

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



Assessing Achievement of Department Learning Outcomes

Iowa Outcomes Assessment Papers

A useful assessment plan incorporates a variety of strategies for examining student learning. No single approach serves all departments equally well.

Iowa Outcomes Assessment Papers identify common department practices that can be integrated into a department's overall assessment efforts.

This paper focuses on principles for developing a manageable plan for program-wide assessment of student learning outcomes.

Using Evidence of Student Learning as a Basis for Reflecting on Department Practices

The goal of outcomes assessment is to look systematically at what students in a department are learning, across courses and over time, through their experiences in the major.

However, student learning over an entire degree program is complex and multifaceted, and it is highly unlikely that it can be adequately portrayed by a single assessment, or at a single point in time.

A useful, effective assessment plan will seek to identify a variety of indicators that can contribute to an ongoing composite profile of student learning in the department. Effective assessment plans are:

Multidimensional

Since learning in most cases cannot be captured by a singular measure, effective assessment plans make use of a variety of both direct and indirect assessments.

- **Direct** assessments identify what your students have learned, often based on work they have done within or across courses (projects, tests, portfolios, etc.). These assessments demonstrate student learning, but they might not help you identify what helped students learn or what challenges they faced.
- **Indirect** assessments identify perceptions of your program, often through interviews or surveys of students, alumni, or others in the community. These assessments ask about student experiences in the program or effects of their learning, but they only indirectly identify what students learned.

Useful for the Department

Department assessment of learning outcomes should focus on information that you are able to use within the department. The goal is not simply to get more information about students, but to use that information as a means for reflecting on department practices.

Use lessons learned from outcomes assessment to identify successes as well as areas for improvement, and modify your assessment plan as your program develops over time so that you can observe effects of changes you are making.

Sustainable

As much as possible, make use of information that is readily available, or that can be collected through regular department and class activities. The more an assessment plan varies from routine department practices, the less likely it is to be sustained over time.

Information that is readily available might include:

- capstone projects or senior theses
- internship or practicum experiences
- performances or recitals
- student learning portfolios
- student meetings with undergraduate advisors

Additional information might be readily available from sources outside the curriculum, such as

- student participation in campus organizations or events
- internship coordinators or site supervisors
- student or alumni reflections on their undergraduate experiences
- employers
- certification or licensure exams

You may find that you need additional information to assess some aspects of your department learning outcomes. In that case, any new department-wide assessment that is introduced will be most useful if it is coordinated with course-specific assessments already in place.

Systematic

Incidental assessments (informal student comments, unsolicited email, etc.) are often helpful, but it is rarely clear how representative individual student comments are. Systematically choose who, when, and what to assess so that you can be more certain of what your findings represent.

Thorough Over Time

Your assessment plan should address each of your department's learning outcomes, though not necessarily at the same time. In any given year, you might choose to focus on assessment of a particular outcome, knowing that there is a plan in place for examining learning related to your other department outcomes over a two-to-four-year period of time.

Used by the Department

To help make sure that your assessment plan is both useful and used, build faculty consideration of assessment findings into the plan from the beginning. In your department's assessment plan, indicate not only when and how learning will be assessed, but also when findings will be brought to faculty for analysis and collective review.

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