

What are students learning at The University of Iowa?



Contributions of Advising to Learning 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.

Advising plays a central role in student success, and there are many resources available on effective advising practices. This paper focuses on practical guidelines and principles for departments that choose to incorporate lessons learned from advising into their program-wide outcomes assessment.

What can advising tell you about achievement of department learning outcomes?

Department advising practices vary widely, and there are many goals for advising other than assessment. However, advisors often have a view of the department across students, courses, and time that is rarely seen in a single class or through a review of student work. Advisors can contribute significantly to the department's examination of how well it is supporting student learning.

Steps suggested here are not recommendations for effective advising, but for integrating advising effectively into department outcomes assessment. These steps can be taken whether advising is conducted primarily by faculty or by staff, whether there are multiple advisors or a single advisor meeting with all students. In most cases these steps can be taken whether advising is primarily in the department or in the Academic Advising Center.

Using Advising as a Source of Information for Outcomes Assessment

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. Advisors can offer perspectives on a number of factors that contribute to the achievement of learning outcomes, including:

- Interests and goals that motivated students to select the major
- Factors influencing student decisions to select courses or take advantage of other learning opportunities in the department
- Students' overall perceptions of the program, both within and across courses
- Contributions of learning opportunities outside the classroom, such as internships, service learning, undergraduate research, or study abroad
- Student experiences in non-department courses, prerequisites, and electives
- Contributions of experiences outside the curriculum such as participation in student organizations or the overall sense of department community
- Obstacles to success that students are encountering
- Reasons that students leave the department or the university

Hearing From Students Systematically

In interactions with students, advisors are likely to hear a variety of incidental feedback on courses and programs. To bring this information into outcomes assessment, advisors can make it a practice to systematically identify concerns across student and keep track of student responses.

Information from advising is most useful for outcomes assessment when advisors can not only report what they observe among students, but also provide additional context by noting how common it is for an issue to come up, how many students are affected by it, and how seriously students seem to be affected.

Listening for Information That Pertains to Learning Outcomes

Advisors interact with students on a wide range of questions and concerns. Some examples of topics that students raise in advising which might pertain to outcomes assessment include:

- How well courses and other learning opportunities are working together
- What they think contributes to their learning (focusing not on what they *like* or *want*, but on what *helps* or *hinders* their learning)
- How well experiences in the program are supporting their achievement of department learning outcomes.
- Their level of confidence in how well the program is preparing them for their next steps

Asking for Constructive Feedback

Asking for feedback is an opportunity to identify areas for improvement, but it should not be seen simply as an avenue for airing general dissatisfaction or complaints. The more specific student examples or recommendations are, the more useful they are for outcomes assessment.

Advisors can ask students to identify successes as well as areas for improvement. For outcomes assessment, learning what is going well can be just as important as learning what can be improved.

Reviewing Information From Advisors as a Department

To benefit from the lessons advisors are learning, departments need to make time to hear from advising as a regular part of faculty discussions and department planning.

- Add an “Advising Report” to the agenda of faculty meetings on a regular basis. Faculty advisors are already included in these meetings, but it may take extra steps to build this practice into the schedule of advisors who are not faculty members in the department.
- Include advisors in discussions of department practices that affect students, including courses and curriculum, prerequisites, department climate, and resources for students.
- Document decisions that are made, with recognition that information came through advising. For example,

“Advisors report that many students have questions about ... so we have reviewed the undergraduate handbook and clarified ...”

“We have learned from advisors that students would benefit from ... so we decided to change ...”

Then, follow up with advisors after an appropriate length of time to evaluate the effects of changes that were made.

Advising offers a view of the program across students, courses, and time that is rarely seen in a single class or through a review of student work.

