MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

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An Open Source Framework
for Reporting Student Outcomes,
Using AICPA Criteria

April 2016

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Background

For a long time now, higher education has been heading towards a crossroads. The degree faces unprecedented skepticism as policymakers question the value of public-sector investments. Students and their parents question whether the costs and debt load are worth it. Employers wonder whether they can count on higher education to produce the workforce they need.

But the measure of our system of higher education has to be about more than just job placement. Higher education is a vehicle for social and economic mobility and an engine for economic growth. And that makes the measurement of outcomes complex. Should an institution like Yale be held accountable for the same job placement rates as a technical college? How should we balance the educational outcomes of MIT or Berkeley with their contributions to our national scientific and defense infrastructure? And importantly, how do we ensure accountability without unnecessarily hampering innovation and new offerings?

The work we do at General Assembly represents just a tiny piece of the puzzle. We were founded on the principle that first and foremost, education is an investment business. Students invest their time, money, and passions with us, and we have a duty to earn them a return on that investment, both in the short and long run. That makes measuring our outcomes much more simple: how many students who enroll in our programs complete them, and how many of those graduates achieve the desired outcome.

Measuring What Matters

Over the past year and a half, we've embarked on a project to research gold standard models and methods of reporting and measuring the success of our students. This involved a significant amount of time spent focused internally on data quality and integrity and, believe it or not, work with two of the Big-Four accounting firms. What's come out of it is a methodology for tracking the outcomes of our immersive students, and a framework for reporting those outcomes in the same way that public companies report non-financial metrics important to their success such as social impact and environmental sustainability.

"Measuring What Matters" is about sharing the first components of that framework with the world. Our goal is to start a conversation about outcomes predicated on the use of consistent definitions and the application of a rigorous framework and methodology. Over time, we hope to develop new measures of return on education that consider income or other criteria that can be used by students and other stakeholders to understand student success in even more specific and granular ways. This framework will also set the foundation for longitudinal reporting on our students' outcomes, which, for a new industry like ours, is incredibly important. We designed this to be an open source framework, and we hope that others will consider it to be a thoughtful starting point and share ideas on how it can be improved.

AICPA Criteria

Our framework was created by applying the American Institute of Certified Professional Accountants (AICPA) criteria definition found in AT Section 101 to the education context. Founded in 1887, the AICPA develops standards for audits of companies and monitors and enforces compliance with the profession's technical and ethical standards, among other things.

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

AT Section 101 was developed by the AICPA and sets the standards for CPAs to follow when engaged to attest to non-financial information. To comply with these standards, we followed a two-part process that began with the development of suitable and available criteria (described in the chart below) by one Big Four accounting firm, and will culminate with independent assurance through a different Big Four accounting firm.

This framework, with indicators and criteria specific to full-time accelerated learning programs, aims to ensure that prospective students and other stakeholders clearly understand the outcomes for every single student who participates in a full-time program at General Assembly. By including a greater number of criteria and categories of student outcomes, our goal was to provide a comprehensive view of both the reasons that students enroll in a program like ours, and the specific outcomes they achieve. We hope that our definitions will help students make informed choices and enable other stakeholders to consider the role that programs like ours can play within the higher education landscape.

Suitable	Available
Objective: Criteria should be free from bias	The criteria should be available to users in one or more of the following ways: • Available publicly • Available to all users through inclusion in a clear manner in the presentation of the subject matter or in the assertion • Available to all the users through inclusion in a clear manner in the practitioner's report • Well understood by most users, although not formally available (for example, "The distance between points A and B is twenty feet;" the cirterion of distance measured in feet is considered to be well understood) • Available only to specified parties; for example, terms of a contract of criterion issued by an industry association that are available only to those in the industry
Measurable: Criteria should permit reasonably consistent measurements, qualitative or quantitative, of subject matter	
Complete: Criteria should be sufficiently complete so that those relevant factors that would alter a conclusion about subject matter are not omitted	
Relevant: Criteria should be relevant to the subject matter	

How It Works

The chart on the following page is designed to illustrate how schools like General Assembly can make assertions about their graduation and placement rates using a set of defined criteria and formulas. The definitions for each criterion are also included as an Appendix to this document, and can be applied across a range of educational programs designed to prepare learners for successful and immediate workforce outcomes.
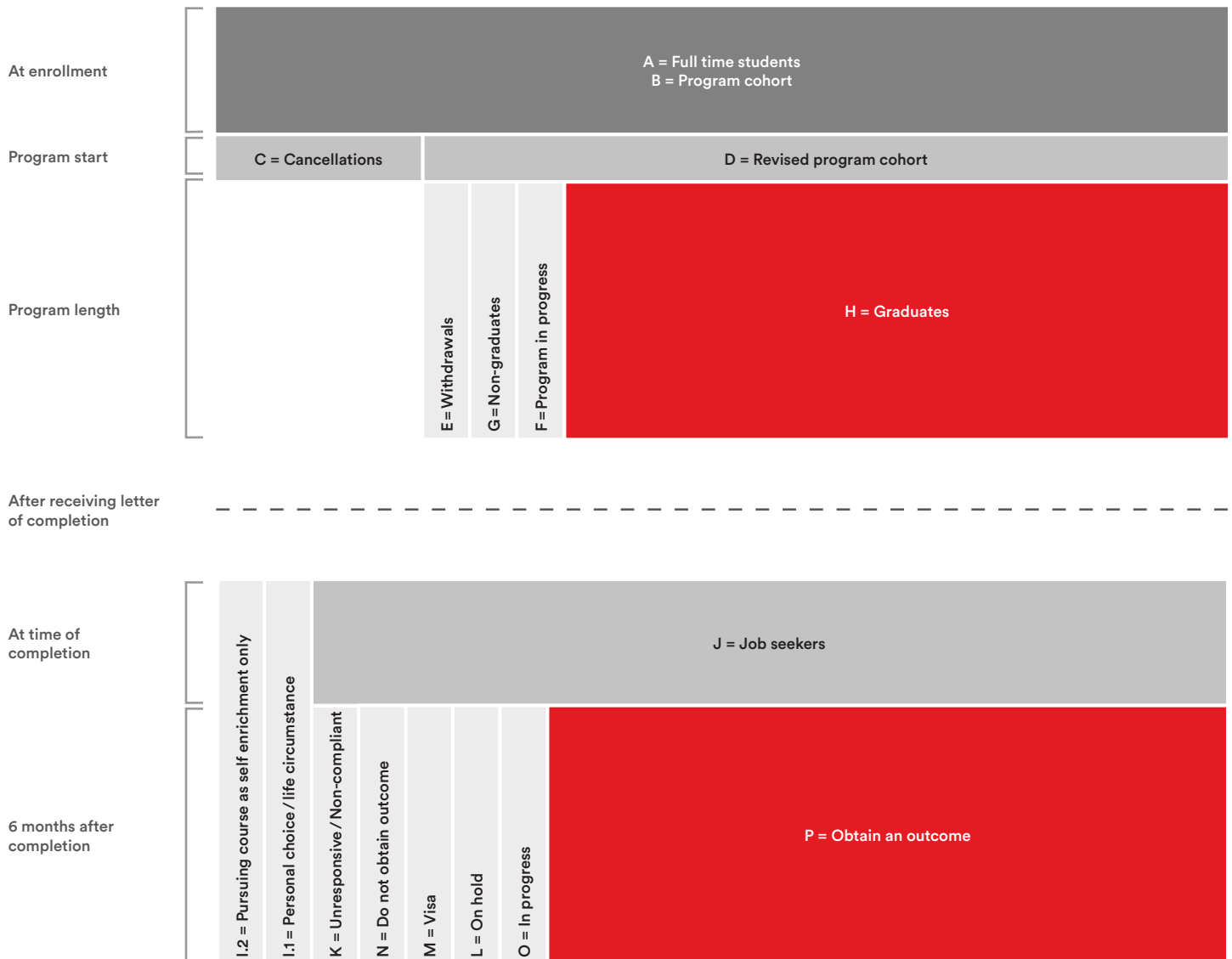
To develop new assertions, schools can follow a four-step process, which aligns with AICPA guidelines:

• Define the criteria used for each indicator used in the calculation of the assertion

• Document the data gathering, consolidation and reporting processes

• Obtain an understanding of the completeness and accuracy of the available data

• Obtain an understanding of the reliability of the information gathered (reviews, analytical procedures)

Overview of full time students per type of program

At enrollment	A = Full time students B = Program cohort
Program start	C = Cancellations / D = Revised program cohort
Program length	E = Withdrawals / G = Non-graduates / F = Program in progress / H = Graduates
After receiving letter of completion	- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
At time of completion	I.2 = Pursuing course as self enrichment only / I.1 = Personal choice / life circumstance / J = Job seekers
6 months after completion	K = Unresponsive / Non-compliant / N = Do not obtain outcome / M = Visa / L = On hold / O = In progress / P = Obtain an outcome

Representation is not to scale

To calculate graduation and placements rates, schools can use the following formulas:

Graduation Rate = Graduates (H) **divided by** Revised program cohort (D)

Graduates = Revised program cohort (D) **minus** Withdrawals (E) **minus** Non-graduates (G)

Placement rate = Outcome obtained within 6 months (P) **divided by** Job seekers (J)

Job seekers = Graduates (H) **minus** Does not meet job seeker requirements (K) **minus** Visas (M) **minus** Pursued course as self enrichment only (I.1) **minus** Personal choice / life circumstance (I.2)

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Appendix

Item	Indicator	Definition
A	Full-time students	All students who are enrolled and signed an enrollment agreement for a full-time program.
B	Program cohort	The global population of students enrolling in a particular full-time program.
C	Cancellations	Students who enroll but do not start the program and may be removed from the program cohort.
D	Revised program cohort	Students who are enrolled in a full-time program and start the program.
E	Withdrawal	Students who start a program but do not complete the program (for voluntary and involuntary reasons).
F	Program in progress	Students who are enrolled in a full-time program, but have not yet completed all the requirements to receive a letter of completion for the program.
G	Non-graduates	Students who finish the program but fail to meet the requirements to receive a letter of completion.
H	Graduates	Students who complete the program and receive a letter of completion from the school.
J	Job seekers	Graduates who notify the school, in writing, upon receiving the letter of completion that they want to opt-in to the job search process and are seeking paid employment as a practitioner in their field of study. A graduate should meet the following requirements within 4 weeks of graduation to qualify for job seeker status: • A resume meeting professional standard requirements • Digital presence (e.g. LinkedIn) • A documented way for the school to track the graduate's job search • Attendance & participation in job placement programming • Completion of a professional & working portfolio

K	Does not meet job seeker requirements	Job seekers who become unresponsive or who do not maintain job seeking status requirements during the 6-month period after receiving the letter of completion should be removed from the job seeker category. Graduates should be classified as unresponsive if they do not answer after at least four attempts from a program representative.
L	On hold	Job seekers who, within 6 months after receiving the letter of completion, notify the school, in writing, that they: • Have opted to put the search on hold while freelancing part-time • Have opted to put the search on hold to focus on learning a new skill • Intend to job search but need visa in order to be eligible to work in the country • Intend to job search but are relocating to a new region where the school is present This is not an exclusive list and each case will be evaluated (and documented) individually. Students that opt to put their job search on hold for more than 1 month should be reclassified as not meeting job seeker requirements.
M	Visa	Job seekers who notify the school, in writing, that they did not obtain a visa in the current location, restricting their ability to work in desired location.
N	No outcome within 6 months	Job seekers who do not obtain an outcome within 6 months after graduating.
O	In progress	Job seekers who have not yet obtained an outcome but have been seeking for less than 6 months.
P	Obtain an outcome within 6 months of graduating	Job seekers who notify the school, in writing, within 6 months after receiving a letter of completion, that they: • Have accepted an offer that meets the following requirements: Paid job, Full-time employment and in the field of study • Have received three offers that meet the above criteria and turned down all offers • Are using their new skills to launch a new company or expand a company of their own • Have returned to their former company and are utilizing new skills learned through program participation in their role

I.1	Pursued course as self-enrichment only	Graduates who notify the school, in writing, that they are not seeking to start and/or continue the job search process due to one of the following reasons: • Returning to the same job at previous company with no changes to the role • Took the course for personal interest only • Pursuing further education • Seeking at maximum part-time employment or unpaid employment opportunities only • Seeking an outcome in a field unrelated to the course completed. This list of reasons is non-exclusive.
I.2	Personal choice / life circumstance	Graduates who: • Notify, in writing, that they are not seeking to start and/or continue the job search process due to family, health or other personal focus • Do not complete the opt-in process
	Maintain job seeking status	To maintain job seeker status and the benefit of placement programs, job seekers must for six months (or until an outcome is achieved): • Apply to minimum of 10 appropriate roles per week • Attend two monthly networking events or informational interviews • Provide weekly, written updates on their job search to the school • Respond to career coach or other school outreach within 48 business hours • Be present in preferred market of search
	Items not counting as an outcome	• Graduate doing unpaid work • Graduate doing part-time work • Graduate becoming unresponsive • Graduate taking job in unrelated field • Graduate returning to education path (college, additional boot camp programming, etc.)
	Full-time employment	Full-time paid position, full-time contract work for 1+ month(s), freelancing for equivalent of full-time • Full-time definition is >32 hours / week • Internships/apprenticeships are considered outcomes as long as they are paid & fall into full-time hours per week
	Field of study	A recognized occupation for which students are trained or a related, comparable, recognized occupation.