

## Random Thoughts . . .

# IF YOU'VE GOT IT, FLAUNT IT

## Uses and Abuses of Teaching Portfolios

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A memo from the Provost appears in all faculty mail boxes one morning, announcing that from now on every candidate for tenure and promotion must submit a teaching portfolio along with the usual research documentation. Faculty reaction is swift and divided, even though no one understands exactly what is being required or why. Some professors see the requirement as an indication that the administration is finally starting to take teaching seriously, others view it as just another drain on their time that won't accomplish anything useful and could hurt them. Either viewpoint could turn out to be correct, depending on how the portfolio program is handled.

A **teaching portfolio** is a collection of materials that document a professor's teaching goals, strengths, and accomplishments. It contains

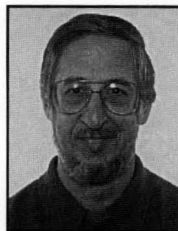
- Self-generated material* (e.g., a teaching philosophy statement; representative syllabi, instructional objectives, handouts, assignments, and tests; descriptions of educational innovations and evaluations of their effectiveness; textbooks and education-related papers published; instructional software developed; teaching workshops and seminars presented or attended).
- Teaching products* (e.g., graded assignments, tests, and reports; scores on standardized tests; student publications or presentations on course-related work).
- Information generated by others* (e.g., summaries of student, alumni, and peer evaluations; honor and awards; reference letters).

Some items may be mandated, others may be included at the professor's option.

Portfolios have been used to document college teaching performance beginning in Canada in the 1970s, and their use

has become increasingly widespread since the 1991 publication of *The Teaching Portfolio* by Peter Seldin.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite abundant evidence that their use improves teaching,<sup>[2]</sup> the required inclusion of teaching portfolios in promotion and tenure dossiers is often viewed with faculty skepticism. This attitude may prove to be justified, as poorly designed or implemented portfolio programs are likely to have a minimal impact on institutional teaching quality and a negative impact on faculty morale. In the remainder of this column, we extract ideas from Seldin<sup>[1,2]</sup> on ways to avoid the pitfalls and make portfolio programs effective.

**What is the purpose of the teaching portfolio?** • A portfolio can be used for *summative evaluation* (to evaluate teaching performance and provide a rational basis for promotion and tenure decisions and teaching award selections) or *formative evaluation* (to help identify and correct teaching problems). What goes in the portfolio depends on which function is intended. For summative evaluation, the portfolio should include some mandated items like a teaching



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philosophy and a summary of student ratings and some optional items that reflect on teaching performance and educational scholarship (e.g., student products, descriptions of teaching innovations, and reference letters from alumni or colleagues). For formative evaluation, the choice of content is entirely up to the professor and the focus should be on problem areas. The same portfolio should not be used for both functions.

**How should summative portfolios be designed and evaluated?** • Three key requirements for effective portfolios are *relevance* (the elements selected for evaluation must be clearly linked to established criteria for effective teaching), *reliability* (ratings from different evaluators should be reasonably similar), and *practicality* (portfolios should be well organized, not too long, and easy to evaluate). While the ideal portfolio structure may vary considerably from one institution to another and from one discipline to another, the following design procedure is broadly applicable:

1. *Select categories that will be used to define the quality of a professor's teaching performance* (e.g., course design, instructional delivery, content expertise, development of new instructional methods and materials), *and assign relative weights to each category.*
2. *Formulate an objective set of questions addressing each category* (e.g., questions for the course design category might include, "Are the instructional objectives appropriate and consistent with the candidate's teaching philosophy and with institutional or departmental goals?" "Are the assignments and tests consistent with the objectives?")
2. *Specify required portfolio materials that will help provide meaningful answers to the questions.*

Once a summative portfolio has been prepared, several people should independently examine it, rate each category using a predefined system (e.g., 0=poor, 5=outstanding), calculate a weighted average rating, attempt to reconcile widely divergent evaluations, and finally provide a collective rating.

**What is the point of the teaching philosophy statement?**

• The philosophy statement enables portfolio evaluators to judge how well institutional goals and generally accepted criteria for good teaching are reflected in the professor's objectives, and the remaining portfolio contents can then be used to assess how well the objectives are being met. Good teaching is clearly being done when appropriate goals have been chosen and the portfolio contents demonstrate success in achieving them. Moreover, simply reflecting on *why* we do *what* we do in the classroom is likely to improve our teaching, even if the portfolio preparation goes no further.

**How should new professors be assisted with portfolio preparation?** • There should be no secret about what

constitutes an outstanding portfolio and what constitutes an acceptable one. Discipline-specific model portfolios, like the illustrative ones given by Seldin,<sup>[2]</sup> should be shown to professors at the outset of the process, and faculty colleagues or campus teaching consultants should be available as *portfolio mentors* to offer guidance and support. The mentors do not have to be in the same disciplines as the professors they are helping, but they should clearly understand the evaluation criteria used in those disciplines.

**How should a portfolio program be initiated and institutionalized?** • Seldin cautions, repeatedly and emphatically, that *a portfolio program developed by administrators and imposed on the faculty will probably not achieve its objectives*, and suggests several ways to promote institutional acceptance.<sup>[2]</sup> Administrators at all levels (department, school, and institution), in collaboration with the faculty, should set clear standards for both outstanding teaching and acceptable teaching, and they should publicize the portfolio evaluation criteria so that faculty members are clear about institutional expectations. The program should be pilot-tested on volunteers, including some of the most prestigious teachers and researchers on the faculty, before an attempt is made to institutionalize it. The administration should support portfolio development workshops and mentorships, e.g., by providing release time or other compensation for the workshop leaders and mentors.

Perhaps most importantly, the administration should demonstrate by actions as well as words its commitment to take portfolios seriously when making personnel decisions. If professors with strong teaching portfolios are treated the same as professors with strong research records in promotion and tenure decisions, faculty acceptance is likely to follow and the portfolio program has a good chance of working. Conversely, if professors with strong teaching portfolios and weak research records are denied tenure while others with weak teaching portfolios and strong research records get it, faculty acceptance will almost certainly be unattainable and the portfolio program is likely to fail.

This synopsis hardly does justice to the wealth of models and tips Seldin offers for portfolio preparation and evaluation. Anyone thinking about implementing a portfolio program should study the references and, if possible, attend a Seldin workshop. The potential impact of the program on teaching quality justifies doing whatever it takes to get it right the first time.

## REFERENCES

1. Seldin, Peter, *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*, Anker Publishing Company, Inc., Bolton, MA (1991)
2. Seldin, Peter, *Successful use of Teaching Portfolios*, Anker Publishing Company, Inc., Bolton, MA (1993) □