



USE OF PORTFOLIOS

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A portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that demonstrates student achievement relative to specific student outcomesⁱ. Portfolios can provide for the direct measure of student learning for the purpose of program improvement. However, portfolios have been severely criticized by those who initially had a vision for their potential and were later disappointed in the results. The failure of portfolios to deliver on the initial enthusiasm lies primarily in three things: the design of the portfolio, the implementation process and the clarity of the outcomes being assessed. Some of the questions to consider before embarking on the portfolio journey are as follows:

What is the focus of the assessment?

Are the assessment results going to be used to assess individual students or provide information on student cohorts (e.g., graduating seniors, freshmen, all students in a particular major, etc.)? This decision depends on how the results are going to be used and will, as a result, affect other aspects of the portfolio process. Will the portfolio process be used to assess student learning at both the formative and summative levels? The answer to this question will drive the number and frequency of artifactⁱⁱ submission and the scoring of student performance.

What performances related to the learning outcome will be measured?

The development of measurable student learning outcomes is the most crucial aspect of any assessment process. This is particularly true in the implementation of portfolios. For program assessment, outcomes must be defined in terms of a few measurable performance indicatorsⁱⁱⁱ. Scoring rubrics are generally used as a measure of the extent to which students are attaining the outcome. Rubrics are scaled with progressive levels of student achievement for each performance indicator.

What is the role of faculty and students?

To enhance the likelihood of success during the implementation of portfolios, the role of faculty and students should be explicit. It is especially important to answer the question “what’s in it for me?” Some of the decisions that need to be made include the following:

- Who will determine what is placed in the portfolio — faculty or students?
- Who will score the portfolios? How often?
- Will students get “credit” for their portfolios?
- Will the submissions be required as part of a class or program?
- Will students be asked to reflect on the portfolio entries that they make? If so, will they get feedback on the quality of their reflections?
- If portfolios are being used to assess cohorts instead of individual students, will the students get feedback on their portfolios?

How are the portfolios going to be assessed?

It is necessary to have a clear plan on how portfolio submissions are categorized and assessed in a meaningful, focused way that is relevant to the desired student outcomes. Because of the potential time commitment needed to evaluate portfolios for a number of outcomes, a clear plan needs to be developed on the nature of the rubrics to be used and the format of the scoring process. Issues such as training for faculty raters, maintaining interrater reliability and providing incentives for faculty participation need to be considered.

How are the results going to inform the curriculum?

Having a well-designed portfolio is critical to both efficiency and effectiveness of scoring student learning for the purpose of improving the educational program. However, without a mechanism to link the anticipated outcomes to curricular processes, it will be difficult to focus improvements in meaningful ways. Curriculum maps that depict the alignment of outcomes and performance indicators should be used strategically for this purpose.

There are now many electronic platforms that can be used to meet your portfolio needs. It is important to have firmly in mind how your program or institutions are going to use the results of the portfolio process to make decisions about student learning before you begin to look for possible solutions. You may already have a course management system or assessment system (or both) that contain portfolio features. However, be sure that you are clear about your purpose for using them to be sure that what is provided meets your needs.

ⁱ Student outcomes are the knowledge, skills and affective traits that faculty expect students to demonstrate at the end of a unit of study (e.g., module, course, program).

ⁱⁱ An artifact is an item that is submitted to a portfolio. This can be a document, video, audio or other electronic submissions that demonstrate performance.

ⁱⁱⁱ Performance indicators are the measurable statements that define the student learning outcomes.