



RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

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Current Assessment Needs in Adult Education and Workforce Development

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The [Adult Skills Assessment Program \(ASAP\)](#) is an initiative funded by the [U.S. Institute of Education Sciences \(IES\)](#) to improve the assessment of adult skills for adult learners, educators, employers, and career counselors. To achieve this goal, we conducted a comprehensive needs assessment to understand and document the specific assessment needs in adult education and workforce development.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Open assessment resources tailored to lower-skilled and culturally diverse adult learners are in demand.**
- **Adult learners have expressed a need for actionable information to help achieve their personal and occupational goals.**
- **Educators have expressed a need to align assessments to the curriculum and instruction they use daily.**
- **Employees and employers have expressed a need for tools that can help identify in-demand skills and train the current and future workforce.**

BACKGROUND

Technology significantly influences our daily lives, enhancing our potential for improved living conditions. However, whether technology benefits us or makes us fall behind depends on continuing to update our skills throughout life. The knowledge and skills learned in formal schooling are no longer enough to succeed in a technology-driven 21st century.^a Many (middle-skill) jobs have disappeared and will continue to fade due to automation in the workplace.^b

Adult basic education in the United States is rooted in the [College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education \(CCRSAE\)](#). These standards also influence the assessments in adult education, as mandated by the [National Reporting System \(NRS\)](#). While NRS assessments offer essential data for program accountability, there is a need for more detailed information related to specific instructional units to truly grasp students' strengths and weaknesses.

Unfortunately, a gap exists between the skills required by employers and what is assessed in adult education. Notably, the state of Texas has made strides to link academic standards with industry needs via the [Texas Adult Education and Literacy Content Standards](#). These standards connect with the U.S. Department of Labor's online occupational information database, [O*NET](#). Yet, current NRS measures are not tailor-made for non-academic workers' requirements in the modern workplace.

Additionally, adult learners are considerably diverse in various ways, and current adult skills assessments are not typically designed to incorporate principles of culturally responsive and accessible assessments; some assessments even exclude learners with lower literacy skills. Using culturally responsive and accessible assessment principles in adult education is crucial to allow adults from various backgrounds and ability levels to demonstrate their capabilities,^c represent an increasingly diverse population of adult learners,

and exhibit existing workforce potential that may otherwise go undetected.^d

In this ASAP brief, we summarize the research conducted through focus groups, literature reviews, and a listening session to understand and document the specific assessment needs in adult education and workforce development in the United States.

CO-DESIGNING ASSESSMENTS WITH DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS

We conducted six focus groups with diverse learners and employees and a listening session with educators. These discussions helped us to understand individuals’ needs, familiarity, and experience with digital technology as well as to better understand the literacy and math materials with which frontline workers (e.g., stackers, line leads, and their supervisors) interact at work. Table 1 summarizes the key characteristics of each session, which took place in Arkansas, New York, and Massachusetts.

**TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUPS, INTERVIEWS,
AND LISTENING SESSION**

Group	Participants (n)	Date	Location
Adult Learners	2	May, 2022	NY (Online)
	1	May, 2022	NY (Online)
Employees	7	June, 2022	MA
	6	Sept, 2022	AR
	6	Sept, 2022	AR
	2	Sept, 2022	AR (Online)
Adult Educators	46	April, 2022	MA (Online)

PERSONALIZED, INTEGRATED, AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE ASSESSMENTS FOR ADULT LEARNERS

The results of the needs assessment indicated that adult learners’ and educators’ backgrounds and needs are diverse, but all agree there is a strong need for open assessment resources for lower-skilled and culturally

diverse learners to provide them with actionable information to help achieve their personal and occupational goals. Learners want to know which items they answered right and wrong, and educators want to provide students with concrete examples of what they were and were not able to do and explain their errors in the assessment. Ultimately, adult learners’ motivations to continue education typically involve finding a job or promotion in their current position.

On the one hand, educators expressed a need for assessment information connected to the standards and curriculum that guide their instruction. They want to connect the item-level information from assessments to the standards that guide their instruction and the curriculum they use. The challenge for test developers is that instruction and curriculum can and do vary across programs and teachers. This means each curriculum may implement the same content standards differently, and each teacher may implement the same curriculum differently. Due to this and other challenges, adult education assessments rarely meet these needs, thus creating an abundance of opportunity and momentum for new generations of assessments.

On the other hand, employees and employers have expressed a need for tools that can help identify in-demand skills and train the current and future workforce. Some current workplace demands include operating a robot to pack items in an assembly line, reading safety manuals, identifying when a machine breaks down and understanding how to fix it, or finding someone else to fix it. Mastering those tasks requires specific organizational knowledge from the worker’s industry, foundational literacy, numeracy, and complex digital problem-solving skills.

These results highlight a noticeable disconnect where educators ask for curriculum-

aligned assessments, learners aim to acquire job-related skills for employment or promotion, and employers seek candidates trained in skills that are currently in high demand within their industries. In general, adult education lacks assessments that attend to learners' characteristics and goals, are integrated with the existing needs and goals of educators and employers, and embrace the cultural diversity of the adult learner population.

BOTTOM LINE

Current adult education and workforce development assessments reasonably meet some of the aforementioned needs. However, they do not meet all stakeholders' needs equally and to the extent they would desire. The emphasis on using assessments for accountability, particularly summative scores, has led to assessments in adult education that are not designed to provide actionable information to the learners, their instructors, and their employers. A single

assessment will hardly be able to meet all stakeholders' needs to the desired extent. Instead, a more optimal solution would be to develop a digital warehouse (repository) of assessment modules that can be electronically assembled and delivered in different configurations to serve specific assessment needs. The [Adult Skills Assessment Program \(ASAP\)](#) is one of the first attempts to respond to these needs by developing an assessment system that delivers real-time customizable assessments to measure and improve adult learners' literacy and numeracy skills. ASAP incorporates [socioculturally responsive assessment principles](#) to serve the needs of all learners by embracing the uniqueness of their characteristics. In ASAP, for example, the adult learner will decide the type of test they want to take, when to take it, and the context within which the assessment will be framed, as well as when, where, and to whom the assessment result will be delivered.

^a[Kirsch, I., Sands, A., Robbins, S., Goodman, M., & Tannenbaum, R. \(2021\). *Buttressing the middle: A case for reskilling and upskilling America's middle-skill workers in the 21st century*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.](#)

^b[Autor, D. H. \(2019\). Work of the past, work of the future. *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, 109, 1-32. <https://doi.org/10.1257/pandp.20191110>](#)

^c[Sireci, S. G. \(2020\). Standardization and UNDERSTANDARDIZATION in educational assessment. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 39\(3\), 100-105. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/emip.12377>](#)

^d[Blair, P. Q., Castagnino, T. G., Groshen, E. L., Debroy, P., Auguste, B., Ahmed, S., Garcia Diaz, F., & Bonavida, C. \(2020\). *Searching for STARs: Work experience as a job market signal for workers without Bachelor's Degrees*. NBER Working Paper No. 26844. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26844>](#)

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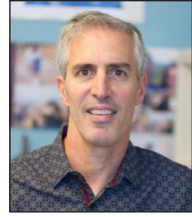
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The [Adult Skills Assessment Program \(ASAP\)](#) is a project of UMass Amherst's [Center for Educational Assessment \(CEA\)](#). The CEA is one of the largest, most prolific, and influential University-based research and service institutions in the area of educational assessment. Our faculty members, staff, and graduate students work together on funded research projects, and service and outreach activities, to improve educational assessment practices in ways that support student learning and benefit individuals and organizations.

For more information, contact [Kat Tremblay](#), Managing Editor.

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