# Summary of Direct Assessment Techniques

**DIRECT ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES**  
(Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education by Allen 2004)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Potential Strength</th>
<th>Potential Limitations</th>
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| Published tests            | • Can provide direct evidence of student mastery of learning objectives  
• Generally, are carefully developed, highly reliable, professionally scored, and nationally normed  
• Examiners provide a number of norm groups, such as norms for community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive universities  
• Online versions of tests are increasingly available, and some provide immediate scoring  
• Some publishers allow faculty to supplement tests with their own items, so tests can be adapted to better serve local needs | • If the test does not reflect the learning objectives that faculty value and the curricula that students experience, results are likely to be discounted and inconsequential  
• Most published tests rely heavily on multiple-choice items that often focus on specific facts, but program learning objectives more often emphasize higher-level skills  
• Test scores may reflect criteria that are too broad for meaningful assessment  
• Students may not take the test seriously if test results have no impact on their lives  
• Tests can be expensive  
• The marginal gain from annual testing may be low  
• Faculty may object to standardized exam scores on general principles, leading them to ignore results |
| Locally developed tests    | • Can provide direct evidence of student mastery of learning objectives  
• Appropriate mixes of items allow faculty to address various types of learning objectives  
• Can provide for authentic assessment of higher-level learning  
• Students generally are motivated to display the extent of their learning  
• If well constructed, they are likely to have good validity  
• Because local faculty write the exam, they are likely to be interested in results and willing to use them  
• Can be integrated into routine faculty workloads  
• Campuses with similar missions could decide to develop their own norms, and they could assess student work together or provide independent assessment of each other’s student work  
• Discussion of results focuses faculty on student learning and program support for it | • These exams are likely to be less reliable than published exams  
• Reliability and validity generally are unknown  
• Creating effective exams requires time and skill  
• Score exams takes time  
• Traditional testing methods may not provide authentic measurement  
• Norms generally are not available |
| Embedded assignments and course activities | • Can provide direct evidence of student mastery of learning objectives  
• Out-of-class assignments are not restricted to time constraints typical for exams  
• Students are generally motivated to demonstrate the extent of their learning  
• Can provide authentic assessment of learning objectives  
• Can involve ratings by fieldwork supervisors  
• Can provide a context for assessing communication and teamwork skills, as well as other types of learning objectives  
• Can be used for grading as well as assessment  
• Faculty who develop the procedures are likely to be interested in results and willing to use them  
• Discussion of results focuses faculty on student learning and program support for it  
• Data collection is unobtrusive to students | • Requires time to develop and coordinate  
• Requires faculty trust that the program will be assessed, not individual teachers  
• Reliability and validity generally are unknown  
• Norms generally are not available |
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| Competence interviews | • Can provide direct evidence of student mastery of learning objectives  
                      • The interview format allows faculty to probe for the breadth and extent of student learning  
                      • Can be combined with other techniques that more effectively assess knowledge of facts and terms  
                      • Can involve authentic assessment, such as simulated interactions with clients  
                      • Can provide for direct assessment of some student skills, such as oral communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills | • Requires time to develop, coordinate, schedule, and implement  
                      • Interview protocols must be carefully developed  
                      • Subjective judgments must be guided by agreed-upon criteria  
                      • Interviewer training takes time  
                      • Interviewing using unstructured interviews requires expertise  
                      • Not an efficient way to assess knowledge of specific facts and terms  
                      • Some students may be intimidated by the process, reducing their ability to demonstrate their learning |
| Portfolios     | • Can provide direct evidence of student mastery of learning objectives  
                      • Students are encouraged to take responsibility for and pride in their learning  
                      • Students may become more aware of their own academic growth  
                      • Can be used for developmental assessment and can be integrated into the advising process to individualize student planning  
                      • Can help faculty identify curriculum gaps  
                      • Students can use portfolios and the portfolio process to prepare for graduate school or career applications  
                      • Discussion of results focuses faculty on student learning and program support for it  
                      • Webfolios or CD-ROMs can be easily viewed, duplicated, and stored | • Requires faculty time to prepare the portfolio assignment and to assist students in preparing portfolios  
                      • Requires faculty analysis and, if graded, faculty time to assign grades  
                      • May be difficult to motivate students to take the task seriously  
                      • May be more difficult for transfer students to assemble the portfolio if they haven't saved relevant materials  
                      • Students may refrain from criticizing the program if their portfolio is graded or if their names will be associate with portfolios during the review  
                      • It may be difficult to protect student confidentiality and privacy |
| Collective portfolios | • Can provide direct evidence of student mastery of learning objectives  
                      • Students generally are motivated to display the extent of their learning  
                      • Workload demands generally are more manageable than traditional portfolios  
                      • Students are not required to do extra work  
                      • Discussion of results focuses faculty on student learning and program support for it  
                      • Data collection is unobtrusive to students | • If assignments are not aligned with the objectives being examined, evidence may be problematic  
                      • If sampling is not done well, results may not generalize to the entire program  
                      • Reviewing the materials takes time and planning |