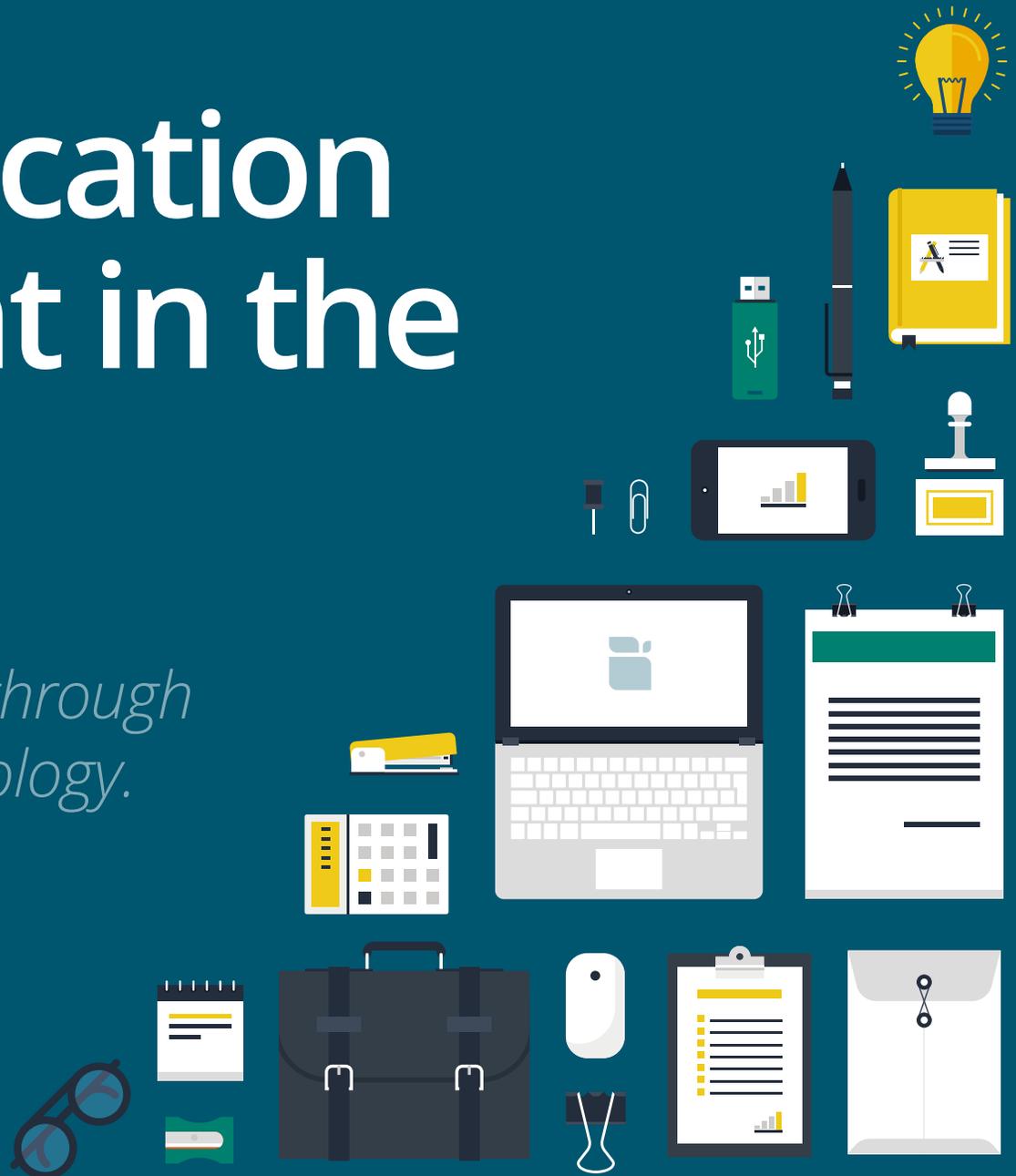


Best Practices

# Higher Education Assessment in the Digital Age

*Making assessment easier through smart application of technology.*

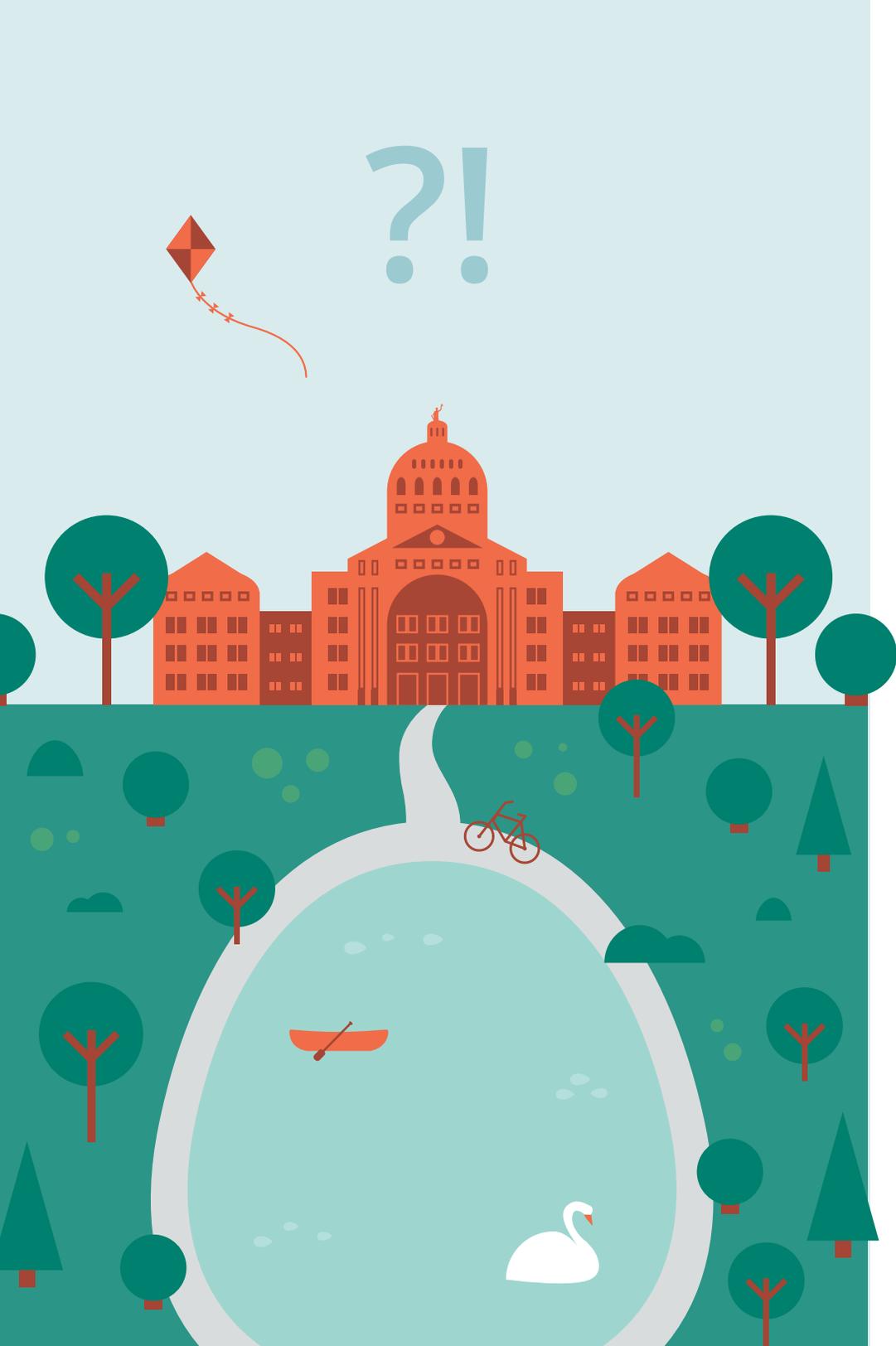
 Tk20™



## It's no secret that we live in a digital age.

Every single day we are bombarded by information that impacts the way we make decisions. Decisions that range from the mundane to the tremendous. Do you read the reviews for a book you're about to buy on Amazon? How about those Yelp reviews of your local coffee shop? In nearly every interaction, we use a process of digital discernment to assess and make decisions about everything from what kind of milk we buy to what house we buy.





The same is true in when it comes to the assessment of higher education. There are few who would dispute that technology has tremendously impacted the way that secondary education is measured.

Institutions need to assure students, faculty, families, the government and the rest of the American public that they are meeting high levels of quality even as they face the potential loss of federal funding and financial aid. In the face of such challenges, it's no longer enough to utilize the tools of pen and paper to assess a program or institution. It doesn't scale, it doesn't translate easily to other departments or groups, it's not replicable or shareable, data cannot be extrapolated from it, and in most cases handwritten notes are no longer accepted as a form of proof for accreditation. A higher level of visibility and metrics needs to be applied. So what is an institution or an organization to do?



## What is Assessment?

First it's important to understand what assessment is.

Think of assessment as a vehicle. Depending on the size of your organization, that vehicle can carry a few people or thousands of them in the same direction. Whether your “vehicle,” the size of a cruise ship or a Smart car, the destination is the same: An improved future. Assessment is how schools prove their worth and tell their own story. It is a tool that gives students and faculty important and meaningful feedback. It is designed to move you toward ever increasing goals that improve the standing of your organization and your students.

Educational assessment usually occurs in one of two formats: classroom or large-scale also known as direct and indirect. In classroom settings, assessment is used to assist learning and gauge students’ achievement over the longer term. In large-scale settings like those used by universities, institutes and organizations, assessments are used by policy makers and educational leaders to evaluate programs and/or obtain information about whether groups of individual students have met learning goals.

The aim of assessment in the education system is to provide clear, valuable information that helps determine the next steps that need to be taken by an institution, a program or an individual.





## Why does assessment matter?

Assessment is often seen in a negative light because it takes teachers, professors and adjuncts away from their core goal--teaching students. Many see it as more paperwork, more forms, more time spent away from the classroom. The truth is that assessment actually aligns with teacher and student goals in a way that helps move both toward greater success.

For one, assessments provide measurable data on the growth of the program. Assessment helps students and faculty get an accurate idea of areas for improvement. It can also open lines of communication across departments and groups and get faculty involved outside of their individual departments. When implemented well it can even develop a sense of community amongst groups and organizations.



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In addition to building community and supporting student goals, assessment is a key in getting or maintaining accreditation for any university, organization or program. More and more accreditors want to see assessment cycles that involve planning, measurement, analysis, reporting and improvement planning. Neglecting to provide this kind of data can cause an organization or a program to lose its accreditation, which can, and often does, lead to a decrease in enrollment, funding and other major issues.

Digital assessment is superior to traditional pen-and-paper assessment because it allows for higher-level visibility across an entire organization. It makes information available from a holistic standpoint. Think of assessment like a medical physical for the entire school or program body. Typically, departments within a single institution are scattered across campuses. Each one has different metrics and information that it needs to assess its own success and the success of its students and faculty. Those measurements are often not the same from department to department, however.

So how do you rectify the data between the engineering school and the business school? *Through a smart digital assessment tool.*

Without that tool, school leaders have no way of definitively knowing what the actual health of the overall school is.

It's important to remember that assessment is not merely a question of collecting more data but building meaningful, data-driven, information and analytics. By implementing digital tools that offer this kind of data digestion, it can help programs and institutions achieve and maintain accreditation, improve planning, measurement, reporting and institute improvements across the board. It is crucial to the success of any program or university to implement the right digital system for assessment. The implementation of a digital assessment tools can help a program or college grow and move forward.

Smart assessment tools give you the power to tell your own institution's story and move toward your goals.

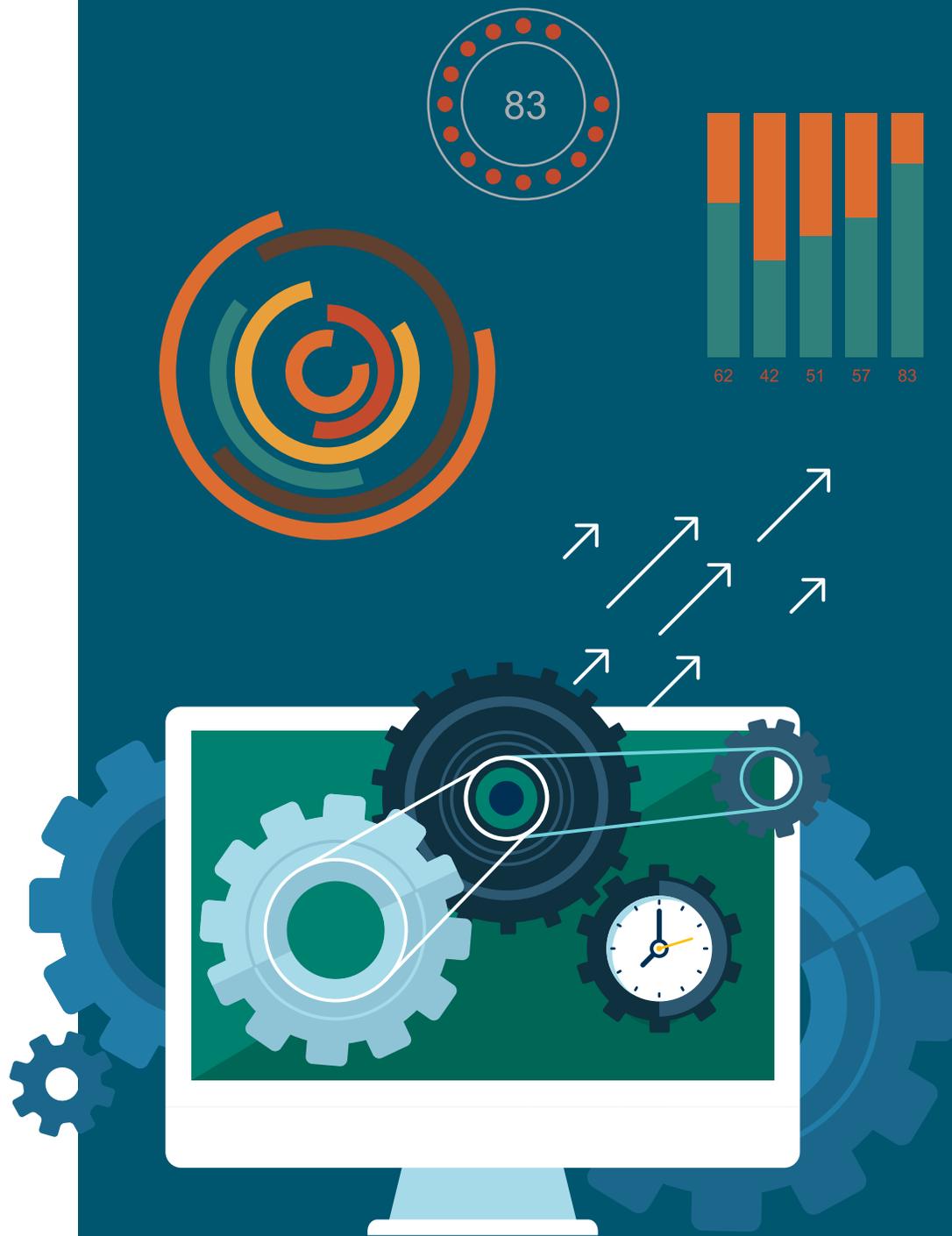


## Best practices in assessment

You wouldn't use a screwdriver to cut down a tree, so why would you use pen and paper to conduct assessment? While each platform is different, it's important to realize that your tools can literally make or break your assessment. It's crucial when choosing a digital assessment system that you adhere to a few basic rules.

Before you begin, identify your educational values and goals. Those values need to not only inform what you've chosen to assess but how the assessment takes place. Next, you need to be crystal clear about what those values and goals are and create measurable signposts both in hard metrics and soft skill assessments that spin up into those goals. Be sure you are only asking the questions that that are aligned to the assessment objectives and program goals. It's also important to take constant, regular measurements in assessment. It should not be a once-a-year-event as it won't provide the kind of data needed to truly know what is happening in a program.

Moving to an electronic assessment and accreditation platform is a great time to consider revamping your assessment tools. You'll want to work with faculty and program leaders to take a fresh look at your assessment instruments before moving them to an electronic form in a platform like Tk20, which can accommodate a variety of institution-designed direct and indirect assessments.



# Whether you are creating a new assessment tool or refreshing an existing one, consider these tips:

- Do you remember the old adage from grammar school? Tighten and combine? Short and sweet is always better when it comes to assessment. Use shorter rubrics and surveys that are more to the point. Tools that are too long can lose their effectiveness as the user completes the instrument, and can also result in higher incomplete or non-response rates.
- Don't ask users to provide information that you can get elsewhere in your system. Smart systems provide great tools that can get the data you need without burdening your users.
- Update your instruments to remove any outdated language, now that you are accepting submissions in an electronic form. For example, paper application forms may ask students to print their name, circle a choice, or staple a transcript to the application form. Take this time to revise your instrument language to meet the needs of your digital users.
- Consider reformatting some of your text-based entries to a multiple choice or radio button entry, which will allow you to aggregate your data whenever possible.
- Consider creating instruments that allow for a variety of feedback. For example, an assessment tool could contain a rubric followed by a comments area for specific qualitative feedback for the student being assessed.
- When creating rubrics and Likert scales, consider using point values in addition to performance descriptors and ratings so that you can take advantage of some of the basic descriptive statistics like mean, median, mode, and standard deviation. When choosing a platform, it's important to ensure that it can handle these kinds of basic statistics and deliver actionable information to your institution, college or program.
- Rubrics that contain multiple criteria with clear descriptors and common performance ratings can be great feedback for students. Clear descriptors in rubrics allow students to reflect and learn from their assessment. Take the time after a data collection period to review your data, share it widely, and identify ways to improve your program and to improve student learning at your institution.

## Conclusion

There's no question that the era of pen-and-paper assessment is rapidly coming to an end. In order to succeed in today's competitive and ever-changing landscape, colleges, institutions, organizations and programs need to evolve and find new ways to take advantage of the digital revolution. By utilizing an outcome management system that integrates data collecting, planning, assessment, and reporting, you can easily reach your campus or programmatic goals and deliver outstanding service to your users on all levels. Through good tools and best practices, universities, colleges, organizations and institutions are able to meet the responsibilities they have and tell their own powerful stories in the process. It's time to tell your own story through smart data.

Find a better way forward today.

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