

Using the ETS® Proficiency Profile Test to Meet VSA Requirements — Frequently Asked Questions

What is the ETS® Proficiency Profile?

The ETS Proficiency Profile from ETS is an outcomes assessment of four core general education skills — critical thinking, reading, writing and mathematics.

What is the VSA?

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) is a voluntary initiative for four-year public colleges and universities. A collaborative effort of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), the VSA is designed to improve public understanding of how public colleges and universities operate. The VSA is aimed at providing consistent, transparent and comparable information on the characteristics of institutions and their students.

How will the VSA disseminate information about participating institutions?

The VSA has designed a common reporting template called the College Portrait. Because VSA data is intended to be used by students, families, and the general public as well as campus faculty and staff, the College Portrait supplies basic comparable information through a common web report. Information includes student and campus characteristics, cost of attendance, success and progress rates, campus safety, class size, student experiences on campus, and student learning outcomes. Participating institutions will publish their College Portrait to their institution's website. Institutions may use the VSA logo on their website to indicate that their institution participates in the initiative and to point to their College Portrait.

What role does the ETS Proficiency Profile play in the VSA?

A critical aspect of the data reported on the VSA College Portrait is Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). After a thorough review process, APLU/AASCU approved the ETS Proficiency Profile for use by participating VSA institutions to collect standardized assessment data about SLOs. The ETS Proficiency Profile was approved not only because it measures two of the core learning goals of interest to the VSA — critical thinking and written communication — but for its rigorous test design, validity and reliability.

What is the recommended study design for the ETS Proficiency Profile when administered for the VSA?

The VSA recommends a cross-sectional study design in which different cohorts of freshmen and seniors would be compared. Results from a cross-sectional study can be obtained much more quickly than in a longitudinal study (which would entail administering the ETS Proficiency Profile to a cohort of entering freshmen as a pretest and then again as a posttest to the same cohort as graduating seniors). While a longitudinal study would provide more accurate estimates of group performance, a cross-sectional study design is the faster and more cost-effective administration model.

How many freshmen/seniors should be tested?

In the cross-sectional design, an institution would administer the ETS Proficiency Profile to a minimum of 400 students — 200 freshmen and 200 seniors. This is the minimum for providing adequately representative data for the VSA College Portrait. If possible, the sample of seniors should be comprised solely of persisters — students who began and completed their course of studies at your institution. The VSA recommends that separate studies be conducted for transfer students.

Is a sample of 400 students really adequate for representing an institution of several thousand students?

Yes. The learning gains an institution reports on the VSA College Portrait are calculated using a regression algorithm based on a pool of other institutions using the ETS Proficiency Profile. Because learning gains are reported at the group level — not at the individual student level — and because the VSA learning gains model uses SAT®/ACT scores as a control variable, this model requires modest sample sizes to fairly and accurately represent an institution's overall performance.

If 400 is the minimum sample size, what is the optimum sample size?

A sample of 200 freshmen and 200 seniors in a regression model is adequate for producing the learning gains report for the VSA College Portrait, but other inferences about the entire population should be based on more scientifically precise sampling. If an institution wishes to evaluate its curriculum or analyze the performance of subgroups using the ETS Proficiency Profile, the sample should be large enough to minimize sampling error to the extent possible and representative of the demographics of the institution. As a general rule of thumb, the ETS Proficiency Profile requires a minimum of 50 students per subgroup of students (when using the 40-minute abbreviated form of the test) in order to produce a statistically reliable report. Upon request, ETS psychometricians can work with each institution to determine an appropriate sampling plan based on how they will use their test results.

ETS also offers a two-hour standard form of the ETS Proficiency Profile. The minimum samples for this version for participation in the VSA are the same as those recommended for the abbreviated form. However, the additional administration time required of the standard form of the ETS Proficiency Profile increases statistical reliability of skill subscores and proficiency classification — scores that are only available at the group level when administering the abbreviated form. This standard form data can be used both for additional institution-level analyses and counseling of individual students.

What type of standardized assessment data is reported on the VSA College Portrait?

The *College Portrait* requires that two different types of data be reported. The mean scores in the skill areas of Critical Thinking and Writing should be reported for both the freshmen and senior cohorts. For example:

	Freshmen	Seniors
Critical Thinking	112.5	116.50
Written Communication	115.0	118.5

Because the three VSA-approved measures of SLOs are different tests — each reported on a different score scale — learning gains in the areas of Critical Thinking and Writing must also be reported in a manner that students and parents can more easily compare. The scale prescribed by the VSA to facilitate comparisons across institutions is, therefore, not numeric but *descriptive*. Because both freshmen and seniors are tested at participating institutions, the performance of seniors and freshmen can be compared, so the seniors at these institutions can be described in the following manner:

- “Well Above Expectation”
- “Above Expectation”
- “At Expectation”
- “Below Expectation”
- “Well Below Expectation”

How are learning gains calculated using the ETS Proficiency Profile data?

Regression algorithms were created using the ETS Proficiency Profile and SAT/ACT score data for students from a representative sample of institutions across higher education. The ETS Proficiency Profile scores of freshmen or seniors can be predicted based on these regression algorithms. Then the difference between the predicted and actual ETS Proficiency Profile scores for both the freshmen and senior cohorts are calculated. Finally, the standard difference for freshmen is subtracted from the standard difference for seniors in order to determine learning gains. This “difference of the differences” is used to determine an institution’s decile ranking compared to the other institutions in the regression algorithm. The characterization of an institution’s learning gains — such as “above expectation,” “well above expectation” or “below expectation” — to be reported on the *VSA College Portrait* is based on how many standard deviations the actual ETS Proficiency Profile scores are above or below the expected ETS Proficiency Profile scores based on the regression algorithms.

When creating your institution’s *ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report*, ETS can accept SAT scores, ACT scores, or a combination of both. Therefore, when choosing the students who will take the ETS Proficiency Profile, you do not need to select students who have only taken one or the other admissions test. The regression algorithms used to create the ETS

Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report treat SAT and ACT scores alike. Scores from either admissions test are equally useful in determining “value added.” Neither score poses an advantage or disadvantage over the other in assessing learning gains.

If ETS collects SAT/ACT data to determine learning gains, why not simply use these scores as the “pretest” in this study design? Why must the ETS Proficiency Profile be administered twice?

High correlations between admissions test scores and scores on standardized outcomes assessments do not necessarily mean that they are measuring the same thing in the same manner. For this reason, the VSA feels that learning gains cannot be measured accurately using two different instruments.

When should the test be administered?

To meet the spirit of the VSA requirements as closely as possible, entering freshmen should be tested as soon as possible after they begin their program, and seniors should be tested as close to graduation as possible. Because of considerations such as scheduling, proctor availability, or availability of computer lab seating (if administering online versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile), these should not be considered strict guidelines. Rather, the objective is to create a study design which would as meaningfully and accurately as possible demonstrate the effect of your curriculum — learning gains — on students.

When should an institution begin administering the ETS Proficiency Profile for the VSA?

Participating VSA institutions have up to four years after signing on to the VSA to report SLOs from one of the VSA-approved standardized outcomes assessments. An institution does not have to begin administering the test right away, but should also be mindful of the lead time required to plan the logistics of test administration such as purchasing/delivery of tests, recruitment of test proctors, and selection/sampling of students.

How frequently should an institution administer the ETS Proficiency Profile?

To meet the minimum requirements of the VSA, an institution must reevaluate learning gains based on SLOs at least once every three years and update their *College Portrait*. An institution may choose to administer the ETS Proficiency Profile more frequently if they are using the data for other purposes such as curriculum improvement, reporting to accrediting agencies or state/local government, benchmarking or performance funding.

How do we create ETS Proficiency Profile cohorts for VSA reporting?

Because the learning gains reports will be calculated for each institution manually by ETS psychometricians, you can design your cohorts in any manner that makes sense given other non- VSA analyses your institution will conduct using ETS Proficiency Profile data. If using the paper-and-pencil versions of the test, you can mail the answer sheets from your senior administration after the answer sheets from your freshmen administration, *or* you can hold your freshmen answer sheets and mail the answer sheets for freshmen and seniors to ETS at the same time. If using online versions of the test, you can create separate cohorts for freshmen and seniors *or* one cohort with both freshmen and seniors. You may test the students online all at one time *or* on demand as students are available. The ETS Proficiency Profile offers your institution a great deal of flexibility in terms of when, where and how to test. You will indicate which cohorts/batches of students to include in your *VSA Learning Gains Report* at the time you request the report.

Should extraordinary effort be taken not to test transfer students as part of the senior cohort?

The VSA *strongly* suggests that transfer students not be tested when attempting to determine learning gains in general education, since students with a considerable number of transfer credits have likely acquired or reinforced these skills at another institution. However, not only can the process you choose for selecting which students will take the ETS Proficiency Profile preclude you from easily excluding transfer students (such as sampling whole classes/courses), institutions with smaller populations may find it difficult to meet the minimum of 200 seniors to test unless they include some proportion of transfer students. Because of this, the VSA has temporarily relaxed this restriction on which seniors should be tested.

What does an institution do if it cannot meet the minimum samples of 200 freshmen/seniors for any reason?

The minimum number of students to be tested is based in part on VSA guidelines and in part on the ETS Standards for Fairness and Equity. A minimum number of students must be included in the dataset in order for the results to be considered both reliable and representative of the larger population of an institution. The ETS Proficiency Profile offers the flexibility of testing smaller cohorts of students and combining them over time. For example, an institution might administer the ETS Proficiency Profile to 100 seniors graduating this year and another 100 seniors graduating next year. These two senior cohorts can be combined by ETS to meet the minimum of 200 seniors required to produce the *ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report*. Even smaller cohorts can be combined to meet these minimums. This is true for both freshmen and seniors, and applies to both the paper-pencil and online versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile.

The minimum samples must also be comprised of *valid* ETS Proficiency Profile results. A student record is not considered valid unless the student had completed 75 percent or more of the ETS Proficiency Profile. Students who did not complete 75 percent or more of the test are indicated on ETS Proficiency Profile rosters with an asterisk (*). Students who have not completed at least this much of the assessment cannot contribute meaningfully to the *ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report*.

Note: The *ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report* cannot be created unless 200 freshmen and 200 seniors have taken the ETS Proficiency Profile **and** your institution has provided SAT/ACT scores for **all 200 freshmen and 200 seniors**. If you have included students in your sample who are transfer students or for which for any other reason you do not have an SAT/ACT score on file, this student must be excluded from the learning gains calculations. When selecting students to be included in your VSA sample, you need not exclude transfer students, but you must ensure that all students tested — *including* transfer students — have SAT/ACT scores as part of their academic record.

Should an institution use the paper-and-pencil or online version of the ETS Proficiency Profile for the VSA?

Either or both. Because the scores on any version of the ETS Proficiency Profile are made fully comparable to scores on all other versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile through a statistical equating process, scores from the paper-and-pencil and online versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile can be compared or combined. The ETS Proficiency Profile offers your institution the flexibility of choosing the administration method that works best for your administration, faculty and students.

Should an institution use the proctored or unproctored version of the ETS Proficiency Profile for the VSA?

Either or both. Because the scores on any version of the ETS Proficiency Profile are made fully comparable to scores on all other versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile through a statistical equating process, scores from the proctored and unproctored versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile can be compared or combined. It offers your institution the flexibility of choosing the administration method that works best for your administration, faculty and students. The unproctored version makes the ETS Proficiency Profile the most convenient and appropriate option for reaching your distance learning students.

When can an institution administer the ETS Proficiency Profile for the VSA?

Institutions can administer the ETS Proficiency Profile anytime, anywhere they choose. There are no pre-scheduled testing windows. Online versions of the test are scored as soon as the students complete their test. Paper-and-pencil versions are scored once a week, 52 weeks a year.

When can an institution request the ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report?

The institution should first ensure that they have administered the ETS Proficiency Profile to *at least* 200 freshmen and 200 seniors. If the freshmen and senior cohorts do not include the minimum number of students, the institution will need to hold additional test administrations.

How does an institution request the ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report?

The institution should complete the [ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report Request Form](#) at the [ETS Proficiency Profile website](#) (on the VSA page). The form will ask for basic information about your institution in order to deliver the completed report to you. More importantly, the form requires you to indicate which cohorts of ETS Proficiency Profile takers should be used by ETS to calculate learning gains for your institution. Cohorts should be identified by name and administration date which can be obtained from the ETS Proficiency Profile online score reporting system, ETS Program Workshop. (Scores for both paper-and-pencil and online versions of the ETS Proficiency Profile are reported and stored in ETS Program Workshop.)

How much does the ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report cost?

There is no charge for this report.

How does an institution provide the SAT/ACT scores of its ETS Proficiency Profile takers to ETS?

Upon receipt of your ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report Request Form, ETS will create a spreadsheet of the ETS Proficiency Profile test takers included in the cohorts you requested and send it to your institutional administrator via email. Your institution should then insert the SAT/ACT scores for these students to the spreadsheet and return it to ETS via email.

How long after submitting the ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report Request Form and the SAT/ACT scores should an institution expect to receive the report?

ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Reports are created manually by ETS psychometricians. This process may take up to four weeks. In order for your institution to be included in the report processing cycle for any given month, the deadline for receipt of the ETS Proficiency Profile Learning Gains Report Request Form **and** the completed spreadsheet of SAT/ACT scores is the 25th of the *previous* month. ETS must receive both of these documents in order to create your report. Requests received after the 25th of the month will not be processed until the processing cycle beginning the 25th of the following month. Reports will be delivered to each institution electronically in PDF format via secure email attachment.

Once report processing has begun, ETS may find that the data needed to complete the report for your institution is somehow incomplete. This may be because your institution has not met the minimum of 200 freshmen and 200 seniors needed to create a statistically reliable report, or it may be because you have not provided SAT/ACT scores for all students in your cohort. The report cannot be created unless 200 freshmen and 200 seniors have taken the ETS Proficiency Profile **and** your institution has provided SAT/ACT scores for **all 200 freshmen and 200 seniors**. If you have included students in your sample who are transfer students or for which for any other reason you do not have an SAT/ACT score on file, this student must be excluded from the learning gains calculations. When selecting students to be included in your VSA sample, you need not exclude transfer students, but you must ensure that all students tested — *including* transfer students — have SAT/ACT scores as part of their academic record.