IOWA

Division of Student Life

GUIDE ON CHOOSING THE RIGHT ASSESSMENT METHOD

This introductory guide helps you determine which assessment method best fits your learning or program goals. Selecting the right strategy allows you to collect meaningful and actionable data while keeping assessment practical, intentional, and integrated into your daily work.

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Step 1: Start by Defining Your Outcomes

Begin by defining what you want to know or measure as a result of your assessment. Identify specific learning or program outcomes using clear, concise, and active verbs.

Ask yourself:

What knowledge, skill, behavior, or change do I expect to see?
What evidence will demonstrate that the outcome was met?
Who will use this information, and how?

Step 2: Match the Method to the Purpose

Choose the assessment method that best provides meaningful and actionable evidence for your assessment outcomes.

If you want to…	Consider using…	When it's most useful
Assess thinking and performance skills	Assignments or prompts evaluated with rubrics	For presentations, role plays, or applied projects
Assess knowledge or conceptual understanding	Quizzes, tests, or problem-solving activities	For factual recall or analysis-based learning
Assess attitudes, values, or dispositions	Surveys, focus groups, reflective writing, interviews	To explore perceptions or behavioral intentions
Draw an overall picture of learning	Portfolios or cumulative projects	To capture long-term growth
Compare results to external benchmarks	Published surveys or standardized tests	For institutional or national comparisons

Step 3: Understand Each Tool's Strengths

Each method has unique advantages depending on what you need to measure:

Method	Strengths	Student Affairs Example
Rubrics	• Make criteria clear for staff and students • Promote consistent evaluation • Support self-assessment and reflection • Help track improvement over time	• Leadership or peer educator evaluations • Student employee performance reviews
Surveys	• Reach large groups efficiently • Allow anonymous responses Provide easy-to-analyze data (especially online) • Enable national or institutional comparisons	• Post event, workshop, or educational session feedback • Program or service satisfaction
Focus Groups	• Provide detailed, qualitative insights • Allow for immediate clarification • Encourage reflection and dialogue, which itself promotes learning	• Gather perspectives on new programs or services • Explore barriers to student engagement

Observations or Checklists	• Capture real-time behaviors • Useful for skill-based or service-based settings	• Observing orientation leaders or peer mentors • Observing dining hall staff service
Portfolios or Projects	• Show cumulative learning across time • Demonstrate application and synthesis	• Student leadership portfolios • Volunteer projects
Interviews	• Elicit detailed individual perspectives • Allow deeper exploration of complex topics	• Student stories for program or service improvement • Internship experiences
Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs)	• Quick, low stakes tools to check understanding in real time • Encourages reflection and adjustment based on feedback	• Digital polls during workshops (For example, Menti meter) • "Muddiest point" reflections after an educational session • One-sentence takeaways on index cards after educational sessions or workshops

Step 4: Reflect on Formative vs. Summative Assessment

Rather than combining both formative and summative assessment, reflect on which approach best fits your purpose. The choice between formative and summative influences you're timing and method of assessment.

Formative Assessment

- Ongoing and low stakes, used to monitor learning in the moment, and adjust programs/services immediately
- Ideal when the goal is improvement or feedback during a program
- Examples:
    o Quick polls in presentations
    o One-minute reflections after workshops
    o Debrief discussions with student employees

Summative Assessment

- Conducted at the end of a program, course, or event to measure overall success
- Ideal when the goal is evaluation or accountability
- Examples:
    o Post-program surveys
    o Performance rubrics
    o Summary reports

Step 5: Reflect on Direct vs. Indirect Assessment

When selecting an assessment method when you are measuring learning, consider whether the evidence of learning should be direct and/or indirect. Each type serves a different purpose and can influence which tool or strategy is most appropriate. Many effective assessment strategies use both.

Direct Assessment: Provides observable, tangible evidence of learning or performance
Ideal when you want to measure specific skills or behaviors demonstrated by students

Examples:
Rubrics
Observations
Projects
Presentations
Portfolios

Indirect Assessment: Captures perceptions, opinions, or self-reported learning
Ideal when you want to understand attitudes, satisfaction, or the learning experience

Examples:
Surveys
Focus groups
Reflection prompts
Interviews

Combining Direct and Indirect Assessment: Provides a fuller picture by linking measurable outcomes with participant perceptions. Ideal when assessing complex learning goals or demonstrating impact and growth

Examples:
Use a rubric (direct) to assess leadership workshop presentations and a post-survey (indirect) to assess confidence applying those skills
Pair observation checklists (direct) with focus groups (indirect) to explore how students apply wellness techniques
Assess student employee performance (direct) and add a self-assessment (indirect) to assess perceived performance

Quick Reference: Matching Goals and Tools

Goal Type	Example Outcome	Best-Fit Methods
Knowledge	Students identify key program policies	• Quiz • Short-answer test
Skill	Students lead a group meeting effectively	• Observation • Rubric
Attitude	Students report increased cultural awareness	• Focus group • Reflection • Survey
Behavior	Students apply feedback to improve work	• Portfolio • Self-assessment
Satisfaction	Students feel supported by staff	• Post-program survey • Interview

Sources

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