

# **Essays on Teaching Excellence**

## ***Toward the Best in the Academy***

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# **Teaching Portfolios for Graduate Students: Process, Content, Product, and Benefits**

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Graduate school is a time of exploration and definition. Graduate students who begin their studies with a clear understanding of their career goals are more likely to focus and finish. The teaching portfolio process is an excellent tool to guide graduate students' development and success as they begin to clarify who they are, what they want to teach, and where they want to teach.

## **The Process**

The process involved in the development of graduate student portfolios is different from that of faculty. Faculty already know what they are teaching and what their career path is. They also know who their peers are and who will be evaluating them for promotion and tenure. Graduate students are explorers engaged in a field of endeavor that is not yet clear to them. As they progress through their programs, they need assistance and guidance to help them find their way. They need guides who understand their disciplines, as well as career paths in those disciplines, and who have a good understanding of postsecondary education in the United States and abroad. Graduate students also need mentors who are able to support them in their search for the academic career track that is ideal for them as individuals. They need mentors who can help them strategize and

plan for success regardless of their chosen path. Thus, it is important for graduate students to seek out multiple mentors as they begin to form their viewpoints on teaching and learning. For example, when they enter a department, graduate students should become familiar with each faculty member's strengths and interests. They should ask questions about various postsecondary career tracks, differences in course preparation at the various levels, and questions about job opportunities. They should question various faculty on multiple campuses about teaching, research, and service requirements in different situations, in different institutions. As graduate students begin to develop a good sense of the possibilities available to them, they should begin to develop a philosophy of teaching and learning that will direct them toward a preferred type of institution. The most important function of a teaching portfolio for graduate students is to prepare them for the job market.

## **The Content**

Because writing generates thought and questioning, the process of actually beginning to write helps graduate students begin to feel more confident and clear about their teaching experience and goals. Graduate student teachers usually have much less experience to draw on than faculty do when approaching the construction of a teaching portfolio. Nonetheless, because of the introduction of TA development programs on many research campuses, some current graduate students have experienced training and support that their faculty never received. Today, graduate students who plan academic careers can focus specifically on preparing for their roles as future faculty rather than bumbling their way through their doctoral programs.

Graduate students who know they want to teach can seek out opportunities to teach in labs, recitations, or courses. They can assist with undergraduate research projects and they can work in vertically integrated research teams. These experiences become the building blocks of individual philosophies of teaching and learning. Concomitantly, participation in teacher preparation activities such as workshops, seminars, courses, and videotape consultation can add skills and confidence, and thus pages, to the portfolio. In their portfolios, graduate students should present current teaching

experience while also projecting their plans for teaching courses in the future as a faculty member. Such projections help graduate students identify their preferred areas of research and connect them to budding job opportunities. It is important to start such explorations during the first or second year of graduate school so that individuals can more quickly narrow their interests and define their topics.

The teaching portfolio should also contain a discussion of any assessment and evaluation procedures in which the graduate student was engaged while teaching. It is important for young graduate teachers to begin to define their preferred methods of teaching, preferences in style, content, and approach. Student and faculty mentor feedback can be invaluable in helping graduate students define the styles that are the best fit for them as individuals. Graduate school is a time of exploration and as such is a fertile ground for the development of experience in lecturing, discussion, problem-based learning, concept testing, and other methods. As graduate students develop, they begin to mold themselves into their preferred personal style. This, of course, should be reflected in the teaching portfolio.

Graduate school also presents the opportunity to explore service to the academy, the discipline, and the community. As graduate students build the service section of their portfolios, they become more aware of the importance and pitfalls of academic service. With proper guidance, they can begin to define academic service as an expression of their individual disciplinary expertise and seek out opportunities to build their skills and contacts in service areas of import to their disciplines and to future positions. For example, sitting on graduate student committees or on faculty committees as a graduate student representative can produce a better understanding of the faculty role.

Graduate students need to learn to define and limit their research agendas while they are producing their doctoral dissertations. Nevertheless, many never grasp the fact that the research they produce for their dissertations is likely to guide them through their first faculty positions. Beginning a research section to the portfolio, ideally in the first year of graduate work, can help graduate students better define and refine their interests, topics, and publications. The

process of writing about one's research in an objective way while still a graduate student is bound to lead to a more solid and well-planned lifetime research agenda. Maintaining and updating one's yearly research plan in a portfolio is an excellent method for clarifying one's research path.

## **The Product**

The teaching portfolio should be condensed, clear, well written, and focused on the position and institution that the graduate student job seeker is interested in. Materials should be reduced to the latest three-year span of the individual's career. They should be organized clearly, using a table of contents with illustrative headings that help the reader navigate his or her way through the material. The narrative should read like a carefully crafted paper on the individual who wrote it. This means looking at one's self objectively, examining one's own strengths, weaknesses, contributions, products, and performance. Developing a personal voice and point of view that is sincere and representative of one's own style and methods is indispensable. The portfolio should be accessible and interesting to any faculty member on the hiring committee and short enough to be read quickly. Supportive documentation should be carefully selected, minimal, and powerfully illustrative of the teacher's personal style and contributions.

## **Uses and Benefits of the Graduate Student Portfolio**

Teaching portfolios for graduate students are most useful as supportive materials for the job search. Naturally, form follows function; and graduate students need to prepare portfolios that will actually be understandable to hiring committees. Hiring committees tend to be interested in a teacher's past, present, and future teaching roles and responsibilities. Thus, it is important for graduate teachers to describe what, when, and how they have taught up to the present. With the job search in mind, they also need to project into the future and sketch out courses that they might like to teach at both the undergraduate and graduate levels if the institution in question were to hire them.

Graduate students who successfully complete portfolios for the job

search report that they feel more prepared for their telephone interviews, the on-campus interviews, and quite literally for the job itself. Because they have carefully considered their pathway as they have progressed through graduate school, they are able to talk authoritatively, confidently, and clearly to the hiring committee. They are also better able to define for themselves which types of institutions are more likely to be a good fit for them, which of course saves them and their hiring committees time and energy. Graduate students who focus on their strengths, interests, and personal and professional development are much more likely to move into academic careers with ease and gainful outcomes.

## **Resources**

Border, Laura L. B. (2002). The socratic portfolio: A guide for future faculty. *PSOnline*, [www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org), 35 (4), 739-734.

Seldin, Peter (1997). *The teaching portfolio: A practical guide to improved performance and promotion/tenure decisions*. Bolton, MA: Anker.

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