

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



Bringing Student Grades into Outcomes Assessment

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.

Grading is a routine assessment activity in every department, and there are many resources available on effective grading practices. This paper focuses on practical guidelines and principles for departments that want to incorporate lessons learned from grading into their program-wide outcomes assessment.

What can student grades tell you about achievement of department learning outcomes?

Grades can contribute to your department's outcomes assessment efforts by helping you identify elements such as:

- Student success in courses or projects that directly address particular department learning outcomes
- Individual student achievement across courses
- Patterns of achievement for groups of students such as participants in service learning, undergraduate research, or study abroad
- Points in the program at which students tend to do particularly well, or where they typically face challenges

Grades play a central role in assessment of student learning throughout the university, but there are some additional factors to consider when using student grades as a source of information for departmental outcomes assessment.

Course Information for Students vs. Program Information for Faculty

Grades communicate most clearly in the context of the course in which the grade is earned. Faculty set grading criteria on a course-by-course basis and design assignments and tests that uniquely fit learning goals and grading criteria for the course. Grades then convey to students how effectively the faculty member thinks they have learned in that course.

When assessing department learning outcomes, the goal is not to communicate with students about effectiveness of their learning, but to provide evidence to faculty about the effectiveness of their program. Since all grades are tied to courses, faculty must have a shared sense of what grades mean across courses in order to know what grading patterns say about the program as a whole.

Grades alone tell you very little about what students learned in a course. For example, all students receiving an "A" in a course might mean:

- The faculty member effectively helped all students reach the highest level of achievement in the course, or
- Students had no difficulty completing the tasks they were assigned, or
- Grading criteria did not make meaningful distinctions among high, medium, and low levels of student learning.

Similarly, all students receiving a “C” or below could suggest a wide range of possible actions for the department to take:

- Let students know what to do differently in order to study more effectively and be better prepared for future classes
- Change the curriculum to better prepare students for difficult courses
- Modify teaching practices to give more support for student success
- Adapt grading criteria to better reflect learning that is occurring

By themselves, grades won’t identify either program effectiveness or areas for improvement. For grades to be useful as program-level information, faculty need to agree on common grading practices and have common understandings of what grades mean across courses.

Using Lessons Learned From Grades as Program Information

Departments vary widely in the extent to which they find it useful to develop common understandings of grades across courses. For departments that want to bring lessons learned from grading into their outcomes assessment, faculty in the department need to work together to:

- Identify how learning goals for a course are related to goals for other courses and for the program as a whole.
- Determine how assignments, tests, and classroom activities contribute to achievement of identified learning goals.
- Agree on grading criteria and reference points so that faculty share a common sense of what course grades communicate about achievement of department learning goals.
- Implement agreed upon grading practices, so that faculty members are all applying criteria in similar ways in their courses that address department learning outcomes.
- Reserve time at faculty meetings to review grading patterns, discuss what they tell you about department support for student achievement of learning outcomes, and identify possible areas for improvement.
- Consider grading patterns alongside other evidence of student learning such as learning portfolios, capstone projects, senior theses, final performances, or exams that represent a synthesis of student learning and thinking across their experiences in the department.
- Use information learned from grades to inform department practices and decisions about curriculum, advising, prerequisites, or other learning opportunities for students.

Grades are useful as program-level information when faculty agree on common grading practices and have common understandings of what grades mean across courses.

