

Tip Sheet #14

Indirect Assessment Measures

What do you mean by “indirect” measures of learning?

Usually assessment experts apply the concept of “indirect learning” to measurements of opinion rather than direct performance of learning. The target of opinion gathering can be the student (e.g., exit survey or focus group), alumni (e.g., satisfaction with education survey), or employers (satisfaction survey).

What are the advantages of indirect measures?

If the survey is designed well and if the return rate (the percent of the target group responding) is high, the feedback drawn from a survey can provide data to help the department make corrections in course. Indirect measures can be relatively easy to design, particularly if the basic questions reflect the learning outcomes your department has adopted. If the survey is used at regular intervals, the positive changes in response from the target group can provide evidence of program effectiveness.

What are the disadvantages of indirect measures?

There are some obvious challenges to the validity of the data. For example, students can overestimate their real satisfaction in an attempt to garner favor. Employers might not be particularly motivated to supply the data. Getting a high return from the target group can be problematic.

Are exit surveys the best indirect method?

For some purposes, yes. An exit survey signals to a graduate that you care enough to get feedback about the program so it can provide a kind of positive closure to the educational experience. You can include some questions that identify the future plans of the graduate that can help you maintain a departmental database about your alumni. The fact that the students have a sense of obligation at this point in their education also enhances the return rate. Some approaches make completion of an exit exam a prerequisite to

graduation. Data gathering can be automated so students can be directed to a website making administration much easier.

What should be included on an exit survey?

The survey could be as simple as asking students to describe their level of satisfaction (confidence, expertise) in the various areas identified in your academic learning compact. You can include other aspects of operation of the department as well. For example,

- How would you estimate your satisfaction with advising?
- What was your most valuable/least valuable learning experience?
- Are there faculty members whose work should be singled out for their contributions to your education?
- What changes would you recommend to the department about your education and why?
- Were you treated well by the department chair/secretary?
- If you had it to do over again, what would you do differently? (Answers to this question can give you some helpful data to give guidance to new students).

Exit surveys can include a mix of quantitative (“on a scale of 1 to 5”) questions and qualitative.

Why would you choose a focus group?

Focus groups represent randomly selected individuals from the target population to discuss the dimensions that the department wishes to measure. Focus groups might be a preferred method for departments that have huge majors. It is important to ensure that the population of the focus group is drawn randomly because if the target group represents only honors students, their point of view about the department is likely to be inflated and it won't give you much feedback about changes that are in order. Focus group discussions must be recorded and then summarized. Qualitative data can be a bit harder to handle and interpret from year-to-year.

Can you address alumni surveys?

Alumni feedback can be especially valuable. As you can guess, students' opinions can change about the value of their learning (in both positive and

negative directions) when their life circumstances prove their value. Happily, alumni surveys often provide strong reinforcement for maintaining really challenging courses. Students “get it” that the challenging things you asked them to do prepared them more effectively for what they encountered. Unhappily, sometimes students who are motivated to fill out an alumni survey may be driven by bitterness so not all alumni news is pleasant. However, most people who are motivated to fill out the surveys have positive sentiments as the primary motivator. An additional advantage of alumni surveys is that your up-to-date alumni database provides a good resource for fund and mentor raising.

What about employer surveys?

Much more challenging to manage because you have to know where your graduates are and they aren't always good about keeping you updated as their employers change. However, this strategy does produce very direct feedback about the cognitive abilities of our graduates as they are applied to work. Return rates are notoriously challenging in this form.

Since the university has adopted a national survey for student engagement (NSSE), can that serve as our measure?

Yes. One of our SACS consultants indicated that we can produce some departmental tags on the NSSE data and that can serve as a valid indirect measure. Chances are good we will be having some workshops early in the fall to explore how the NSSE can serve your purpose. The limitation of this approach is that it will not give you more direct information that can be helpful to the operations of your department.