

Assessment Vocabulary and Definitions

Communication about assessment and student learning outcomes sometimes uses multiple terms to refer to the same concept, or the same term with different meanings. A list of commonly used vocabulary terms and definitions related to assessing student learning outcomes is helpful so that everyone is able to speak a common language.

The terms used in this dictionary were selected from regional accreditation and state assessment guidelines; from selected presentations at the Assessment Forums of the American Association for Higher Education; from a group of policy makers, government officials, assessment practitioners, testing company representatives; and from Center for Assessment and Research Studies faculty and graduate students at James Madison University.

Glossary of Common Assessment Terms

Source: James Madison University's online Dictionary of Student Outcome Assessment, <http://people.jmu.edu/yangsx/>.

Assessment – The systematic process of determining educational objectives, gathering, using, and analyzing information about student learning outcomes to make decisions about programs, individual student progress, or accountability.

Benchmark – A criterion-referenced objective performance datum that is used for comparative purposes. A program can use its own data as a baseline benchmark against which to compare future performance. It can also use data from another program as a benchmark. In the latter case, the other program often is chosen because it is exemplary and its data are used as a target to strive for, rather than as a baseline.

Direct assessment – Direct measures of student learning require student to display their knowledge and skills as they respond to the instrument itself. Objective tests, essays, presentations, and classroom assignments all meet this criterion.

Formative – An assessment which is used for improvement (individual or program level) rather than for making final decisions or for accountability.

Indirect – Indirect methods such as surveys and interviews ask students to reflect on their learning rather than to demonstrate it.

Longitudinal – Data collected on the same individuals over time for use in a longitudinal study. A study that investigates development, learning, or other types of change in individuals over time.

Measurement – The systematic investigation of people's attributes.

Norm – An interpretation of scores on a measure that focuses on the rank ordering of students – not their performance – in relation to criteria.

Objectives – Refers to the specific knowledge, skills, or attitudes that students are expected to achieve through their college experience; expected or intended student outcomes.

Outcomes – Refers to the specific knowledge, skills, or developmental attributes that students actually develop through their college experience; assessment results.

Percentile – The percentage of examinees in the norm group who scored at or below the raw score for which the percentile rank was calculated.

Performance-based – Assessment technique involving the gathering of data through systematic observation of a behavior or process and evaluating that data based on a clearly articulated set of performance criteria to serve as the basis for evaluative judgments.

Qualitative – Data in which the values of a variable differ in kind (quality) rather than in amount.

Quantitative – Data in which the values of a variable differ in amount rather than in kind.

Rubric – A scoring tool that lists the criteria for a piece of work, or “what counts” (for example, purpose, organization, and mechanics are often what count in a piece of writing); it also articulates gradations of quality for each criterion, from excellent to poor.

Summative – A sum total or final product measure of achievement at the end of an instructional unit or course of study.

Triangulation – The building of multiple sources of information or ideas to support a central finding or theme.

Value-added – The effects educational providers have had on students during their programs of study. The impact of participating in higher education on student learning and development above that which would have occurred through natural maturation, usually measured as longitudinal change or difference between pretest and posttest; A comparison of the knowledge, skills, and developmental traits that students bring to the educational process with the knowledge, skills and developmental traits they demonstrate upon completion of the educational process.

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