

# What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



## Developing 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 practical strategies for departments that are developing, revising, or updating learning outcomes for their undergraduate programs.

### What Do You Want Students to Learn as a Result of Their Experiences in Your Department?

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. It begins with faculty working together to articulate a shared understanding of what they want students in their department to learn.

#### Getting Started

The first step in outcomes assessment is to identify what the department hopes to see students learn through courses and other learning opportunities offered by the program. Departments have approached this task in variety of ways:

- **Faculty Consensus:** Many departments have begun developing department learning outcomes through a faculty discussion of characteristics they hope to see in their graduates.

Starting points for this discussion might include identifying distinguishing characteristics of a successful graduate (hypothetical or actual), types of activities or problem-solving that graduates typically engage in, or common post-graduation paths taken by students.

- **Syllabus Study:** Another way to begin articulating department outcomes is to review syllabi for existing courses to see what outcomes have developed across courses and over time.

The outcomes that emerge from the syllabus study can become the basis for a discussion of department outcomes as faculty reflect on how fully these course-based outcomes represent their goals for undergraduate learning in the department as a whole.

- **Peer Departments:** Some departments review learning outcomes of other departments at UI or at peer institutions as a springboard for articulating their own outcomes. In what ways do they see themselves as similar to, and distinct from, these peer departments?

- **Disciplinary Organizations and Accrediting Bodies:** In some fields, learning outcomes are suggested by disciplinary organizations or accrediting bodies. Depending on the field, it's sometimes possible to add to or customize these externally defined outcomes.

In all these approaches, an important common feature is that the outcomes reflect faculty members' shared understanding of what they want their students to learn. Individuals may be appointed to provide leadership and coordination for the department's outcomes assessment efforts, but the department learning outcomes should reflect input and participation of all faculty members who are teaching undergraduates.

### Focus on Learning

Outcomes assessment focuses on what students will learn as a result of their experiences throughout the program, rather than what students will be taught in individual courses.

Learning outcomes are most useful when they are stated in terms that can be readily identified by faculty and by students. For example, it is a greater challenge for both faculty and students to identify exactly what students *know* or *understand* than it is to identify what they can *demonstrate*, *distinguish*, or *create*.

### Focus on Integration and Synthesis

Students often concentrate on learning in particular courses, rather than on connections across courses and broader contexts into which their learning fits. Department learning outcomes can provide students with a more integrated sense of what faculty expect them to learn and be able to do as a result of their overall experience in the major.

As a result, students will be in a better position to assess their progress and make decisions about their learning within and across courses.

### A Guide to Mapping the Curriculum

Department learning outcomes provide a unifying framework for courses and other learning opportunities. With learning outcomes as a guide, some departments have found it helpful to map out where learning related to each outcome is introduced, extended, or assessed in the curriculum.

This curriculum map can help faculty see how learning in their own courses relates to learning in their colleagues' courses, and it can also show students how particular courses fit into their overall learning plan.

### Setting the Stage for Self-Assessment

Department learning outcomes help prepare the way for department reflection and self-assessment related to each outcome.

The primary goal of outcomes assessment is to provide a window for reflecting on department practices. For each outcome, there should be points at which faculty can identify how well the department is achieving the outcome: What will patterns of student learning and performance, within and across courses, tell you about how effectively the department is supporting student success?

Learning outcomes are most useful when they focus on what students will learn, rather than what students will be taught.

