

CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHING PORTFOLIO

An important and welcome change is taking place on college and university campuses: teaching is being taken more seriously. Interest has mushroomed rapidly in recent years, burrowing into all areas of the country. Institutions are moving from lip-service endorsements of the importance of teaching to concerted and sustained efforts to evaluate and reward it. As for faculty, they are being held accountable as never before to provide solid evidence of the quality and effectiveness of their instruction.

The familiar professorial paradox is crumbling on many campuses. Traditionally, college professors were hired to teach but rewarded for research. Although this is still true in many institutions, especially those with strong graduate schools, it has been largely swept away on campuses stressing undergraduate education. Today, teaching may still be in second place in the race with research, but the gap is slowly closing.

What is behind this new emphasis on teaching? The growing number of students and parents facing rapidly escalating tuition bills has led to pointed questions about the quality of teaching and played a part. So have the rapid changes in educational technology, which have forever altered concepts of teaching and learning. But perhaps the most compelling force behind the demands for teaching accountability is the unrelenting budgetary squeeze that legislatures and institutional governing boards face. It has pressed colleges and universities hard to take a much closer look at each professor's teaching effectiveness.

Unfortunately, factual information on teaching performance is often skimpy at best. The typical curriculum vitae lists publications, research grants, publications, and conference presentations but says almost nothing about teaching. It offers little factual information about what the person does as a teacher, why he or she does it in that way, or how well he or she does it. Evaluating teaching performance in the absence of factual information is very difficult. Rewarding it is also very difficult, as is improving it.

Is there a way for colleges and universities to respond simultaneously to the movement to take teaching seriously and to the pressures to improve systems of teaching accountability? The answer is yes. A solution can be found by turning to the teaching portfolio, an approach increasingly recognized and respected. Although reliable numbers are hard to come by, estimates are that as many as twenty-five hundred colleges and universities in the United States and Canada (where it is called a teaching dossier) are using or experimenting with portfolios—a stunning jump from the ten institutions thought to be using portfolios in 1990.

WHAT IS A TEACHING PORTFOLIO?

A teaching portfolio is a factual description of a professor's teaching strengths and accomplishments. It includes documents and materials that collectively suggest the scope and quality of a professor's teaching performance. The portfolio is to teaching what lists of publications, grants, and honors are to research and scholarship. As such, it allows faculty members to display their teaching accomplishments for examination by others. And in the process, it contributes to both sounder tenure and promotion decisions and the professional development of individual faculty members. As a result, it provides a strong signal that teaching is an institutional priority.

The teaching portfolio is not an exhaustive compilation of all the documents and materials that bear on teaching performance. Instead, it culls from the record selected information on teaching activities and solid evidence of their effectiveness. Just as in a curriculum vitae, all claims in the portfolio should be supported by firm empirical evidence. Selectivity is important because the portfolio should not be considered a huge repository of indiscriminate

documentation. Rather, it should be seen as a judicious, critical, purposeful analysis of performance, evidence, and goals.

The portfolio permits faculty to describe the unique circumstances of their courses and general approaches to teaching, explain their use of specific strategies and methods, and provide convincing evidence that they are effective. We interpret the word *teaching* here to signify all professional activity that provides direct support for student learning. That includes not only traditional classroom and laboratory teaching, but also instruction of online courses, and small-group settings, one-to-one teacher-student interactions, student advising, and the scholarship of teaching and communication of its results.

Why should a skeptical professor spend valuable time preparing a portfolio? Because it makes good sense to document teaching activities with the same care and accuracy as he or she uses to document research and scholarship. Portfolios are a step toward a more public, professional view of teaching and reflect teaching as a scholarly activity.

The logic behind portfolios is straightforward. Earlier assessment methods such as student ratings or peer observation were like flashlights: they illuminated only the teaching skills and abilities that fell within their beams and therefore shed light on only a small part of a professor's classroom performance. With portfolios, the flashlight is replaced by a searchlight. Its beam discloses the broad range of teaching skills, abilities, attitudes, philosophies, and methodologies.

PORTFOLIO USES

Faculty members are busy, even harried, individuals. Here are some reasons they should want to take the time and trouble to prepare a teaching portfolio:

- Graduate students are preparing portfolios to bolster their credentials as they enter the job market.
- Professors are preparing portfolios to take on the road as they seek a different teaching position.
- Some institutions are requiring portfolios from finalists for teaching positions.

- Portfolios are being used to determine winners of an institution's teacher of the year award or for merit pay consideration.
- Professors nearing retirement are preparing portfolios in order to leave a written legacy so that faculty members taking over their position will have the benefit of their experience.
- Portfolios are used to provide evidence in applications for grants or release time.
- Institutions are asking faculty to prepare portfolios so they can provide data on their performance to persons and organizations operating off campus, such as government agencies, boards of trustees, alumni, the general public, and advocacy groups.

By far, though, the two most often cited reasons for preparing teaching portfolios are to provide evidence for use in personnel decisions and to improve teaching performance.

PERSONNEL DECISIONS

Providing a rational and equitable basis for promotion and tenure decisions is a central reason for preparing a teaching portfolio. In today's climate of greater accountability, colleges and universities are increasingly looking to portfolios as a rich way to get at the complexity and individuality of teaching. The portfolio provides evaluators with hard-to-ignore information on what individual professors do as teachers, why they do it, how they do it, and the outcome of what they do. And by so doing, it avoids looking at teaching as a derivative of student ratings.

Some argue that professors should be given unrestricted freedom to select the items that best reflect their performance. That approach works well if the portfolio is developed for improvement, but not if it is developed for personnel decisions such as tenure or promotion. Because each portfolio is unique, the lack of standardization makes comparability very difficult for faculty members from different teaching contexts.

One answer is to require that portfolios being used for personnel decisions such as tenure or promotion include certain items, along with those chosen specifically by the professor. Mandated items might include summaries of student evaluations,

classroom observation reports, representative course materials, and a reflective statement describing the professor's teaching philosophy and methodologies. The professor would then choose which additional items to include in the portfolio.

If certain items in the portfolio are standardized, comparison of teaching performance (three finalists from different disciplines competing for university teacher of the year, for example) becomes possible.

Because they are based on triangulation of data, portfolios provide evaluators with solid evidence from an array of different sources. This material enables them to better recognize and evaluate the effectiveness of faculty members as teachers inside and outside of the classroom.

The contents page prepared for personnel decisions (that is, evaluations) might include the following entries:

Teaching Portfolio
Name of Faculty Member
Department/College
Date

Table of Contents

1. Teaching Responsibilities
2. Teaching Philosophy
3. Teaching Methodologies
4. Student Evaluations for Multiple Courses (summative questions)
5. Classroom Observations
6. Review of Teaching Materials
7. Representative Course Syllabi
8. New Instructional Initiatives
9. Evidence of Student Learning
10. Statement by the Department Chair Assessing the Professor's Teaching Contribution to the Department
11. Teaching Awards
12. Teaching Goals
13. Appendices

When portfolios are submitted for personnel decisions, the focus should be on evidence that documents the professor's best

work as a teacher and demonstrates that significant student learning (cognitive or affective) has taken place. The faculty member's achievements, awards, and successes are the focus. Self-criticism is a key component in a portfolio developed for teaching improvement, but it does not make much sense to include for those who are being considered for promotion or tenure.

It is important to keep in mind that use of the portfolio for personnel decisions is only occasional. Its primary purpose is to improve performance.

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

There is no better reason to prepare a portfolio than to improve performance. Faculty are hired by institutions in expectation of first-class performance. To help them hone their performance is nothing less than an extension of this expectation. It is in the very process of reflecting on their work and creating their collection of documents and materials that professors are stimulated to reconsider policies and activities, rethink strategies and methodologies, revise priorities, and plan for the future.

A portfolio is a valuable aid in professional development for three important reasons: (1) the level of personal investment in time, energy, and commitment is high (since faculty prepare their own portfolios), and that is a necessary condition for change; (2) preparation of the portfolio stirs many professors to reflect on their teaching in an insightful, refocused way; and (3) it is grounded in discipline-based pedagogy, that is, the focus is on teaching a particular subject to a particular group of students at a particular time in a particular institution.

Do teaching portfolios actually improve faculty performance? For most faculty, teaching portfolios actually improve their performance. Experience suggests that if a professor is motivated to improve, knows how to improve, or knows where to go for help, improvement is quite likely.

When used for improvement purposes, the portfolio contains no mandated items. Instead, it contains only items chosen by the professor working in collaboration with a consultant/mentor.

The contents page in a portfolio for improvement might have the following entries:

Teaching Portfolio
Name of Faculty Member
Department/College
Date

Table of Contents

1. Teaching Responsibilities
2. Teaching Philosophy
3. Teaching Objectives, Strategies, Methodologies
4. Description of Teaching Materials (Syllabi, Handouts, Assignments)
5. Efforts to Improve Teaching
 - Curricular Revisions
 - Teaching Conferences and Workshops Attended
 - Innovations in Teaching
6. Student Ratings on Diagnostic Questions
7. Evidence of Student Learning
8. Teaching Goals (Short and Long Term)
9. Appendices

The improvement portfolio provides a record of performance that details progress and setbacks, successes and disappointments in a framework of honest and thoughtful information analyzed and examined in a timely way. The goal is to establish a baseline of information and then progress through stages of experimentation and development until enhancement of teaching performance becomes evident through assessment.

Sometimes a professor will decide to prepare a teaching portfolio that focuses on a single course rather than an array of courses. The goal is to improve his or her teaching of that particular course by helping the faculty member (1) articulate a teaching philosophy for that particular course; (2) describe, analyze, and evaluate course materials, methods, and outcomes; (4) study student and peer evaluations; and (5) formulate an action plan for improvement.

Whether improvement actually takes place depends on the information included in the portfolio. It will not be successful unless the teaching elements to be strengthened are singled out. If the portfolio is to stimulate improvement in teaching performance, it must have multiple items, and the data must be detailed, thoughtful, and diagnostic.