

Strategies and Considerations: A Brief on Youth Assessments

Youth Assessment Technical Assistance Background

The Employment and Training Administration (ETA) regularly surveys the field for technical assistance needs. One frequently raised topic is the objective assessment requirement within the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth program. For many youth, the assessment process provokes anxiety. It may remind youth of previous negative experiences within the education system, harsh questioning experiences in institutional settings, or past moments when assessments ruled the youth out of program opportunities. Youth may have experienced multiple assessment interventions and feel over-assessed or perceive assessment tools as having the purpose of highlighting their weaknesses and deficiencies.

This is why developing youth assessment policies and procedures are such a critical part of youth programming. By adopting a strengths-based approach and managing expectations, staff can change the assessment experience for the youth they serve to one that is meaningful and informative, as well as a critical step in educational and career pathway planning. This brief was developed to assist state and local areas in understanding not only the requirements in the law, but also the purpose of assessments, key components of strong assessment tools, and strategies for conducting effective and empowering assessments with youth in the WIOA program.

How does WIOA define objective assessment?

WIOA sec. 129(c)(1)(A) requires youth programs to provide an objective assessment of the academic levels, skill levels, and service needs of each participant. As stated in WIOA sec. 129 (c)(1)(A), the objective assessment includes a review of basic skills, occupational skills, prior work experience, employability, interests, aptitudes (including interests and aptitudes for nontraditional jobs), supportive service needs, strengths, and developmental needs of the youth, for the purpose of identifying appropriate services and career pathways for participants, except that a new assessment of a participant is not required if the provider carrying out such a program determines it is appropriate to use a recent assessment of the participant conducted pursuant to another education or training program. To the youth service provider some components of the WIOA defined objective assessment, such as support needs, are subjective; while academic levels, for example, are objective in nature.

As discussed above, a review of basic skills is required by WIOA as part of the objective assessment. It is important to note that the requirement to review basic skills as part of the objective assessment process is not the same as conducting a basic skills assessment for eligibility determination for the basic skills deficient barrier or as conducting a basic skills assessment for determination of an educational functioning level gain within the measurable skill gains indicator. If using the basic skills deficient component of WIOA Youth eligibility in WIOA (3)(5)(A), programs must use a generally accepted standardized test which DOL defines as an approved test from the list of tests the Secretary of Education determines to be suitable for use in the National Reporting System for Adult Education. The list of approved assessments is published annually in the Federal Register. Likewise, if using the educational functioning level gain type in the measurable skill gains indicator, programs must use one of the approved tests from the list of tests determined suitable for use in the National Reporting System for Adult Education. However, for the review of basic skills as part of the objective assessment, WIOA youth programs are not required to use one of the approved tests from the list of tests determined suitable for use in the National Reporting System for Adult Education. WIOA Youth programs have the flexibility to determine how to conduct the review of basic skills that is required as part of the objective assessment.

Why Do We Use Assessments?

The importance of assessments goes beyond fulfilling WIOA requirements. They are a critical part of programming that enables youth workforce professionals to better understand the youth's background, experiences, strengths, challenges, and needs. The experience of conducting the assessment can strengthen the relationship between the youth workforce professional and the youth as well as define case management needs.

There are several different types of assessment methodologies available to youth workforce professionals that fall along these categories:

- ▶ Collecting quantitative data (can be measured, counted, or expressed numerically) versus qualitative data (non-numerical data such as characteristics and qualities that is observed, descriptive, and subjective).
- ▶ Formal assessments (structured such as written or online) versus informal assessments (observations or unstructured interviews).
- ▶ No cost or purchased tools.
- ▶ Standardized or customized tools.

What Do Assessment Tools Measure?

Assessment Tools Measure -

- Academic levels (reading, math)
- Ability, aptitude, and achievement levels
- Personality inventories
- Skills and competencies
- Basic skills
- Technical (hard) skills
- Soft skills (essential skills, defined by employers)
- Career exploration
- Interests, values, strengths
- Work readiness/employability
- Social/emotional intelligence
- Digital literacy
- Prior work experience
- Reality check/testing
- Life skills
- Supportive service needs
- Developmental needs
- Family environment/needs
- Financial situation/needs

WIOA requirements do not dictate the use of specific assessment tools. It is up to the state and/or local WIOA Youth program to determine which assessment tools they will use. Assessment tools vary in their scope and complexity and in what they measure. Assessment tools measure a variety of characteristics that may assist the youth workforce professional. Programs may choose to have access to a variety of assessment tools which allows for the customization of the assessment process based on the youth's needs. The purpose of this brief is not to recommend any specific assessment tools, but instead share information on what assessment tools measure and what to consider in selecting assessment tools. Assessment tools use objective and subjective methods to gather data.

How Are Assessment Tools Used?

Assessment tools provide a wealth of information about the youth that can be used in a variety of ways that assist both the youth and the youth workforce professional:

- ▶ The experience allows the youth to gain a better understanding of themselves, seeing both the bigger picture and individual events that shaped their experiences. The information generated from these tools assist the youth in understanding their strengths, areas for improvement, and successes they have had. Having this information all in one place may be the first time a youth has had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, begin to explore or articulate interests or gain insights about themselves.
- ▶ The experience allows the youth workforce professional to also understand the youth in a deeper way than perhaps their initial meeting. It creates an opportunity for the staff member to start connecting and building a trusting relationship with the youth.
- ▶ The information gathered shapes and helps determine the individual case management needs and Individual Service Strategy (ISS).
- ▶ Information gathered from assessments can be analyzed to determine patterns of needs or interests among youth served. This can in turn shape program design and the development of new or modification of existing program offerings and activities. Examples include the creation of new work readiness or group activities or new industry-recognized credentialing opportunities.
- ▶ Assessment findings can create new or enhance existing partnership opportunities. Based on the needs identified, new partnerships may be developed, or, with existing partners, information can be shared to create new services, initiatives, or activities.
- ▶ The patterns and findings noted can be used for community awareness campaigns, advocacy efforts, and educational initiatives.

What Should Youth Workforce Professionals Look for in an Assessment Tool?

The number and types of assessments tools are too great and too varied to list or describe in this brief. Neither ETA nor WIOA requires a specific tool(s) to be used for the assessment, nor do they recommend any specific tool(s). It is suggested that youth workforce professionals and their leadership research and review multiple tools and processes to determine which the best fit is for the youth they serve, their staff, and their agency and partners.

Below are suggested questions that can help assist in the determination and selection of assessment tools:

- Does the assessment tool measure the necessary elements?
- Is the tool valid and normed on your target audience?
- Are the results useful and easy to understand and interpret?
- Can the results and information learned be shared with and used by partnering agencies?
- Does the tool accommodate different learning styles?
- Does the assessment offer accommodations for youth with disabilities?
- Is the tool fair, culturally sensitive, and representative?
- Is the tool cost effective?
- Is the tool easy to administer for staff? Does it require special training or certification to facilitate?
- Can the tool be administered in a group, individually, or both?
- Can the tool be administered virtually?

Tips for Conducting Assessments

As new assessment tools are introduced, all youth workforce professionals need training on the use and implementation of the tools. Periodic reviews of the tools should be conducted to determine if the tools are still useful and relevant or whether new assessment methods should be explored. Below are a few tips for leadership and youth workforce professionals to consider as they develop implementation processes:

- ▶ **Adopt a strengths-based approach.**
While it is important to learn about challenges, barriers, and past failed experiences, solely focusing on this can be demoralizing and discouraging for the youth. Be sure to begin with and regularly explore strengths, successes, and opportunities. Acknowledge the achievements and do not allow the focus to be solely on deficiencies.
- ▶ **Map out the timing of the assessment tool and ensure there is enough time.**
This includes the time it takes to set up, review the instructions, answer questions, administer the test, and time for follow-up or a debrief. Create a visual map for the process with all steps and use this as a training tool for staff and a guide for youth.
- ▶ **Create a safe tone and setting for potentially sensitive information.**
Create an assessment environment that ensures privacy and has minimal distractions or noise. Discuss and share written information reviewing confidentiality and include who can or cannot see the information revealed without consent. Review consent protocols.
- ▶ **Manage expectations for the youth.**
Ensure the youth know in advance what to expect during the assessment. This may include how long it will take, what is the purpose of the objective assessment tool, how the information is collected, and how the information will be used. If the assessment includes multiple parts, create a written schedule for the youth to have in advance.
- ▶ **Allow ownership of the process for the youth.**
Like most of us, youth feel disengaged when they do not have control or a stake in a process. Show the youth how they have choices in the process and how this is an opportunity for them to learn more about themselves. Provide examples of how this could lead to new resources and services that will assist them in achieving their goals moving forward.
- ▶ **Use the objective assessment process as a way to connect with the youth.**
By implementing many of these tips, the youth workforce professional is creating a safe place for the youth to share personal information. Use the time during this process to connect with the youth, get to know them, build trust, and strengthen their engagement and connection to the program.

- ▶ **Develop an objective assessment “toolbox.”**
Allow for youth workforce professionals to have access to a variety of objective assessment tools. There may be some tools all youth receive, but where possible, customize additional tools to youth needs and interests.
- ▶ **Set a time to discuss results, offer feedback, and answer questions.**
Continue to adopt a strengths-based approach when sharing the results and feedback. Acknowledge where the youth had positive results, showed interest, and exhibited potential before reviewing areas for improvement or challenges to goals.
- ▶ **Develop staff trainings on the administration of the objective assessment tools.**
Conduct regular trainings for staff to learn how to facilitate the tools, interpret results, and share feedback using a strengths-based approach.
- ▶ **Develop virtual options where possible.**
Where in-person objective assessments are not possible, develop standards and process for virtual implementation. Factor in there may be a need to implement incrementally or in smaller “chunks” and reconsider timing. Evaluate the youth’s technology access and connectivity. Evaluate their technology skills and if necessary, offer training on how to participate in virtual assessments. Determine if the youth is able to participate in a private setting and look for alternatives if this not the case.

Considerations for Youth with Disabilities

When working with youth with disabilities, or youth you suspect may have non-apparent ones such as learning disabilities, workforce professionals may also consider:

- ▶ Does the youth require assessment accommodations? Is there a need for assistive technology?
- ▶ Have previous assessments already been completed that can be reviewed so they do not have to be repeated?
- ▶ Should the assessment be restructured to include additional modalities from standard test taking, such as observations, interviews, family visits, etc.?
- ▶ Do staff have relationships with partners such as Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for guidance, resources, or support if needed?
 - If youth function at a much higher level than written assessment results indicate would be expected, youth service providers might consider consulting with VR or check out the additional resources listed.

Additional Resources

- ❑ TEGL 21-16 – [Third Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\) Title I Youth](#)
- ❑ TEN 21-07 – [Effective Use of Assessment in the Public Workforce Investment System](#)
- ❑ [Career Planning Begins with Assessment: A Guide for Professionals Serving Youth with Educational and Career Development Challenges](#) *National Collaborative on Workforce & Disability for Youth - Institute for Educational Leadership*. While this publication was written in alignment with WIA (versus WIOA), the strategies discussed for understanding and selecting assessment tools and for assessments of youth with disabilities are still relevant.
- ❑ CAST - CAST is a nonprofit education research and development organization that created the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and UDL Guidelines. Their work includes resources, tools and services in workforce and career education. They can be found at [CAST](#).
- ❑ Job Accommodation Network (JAN) – JAN provides guidance and resources on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues for employees, employers, and workforce professionals. They can be found at [JAN](#).