

Department Strategies for Supporting Faculty and Students During the Spring 2020 Pandemic Response

Learning outcomes assessment at the university rests on faculty expertise and department leadership. Each department establishes learning outcomes for its programs, determines how to best organize its curriculum to support student learning, devises appropriate strategies for assessing student learning, and decides how to use assessment findings to further develop its programs. An annual report showing the extent of department assessment efforts is available at assessment.uiowa.edu/learning-outcomes-reports

Two weeks after the transition to virtual instruction was announced in Spring 2020, the university recommended that departments alter plans for their usual program-level outcomes assessment and focus instead on collecting information they would need in order to help support faculty and students during the pandemic (Appendix One). After the semester ended, the Department Executive Officer (DEO) or Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) for each department was asked to provide an update on their efforts by using an online Assessment Short Form (Appendix Two); they also had the option of responding via the usual Assessment Update form if they preferred (Appendix Three).

Approximately three-fourths of undergraduate degree programs responded by the beginning of July 2020, representing a cross-section of departments in arts, business, education, health professions, humanities, languages, social sciences, and STEM. This summary provides an overview of common strategies identified by departments, followed by excerpts from descriptions they provided in response to four questions:

#1. Steps taken by departments to systematically hear from faculty	2
1.A Use of existing communication channels.....	2
1.B Regularly scheduled open meetings	2
1.C DEO or DUS outreach to faculty.....	2
1.D Department-sponsored faculty development.....	2
1.E Facilitating collaboration outside of meetings	3
#2. Steps taken by departments to systematically hear from students	3
2.A Class meetings	3
2.B DEO or DUS outreach to majors	3
2.C Surveys.....	3
2.D Advisors	4
2.E Student representation on department committees	4
#3. Lessons learned through the department's interactions with students and faculty.....	4
3.A Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Class Sessions.....	4
3.B Support for Students.....	5
3.C Feeling the Loss of Meeting In-Person	6
3.D Value of Meeting with Colleagues	6
#4. Questions or challenges that the department is anticipating as you plan for next year.....	6
4.A Uncertainty	6
4.B Health and Safety	7
4.C Faculty Work and Well-Being	7
4.D Teaching	7
Additional Resources	8

Note: Departments received an earlier version of this report that identifies which department provided each example that is cited. This version of the report does not identify departments or colleges by name. Eight of the university's 12 colleges have undergraduate programs, and some comments cite steps taken by College leadership; except for cases that specifically identify college-level steps taken, these examples represent the actions of academic departments and major programs

#1. Steps taken by departments to systematically hear from faculty

1.A Use of existing communication channels

Nearly all departments reported utilizing existing communication channels, such as faculty meetings, department email discussion lists, and committees that were already in place prior to the pandemic:

- Our department maintained an ongoing email discussion through our faculty listserv regarding how people were modifying courses, what things that worked well or didn't work well ... Some faculty shared how they were utilizing regular class time with respect to synchronous and asynchronous options.
- Regular zoom faculty meetings; email correspondence on teaching issues; regular meetings of Faculty Advisory Committee and ad-hoc planning group for Fall semester teaching.

Our DEO devoted time at the beginning of each post-midterm faculty meeting to check with instructors on their well-being and the challenges posed by online instruction.

1.B Regularly scheduled open meetings

About half reported adding regularly scheduled meetings to discuss issues related to virtual instruction:

- To address common teaching issues that arose following the shift to all-online learning during the Spring 2020 semester, [we] began holding weekly Zoom meetings that all faculty are welcome to attend. ... Topics encompassed course delivery, exam administration (with a significant emphasis upon how to maintain academic integrity), impacts upon student learning and well-being, and identification of enduring teaching/learning strategies we may continue to use upon the return to in-person course delivery.
- Weekly zoom meetings where faculty and instructors shared tips
- Our Department Chair scheduled meetings in which faculty met for one hour each week for the remainder of the semester to share our experiences meeting the needs of students as they adapted to the virtual format. Discussions that took place were enormously helpful in allowing us (1) to develop evolving strategies that kept us attuned to the challenges students were facing and (2) to consider adopting different methods of delivering course material that other colleagues had found effective.

The College implemented weekly town hall meetings open to all faculty and staff to share updates on available resources, College and University updates, and strategies and tools available.

1.C DEO or DUS outreach to faculty

Nearly as many departments reported regular individual outreach, initiated by the DEO or DUS, to help them systematically hear from faculty and address their concerns.

- The department undergraduate committee has developed a faculty and TA survey, in addition to weekly meetings, to assess challenges to instruction relative to the virtual delivery mode. The survey also seeks to document best practices and specific challenges for large, medium, and smaller courses.
- We had several "check-in" Zoom meetings with our faculty, tenure-line and instructional, to hear how everyone was doing personally and how the transition to virtual instruction was going. The DUS solicited written feedback about experiences with virtual instruction.
- The Department chair has been holding virtual online lunches to hear from faculty and give support as needed.

1.D Department-sponsored faculty development

About one in four departments offered faculty development sessions focused on preparing for virtual instruction:

- The Program offered a workshop for the instructors prior to switching to online teaching. At the workshop, questions and challenges about implementation of switching to online teaching for each course were discussed in depth.
- The DEO was extremely helpful at the start of, and throughout, the transition to virtual teaching. He walked us through various options for virtual teaching at an "in person" meeting, and through a video he taped and distributed through e-mail.
- Offered online faculty meeting with breakout rooms to discuss instructional challenges and lessons learned as a professional development experience.
- Two college-wide teaching sessions were held. These included guidance on online teaching strategies [and] on the challenges that students may be facing as they attempt to keep learning among a variety of challenges.

1.E Facilitating collaboration outside of meetings

A variety of other strategies were used to facilitate collaboration among faculty and sharing of expertise within departments:

- We created a WIKI where faculty could share technical information on how they were dealing with technology issues related to doing real-time math on-line (e.g. apple pencil with ipad + screensharing) and how they were utilizing Zoom and UICapture and ICON to deliver recorded lectures to students.
- A college-wide ICON page was created to house resources regarding online teaching strategies. All instructors and TAs have access to the site. It also includes discussion boards to encourage virtual discussions.
- When one of us discovered something that worked well, that faculty member would e-mail the rest of us. When one of us encountered a problem, that faculty member would e-mail the rest for advice. In short, we learned from each other.

A new faculty-graduate student reading group, held on Friday afternoons via Zoom, provided space to discuss experiences in virtual instruction.

#2. Steps taken by departments to systematically hear from students

2.A Class meetings

About half of departments reported asking faculty to reach out through classes to hear about student concerns.

- We felt that it was best to let each instructor determine the exact methods to be used to get student feedback. Some used an ICON comment box with weekly assignments and the Announcements feature to get important information out quickly. Others sent out emails to students to ask them about how they were managing. This was a particularly important method for many of our instructors because we found that most students were more reluctant to ask for help. In several cases an email checking in on students who had missed assignments led to productive conversations about how we could adapt aspects of the course to help them complete it.
- Distributed examples of strategies that faculty can use to collect feedback from their students in order to help inform their ongoing decisions about teaching.
- In classes, professors did a good job reaching out and communicating with students who went missing during the transition and no longer attended/turned in materials. We were able to contact the Dean of Students when this happened in order to ensure that the students received the help they needed.

Undergraduate teaching faculty were highly encouraged to send an informal "midcourse" evaluation following the transition to online learning. These results were not shared with the College.

2.B DEO or DUS outreach to majors

About half of departments indicated that the DEO or DUS initiated regular check-in meetings and/or individual outreach to students, outside the context of individual courses.

- Each program head met via zoom regularly with the students in their program. The DEO conducted two virtual Town Halls with the students. The Department sent out a weekly newsletter.
- The Dean held monthly open forums with students. Additionally, the Undergraduate Program Director surveyed undergraduate students re: technological and other support needs during the time of transition. Finally, the College hosted focus groups sessions with students after the end of the semester to get a sense of how things went for student across our programs.
- As DUS, I had a series of communications with students via email asking for feedback on their experience. I met with many students who had concerns (via Zoom) and then reached out to individual instructors (anonymously) with student issues and questions.
- The Director of Undergraduate Studies sent regular emails to all [our] majors and minors inviting them to contact the department with any questions or concerns ... Via Zoom, the department maintained its weekly conversational practice in [the language] for students at all levels of our program. It quickly became clear that students were logging on to the sessions not just to practice their language skills, but also to preserve a sense of community among their peers and to share updates on their personal circumstances.

2.C Surveys

Nearly as many departments reported reaching out through student surveys:

- The department has administered a survey to all [our] undergrads. The survey examined (1) student difficulty in accessing necessary technology and any other difficulties in completing their assignments, (2) if the changes in instruction had added to their workload in any way and/or affected their mental health, (3) if there was anything the department could do in addition to student health to support them, 4) and any other information they might want to express.
- We have surveyed undergraduate and graduate students, as well as graduating seniors. We have also held a townhall meeting for both undergrads and grads.
- We surveyed our students using the anonymous survey tool in ICON to solicit information about the particular issues they faced, what we were doing that eased the transition, what other instructors had done that eased their transition, and other information about their experience.

2.D Advisors

A number of departments also reported reaching out through advisors:

- The Program has mandatory academic advising which means that the academic advisor continued to "meet" with [our] students via phone appointments after it was determined that students would not be returning to campus after spring break.
- All advisors contacted their advisees individually. All instructors asked how they were doing in class regularly.
- Our academic advisor also made a point to ask her advisees in virtual meetings how they were doing generally and how classes were going specifically since the move to virtual instruction.

2.E Student representation on department committees

Finally, some departments invited student representatives to participate on department planning committees:

- The DEO met bi-weekly with the undergraduate student reps. The student Reps consist of 4 to 5 students per class cohort.
- Held weekly meetings with associate dean, the DEO, program coordinator, two student ambassadors, and [other student representatives] to hear students' needs and concerns.
- We were unfortunately unable to convene our Undergraduate Advisory Board in person, but we did send an email survey to these students, who are made up of especially engaged juniors and seniors within the major.

#3. Lessons learned through the department's interactions with students and faculty

3.A Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Class Sessions

Departments did not come to a singular consensus on the value of synchronous vs. asynchronous class meetings, which is similar to [feedback received from students](#) on their experiences during virtual instruction. Departments reported advantages and disadvantages to each, some of which varied by discipline, class size, and the nature of course content.

- Satisfaction with mode of delivery (synchronous vs. asynchronous) was all-over the place, with some students appreciating the flexibility of asynchronous learning and other students appreciating the interaction with peers and instructors that came with synchronous class session facilitated by Zoom.
- Several of our faculty found that students valued weekly synchronous Zoom meetings ... These meetings helped create more of a sense of community than asynchronous discussion threads. That said, asynchronous ICON discussion threads were their own kind of revelation to faculty as some students (roughly half) displayed their knowledge of readings in deeper and more focused ways.
- We are using this forced experiment to find new ways to improve the effectiveness of our instruction. For example, recording all lectures, even those normally delivered face-to-face, provides students with the opportunity to re-listen to challenging portions. Breaking up a 50-minute lecture into 2 or 3 blocks helps students recognize the organization of related topics plus likely converts lessons into more digestible bites. The advantages of these changes were reflected in slightly improved performances on at least some final exams.

We are using this forced experiment to find new ways to improve the effectiveness of our instruction ...

Observations concerning synchronous instruction

- The faculty consensus formed very early in the transition to online instruction was that it is imperative that faculty members gather students every week so that actual interaction could take place between students and instructors.

- Synchronous lab and discussion sections can work quite well via Zoom, but the expectation about participation needs to be set early and reinforced.
- Students widely appreciated Zoom lectures that were synchronous and offered at the same time as their normal lecture courses. These sessions were also recorded for students who couldn't make the live time, but it was clear that students were more likely to engage when the lecture was live.

Observations concerning asynchronous instruction

- Generally positive feedback about live Zoom classes, recorded Zoom classes and pre-recorded lectures. On average students rated pre-recorded lectures higher than live Zoom classes.
- Through interactions with students and faculty, we learned that students appreciated recorded lecture videos which provided extra flexibility to students' learning.
- Although there are some learning goals that are best met through synchronous interaction, faculty reported that students appreciated videos and other asynchronous contact that allowed flexibility.

Preparing for virtual instruction requires re-designing class sessions, assignments, and assessments. It is not just a matter of moving a traditionally face-to-face course to an online meeting schedule.

- A face-to-face class can't just be migrated to an on-line format effectively without re-working assignments and assessments.
- The department is also anticipating the possibility of using hybrid courses ... This will require significant reconfiguration of course design.
- Faculty time and effort to redesign traditionally in-person classes for online OR to make changes to in-person courses to meet physical distancing requirements and maintain the quality of the learning experience.

Faculty need time to adjust courses ... It is more than simply putting your class online. It is a reimagining of each course.

3.B Support for Students

Departments recognized a need for flexibility and consideration of challenges faced by students, both academic and non-academic.

- Empathy is central. Be kind. Bring greater flexibility to the classroom -- in terms of deadlines, assignments, learning goals, attendance requirements.
- Students are really struggling, as are all people right now. The pandemic has exacerbated difficult life circumstances for many, and created new disruption and trauma. We are trying to be as kind, supportive and flexible as possible.
- Expectations need to remain high, but we need to be flexible. Some students definitely needed more emotional support than others.

Students are really struggling, as are all people right now ...

Importance of clear structure and communication as students manage multiple courses each being adapted differently

- Helping students stay organized seemed very important. Sending some type of weekly "Announcement" listing the readings/homework/lecture topics for that week seemed very useful to help students stay on track.
- One source of stress for students was the different ways each class approached online instruction and the need suddenly for the student to "keep track of five completely different sets of new deadlines, assignments, and requirements that had previously been pretty unified in the era of face-to-face classes." The desire for greater consistency with online approaches was feedback that several students shared.
- Some [courses] had more synchronous classes and expected a lot of involvement. Others, had minimal expectations. Students struggled with staying organized with deadlines and changing expectations of classwork.

Importance of manageable communication strategies

- Students seemed overwhelmed by the amount of email they were receiving ... Limited but personal contact, rather than frequent group or mass emails, seem to be the most effective way to communicate with students as we move forward to a likely-to-be-disrupted fall semester.
- Students expressed an information overload from emails sent from multiple departments. This may have contributed to their stress/anxiety. We may need to explore a better way to communicate without overloading the students with lengthy emails.

Importance of proactively reaching out to students

- The students who were doing most poorly typically gave the least, or often no, feedback. This type of instruction and the added pressure for them to attract attention by asking for help can prove daunting for many students for several reasons. ... We would need to find better ways of helping and encouraging all students to communicate and engage. One possibility would be to require students to have regular individual meetings or email communications with instructors.
- Students who struggle even with traditional learning tended to struggle even more with online. And students with mental health issues tended to struggle even more away from face to face teaching.
- Instructors should proactively reach out to students who appear to be falling behind in virtual instruction, as encouraging and supportive contact seems to improve student performance in those cases.

The students who were doing most poorly typically gave the least, or often no, feedback ...

3.C Feeling the Loss of Meeting In-Person

One of the more frequently recurring themes in [student feedback](#) was the value students place on direct interaction with faculty – greatly appreciating it when it was present, greatly missing it when it was not. A number of departments made a similar observation about students and noted that many faculty also reported missing in-person interaction with students.

- Faculty generally missed the face to face interaction ... Students missed the engagement with students and faculty, and a few felt lost. For many, it was difficult to not have a classroom experience to help structure their day and work. I think they adjusted and adapted to it but missed the engagement and structure that a classroom experience provides.
- Students truly desire in-person courses. We have not heard any feedback indicating that students prefer any aspect of online courses. We have learned that our in-person instruction and lab courses are immensely valuable to students.
- The students and faculty both need the personal contact with others.

Faculty missed greatly the person-to-person connection one gets from teaching in a classroom.

3.D Value of Meeting with Colleagues

Finally, a number of departments that instituted regular meetings noted the value of these meetings for both the collaborative problem-solving these meetings facilitated and the contribution of these meetings to sense of community within the department.

- Two unexpected benefits have arisen from these weekly faculty meetings, creating a stronger sense of departmental culture:
 1. Recognition of the shared value faculty place on academic integrity: how to fairly assess student learning has been the most-frequently discussed topic throughout all meetings, to include (1) appropriateness of exam content and format following the transition to virtual course delivery, (2) practices to minimizing technology limitations that may disadvantage some students, and (3) prevention of cheating.
 2. Discussions regarding how we each adapted our teaching practices has led to a greater appreciation for how each course contributes to the curriculum as a whole. There is also improved recognition of who possesses expertise with certain technologies and teaching practices and could serve as mentors for others in the department.
- Faculty and graduate students appreciated the weekly check-ins and attendance was robust.
- Faculty members who participated in weekly meetings expressed gratitude for the ways this collaborative structure encouraged and supported efforts to remain alert to difficulties students might be having. These meetings also helped counter the isolation that grew as the weeks of having no face-to-face contact with students and colleagues passed.

We held several faculty zoom meetings in which instructors were able to discuss what was working and what wasn't working during virtual instruction. This proved to be very helpful.

#4. Questions or challenges that the department is anticipating as you plan for next year

4.A Uncertainty

- We don't know a lot about the fall, so faculty and grad students are feeling extremely stressed and anxious and yet feel unable to plan yet because we aren't sure about whether our classes will be asked to be moved online (due to the need for classroom

space) ... We want to offer the best education we can, whatever circumstances we are working with, but [we are uncertain about] investing time in any particular course design because it might change.

- Faculty find it very difficult to plan anything given the uncertainties of how to conduct f2f instruction safely, for all members of the campus community. Perhaps our greatest concerns focus on our practicum course as well as our senior research seminar, where f2f instruction is most necessary.
- Having to create multiple plans due to unpredictability of the situation.
- Pedagogically, might our classes actually be better experiences for students in an online format rather than in an awkward socially distanced, masked, and unable to take advantage of the typical interactive elements of face to face learning environment?

4.B Health and Safety

- How can we provide the best possible education for students while also adhering to the guidelines for safety?
- The greatest challenge for us as we face the possibility of returning to face-to-face instruction in the Fall is the risk factor for instructors. For reasons of age and medical conditions, [many] of us can be considered to be at higher risk for severe illness for COVID-19. We are also concerned about the challenge of covering our teaching needs if one of us were to become ill for an extended period of time.
- How to accommodate those who are at risk or are caregivers to those at risk, and who need to self-isolate.
- Concern among instructors about uneven exposure to COVID risk, uncertainty about what the campus safety guidelines will be and how much flexibility instructors/DEOs will have in choosing when and how to adapt to remote instruction.

Is our rush to provide F2F instruction risking public health for our faculty, students, and community?

4.C Faculty Work and Well-Being

- How can archival and other forms of research be done in this environment? Those who have children - how can time for work be balanced with childcare? How will the administration assess people's research productivity in the face of these challenges?
- Instructors are now considering how they can better present course material for student success in this setting. This in turn challenges instructors as they spend considerable time absorbing information on best practices, revising courses, and learning new technology. This may be happening alongside personal or family health concerns and increased family or community obligations. Many instructors report significant time stress and anxiety as well as concerns about maintaining research programs.
- Would a scheduled, semi-structured forum for discussion of teaching could be a valuable opportunity for faculty members to share expertise, learn from one another, and help the department identify needs for additional support while there is still time to recalibrate?

Faculty are in information overload.

4.D Teaching

Challenges in Lab, Clinical, and Practicum experiences

- Discussions continue within the department, and among peers from outside of the University of Iowa, for best practices for delivery of lab courses.
- Faculty are concerned that the time away may affect the students' clinical ability/confidence ... Students will need remediation, re-orientation, and re-education on multiple topics.
- We will continue to explore additional ways to manage the transition to a virtual laboratory space for our classroom. Some exercises simply cannot be done in the virtual laboratory setting.
- We of course are concerned about the ability to conduct high-quality laboratory experiences remotely or safely in small groups.

The two biggest challenges are execution of laboratories and other experiential learning while keeping everyone at safe distances as well as minimizing cheating during on-line examinations.

Challenges in assessment

- Course assessment (exams, homework, etc.) being on-line is challenging, especially for larger courses.

- It was difficult to be understanding and accommodating for students and maintain academic integrity to be fair to all students at the same time. Some students tried their best even in the most difficult circumstances, while some other students just ... completed much less work quantitatively and/or qualitatively than others.
- The biggest issue I heard from colleagues centered around exams and how to assess students.
- Assessment strategies that are compatible with social distancing requirements.

Challenges to collaborative Learning

- Adapting on-campus instruction to address social distancing requirements – particularly in-class teamwork and group assignments.
- Our faculty noted that conducting group projects in virtual instruction is more challenging compared to face-to-face instruction.
- We also identified that the change in delivery did result in a perception of additional work or time to complete certain assignments. This was particularly problematic for courses requiring group work.

Challenges to classroom interaction and participation

- Creating community among students and fostering meaningful interaction in a remote learning setting.
- Lack of time (e.g., responding to Discussion posts), lack of conversation and interpersonal interaction, lack of student engagement, lack of group work and collaboration.
- If we have to go completely online, one challenge will be to keep students engaged and motivated. This applies both to the lecture materials and providing avenues for all students to ask questions and receive help.

Additional Resources

The ACE Supplement survey asked all students three open-ended questions about experiences with virtual instruction and one rating-scale question, “Under the circumstances, how would you describe the support you received for managing the transition to virtual instruction?” Responses are reported at assessment.uiowa.edu/ace-supplement.

After the semester ended, the Pandemic Response Survey (PRS) asked all undergraduates about concerns during the pandemic, their feedback on the campus response during Spring 2020, and their perceptions of academic support, student support, and virtual instruction. An overview of responses is reported at assessment.uiowa.edu/prs.

From Pandemic to Planned: Preparing for Virtual Teaching and Learning. Resources prepared by Distance and Online Education and the Office of Teaching, Learning, and Technology

Examining Student Learning and Success in Academic Programs: Resources and strategies for assessment of program learning outcomes, compiled by the Office of Assessment