

## GIVING WORDS MEANING: MAKING THE LANGUAGE OF ASSESSMENT ACCESSIBLE

For many, making assessment accessible starts with understanding the terminology associated with the activity. As we often say in our office, “words mean something.” In this Special Insert, we provide the definitions of some of the most common assessment terms, including many used in this edition of the *Student Pulse*. It is our hope that this document will provide useful definitions of terms commonly used in assessment and help you think of different ways you can incorporate assessments in your work.

### *Common Assessment Terms in Student Affairs*

**Case Study:** This term has two definitions: 1) It refers to an in-depth study of a program or service. This technique is often used to understand more fully why a program or service has been successful or unsuccessful. 2) This term also refers to an approach in which practitioners ask students to respond to specific scenarios they may face in a given leadership role. The manner in which the students respond to these scenarios provides the assessment data.

**Checklists:** A list of statements that describe expected performance. Performance may include skills or knowledge. Checklists can be used to analyze reflective essays, observed behavior, or open-ended responses on questionnaires. A checklist is used to simply record the presence of the expected performance. This is in contrast to a rubric, which is used to assign a score to the performance.

**Closing the Loop:** Also known as “evaluation,” this phrase describes any effort to use evidence gathered from assessment to improve programs and services. Closing the loop ensures that information is being used for improvement rather than merely “collecting dust on a shelf.”

**Document Analysis:** Document analysis is a technique a practitioner can use to make inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages, whether they are written records or communications, physical evidence, or audio, video, or electronic recordings. Document analysis is often used to examine the values espoused by an organization.

**Existing Data (or Preexisting Data):** Refers to any previously gathered information. This can include information found in applications for positions, reflective essays, or usage data (e.g. the number of transactions during given time periods or attendance records for a series of events).

**Existing Data Sets:** Refers to sets of data collected through previous assessment or research efforts. This term includes data gathered by US government agencies, UGA offices, such as the Office of Institutional Research, or by national organizations, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement or Educational Benchmarking, Inc.

**Focus Group:** A group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a program, service, or concept. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting in which participants are free to talk with other group members.

**Interview:** Refers to a question and answer session in which a person is asked to share opinions, attitudes, or experiences. Interviews can range from highly-structured and formal to unstructured and informal. Responses are usually recorded in the form of notes or transcripts and are then analyzed.

**Mixed Methods:** An assessment project that employs more than one strategy for collecting information. The purpose of using mixed methods is to acquire a broader understanding of a service or program being assessed. For example, The Center for Leadership and Service administers an online questionnaire to students in a leadership program and then conducts follow-up interviews with them to gain a richer understanding of the experiences.

**Observations:** An effort to gain familiarity with a given group of individuals and their practices by observing them in their natural environment, usually over an extended period of time. Observations might include: watching how students socialize in public, observing the ways students use furniture in a lounge, or witnessing a college football game from the student section.

**Photo Elicitation:** Photo elicitation involves giving students a prompt or question to address by taking photos of objects within their environment. The student photographer is then interviewed about the photos. For example, students may be asked to keep a journal throughout the picture-taking process and discuss its contents during the interview process as well.

**Program Effectiveness:** The degree to which a program, service, or initiative meets its mission, objectives, and outcomes. Program effectiveness relies on the establishment and assessment of clear outcomes. An administrator must know specifically what the desired effect (outcome) of a program or service is in order to determine the extent to which the program is being effective, i.e., achieving the outcome.

**Questionnaire:** A tool used to gather information through a series of questions. Questionnaires are often referred to as “survey instruments” or mistakenly as “surveys.” The use of questionnaires is the most common technique for gathering information due to how quickly and inexpensively they can be administered. *See Survey*

**Rubric:** A scoring tool developed to measure a student’s performance on a given activity. Rubrics list several areas of performance to be evaluated and the specific criteria used to evaluate each area. A score is then assigned to each area of performance, based on the outlined criteria. A rubric is useful in analyzing existing data, such as reflective essays or student leadership applications. A practitioner, for example could apply a rubric to reflective essays completed after a community service experience to measure learning among student participants.

**Survey:** Refers to a process by which one gathers information from a number of people. Information gathered by surveys is usually used to describe group attitudes, satisfaction, or learning. Surveys can include a number of data gathering techniques, such as questionnaires and interviews.

**Usage Data:** Information about the extent to which a program or service is used. Usage data can include number of tickets sold, number of people who pass through a turnstile during a given period of time, or number of students who attend an activity.