

Indoor Climbing Programs Assessments: A How To Guide

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in [CWA Blog](#)



In our last blog post, we wrote about some lessons we have learned in our work supporting indoor climbing gyms and program teams in designing staff training.

One of the key takeaways from our work is the power of assessment in identifying needs, means of change, and progress. With limited resources, staff, and time, program assessment is the key to making sure resources are effectively allocated and impactful.

Assessment takes many forms as you can evaluate your programs or your staff with different strategies. No matter which direction you go, assessment should take form in comparing structured goals. Assessment means that we are identifying goals we want to accomplish and determining the progress we have made toward those goals, during a specified operational period. That operational period could vary from a season to a fiscal year, or the entire operating period of your gym.

For the sake of this article, we can say a climbing gym's program goals are retention, participant satisfaction, and uniform coaching behaviors.

Assessments come in three stages, each essential to program development.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment tells us where we are in relation to where we need to be.

Examples of formative assessments include a new hire skills assessment, a member survey prior to a new initiative, or a program staff goal-setting check-in with management

All of these tools allow us to determine how close we are to meeting those goals. An example of this might be a formative assessment of a youth climbing team at the beginning of a season

This might be a formative assessment of a youth climbing team, at the beginning of a season. To conduct a formative assessment, we might determine that as a climbing gym, we want 90 percent year-to-year team retention and high satisfaction. We might also decide whether there are coaching behaviors that are important to our team and identify them. To assess this, we would collect data on retention from the past season, do a pre-season survey of families and their expectations and observe an early coaching session.

Ongoing Assessment

Once we have a baseline, it is essential that we perform ongoing assessments.

While assessment is often misconstrued as a lot of work or large-scale surveys, ongoing assessments can be minimal work, but still allow a strong sense of program impacts or a program’s progress towards its goals.

Some examples of ongoing assessments include:

- one-on-one check-ins
- visual assessments
- written check-ins

Below is an example of coaching behaviors that can be assessed and a rubric that aids in easy assessment. The behaviors were identified, put into a rubric, and allow program managers to visually check if their program staff are engaging in best practices.

Preparing the Learning Environment	Engaging Participants Upon Arrival	Managing the Learning Environment	Engaging Participants Throughout Practice	Engaging Families/Paren

- All equipment and materials are ready
- Instruction area is ready and visually separated
- All appropriate signs are posted and the space for the members has been reserved
- Participants are greeted and given initial instruction
- Participants are gathered for group discussion
- Participants are rolled into the initial activity
- Pre-teaching safety expectations
- On-going maintenance to ensure safety and appropriate equipment are available
- Pre-teaching and follow through of space sharing and etiquette expectations
- Pre-teaching activity rules using TELL, SHOW, DO
- Performing regular check-ins with individuals related to personal goals
- Regular opportunities for group reflection
- Greeting parents and answering questions before practice
- Consistent and Quality communication with families
- Monthly progress reports to families

Cumulative Assessment

This is what most of us think about when we consider program assessment. Cumulative assessments allow us to consider a full operational period and our performance towards goals during that period. We might compile data from the rubrics above and see progress over a season or conduct another member survey to see if satisfaction increased or decreased or we might compare year-to-year retention. This information allows program managers to focus training resources on areas that require support, identify role models on staff, and best meet the needs of participants and gym members.

Next Steps

A comprehensive program assessment plan **includes formative, ongoing, and cumulative assessments**. As we have outlined in previous articles, this assessment needs to align with the *goals, mission, and vision* of your climbing program.

This assessment also assists us with the challenging work of determining how to grow our programs and where to devote resources and time.

While assessment may sound like another task to add to an evergrowing list of work associated with managing a climbing program, a sound assessment program can be minimal additional work, with **incredible payoffs for your program**, staff, and climbers!

If you're interested in learning more about how program assessment can impact your programs, reach out to Bix and Pat of Headwall Group at info@headwallgroup.com.

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About the Headwall Group



The [Headwall Group](#) was founded by Bix Firer and Pat Brehm. Bix Firer (MA, University of Chicago) is an Associate Professor of Outdoor Studies at Alaska Pacific University and has worked as a wilderness educator, trainer, facilitator, and experiential educator for over a decade.



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