

## CHAPTER 3: CHOOSING ASSESSMENT TOOLS

*Decisions about appropriate assessment data and tools can be made after goals and objectives have been determined. This chapter outlines what to consider when choosing assessment tools. Chapters that follow will explore additional tools that are available.*

### **Topics Presented**

- Description of how the purpose, subject matter, audience, and participants of an assessment determine the tool to be used

### **General Information**

Several issues influence the choice of assessment tool.

- Purpose of the assessment
- Subject to be studied
- Audience to which assessment results will be directed
- Potential participants in the assessment activities
- Available information
- Available resources

### **Purpose**

The ***purpose of an assessment*** will suggest or point to the appropriate assessment tools. For example, an accreditation review requiring representative statistics or examples of student work will prompt the use of surveys, testing, or portfolios. There are times, however, when certain assessment tools will not accomplish the intended results. For instance, a focus group would not be useful in determining the gain in subject knowledge due to a specific course. It is obvious that testing would be a better choice for that purpose.

## **Subject Matter**

The ***subject matter of the assessment*** must be considered when selecting assessment tools. Assessment efforts focusing on varied subject matter, from student learning to satisfaction, are best captured with specific tools. For example, student learning may best be measured with testing, portfolios, or performance-based measures and student satisfaction with surveys, focus groups, or interviews. Standardized tests and inventories are available for assessment use with subjects such as critical thinking.

## **Audience**

The ***makeup of the audience*** is important to the selection of an assessment tool. If the assessment is to be effective or useful in decision making, the audience should be comfortable with the data gathered and its analysis. Some audiences are not comfortable with numbers; and for these groups, assessment tools that focus on statistics and numeric data would probably not be effective at promoting understanding. Focus groups, which use student language and narrative summaries, will be better understood and valued. On the other hand, when audiences are comfortable with statistics, they will probably be suspicious of other types of data. The use of narrative data from focus groups or student interviews might raise more questions than it answers. These audiences will want test data, survey responses, and statistical analysis.

## **Participants**

It is important for departments to consider who should participate and, when possible, to tailor the assessment tool accordingly. Participants could be current or future students, alumni, faculty, or employers. The ***availability*** of or ***accessibility*** to any group may require different assessment tools. For instance, because students are easily available for assessment, the choice of assessment tools will not be limited by the ability to contact them. It will be more difficult, however, to access employers and alumni because they must be identified, located, and contacted. The difficulty of organizing a group of alumni or employers can make it all but impossible to use some forms of assessment with them.

The ***number of possible participants*** influences the choice of assessment tool, also. Gathering and reviewing portfolio data might be informative and manageable for departments with smaller numbers of students, but overwhelming for large departments. On the other hand, comparisons of survey responses would be impossible in smaller departments but useful in units with larger numbers of students.

Issues such as anonymity, high stakes, time requirements, and convenience will most likely influence the ***willingness of participants***. For example, current graduate students will probably be more candid if their responses in an interview will remain anonymous. Web surveys will probably not reach students who do not have access to university email accounts, and they might intimidate individuals with limited computer experience.

### **Available Information**

Assessment teams can use information already available to them to reduce the amount of work and effort required for their assessment and to prevent the duplication of efforts. Since most universities collect a large amount of data, an assessment team will probably find that an analysis of this information will adequately meet their needs.

Information may also be already available at the department level since faculty members engage in evaluative or research activities that are, or can be translated into, assessment activities. A review of these processes would determine whether they are effective and usable for assessment purposes and if the department is making the most of existing points of contact with their students. Information in the form of syllabi, course descriptions, and department reports will already be available and useful to an assessment effort.

(Assessment using available data is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 8. The Appendix lists surveys currently conducted by the Ball State Office of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research.)

## **Resources**

Resources (***expertise, time, budget, computer technology, and space***) influence the extent and range of assessment activities as well as the assessment tools utilized. The use of a web survey, for example, requires expertise in designing web surveys and downloading the data, computer technology to handle the survey and access student email addresses, and time to design the survey and analyze the data. Using focus groups requires the knowledge to construct appropriate and successful questions, to skillfully moderate the session in a space conducive to the discussions, and the time and expertise to record and analyze the data received.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **Should multiple assessment tools be used?**

Multiple tools or measures give an assessment team ***a more complete picture***. Relying on one measure is risky because perceptions may be misleading, specifically if the tool does not perform well. Students may perform poorly on one test or project but better on another. Student responses on a survey, while certainly informative, take on a much richer meaning when viewed with test results from the same students. Both pieces are enhanced by information from the student database. Multiple measures also allow an assessment team to explore ***multiple perspectives***. For example, multiple measures can delve into what students know, what they can do with what they know, and what they think about the whole process.

### **Should assessment data be collected from all students or just a sample?**

This ***depends on*** the ***assessment tool*** used and the ***size of the student population*** involved. Some assessment tools, such as surveys or standardized testing, require larger numbers. Focus groups are effective when used with smaller numbers of participants.

### **What are some examples of existing information available to departments?**

- Student transcripts
- Student data including SAT and ACT scores, high school percentile rank, GPA, gender, etc.

- Trends in student enrollment
- Retention, enrollment, or graduation rates for students in the department
- Existing exams, assignments, or projects
- Materials describing current curricular program (syllabi, textbooks, exams, etc.)
- Secondary reading of senior papers or final exams for critical thinking and/or writing skills
- University-wide survey results

### **Topics Reviewed**

- The choice of assessment tool can be affected by the following:
  - Purpose of the assessment
  - Subject matter of the assessment
  - Values of the assessment audience
  - Availability and/or accessibility, number, and willingness of participants
  - Information available at the time of the assessment
  - Resources needed and available at the time of the assessment
- The assessment team can use available information to prevent the duplication of efforts and reduce the amount of work necessary for assessment activities.
- Each assessment tool may require a different set of resources (expertise, time, budget, computer technology, and space).
- Multiple assessment tools give a more complete picture of the topic to be assessed. This approach is particularly useful when one tool does not perform well or multiple perspectives are needed.
- The decision to use a sample or the full population depends on the size of the population and the assessment tool selected.

## **Sources of Additional Information**

- Freeman, R., & Lewis, R. (1998). *Planning and implementing assessment*. London: Kogan Page Limited.
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