

Interactive Assessment in Looker Studio: A Guide for Disability Service Professionals (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Assessment is frequently brought forward as a major value in student affairs, and higher education more broadly, but many staff in postsecondary institutions report discomfort with the practice (Fuller & Lane, 2017). Assessment has also been marked as a key component of the operation of disability resource offices (DROs) by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD, 2022). With that in mind, it is paramount that disability services professionals have resources to build confidence, comfort, and competence with this critical practice in order to communicate needs for funding and support. This practice brief presents an overview of assessment as a whole, offering insights on key considerations for planning, executing, analyzing, and communicating assessment. It presents a specific tool for showcasing assessment results—Looker Studio. Companion resources shared in this article allow readers to build deeper competency with the use of Looker Studio. In combination, this article and its linked resources should prepare readers to be more competent stewards of their annual assessment cycle.

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Assessment has become an increasingly central part of the professional landscape in higher education (Henning & Bentrim, 2022). Since the publication of the *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1937; 1949), the demand for assessment of student service initiatives has increased. The creation of centralized assessment quality measures, such as the Council for Advancement of Standards (CAS), further solidified the importance of both assessment generally and quality assessment more specifically to higher education (Henning, 2016). Within student affairs, professional organizations such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have begun emphasizing annual and ongoing assessments as part of their professional competencies for practitioners (ACPA/NASPA, 2015). Disability Resource Offices (DROs) should not view themselves as separate from this push for assessment-driven practice. Indeed, AHEAD's (2022a) current professional competencies note that assessment is necessary to the operation of DROs. These competencies expect practitioners to “demonstrate

effective analytic and organizational skills” (Competency 5), specifically by

- a. “Gathering and analyzing data to effectively perform ongoing assessment of campus accessibility” (5.2), and
- b. “Gathering data relevant to the operation of the disability unit to effectively support ongoing assessment according to AHEAD and/or other relevant program standards” (5.3).

In addition to noting the importance of assessment in ensuring DROs adhere to AHEAD's various program standards, the professional competencies explicitly denote assessment as a distinct component of these standards (AHEAD, 2022a). The program standards reiterate this connection in several instances (AHEAD, 2021), noting that DROs should “include disability in the collection and review of institutional metrics” (1.4.4), “design and implement a rigorous program of ongoing assessment” (4.4), and “establish a written assessment plan” (4.4.1).

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A Challenge at Hand

In spite of the critical importance of assessment in higher education, there is some evidence that it remains an area of weakness for practitioners in student affairs broadly. Fuller and Lane (2017), who researched the practice extensively, found evidence that many staff in postsecondary institutions fear the practice. They tie this discomfort to assessment being a compliance measure, noting that assessment can be perceived as “a regulatory mechanism that significantly reduces their time on core functions or a punishment received at the whim of an institutional leader” (p. 25).

This observation is echoed by other researchers, including Bingham et al. (2023), who identify fear of the practice and its implications for employees as a significant barrier to assessment. Cooper et al. (2016), in their research on perceived skill deficits for graduate students completing coursework for student affairs, noted assessment as an area of underdeveloped confidence.

While not all DROs are positioned within student affairs (AHEAD’s [2022b] data indicate about 49% of DROs are), there is some reason to believe that the perception of assessment among DRO staff would be similar to that identified in this research. One such indication is the dynamics of DRO staffing. According to AHEAD (2022b), 75.5% of DRO staff hold a master’s degree. Of the surveyed participants, there was a wide range of staff knowledge reported based on field, with the highest average for reported knowledge being in “Laws and Legal Compliance” (4.2), which is a field unlikely to devote extensive attention toward assessment in a higher education setting. While “Student Services” and “Higher Education Administration” were both highly represented (4.1 and 3.8, respectively), graduates of degrees in these fields are likely to have been influenced by the same factors influencing the students in Cooper et al.’s (2016) findings. While further research may be warranted to explore the comfort of DRO staff with assessment, resources in this area seem likely to be needed.

As higher education experiences dwindling enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018), individual DROs will likely continue to experience shortages in staffing and funding that require direct advocacy to their administrators to receive support. Proficiency in conducting and communicating the results of assessments may provide a pathway for DRO professionals to advocate for their needs to administrators. In short, a framework for conducting and maintaining ongoing assessment of the ways in which DROs serve students is an essential component to their success.

The Practice

The goal of this brief is to provide such a framework, structured around the use of Google’s Looker Studio. Looker Studio is a cloud-based, online data visualization tool that allows users to host reports and dashboards that provide live, interactive displays of data. It has been used to some effect in other fields, such as public health (Tan et al., 2024), meteorology (Elsonbaty et al., 2024), and business research (Sukhdeve & Sukhdeve, 2023).

This brief describes the practice followed at a large urban university’s DRO to incorporate this tool into routine, bi-annual assessment. Interested readers are encouraged to review the following companion pieces, which offer a deeper look at the tool (see Figure 1).

In this brief, we discuss general strategies for assessment in a DRO context, framed around our office’s reconceptualization of our assessment practice. The above resources offer a deeper look at the use of Looker Studio specifically, including a demo dashboard, the requisite files that construct the dashboard, and a detailed task analysis of building the dashboard. They are publicly hosted—the task analysis is kept in a secure online repository—and include a link to a static version of the demo dashboard in the event the live dashboard loses functionality over time.

A Note on Confidentiality

DRO practitioners are likely to be relatively familiar with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) which sets restrictions on how the information DROs receive from students should be handled. In the context of higher education, information is often understood to fall into three principal categories: public, sensitive, and restricted information (Henning et al., 2023). DROs often have access to information in each of these categories, including a student’s name and email (public in many institutions), student ID and GPA (sensitive), and medical history/disability status (restricted).

It is important to note, however, that the identification of these categories is driven by their connection to individual students. Deidentified data can be leveraged for assessment more comfortably, because it cannot be linked to individual students in a way that would violate their rights under FERPA. Put simply, DROs should feel comfortable sharing high-level overviews of trends within their office (e.g., total enrollment, rough breakdown of demographics, rough breakdown of disability data by category), but should not provide data that would identify students (e.g., a list of students with a given diagnosis).

One way to ensure such privacy is to conduct assessment anonymously. If the assessment process

Figure 1*Additional Resources for Building Proficiency in Looker Studio*

		
A demo dashboard , made in Looker Studio to model the various features of the software highlighted in this article	A set of Google Sheet files , aligned to the demo dashboard, serving as an exemplar of how to organize dashboard data	A more granular task analysis of the setup of charts, graphs, and datasheets for users looking to build their own dashboard

never gathers identifying information, there is no risk it will be exposed in the communication or analysis of the assessment. Practitioners are encouraged to consult their university's institutional research guidelines for more detailed information about these requirements, as there is some variation between institutions.

Interactive Assessment in Looker Studio

While the other linked resources more thoroughly describe and showcase the inner workings of Looker Studio, it is worth talking about why tools like this may offer a better way of leveraging assessment than simpler, more familiar tools, such as Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel.

Looker Studio allows for data to be *live*. Because its data sources are linked to Google Sheets, they can be updated over time, so as new data are gathered, stakeholders will see these patterns update in real time. These live updates can alleviate the frustration and redundancy of lengthy annual reporting and allow for more direct storytelling about trends over time.

Looker Studio allows for *interaction* with data. There are a number of features that support this, such as within reports. Selection of specific variables will filter all linked visuals and tables by that variable, and creators can add more complex variables, visualizations, and searches leveraging this interaction. This flexibility allows users to visualize small, valuable patterns within data. For example, if DRO professionals wanted to know whether disabled students of a given gender identity have a different experience with faculty than their peers, users could use a filter to select one or more gender identity categories (e.g., non-binary)

and see how this filter impacts other data (e.g., ratings of satisfaction with faculty). Even academic year can serve as a valuable filter. One might want to separate the lockdown years from other academic years in the dataset for some analyses, for example.

Platforms like Looker allow DRO professionals to build a powerful platform for sharing assessment results. This is labor-intensive when first created, but in subsequent years will shave off considerable time from reporting, analyzing, and sharing data.

Stage 1: Planning Your Assessment

The first step in conducting an assessment is to decide whether to conduct an assessment. Sometimes this decision is based on if there is a top-down instruction to do so; sometimes it happens because assessment is a priority within the department. At our institution, assessment has always been a part of our practice, but recent changes in the annual assessment cycle led us to a reconceptualization of that practice. We wanted an assessment that was ongoing and effective, but was less onerous on both our staff and stakeholders to execute; we wanted an assessment that was thorough and technical, but able to be communicated effectively to administrators and stakeholders.

Designing assessment often works best when we work backwards from an end goal. For our DRO, as at most DROs, the objective of assessment is to ensure that our office is supporting disabled students in accessing accommodations. To understand our success in this objective, we began by posing a few questions, as follows:

- What are our office's objectives, and how do we know if we are meeting them?
- What do we need to know about how our office's stakeholders interact with us?
- Are there any programs or services we operate that we need to know more about?

Each of these questions led to different considerations for the planning of our assessment cycle.

First, we identified our core objectives, which included academic support, non-academic support, student success, and test administration. Although our office engages in other work in support of these objectives, we understood them to be our core goals. From these, we were able to identify some key performance indicators (KPI) that would give us a sense of our success with each objective (See Figure 2).

While this list is not comprehensive, these metrics allow us to tell a story about the work of our office that is readily understood by administrators and stakeholders, *especially* when we are able to gather this information on a semester-by-semester basis and showcase how the work of our office progresses over time. As an example, when advocating for funding for positions, understanding the average caseload can be useful in giving a sense of the demands on each staff member, and how these demands change over time. When making a proposal for additional funding, this baseline will be invaluable, but it is always possible to add further detail by gathering numbers for meetings, email responses, and more among staff.

In terms of how your office serves your university, student enrollment and the number of letters your students share with faculty are useful measures of your office's total output. When structuring this analysis, you want to report out the number of students requesting a letter, not the total number of requested letters. Because each student takes many different courses, and may submit multiple requests in the event of changes to their accommodations, this number may overestimate how active the accommodations process is at your institution. Depending on the activity of your office, you may want to follow fewer of these metrics than listed in this table, or may have metrics not listed above.

While these KPI give a sense of outcomes, they do not provide a narrative about the quality of services. We designed a regularly-distributed satisfaction survey that allows us to better understand how our stakeholders perceive our services. Our design of this survey was dictated by our programs and services, but many questions a DRO would include in such a survey are universal, such as the following:

- Which of the following barriers, if any, have you encountered in accessing accommodations?
 - Examples could include documentation, scheduling, awareness, personal comfort
- How often, if ever, are professors unwilling or unable to provide your accommodations?
- How often, if ever, have you experienced discrimination on the basis of disability at (university)?

We selected other targets for specific inquiry based on our programs and services. For example, we inquired about both student awareness and student satisfaction of key services such as our testing center, assistive technology lab, and sensory room using simple Likert-scale questions. In designing these questions, we took care to ensure consistent wording across all questions, and avoided questions framed in a manner that would lead the student to specific answers.

We also wanted to provide students with the opportunity to share information with us we may not have anticipated. Likert-scale questions are useful, like KPI, in mapping trends over time, but they cannot provide context for those trends. We include a few open-ended questions with each survey explicitly for this purpose in each survey, that allow students to share concerns we might not otherwise hear, and generally provide context into trends we may see in the fluctuation of our student satisfaction.

In designing open-ended questions, our goal is to cede the floor fully to our stakeholders. To that end, we always include an optional question at the end of the survey, such as, "Is there anything else you would like to share with us?" Where we want to solicit context on more specific, complex interactions, more targeted questions can be useful, such as the following:

- How would you describe your interactions with faculty overall?
- What has your experience been like at (university) as a student with a disability?

These questions are useful for our purposes in a generic, regularly-occurring survey. During our spring assessment cycle, we typically conduct an additional inquiry into a specific objective. For example, during the original roll out of our first-year transition program, we gave a separate survey to participants, and compared their outcomes for several key KPI to those in our general populations.

With these targets in mind, we had a framework for an assessment plan. We would gather KPI through internal sources, distribute a survey at regular intervals, and where needed conduct specific, targeted, ad-

Figure 2*Table of Common Key Performance Indicators*

Academic Support	Student Success	Non-Academic Support	Test Administration
Total registered students	Student GPA	Housing accommodations	# Tests proctored
# of requested letters	Retention data	Dining accommodations	# Private rooms
Average caseload	4, 5, 6 year graduation		Single-day testing
Staff size			Readers/scribes

ditional assessment of key programs or in response to unexpected changes or trends. The next stage in our assessment was to proceed to the collection of our data.

Stage 2: Collecting Data

To gather our KPI, we had to identify our available sources of information. Many of our KPI are available through the reporting feature of our office's internal database. By pulling a report on registered students, disability status, letter requests, and housing requests in our system, we can schedule and automate our assessment at the appropriate time of the semester. A separate report allows us to gather information about our testing center's services. Other sources of information from KPI include individual program tracking (e.g., our learning specialist program), and institutional data sources such as Banner.

For our survey, we worked through the tools recommended by our institution. Depending on your institution, this may include RedCap, Baseline, or other internal systems for assessment. Using such a system ensures the privacy of student responses, as well as allows for a readily-accessible infrastructure for distribution of your survey. We work with our own internal email listserv, fliers in our office, and occasionally communication through campus partners to promote our survey, and ensure a high completion rate.

When planning for the collection of your data, timing is important. For our KPI reporting, we wait until the conclusion of the semester. However, for many internal reporting tools, waiting creates a very narrow timeframe to gather data, as around this period student transfers and graduations will occur. Depending on the tools you use to gather your KPI, you may need to ensure "inactive" students are not included in your reporting, or may have an extremely brief window in which to gather accurate data.

Survey timing is similarly complex. Depending on when you pose the same question, you may receive very different answers. If you are asking about satisfaction with housing accommodations, your results may be skewed by recent housing decisions made outside of your office (e.g., whether students are placed in campus housing). We determined that our survey should be sent at a consistent time in each semester, so that any influence of timing would remain consistent. We send ours shortly after midterms and open it for the remainder of the semester. This timing allows us to maximize our completion and generally avoids responses that might be heavily skewed by external stressors.

A Note on Time

The most important variable in any practice of assessment is time. When you conduct one survey, you have a snapshot of the survey respondents' perceptions, opinions, or feedback *in that moment*. When you gather KPI, you have information about those students in that *semester* or *academic year*. In the moment survey data can be useful for some questions at hand but are limited in their ability to tell a meaningful story. This limitation is, in part, why institutions push for annual assessment. If the same data are gathered in *each* semester or year, you begin to see how change takes place over time. This type of data collection can help show if the introduction of a new practice or program has been successful, or can be used to justify maintaining or increasing staffing in moments of fiscal uncertainty. A targeted survey assessing a new program has value, but that value increases dramatically if you can compare it against a previous baseline. As you consider how best to *use* your data, do not forget about time.

Stage 3: Analyzing Data

Analyzing data often takes the most time and effort from staff facilitating assessment. As our office strove to modernize its assessment practice, analysis was a major focus for us, and a key factor in our decision to employ Looker Studio as a tool for our assessment. Because Looker Studio provides live analysis of data, the upfront creation of our dashboard was only slightly more onerous than any single-year assessment reporting would be. However, in future semesters, we need only add the newly collected data to existing spreadsheets, and it updates our dashboard readily.

Descriptive Statistics & Visual Analysis

For our simple quantitative data, like our KPI and the output of our Likert-scale survey questions, we employ similarly simple means of analysis. To see how our data change over time, we might place them into a graph or chart, or display the figures in a table that presents this story to viewers.

We use simple line graphs (see Figure 3) to showcase trends in our data over time. For other data points, bar graphs or pie charts are more useful; in some cases, simple displays of relevant numbers (an arithmetic mean, or a total) can add value or context to these visual displays. One of the tools Looker Studio provides to our data is that it allows users to filter the data they are viewing. For example, one could narrow to a specific date range, or use a filter to see how students of a specific disability status report experience of discrimination differently.

Statistical Analysis

In some cases, we conduct more complex statistical analyses of data, using software packages such as SPSS, R, or Stata. For example, we have information available to us about the race and ethnicity of students registered with our office, and we have access to information about the demographics of the general student population of our institution. Using these figures, we can conduct a Chi-Square test for goodness of fit to assess whether our demographics are representative. If we identify that a certain group is not accessing our services in a representative manner, that might provoke action on our part, such as outreach to campus partners serving that group.

Different questions require different kinds of analysis, but keep in mind that for statistical analysis beyond descriptive statistics (e.g., means, standard deviations, frequencies, and cross-tabulation), you only want to conduct this analysis if your sample size is large enough to support that analysis.

Qualitative Analysis

For the qualitative data we gather through our open-ended survey questions (and, occasionally, through interviews or focus groups during targeted spring assessments), we use qualitative coding to pick out themes and patterns, which offers deeper into this rich source of data. Qualitative coding is a complex topic, that is worthy of its own practice brief, but there are great introductory texts (e.g., Saldana, 2015) that can introduce interested readers to the topic. In short, the purpose of this approach is to identify themes in qualitative data, which can provide a means of analyzing overall trends, and then individual quotes can help provide deeper insights to readers.

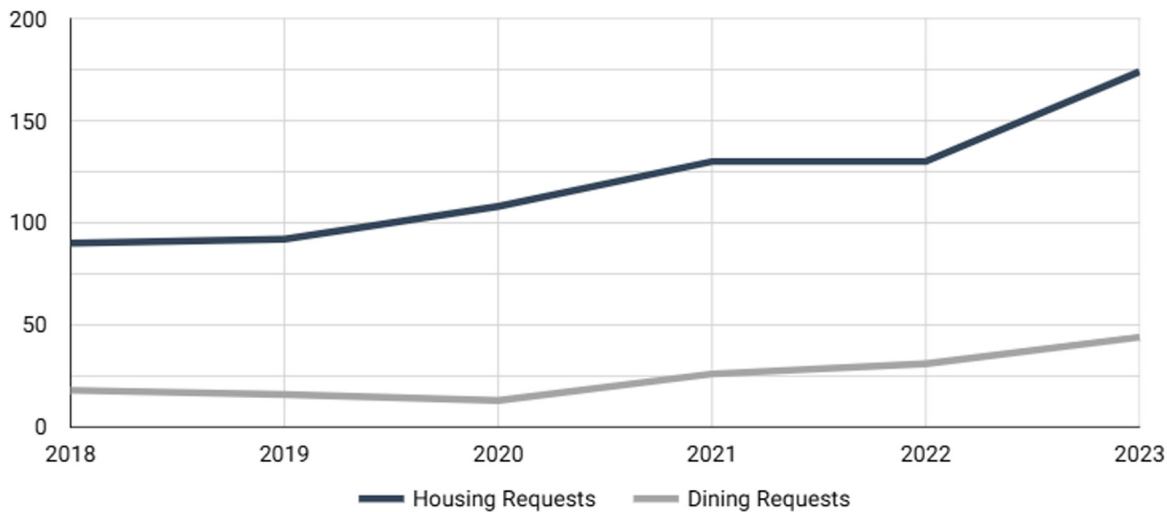
Looker allows us to both showcase the trends our coding identifies and highlight individual quotes. By using a tree map similar to the one showcased in the linked demo, users can visualize the trends identified in coding, as well as review quotes within each identified theme. In building out our data dashboard, we have also highlighted key quotes to showcase alongside our quantitative data. As an example, alongside our graphs showing high satisfaction with our testing center, we might show a student quote describing the profound impact that access to this accommodation has for them.

Allowing users to both see how often themes are appearing in your qualitative data and pick out individual relevant quotes is a powerful tool for telling complex, compelling stories about your work.

Stage 4: Communicating Your Findings

There is a quote attributed to George Bernard Shaw: “The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” While not written with assessment in mind, it is certainly applicable to the practice. Each viewer of your data, each reader of your reports, may come to different conclusions based on the same data. This discrepancy can be influenced by their experience with assessment, their prior assumptions, and their familiarity with the work of your DRO prior to viewing the assessment.

In order to mitigate the risk of miscommunication, we take a few critical steps when reporting out: First, we take steps to ensure stakeholders such as campus partners and administrators understand the relevant terms and programs they find in our assessment. When we present our assessments, we discuss this before showcasing the data. When we provide the dashboard, we also include brief blocks of text that contextualize the data viewers will have access to. We take steps to ensure the clarity and accessibility of the dashboard (e.g., labels, legends); these steps are discussed in greater detail in the companion piece to this article.

Figure 3*Line Graph Display for Non-Academic Accommodations*

Second, we ensure that our data are presented in neutral terms. We want to create opportunities to highlight our achievements and opportunities for growth in equal measure. Transparency is key in assessment. The opportunities for growth we identify can serve as leverage for future requests for support and funding, and the signs of success can demonstrate that such funding would be likely to be put to good use by the team.

Third, we take steps to allow each stakeholder to build their own story from our data. When we present the data, we provide our own narrative based on our expertise and first-hand experience. However, our stakeholders have their own expertise that can add new context to our data. For example, a colleague in residence life might be able to contextualize a sudden shift in use of a certain housing accommodation, or a colleague in multicultural affairs might offer insight into our demographics.

Ultimately, this flexibility is the greatest value to the incorporation of a tool like Looker Studio into our practice. It has allowed for the creation of a live dashboard that can easily be shared with any internal partner, to advocate for the work of our office and to allow our partners to more easily understand and contribute to the work that we do. The work of a DRO is inherently collaborative. While assessment can feel as though it takes place in a vacuum, tools like Looker allow for assessment to contribute, rather than detract, from that spirit of collaboration.

Implications for Practice

Much has been written in recent years about the changing landscape of higher education, whether it is the enrollment cliff (Schuette, 2023), the impact of COVID-19 (Copley & Douthett, 2023), or the practical realities of a shifting political landscape. In disability services, there has been a trend toward increased student involvement with DROs, and an increased desire for inclusion of students with disabilities on college campuses (Shpigelman et al., 2022). There has also been increasing pushback from academics outside of disability services expressing skepticism at the perceived permissiveness of DROs (e.g., Galef, 2024; Levinovitz, 2024). In light of these factors, the role of accessibility professionals will increasingly include justifying the necessity of diverting university resources to DROs, as well as clearly communicating any available measures that evidence the success of DRO services. While assessment is not the only means of telling the story of a given DRO, it is a way of doing so that when done effectively can be convincing, efficient, and can communicate across disciplines. In order for our practice to thrive, proficiency with assessment is a necessary component, particularly for leaders in DROs.

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