national sources—IPEDS, SAM, National Science Foundation (NSF), and the College Scorecard—into a single dataset, aggregated, cleaned and ready for analysis. The dataset contains more than 350 variables on over 4,200 Title IV-participating institutions. Based on feedback from subscribing institutions, the VSA now offers eight years' worth of data as well as Trend Reports. Through a versatile reporting platform (SAS-Visual Analytics), the VSA Analytics delivers a set of custom reports using a nationally recognized set of metrics on institutional performance and student success. The VSA Analytics offers a fresh, new, interactive approach to building informative and compelling visualizations that tell a story and to benchmarking institutional performance.

VSA subscribers can build reports with visual graphics and standardized templates with a set of standard and familiar variables in a matter of minutes. This is in stark contrast to the hours and days it would otherwise take to collect and sort such data. Reports can be customized to feature an individual institution in comparison to a broad set of institutions or to a subset of institutions that subscribers can define. Graphical charts can be downloaded as PDF files, and data from the charts can be downloaded in an Excel spreadsheet, making it easy to create instant handouts to share with stakeholders.
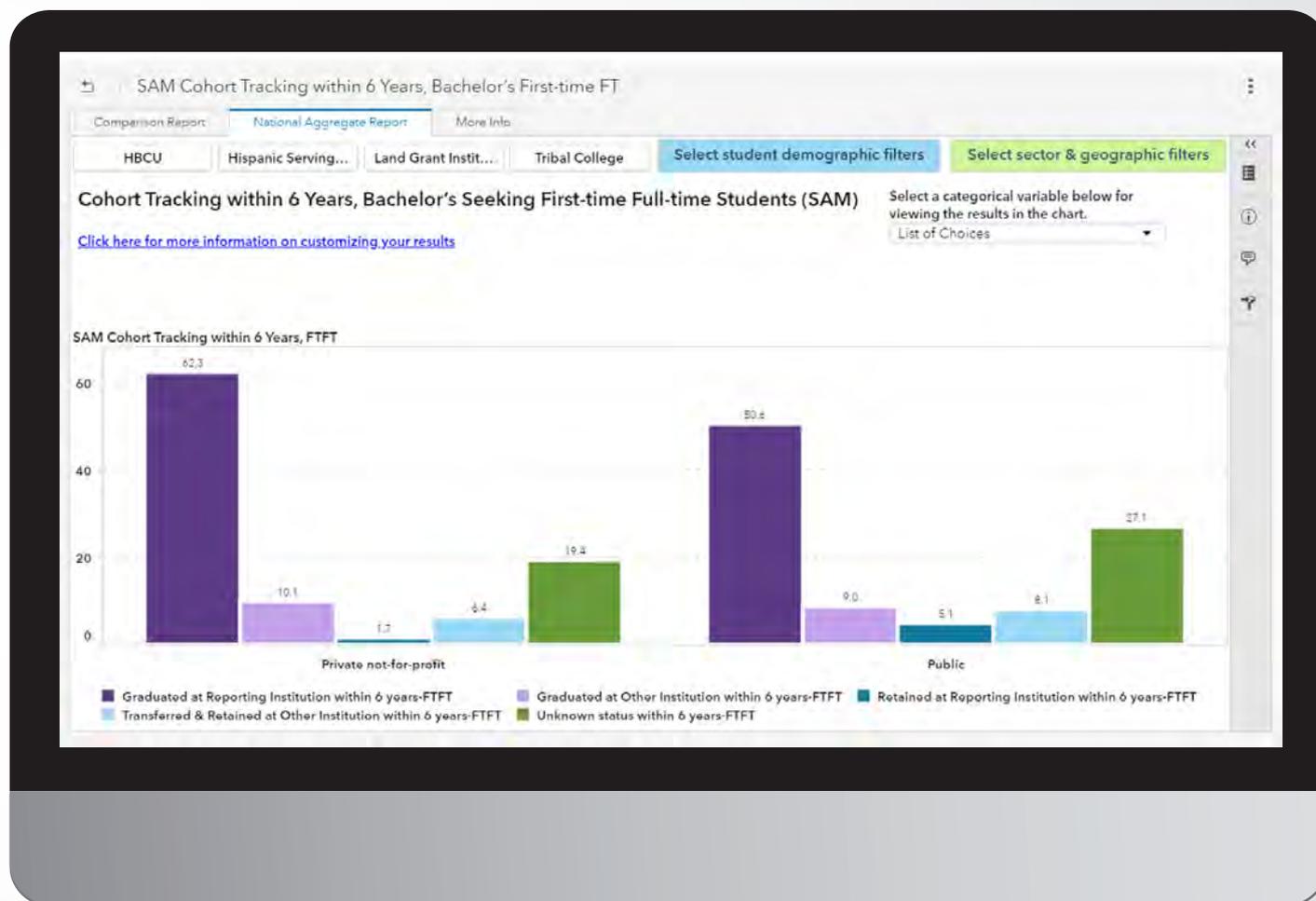
VSA subscribers can also do the following:

- Incorporate SAM data into their graduation rates,
- Examine key performance indicators (KPIs) for custom comparison groups,
- Examine national trends for a subset of institutions,
- Download reports to PDF and data to Excel, and
- Download the entire VSA integrated national dataset.

Created in a partnership between between AASCU and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the VSA is a tool for public institutions for strategic planning, accountability and transparency, particularly in the areas of access, cost, student progress and student outcomes.

Institutions can take a comprehensive look at their individual institution and make comparisons to other institutions like theirs for metrics on enrollment, research and development expenditures, graduation rates, and more. Pictured is an example of one of the reports on the SAM, showing the national average public six-year graduation rate at 50.6 percent. This report shows that, nationally, an additional 9 percent of students transferred and graduated elsewhere (for institutions that submitted data). Institutions are able to disaggregate this report down to individual institutions or isolate the SAM metrics for any group of institutions or sectors, allowing institutions to capture the complete picture of student success.

Supports Institutional Benchmarking & Planning

An example of a SAM report—institutions can disaggregate this report down to individual institutions or isolate SAM metrics.

The VSA has the potential to be a valuable tool for institutional benchmarking, taking reporting on national benchmarking metrics to a new level by putting data into the hands of subscriber institutions. A bonus is that the dataset can be downloaded and analyzed for more in-depth questions. This is the first time the entire integrated database has been shared in a downloadable format.

The VSA launched a new, easy-to-use website where institutions can sign up to be VSA subscribers and access the VSA Analytics. More information is available on the VSA website: *www.voluntarysystem.org*. **P**