



Module 1: Method Considerations

Quantitative, Qualitative, or Mixed Methods

Quantitative methods

- involves the use of predetermined instruments where numeric data is collected;
- typically measures a large number of individuals; and
- involves statistical analysis, description of trends, and comparison of groups, relationships among variables, a comparison of results with predictions and past studies.

Qualitative methods

- involves open-ended questions, observations/field research, interviews, document analysis, audiovisual materials;
- involves typically a small number of individuals; and
- involves text analysis, description, analysis, and thematic development, searching for larger meaning

Mixed methods:

- A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.
- Allows for both breadth and depth in participant responding.

Quantitative

- Closed-ended questions or measures capturing numeric data
- Typically measures a large number of respondents
- Involves statistical analysis, relationship of variables, and comparison of trends
- Captures who, what, where, when

Qualitative

- Open-ended questions, observations, interviews, document analysis
- Typically measures a small number of individuals
- Involves text analysis and thematic development to search for larger meaning
- Captures why, how





Direct and Indirect Methods

Direct methods

Direct methods of collecting information require the students to display their knowledge and skills. Direct measures of learning are usually accomplished through assessment methods such as “quiz” type survey, rubric, document analysis, observation, portfolio, visual methods, one-minute assessment, and/or case study

- Example: Where on campus would you go, or whom would you consult with if you had questions about which courses to register for in the fall?

Indirect methods

Indirect methods require that students or someone else to reflect student learning, behavior, and attitudes rather than to demonstrate it. Indirect measures of learning are usually accomplished through assessment methods such as surveys or collecting feedback from faculty/staff about students.

- Example: I know where to go on campus if I have questions about which courses to register for in the fall.
 - Strongly agree
 - Moderately agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Moderately disagree
 - Strongly disagree

Formative and Summative Assessment

Formative

Formative assessment occurs as a program or activity is happening. Students might give student affairs practitioners’ feedback on how the front end of a program is meeting their needs and encouraging their growth. If there are areas that can be changed and improved in a relatively efficient manner, this assessment information can serve to make the outcome of the program better catered to the student population it is serving in real time.

- *Example:* Say a student affairs professional is giving a seminar for first-year students, an example of a formative assessment might be that the student affairs professional stops midway through the seminar to solicit feedback from the attendees to gauge whether the seminar is answering their most relevant questions. If the students suggest focusing on other material that is more relevant to their immediate needs, the practitioner can shift the seminar toward those topics in order to make the seminar more effective.
- *Pro:* These assessments allow us to understand how the program is meeting the goal outcomes as the program is developing, which allows practitioners to change programming in an effective manner to cater to the needs of the current student population.
- *Con:* Many programs cannot be easily changed in a short period of time, so these assessments may not be as relevant to large-scale projects that would take a long time to change.

Summative

Summative assessment occurs after a program or activity has concluded. Many student affairs assessment projects are summative assessments. In this manner, students experience the entirety of a program and then give their feedback or demonstrate their learning in order to inform future practice.

- *Example:* Say an office of student engagement wants to know how many events students went to on campus in the past semester. If this office surveys all students to ask them how



- many events they attended, since this survey occurs after the students would have attended the events, it is a summative assessment.
- *Pro:* Summative assessments allow practitioners to think through the feedback from the assessment and take time to implement changes for the next program occurrence.
 - *Con:* Summative assessments give us feedback for a specific program with a specific set of students. Because student populations change, this kind of feedback may not be as relevant for the students who attend the program the following year, so it might not have as big of a difference as it could as a formative assessment.

Internal or External

Assessment can be conducted during an event (internal) or before or after the event has started or concluded (external). There are benefits to both types of assessment.

- Internal assessments can give an office an idea of students' thoughts and reactions in the moment that may be more accurate to how the student experienced the event as opposed to inaccuracies that might arise when students are reflecting back on their past experience. These assessments will inevitably get higher response rates because they are done with a captive audience at the event.
- External assessments do not require time during the event to conduct an assessment, which takes the pressure off of practitioners conducting an event to get the assessment correct on the spot. Problems with the assessment can be fixed while an office has full attention on the assessment as opposed to offices trying to balance the competing demands of the event and an assessment at the same time. Response rate and accuracy of responses may suffer given the lack of captive audience and distance from the event. This may be appropriate, however, if data needed requires time to process or behavior to change.

Change over time

Many student affairs offices like to see how their practice is developing and changing over time. While there are certain methodological issues that accompany tracking change over time, this information can be useful to assess whether a unit's practice is improving in important ways. Generally speaking, to accurately assess improvement over time, the assessment tool (e.g., survey, interview protocol) should stay identical in order to hold constant as many variables as possible.

- *Example:* Say a school's orientation program asks students who attend orientation for feedback every year. After three years, this office compares the assessment results for all three years to see if student opinions and experiences changed over time.
- *Pro:* These assessments can give an office an idea of whether they are improving over time.
- *Con:* Because these assessments are typically not done with the exact same students every year, comparisons over time should be taken into consideration with changing student populations and their needs.

A Note on Data Sources

While new assessment questions may emerge at any time, don't forget the data necessary to answer your assessment questions may already be collected or exist somewhere. Make sure to review existing data sources and instruments before creating new instruments or brainstorming methods to suit your situation. While existing resources may not answer all of your questions, take the content it does provide in order to best shape any needed new instruments or efforts.