

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



Using Student Learning Portfolios for Departmental 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 ways that common department practices can be integrated into a department's overall assessment efforts.

Student portfolios are used for authentic assessment of student learning in a number of disciplines. This paper focuses on practical guidelines and principles for departments that choose to incorporate lessons learned from student portfolios into their program-wide outcomes assessment.

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

Student portfolios offer departments a rich portrayal of their students' learning across courses, over time, in the department.

In portfolios, students document and reflect on their learning, receive and respond to faculty feedback on their work, and demonstrate the development of their knowledge and skills as they progress through the program.

If student portfolios are deliberately structured around program learning outcomes, then departments can use the portfolios as a source of direct evidence of student learning with respect to each outcome.

Evidence of Student Learning

Learning portfolios give students an active role in selecting and presenting examples of their work that best represent their learning. Portfolios create opportunities for students to:

- **Reflect on and articulate what they are learning, by ...**
 - *Reviewing the work they have done for their courses.*
 - *Selecting examples that they think best show what they have learned.*
 - *Explaining what they have chosen to include in their portfolios, and why.*
- **Participate in assessing the quality of their learning, by ...**
 - *Responding to faculty feedback on their work.*
 - *Working with faculty to identify next steps for further development.*
- **Make connections across their courses, by ...**
 - *Reviewing how their knowledge and skills have developed over time.*
 - *Reflecting on course-specific assignments in light of their other learning experiences in the program.*

This information can help departments review both what the students are learning and how their learning is supported by their experiences in the major.

Principles for Using Portfolios in Outcomes Assessment

To assess outcomes, departments select and examine evidence of their students' learning, much in the same way that students select and reflect on evidence of their own learning as they create their portfolios. Outcomes assessment, like portfolio assessment, is based on the principle that assessment is best thought of as something you do, not just something that is done to you.

In both cases, assessment is a means to an end – both to document student learning and to identify ways that it can be extended and improved.

Selective Sampling

Just as learning portfolios do not need to comprehensively present all the work a student has done, so also departments can base outcomes assessment on selective samples of their students' work. Options include reviewing

- a random sample of student portfolios
- a cross-section of student work that faculty recognize as typical
- student work that stands out as exemplary

Sampling of student portfolios can be selective, but it is not arbitrary. Identify samples of work from student portfolios that will address questions your department wants to examine, and review student work in systematic ways.

Each sampling strategy has its own advantages and limitations. As with any other review of evidence, part of the process is reporting what was selected for review, and why.

Systematic Review

To help maintain consistency while reviewing portfolios, many departments create a checklist or rubric that identifies criteria for quality of student work and specifies levels of competence within those criteria.

Some departments may want to start with an outcome and review all student work related to that outcome. Others may start with a particular assignment (such as a capstone assignment or senior project), and review student work as a way of reflecting on achievement across department outcomes.

Looking systematically at learning across students lets you identify patterns in achievement, reflect on how the department is contributing to student success, and consider department actions that might further develop student learning.

Reviewed by the Department and Used to Inform Program Practices

The value of taking time to review student portfolios will depend on how this information is used by the department. To get the most value from reviewing student portfolios,

- Add discussion of student portfolios to the agenda of faculty meetings on a regular basis.
- Use lessons learned from reviewing portfolios to inform department practices such as communicating program expectations to students, revising the curriculum, or advising.
- Document actions taken based on your review of portfolios. For example,

“A review of student portfolios revealed a relatively narrow range of ... in students' work, so we will start adding ... to our core courses in order to give students a broader range of examples to draw from.”

After an appropriate length of time, follow up to evaluate effects of changes that were made.

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