

## *Chapter One*

# **The Academic Portfolio Concept**

An important and welcome change is taking place on college and university campuses: evaluating faculty performance is being taken more seriously. Countless institutions are examining their evaluation methods and exploring ways to improve them. As for faculty, they are being held accountable, as never before, to provide solid evidence of the quality of their teaching, research, and service. The new focus is not just what they have accomplished but the skills, abilities, attitudes, and philosophies that enabled them to achieve professional excellence.

What is behind the movement to seek new and more effective ways to evaluate faculty performance? The growing number of parents and students facing swiftly rising annual costs of higher education led to demanding questions about the quality of faculty performance. And strident demands for faculty accountability from newly aroused legislatures and institutional governing boards added to the pressure on campuses.

But perhaps the most compelling force was the growing chorus of complaints from administrators and professors themselves that the current evaluation system was not geared to assisting review committees to understand the rich quality of their work and its significance. True, they probably have student ratings and a curriculum vitae that lists publications, honors, presentations, and research grants. But student rating numbers and lists of scholarly achievements do not describe one's professional priorities and strengths. They do not present a rationale for choices made,

expectations realized, circumstances that promoted or inhibited success. And, importantly, they do not describe the significance of one's work.

Yet in the absence of such information, how can performance be evaluated? How can it be rewarded? How can it be improved? And how can institutions give teaching, research, and service their proper role and value?

Is there a way for colleges and universities to respond to the pressures to improve systems of faculty accountability? The answer is yes. A solution can be found looking outside higher education.

Architects, photographers, and artists all have portfolios in which they display and highlight their best work. An academic portfolio would do the same thing. It would enable faculty members to display their accomplishments in teaching, research, and service and discuss the significance of those accomplishments for the record. At the same time, it would contribute to sounder promotion and tenure decisions, as well as the professional development and growth of the individual faculty member.

## **What Is an Academic Portfolio?**

An academic portfolio is a reflective, evidence-based collection of materials that documents teaching, research, and service performance. It brings together, in one place, information about a professor's most significant professional accomplishments. It includes documents and materials that collectively suggest the scope, quality, and significance of a professor's achievements. As such, it allows faculty members to display their accomplishments for examination by others. And in the process, it contributes to sounder personnel decisions as well as the professional development of individual faculty members. Zubizarreta (2006, p. 202) describes the academic portfolio as a "...judicious, critical, purposeful analysis of performance, evidence, and goals—the kind of reflection and keen scrutiny of achievement and future directions that leads to authentic professional development, meaningful assessment, and sound evaluation."

In order to be useful, a portfolio must be manageable and cost- and time-efficient. A challenge in portfolio construction is to decide "how much information is enough," especially when

the portfolio is to be used for promotion and tenure decisions. Too many data can be unwieldy and, worse, misleading by creating the impression that the candidate is unable to discriminate or is attempting to overwhelm the committee with paper. Yet too sparse a portfolio may convey a lack of richness, substance, and experience.

The academic portfolio is not an exhaustive compilation of all of the documents and materials that bear on an individual's performance as a faculty member. Instead, it culls selected information on teaching, research, and service activities that portray an appropriate balance of professional activities and provide solid evidence of their effectiveness. The focus is on the quality and significance of the work, such as an especially innovative teaching technique, an article from a highly competitive journal, or a particularly time-consuming campus committee. Being selective does not mean creating a biased picture of one's teaching, research and scholarship, and service performance. Rather, it means providing a fair and accurate representation of it.

The logic behind portfolios is straightforward. Earlier assessment methods, such as student ratings, lists of publications, and campus committees, were like flashlights: they illuminated only the activities and abilities that fell within their beams and therefore shed light on only a small part of a professor's performance. But with portfolios, the flashlight is replaced by a searchlight. Its beam discloses the broad range of professorial skills, attitudes, and philosophies, as well as the significance of one's achievements to students, colleagues, the academic discipline, and the institution. It has the capacity to convey a true, rich picture of an academic professional life.

Millis (1991) offers reasons for the viability of teaching portfolio development, a view that is readily adaptable to the academic portfolio:

1. Portfolios are cost-effective since they can be integrated into current evaluation processes without major disruption by rethinking and reallocating faculty time and commitment.
2. They are an effective tool for instructional improvement since portfolios are grounded squarely in discipline-related pedagogy.

3. Since portfolios involve both documentation and reflection, and faculty “own” the portfolio process, they are more likely to act positively as a result of their own reflections.
4. Good portfolios are collegial efforts. Valuable assistance can come from a department chair or a faculty colleague in structuring the portfolio and deciding what goes into it.

## Using the Portfolio

Faculty members are busy, even harried, individuals. Why would they want to take the time and trouble to prepare an academic portfolio? Seldin (2008) says that the two most frequently cited reasons for preparing one are to provide evidence for use in personnel decisions and to improve performance.

## Personnel Decisions

Providing a rational and equitable basis for promotion and tenure decisions is a central reason for preparing an academic portfolio. In today's climate of increasing accountability, colleges and universities are looking toward portfolios as a rich way, and with greater depth, to get at the complexity and individuality of faculty performance. These institutions have concluded that personnel decisions (evaluation) should rest on a holistic examination of faculty teaching, research, and service performance. The portfolio provides evaluators with hard-to-ignore information on what they do, why they do it, how they do it, and the significance and outcome of what they do.

At some institutions, faculty members who elect to dedicate most of their waking time to a major research program are excused by the department chair or dean from some faculty responsibilities. At other institutions, research and publication are mildly encouraged, and professors are expected to focus on their teaching duties. But at most colleges and universities, professors must learn to divide themselves, like Gaul, into three parts: teaching, research (and publication), and institutional or community service. They are accountable in all three areas.

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 the portfolio is developed for personnel purposes (evaluation). Why? Because the contents are based on a combination of availability of supporting materials, the nature of the portfolio, the faculty position, the discipline, and the mission and objectives of the institution. The resulting lack of standardization makes comparability across portfolios very difficult.

One answer is to require portfolios being used for personnel decisions to include certain mandated items along with the elective ones. Such mandated items might include summaries of student evaluations, innovative course materials, representative course syllabi, description of faculty research, selected samples of publications or creative works, external funding obtained, selected samples of department or institution committees, and a description of three major professional accomplishments and an explanation of why they are noteworthy. All additional items in the portfolio would be selected by individual faculty.

Professors stand to benefit by providing their portfolios to evaluators of their performance. Portfolios provide evaluators with rich evidence on which to make judgments about their effectiveness. If certain items in the portfolio are standardized, comparison of faculty performance (for example, three professors from one large department seeking promotion to full professor) becomes possible.

Does the portfolio approach really make any difference? Consider the comments from professors whose portfolios were used for personnel decisions:

*A political science professor in North Carolina:* "The portfolio was particularly helpful as I prepared my material for tenure. It helped me articulate who I am academically to people outside my discipline. That was invaluable."

*A history professor in Kansas:* "The portfolio made a big difference when I submitted my material for post-tenure review. I sailed through!"

*An economics professor in Pennsylvania:* "By completing the academic portfolio, I've been able to easily gather the important documents that I need to support my application for promotion."

*From a clinical science professor in Washington:* “My portfolio helped me to get ready for the promotion process! I felt much more prepared. Internal feedback on my portfolio was very positive, and several colleagues have now asked me to mentor them as they prepare their own portfolios.”

How do members of promotion and tenure committees feel about academic portfolios? Consider the following comments from members of committees:

*A committee member at a large research university in Florida:* “It took time to learn how to evaluate the portfolios. But once we did, the richness of the data and the integration of material made our job much easier.”

*A committee member at a small liberal arts college in Vermont:* “Without doubt, we make better tenure and promotion decisions with academic portfolios. The reflection component is essential.”

*A committee member at a comprehensive university in New York:* “I wish the portfolio idea had come along twenty years ago. Why? Because (a) the integration of material; (b) incorporation of a reflective component; and (c) limited length (sixteen pages here) would have saved the committee considerable time and helped us make much better decisions.”

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

## **Improve Performance**

There is no better reason to prepare a portfolio than to improve performance. The process of thoughtful reflection augmented by the gathering of documents and materials on performance provides data with which to assist the faltering, motivate the tired, and encourage the indecisive.

Faculty are hired by institutions in expectation of first-class performance. To help them hone their performance is nothing more than an extension of this expectation. Improvement becomes

possible when the professor is confronted with portfolio data showing strengths and weaknesses—data that the professor accepts as fair and accurate. Preparation of a portfolio can thus serve as a springboard for performance improvement. It is in the very process of reflecting on their work and creating the collection of documents and materials that the professor is stimulated to reconsider policies and activities, rethink strategies and methodologies, revise priorities, and plan for the future.

The academic portfolio is an especially effective tool for improvement because it is grounded in the tripartite role of a professor working in a specific discipline at a particular college or university at the present time. It focuses on reflective analysis, action planning, and self-assessment.

The bottom-line question, of course, remains: Do portfolios actually improve faculty performance? For most faculty, the answer is yes. Experience suggests that if the professor is motivated to improve, knows how to improve, or knows where to go for help, improvement is quite likely.

Consider these comments:

*An English professor in California:* “The process of taking a fresh look at my teaching, scholarship, and service was motivating and even eye-opening. I especially valued the opportunity to reflect on how my efforts in the proverbial trinity of the professoriate are not as integrated as I originally thought. I’ll work to improve that situation.”

*An engineering professor in Indiana:* “Developing the portfolio enabled me to take a more systematic look at everything that I’ve been doing in the classroom, as department chair, and in professional activities and then tying the threads together. Areas for improvement are more clear now.”

*A foreign language professor in Illinois:* “The portfolio helped me reassess the many movements that I make in a day and think about how to keep my ‘eye on the ball.’ Working in academe is so full of distractions. Looking at myself through the academic portfolio helped me refocus on the core of what I do.”

*A clinical psychology professor in New Jersey:* “Taking the time to step back from the daily work demands and gain a broader

perspective allowed me to create some specific career goals. This was both inspiring and effective in helping me lay out a plan for how to direct my efforts in the next few years.”

*A music professor in Illinois:* “Preparing the portfolio helped me recognize and articulate the connections among my teaching, research, and service; prior to writing it, I hadn’t realized how tightly these professional activities were woven.”

When used for improvement purposes, the portfolio contains no mandated items. Instead it contains only items chosen by the faculty member. For example, a professor might decide to include teaching philosophy and methodology; documentation of teaching improvement activities; comments from peer reviewers on submitted articles and proposed conference presentations; feedback on student advising; description of how his or her teaching, research, and service contribute to professional growth and development; and description of professional goals still to accomplish.

There are three important reasons that the portfolio is such a valuable aid in professional development: (1) it is grounded in discipline-based performance; (2) the level of personal investment in time, energy, and commitment is high—since faculty develop their own portfolios—and that is a necessary condition for change; and (3) it stirs many professors to reflect on their performance in the areas of teaching, research, and service in an insightful, refocused way.

Ideally, academic portfolio development is not a “one-shot” activity but rather a cumulative, reflective process that extends throughout a professor’s professional career. Froh, Gray, and Lambert (1993) view the portfolio as integral to advancement to the next stage of one’s academic career. Why? Because portfolio development can help professors reflect on their accomplishments and activities, chart future goals, and provide documentation to hiring and promotion and tenure committees.

Ongoing examination of professional accomplishments may lead to new directions in academic lives. For example, a faculty member who brings in a major research grant might decide to take up the challenge of incorporating more extensive use of technology in the classroom. A faculty member who completes a new book might agree to chair an institution-wide self-study committee.



## Other Purposes

Although it is true that most portfolios are prepared for purposes of personnel decision or improvement of performance, some are prepared for other reasons—for example:

- 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 position. Generally the portfolio is submitted in advance of an interview.
- Some institutions are requiring academic portfolios from finalists for academic positions.
- Portfolios are used to help colleges and universities determine winners of awards for outstanding faculty performance or for merit pay consideration.
- Professors nearing retirement are preparing portfolios in order to leave a written legacy so that faculty members who will be taking over their position will have the benefit of their experience.
- Portfolios are used to provide evidence in applications for grants or released time.
- Colleges and universities 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.

