

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## The Teaching Portfolio

**Peter Seldin, *Pace University* & Linda Annis, *Ball State University***

Burton Clark (1987) points out that the greatest paradox of academic life is that while a majority of professors spend most of their time teaching, that activity is denied commensurate reward by the academic profession. Instead, the most highly valued activity at institution after institution is research and scholarship. Perhaps that explains why the typical vitae lists publications, research grants and other scholarly accomplishments but says little about teaching.

However, change may be in the wind. Colleges and universities are being encouraged to reconsider the importance of teaching. A key question for those that do is, How can professors document their classroom performance? One means of providing such documentation, an approach increasingly recognized and respected, is the teaching portfolio.

**What is a teaching portfolio?** It is a collection of materials documenting teaching performance. It brings together in one place one's most important teaching strengths and accomplishments. The portfolio is to teaching what lists of publications, grants, and honors are to research and scholarship. As a result, it provides a strong signal that teaching is an institutional priority to be considered along with research and scholarship in tenure, promotion, and merit pay decisions.

The teaching portfolio concept has been used in Canada (where it is called a teaching dossier) for at least ten years. Today it is being

adopted or pilot-tested in some form by an increasing number of American institutions.

## **Preparing a Teaching Portfolio**

There is no single correct recipe for preparing a teaching portfolio. Since it is a highly personalized product, like a fingerprint, no two are exactly alike. But as Shore and others (1986) point out, a good portfolio for promotion or tenure would normally contain items from three broad areas: the products of good teaching; material from oneself; and information from others.

Possible items for inclusion in a teaching portfolio are shown in the **inserts** below. These lists are not meant to be all-inclusive nor definitive. Rather, they illustrate the wide range from which to select items relevant to a particular teaching situation.

How much information is needed to fairly represent a faculty member's teaching performance? The question has no simple answer. But experience suggests that 4-6 pages plus supporting appendix material should be sufficient. Keep in mind that the portfolio does not grow indefinitely. It is a living document that changes overtime. New items are added. Others are removed.

Also keep in mind that use of the portfolio for personnel decisions is only occasional (Seldin, 1991). Its primary purpose is to improve teaching performance. Does it actually help improve teaching? The answer is yes. In the process of sifting and collecting documents and materials that reflect the his or her teaching effectiveness, the professor cannot help but: 1) think about personal teaching activities; 2) rearrange priorities; 3) rethink teaching strategies; and 4) plan for the future. Properly developed and used, the teaching portfolio is a valuable aid in professional development.

From experience we know that the teaching portfolio is best prepared in consultation with others. A department chair, a colleague or a faculty development specialist, for example, can discuss with the professor key questions: Which areas of the teaching-learning process are to be examined? What kinds of information do they expect to collect? How is the information to be analyzed and

presented? One caution: whoever serves as portfolio consultant must have wide knowledge of current instruments and procedures to document effective teaching. Faculty development specialists are especially qualified for this role because they are trained in multiple approaches and techniques to demonstrate teaching effectiveness and can provide valuable suggestions and resources as well as important support during portfolio preparation.

Another caution: all college professors have seen poor student work dressed in fancy covers. The point of the teaching portfolio is not a fancy cover. Instead, it is a careful, thoughtful gathering of documents and materials that make the best case for one's teaching effectiveness.

### **The Ball State University Experience**

Since the spring term, 1990, more than 100 faculty members at Ball State University (Indiana) have volunteered to develop teaching portfolios. They have prepared statements of their teaching philosophy, collected materials documenting teaching performance, and worked individually with a portfolio consultant (Seldin and Annis, 1991). Although the original seed money for the project was provided by the American Association for Higher Education, the bulk of the funding has come from the university itself

What have we learned from the project? Equipped with hindsight and the benefit of research, the authors (who are the project's directors) are convinced that the portfolio concept is sound. It is a practical and immediately useful approach to documenting a professor's in-class performance. Beyond that, we have also learned some key benchmarks for the preparation and use of teaching portfolios.

- Strong administrative backing is **essential**. Administrators must be publicly committed to the concept and provide the necessary financial support. At Ball State University, vigorous administrative backing played a decisive role in persuading faculty to invest time and energy to prepare high-quality portfolios.
- **Open communication** is vital to gain faculty acceptance. It must be presented candidly, clearly, and completely to all faculty

- members, department chairs, and other relevant administrators before its implementation. The utility of the teaching portfolio as an additional, not replacement, source of information on teaching must be crystal clear.
- **Individual differences** must be permitted in portfolio preparation so long as they are allowed by the department and the institution.
  - **Portfolio models** must be available to professors as they prepare their own portfolios to help them see how others have put together documents and materials.
  - **Portfolio consultants** must be available to professors. The consultants serve as mentors and offer suggestions, resources and continuous support.
  - **The portfolio program needs periodic evaluation**, including an internal feedback mechanism for purpose of regular review. It is comforting to both professors and administrators to know that the portfolio program is being fine-tuned and unfair elements corrected or removed.

The Ball State project pointed up something rather important: virtually all participating faculty members mentioned that in preparing their portfolios, they were forced to think about the effectiveness of their teaching. **Why** did they do **what** they did in the classroom? That alone was often a stimulus to teaching improvement. They also enjoyed the project, finding it refreshing to discover from their completed portfolios just how effective they have been in the classroom.

In our judgment the teaching portfolio holds great promise both for improving teaching and for making personnel decisions. We believe that the portfolio concept is an idea whose time has come.

## **INSERTS:**

### ***The Products of Good Teaching:***

\* Student scores on pre- and post-course examinations.\* Student essays, field-work reports, laboratory workbooks or logs.\* Examples of graded student essays showing excellent, average, and poor work.\* A record of students who succeed in advanced study in the field.\* Student publications or conference presentations

on course-related work.\* Testimonials from employers or students about the professor's influence on career choice.

### ***Material from Others:***

\* Student course and teaching evaluation data which suggest improvements or produce an overall rating of effectiveness or satisfaction.\* Statements from colleagues who have systematically reviewed the professor's classroom materials, the course syllabi, assignments, testing and grading practices, and reading lists.\* Invitations to teach from outside agencies, present a paper at a conference on teaching one's discipline or on teaching in general.\* Statements from colleagues who have observed the professor in the classroom as members of a teaching team or independent observers.\* Documentation of teaching/development activity through the campus center for teaching and learning.\* Statements from colleagues at other institutions on such matters as how well students have been prepared for graduate studies.

### ***Material from Oneself***

\* A reflective statement of the professor's contribution to the teaching mission of the department or institution.\* Representative course syllabi which detail course content and objectives, teaching methods, readings, homework assignments and a reflective statement as to why the class was so constructed.\* The pursuit of research contributing directly to teaching one's discipline.\* A personal statement by the professor describing teaching goals for the next five years.\* Description of steps taken to improve teaching including changes resulting from self-evaluation, time spent reading journals on improving teaching, participating in seminars and workshops on sharpening instructional skill.\* Summary of steps taken to identify students with special problems and to design teaching and assessment procedures which facilitate their learning.

How to get more information: For a copy of Peter Seldin's new book, *The Teaching Portfolio*, contact: Anker Publishing Company, Inc. P.O. Box 249, Bolton, MA 01740. (508) 779-6190.

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