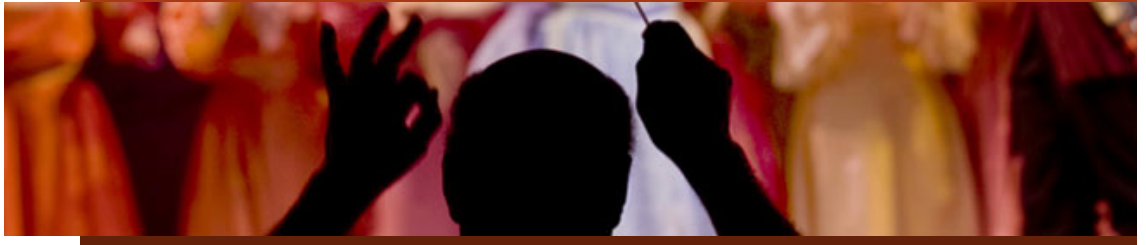


# What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



## Painless Assessment Meetings

### 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 ways that common department practices can be integrated into a department's overall assessment efforts.

This paper presents ways to manage some of the challenges that can hinder effective assessment, and to use assessment constructively to contribute to the work of the department.

### Three Words That Rarely Occur in the Same Sentence

Many departments agree in principle with the idea of outcomes assessment. They value finding out more about what students are learning across courses, over time, in their major, and they appreciate being able to consider evidence of student learning as they reflect on program quality.

And yet outcomes assessment can get sidetracked. Some people are put off by the potential scope of the task, and they would rather postpone it until an unknown point in a hoped-for future when more resources are available.

Others may feel like they're starting over at the beginning whenever assessment comes up – especially if records from previous assessments are hard to find, or have limited value because of department changes since they were last compiled.

In other cases, extensive efforts may have gone into outcomes assessment in the past, but findings didn't get used constructively. People would rather not take time for further assessment if they think it wasn't worthwhile the last time.

No wonder people don't always look forward to meetings about assessment.

Challenges like these can pose significant obstacles to meaningful outcomes assessment, but they are not insurmountable. Departments find that assessment contributes most to their work when it is designed with the following features:

### Manageable Steps

Much of the pain that gets associated with assessment comes from trying to do too much at once. Assessment is most constructive when it is handled incrementally in selected, manageable steps:

- Identify the Current Scope: Focus on particular outcomes, program components, or upcoming decisions, keeping in mind how this current focus fits into the bigger picture of the department's outcomes.
- Set a Schedule: Devise a reasonable timeline with specific target dates for compiling, reporting, and acting on assessment findings.
- Select Participants: Some efforts or decisions need full faculty involvement; others work better when a small working group is given authority to act on the department's behalf.

## Targeted Expectations

If assessment has been planned in manageable steps, then meetings about assessment are most useful when they maintain a similar focus.

- Agree to focus the discussion of assessment findings on the specific questions that the assessment was designed to address.
- Weigh assessment findings and lessons learned alongside other information the department has collected that is related to the focus of your assessment.
- If questions remain that are beyond the scope of your assessment findings, make plans to address them in future assessment efforts.

## Sustained Over Time

Maintain the discussion by planning a long-term cycle for outcomes assessment, addressing each of the department's learning outcomes at some point in the cycle. Use this plan as a framework to help you:

- Situate current assessment efforts in the context of previous and future assessment efforts.
- Document assessment efforts so that lessons learned can be carried forward as people responsible for coordinating assessment change over time.
- Review earlier assessment efforts and actions taken, both to monitor progress and to avoid unnecessarily repeating work that's already done.
- Periodically review and update the assessment plan itself as you evaluate how well it is serving your program's needs for information.

## Future Focused

Discussion of assessment findings should focus on identifying lessons that can be learned from current programs, but always with a view to where the program wants to be headed next.

- What program successes can the department continue to build on?
- What challenges can we anticipate that we need to prepare for?
- What can be enhanced or further developed?

## Transparent Follow-up

Conclude discussion of assessment findings by identifying follow-up actions.

- Next steps might include:
  - Recognizing program successes and publicly acknowledging them
  - Implementing changes suggested by assessment findings
  - Identifying needs for further assessment and making plans to carry it out
  - Exploring new directions for program development
- Identify a person or working group who will have responsibility and authority to implement the next steps you have determined.
- Specify a timeline for implementation and progress reports on steps taken.

Much of the pain that gets associated with assessment comes from trying to do too much at once.

