

# Program-Level Assessment

## Identifying Measures

For each program-level learning goal, each academic program must at least one direct, summative measure and at least one indirect measure. In this context, a “measure” is any task that enables students to demonstrate learning and instructors or other evaluators to evaluate learning.

### Direct vs. Indirect

Please see the [Direct and Indirect Measures handout](#) for more information. It is important to recognize that grades alone are not a direct measure because there is rarely a one-to-one connection between grades and learning. Consider the many reasons for student failure or the students who “only need a C.”

### Summative

Summative measures are taken from or near the end of the student’s time in the program. The focus is on evaluating the students’ final performance, rather than providing feedback for student improvement.

### Choosing Direct Measures

The following two charts provide some guidance in thinking through the best choice for direct measures.

<i>If you want to...</i>	<i>Consider using...</i>
Assess thinking and performance skills	Assignments/prompts with scoring guide
Assess knowledge, conceptual understanding, or skill in application and analysis	Multiple-choice tests
Assess attitudes, values, dispositions, or habits of mind	Reflective writing, surveys, focus groups, or interviews
Draw an overall picture of student learning	Portfolios
Compare your students against peers elsewhere	Published tests or surveys

or

<b>Types of Outcomes</b>	<b>Direct Measures</b>
Cognitive (subject matter knowledge)	Standardized tests; instructor-created exams; portfolios; assignments from courses
Behavioral (skill acquisition)	Juried performance; portfolios; assignments from courses; major projects; certain tests/exams (language proficiency, mathematical reasoning, critical thinking)
Affective (attitudes, awareness, interest, concerns)	Survey of student response to value-laden issues; certain tests (ethics); pre-/post-test measures of attitude/value/belief

## Standardized Tests

Standardized tests offer a number of advantages. Since they already exist and are often scored by the vendor or by a computer, they offer a savings of time and effort to faculty. Norm-referenced standardized tests are the only practical way to compare a program's students with those at other institutions, and they are often required or encouraged by external accreditors.

There are, though, a number of disadvantages associated with the use of standardized tests for assessment. If the test's content is not well correlated with the program-level learning goals, there are limits to the conclusions about relevant student learning that can be drawn from exam scores. Student motivation is also an issue, since standardized tests are usually given outside of the context of a class. Raising the stakes of the exam can improve motivation for some students but may trigger test anxiety in other students. If the exam is scored externally, it is important that results are appropriately disaggregated to enable good decision making. Finally, it is important to weigh the results with the financial cost to the student and/or the institution.

*NOTE: It is also important to recognize the purpose of the test in question. Admissions tests (like the GRE) are primarily designed to predict success in the subsequent program, NOT students' knowledge, abilities, or values.*

## Embedded Assessment

Assessments that are embedded in coursework have a number of features to recommend them. By completing the assessment, students are fulfilling the normal requirements of the course; it is not something external, which helps with motivation. Faculty can score the assessment as part of or parallel to grading, which eliminated the workload associated with an external assessment, like a special project or portfolio. Assessments using coursework can also more easily allow a developmental view which is difficult with a summative assessment.

## Student Performance Tasks

For goals that related to skills ("The student will be able to..."), a performance task is often the best direct measure. If we expect students to be able to do something, the best assessment is asking them to do it and evaluating their performance. Performance tasks are often best assessed by a

rubric or scoring guide, but a written review by an external critic could be analyzed for assessment purposes.

## Pre-Test/Post-Test

Answering the question “Do our students get the education we’ve promised in the learning goals?” can be interpreted two ways: “When they left, did our students know and were they able to do what we articulated in our goals? or “Did our program move the students from where they started to where we wanted them to be?” The former requires only evaluation of a summative assessment. The latter required a measure of their knowledge/skills at the beginning of the program. Using an assessment twice (or a pair of closely matched assessments), once early and once late in the program, provides data to answer the question of growth or change over time. Of course, growth that is seen may simply be attributed to development, so pre-test/post-test is not foolproof.

## Do I Have to Use a Rubric?

No.

In *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Barbara Walvoord provides an example of a group of faculty who all read a selection of student papers, paying attention strengths and weaknesses of individual papers and of the entire group. Finally, in a group meeting, they came to consensus on the strengths and weaknesses of the student work and used that information to make decisions about improving student learning in their program. They did not use a rubric, but “the process yielded action based on careful faculty analysis of student work” (p. 20).

*This document includes information based on material from Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide by Linda Suskie and from the assessment website of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point.*