

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



Guiding Principles for 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.

This paper provides an overview of the guiding principles that shape outcomes assessment at the University of Iowa.

Using Learning Outcomes Assessment in Academic Departments

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. This paper provides an overview of the principles that shape our approaches to outcomes assessment at the University of Iowa.

Transparency, Reason, and Evidence

Our programs are strongest when they are built on the same commitment to rigorous examination that we bring to all our scholarly work. We want our programs to be characterized by clear goals, reasonable design that supports achievement of the goals, systematic review, and development over time as we act on the lessons learned from examining program effectiveness.

Useful, Timely Information

Outcomes assessment is a means to an end: Supporting well-informed decisions about teaching and learning in the department. Outcomes assessment is never an end in itself, and should be designed in ways that provide useful information for the department, at a time when the department is in a position to act on it.

Most departments have identified multiple learning outcomes for their students, and departments should have assessment plans that address each outcome – but not necessarily at the same time. In a given year, a department might focus assessment on a particular outcome, knowing that a plan is in place to examine learning related to other outcomes over a two-to-four-year period of time.

Faculty-Based, Department-Led, Centrally Supported

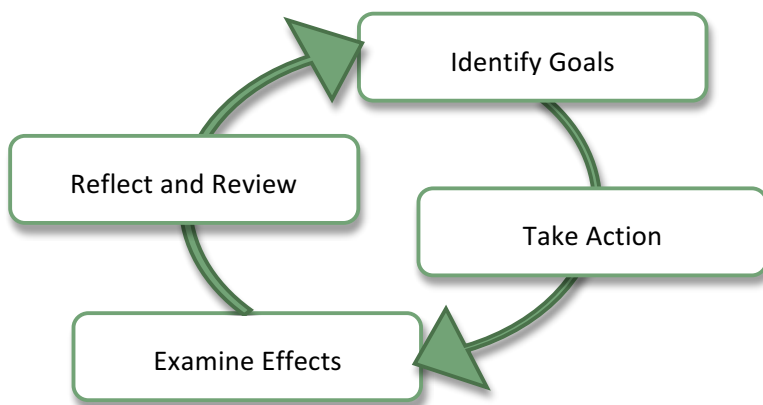
The collective expertise of faculty members working together remains the best resource for assessment at the university. What we share as an institution is a common commitment to the quality of our programs, but each department's approach to program outcomes assessment will reflect unique characteristics of the department and the discipline.

Collaborative Action

There is a natural cycle of teaching, learning, and assessment built into almost every course. Instructors start out with a set of goals for what they want students to learn in the course, and they take a variety of actions (lectures, discussions, assignments, projects, and a wide range of other activities) to help students work toward those goals.

Along the way, most faculty members implement a variety of assessments, both formal and informal: observing how students are doing on assignments and tests, how engaged students are during class, what kinds of questions are coming up outside of class, and other indicators of how students are learning and thinking about the course material.

These observations become a basis for faculty reflection and review: What should I expand on and elaborate? What should I go back to and address again? What should I do differently the next time I teach this course?



In the same way that faculty members **individually** engage in this cycle of teaching, learning, and assessment in their own courses, so also faculty members as a group engage in this process **collectively** to reflect on and review their curriculum as a whole.

A curriculum is a collaborative effort. Faculty members decide together on goals for a curriculum or degree program, and they work together to give students opportunities to work toward those goals.

Outcomes Assessment is the part of this cycle in which faculty work together to examine and reflect on how students are learning in the curriculum, much in the same way that an individual faculty member reflects on learning in a course while teaching it. Where can the curriculum expand or develop? What needs to be re-iterated or re-emphasized? What should we do differently next time?

However, curriculum review differs in significant ways from reviewing a course:

1. The curriculum is distributed over a longer period of time and a wider range of learning experiences.
2. A course may naturally evolve from one iteration to the next, but a curriculum tends to remain in place unless intentional steps are taken to review and revise it.
3. Like the curriculum itself, the examination and reflection is a collective effort, rather than an individual one.

The most useful outcomes assessment plan is one that is based on the question, "What do we need to know, as a department, in order to work together to examine the effects of our program on our students?"

Outcomes Assessment is
always a means to an end
... never an end in itself.

