An Introduction to Assessment

Higher education assessment is clearly the buzz phrase in 2015. However, the idea of assessment and program evaluation can be overwhelming and daunting. Remember that we use assessment in order to make data driven decisions. Our goal is to use assessment and evaluation to inform our actions and improve our programming to enhance the student experience.

This quick reference guide provides an overview of assessment best practices to guide you through the assessment process.

1 Process

- **Goal Directed** → To determine what type of assessment to use, determine what your goals are. What do you hope to learn? What problems are you trying to solve?

- **Minimally Invasive** → Try to balance the needs of the assessment with the needs of the participants. If possible, keep questions to a minimum and do not ask participants about information that is readily available. For example, consider using the demographic panels option in Baseline to gather preexisting demographic information as necessary.

- **Evaluate the Assessment Process** → After completing an assessment, reflect on its efficacy. Could it have been streamlined? Did the assessment provide you with the information you need?

The Assessment Cycle
2 Methods

There are many different ways to gather information to inform your assessment process. When developing your assessment method, you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Consider using surveys or protocols that already exist.

- **Program Reviews** → After a program or event, students provide written feedback (either on paper or a web-based survey) regarding their perceptions of the event.
- **Surveys** → In addition to program reviews, surveys can be used to evaluate the needs and perceptions of different groups of students. Surveys can be distributed quickly and widely, but may yield low response rates and surface-level information.
- **Focus Groups** → Students can describe their experiences and perceptions in an intimate setting. Deeper, more encompassing information can be gathered. When conducting a focus group, the expertise of the facilitator is crucial, and a protocol should be followed.
- **Interviews** → Similar to a focus group, interviews can yield insightful information about an event or process. However, they may be time-consuming and expensive.
- **Pre/Post Tests** → Pre/post tests are a great way to evaluate mastery of learning objectives/goals. By asking the same questions regarding content before and after an event or training session, you can determine if students mastered goals as a result of your event.
- **Formative Assessments** → For quick information to help you improve a program as it goes, you can use a variety of formative assessments. These would include an exit ticket, polling of the audience, clickers, one-minute papers, reflective exercises, etc. For more information about formative assessments, please don’t hesitate to ask.

When developing your methods, pilot test if possible. Test out your survey on a few people. See how it goes. Try to keep assessments as short as possible. **If you plan to publish or present** the results of your assessment at any conference or in any academic journal, **you will need IRB approval**. Please reach out to the Office of Strategic Initiatives and Assessment for assistance in this process.
3 Results

The most important part of the assessment process is reviewing the data to determine what to do as a result of this new information.

- **Answer Goals and Questions** → Return to your questions and goals for the assessment. Can you now answer them? Were participants satisfied? Did they master learning objectives? Were certain areas viewed negatively? Were certain areas viewed favorably? Did participants provide recommendations for how the process/program could be improved?

- **Identify Themes and Trends** → Based on the information you have, do you see the same idea/concept repeating? Do certain groups respond a certain way?

- **Create a Report/Memo** → Write up the results of your assessment. This does not need to be long and complicated. However, after spending the time and energy in the assessment creation process, take the time to write up what you’ve learned and what you plan to do as a result of the assessment. Submit a copy of this memo/report to the Office of Strategic Initiatives and Assessment.

Contact Laura Walaszek Dermody, PhD at laura.a.walaszek@vanderbilt.edu for help in the assessment process.

DEAN OF STUDENTS

*Strategic Initiatives and Assessment*