

Introduction: Why Portfolios?

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In recent years there has been a virtual explosion of interest in portfolios. Why? A review of literature on portfolios that appeared in issue number 6:4 of *Assessment Update* by Janet E. Boyle sums up the appeal of this assessment approach:

The portfolio, as an element of authentic assessment, has captured the interest of many instructors who want a more comprehensive way to assess their students' knowledge and skills, to have students actively participate in the evaluation process, and to simultaneously develop students' skills of reflective thinking. These latter features make portfolios an attractive alternative to traditional summative testing (p. 10).

In her review Janet Boyle points to five key characteristics of portfolios (see italicized phrases below) that make this approach to assessing college student learning so important that I have chosen it as the subject of this special collection of articles from *Assessment Update*.

Faculty are hungry for *alternatives to traditional summative testing* that will provide more *comprehensive ways to assess students' knowledge and skills*. They recognize that no single instrument can measure all that students know about a concept or issue, that not every student will be up to giving their best performance on any specific occasion, and that the important element of growth over time cannot be assessed with a single measurement. Thus faculty seek *authentic assessment* of the range of students' knowledge and skills. Portfolios can yield this assessment as students demonstrate what they know and can do, as well as their diverse

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talents and learning styles, using a variety of artifacts and media in collections of their own work over the period of a semester, a year or two, or an entire college career.

Another characteristic of traditional summative assessment that troubles faculty and students alike is that too often it is developed by faculty and administered to students without their involvement—involvement that could deepen and strengthen student understanding. Using portfolios, *students actively participate in the evaluation process*, selecting materials to include and combine as evidence of specific learnings. Many students take portfolio development very seriously because they plan to use some of the contents to convince potential employers that they have unique skills and talents. And because an essential feature of preparing a portfolio is reflecting on the content and explaining how components fit together to illustrate what has been learned, portfolios *simultaneously develop students' skills of reflective thinking*.

Just how popular are student portfolios as assessment tools? For many years faculty in English and fine arts have used portfolios to evaluate student progress and achievement. In the early 1970s faculty at Alverno and Manhattanville Colleges began to assess a much wider range of competences via portfolios. By the late 1980s, portfolios were being used in assessing the effectiveness of general education. In 1999 I conducted an informal but systematic content analysis of the program for the annual Assessment Conference sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education and reported in my *Editor's Notes* column that “about 40 percent of the sessions that focused on methods dealt with the use of portfolios” (*Assessment Update*, 1999, Vol. 11, No. 5, p. 3). Noting the growing interest in electronic portfolios, I went on to say that “nearly 40 percent of the portfolio sessions were about electronic portfolios.” On the basis of this evidence, I was willing to assert even as early as that article in 1999 that “. . . portfolios, particularly those that use Web-based technology, have great appeal for many faculty and are becoming the instrument of choice for assessment on a growing number of campuses.” While I have not seen usage statistics since then, my experience indicates that portfolio use on campuses has grown exponentially in the intervening years.

Portfolios' Strengths and Challenges

Like any other approach to assessment, portfolios have drawbacks as well as strengths. Above all, they require time. It stands to reason that an assessment method which is comprehensive, and permits a look not just at a student's current levels of knowledge and skill but also at the ways in which learning has developed over time, would require extra effort to plan and to evaluate. Initially faculty must decide what purposes the portfolio will serve, what kind of information will be included, when the artifacts will be gathered, and how the content will be assessed. Where and how will the portfolios be stored? Even with electronic portfolios, dedicated servers may be needed if thousands of students' work is to be submitted for review. Who will have access to which parts of individual portfolios? With electronic portfolios, expensive programming will be required to establish differential access to materials for students, faculty, employers, and others.

Since portfolios permit the display of authentic evidence of what students know and can do, they have face validity for all concerned; that is, portfolios appear to be credible sources of information about what faculty are teaching and what students are learning. But demonstrating validity using traditional definitions and approaches has proven problematic. Scoring is often holistic and different observers see different things, so inter-rater agreement is often difficult to achieve, particularly in the very large middle range of performance between "outstanding" and "failing." Holistic scores are somewhat subjective and thus harder than more objective measures to interpret and to compare across programs or institutions. As convincing and exciting as it may be for an employer to see and hear about a senior project via an electronic portfolio, he or she may express a preference for a single standardized test score when confronted with senior projects for 50 competing job applicants and no convenient guidelines for comparing them.

Despite the challenges that portfolios present, those who use them prefer them to other methods because they are so versatile and adaptable and accommodate such rich information. Portfolios enable faculty to see first-hand not only *what* students are learning but *how* they are learning. So

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faculty can gain a deeper understanding of the successes and failures of their teaching strategies and their curricula. Students also learn from the experience of developing a portfolio. As they make selections for inclusion and reflect on what they have learned, they make connections between components of a course and among courses in their curriculum and thus derive new meaning from their educational experiences. Both faculty and students benefit from being able to show employers and other stakeholders details of the process of promoting student learning in college.

In addition to their usefulness in assessing student learning and development over time, portfolios also can play a role in assessing the effectiveness of courses, curricula, and even institutions. Content analysis of individual student portfolios using rubrics designed for that purpose can show faculty general areas of strength and weakness in student performance in a course, in general education, and in the curriculum of an academic major. Illustrative excerpts conveying the range of student work, accompanied by the scoring rubrics faculty have applied to the work, can be used in an institutional portfolio for accreditation or accountability reports. With the addition of data from constituent surveys and other data-gathering methods, a narrative summary of institutional performance can be conveyed to a worldwide audience via an electronic institutional portfolio.

Organization of this Collection

In the almost 15 years of *Assessment Update's* history, approximately 40 articles about portfolios have appeared. All were published because they had something important to say about the development of this versatile assessment tool. Thus it has been very difficult for us to select a mere baker's dozen for this issue. Ultimately we decided to organize the issue in four sections, each containing three or four illustrative selections. The first section provides an overview, defining terms and tracing some of the history of portfolio use through the literature. Next we present a range of examples of portfolio use in assessment, first in general education, then in the major, and finally in institutional accreditation.

Perhaps the major challenges confronting those who wish to use portfolios relate to evaluating the learning portfolios demonstrate and establishing the credibility of this approach to assessment. These challenges are reflected in the last two sections of this volume, *How Can Portfolios Be Scored?* and *How Can We Judge the Impact and Validity of Portfolios?*

Further Reading

For those interested in further reading about portfolios, the following publications provide additional perspectives:

Electronic Portfolios: Emerging Practices in Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning. Barbara Cambridge (ed.), Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 2001.

“Portfolio Assessment.” Lendley C. Black. In T.W. Banta & Associates, *Making a Difference—Outcomes of a Decade of Assessment in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993. (Now available from National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Boulder, CO.)

Time Will Tell: Portfolio-Assisted Assessment of General Education. Aubrey Forrest. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education, 1990.

Truman State University Web Site: <http://assessment.truman.edu/Portfolio.htm>.

