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**The Three Tier Portfolio Model:
A Dynamic, Results-Oriented Process
in Higher Education**

by

Joan C. Fingon and Paul A. Fahey

Background and Purpose

Portfolios have arrived. Educators across the nation are learning about and using portfolios at the elementary through graduate and post-graduate levels. This new practice is the result of a growing dissatisfaction with traditional assessment procedures that are unconnected to instructional processes, content, and learning and reflects a movement toward a more individualized, outcome-based system to evaluate student performance (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992; Keefe, 1995; Linn, 1994; Perrone, 1991; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1995).

The main purpose of the current article is to review an outcome-based portfolio model currently in use by the education faculty at Green Mountain College (GMC), a small, residential, undergraduate institution located in central Vermont. At GMC there are approximately 550 students and 36 full-time faculty. The student body is composed mostly of traditional, college-age students who come predominantly from New England with smaller percentages from other areas in the United States and foreign countries. The elementary and elementary/special education programs are the largest on campus and serve approximately 100 students. As a prelude to the presentation of the model, some background information relative to portfolios in education and specifically to their current implementation in the state of Vermont would seem appropriate.

Definitions of portfolios seem to vary widely across the states. Teachers and administrators create their own definitions of portfolios that best suit the needs of their students and/or the unique requirements of their school districts. Cooper (1991) identified twelve different portfolio definitions culled from a variety of teachers and schools. Although these definitions appeared to have unique characteristics, Cooper discovered that many had common concerns centering on assessment, student growth over a specified time, and student learning and evaluation.

According to Valencia (1994), recent attention has been given to portfolios for their potential to enhance both teaching practice and learning. She stressed that portfolios aid teachers in self-reflection and help them make better instructional decisions. For example, a group of teachers who participated in the Bellevue Portfolio Project described the portfolio process in this manner: "Our process changed 'portfolio' from a noun, a place to store work, to a verb, a process of looking closely at students' work to help us learn about ourselves and our students" (Valencia, p. 668).

Vermont is an example of one state that mandates the use of a portfolio system for specific elementary grade levels in the content areas of mathematics and writing. Other states such as California, Illinois, and Oregon have examined portfolio systems and have begun to design their own models for implementation across school districts and within selected elementary and secondary classrooms (Frazier & Paulson, 1992; Hebert, 1994; Jamentz, 1994).

In addition to elementary and secondary educational systems, portfolios are now being implemented in graduate and undergraduate teacher education programs. In an effort to personalize assessment and encourage reflective thinking, Stahle and Mitchell (1993) successfully used portfolios in preservice language arts methods courses. Zubizarreta (1994) also found that the beginning teacher stands to gain much from a teaching portfolio because it provides evaluators with a broad data base for making decisions about teaching effectiveness and serves "as a catalyst for substantive improvement in one's teaching philosophy, methods, and goals" (p. 324).

The Vermont Program Approval Process

In Vermont, every six or seven years, each public and private college or university with a teacher preparation program must participate in the program approval process. This evaluative procedure is outcome-based and now includes a portfolio component that reflects student progress relative to the Standards for Vermont Educators, state teaching competencies, unique program theme or philosophy, and other college program requirements. Guidelines for this process are provided by the state, but each institution is allowed flexibility in meeting the specific criteria. As of Spring 1995, over half of the higher education institutions in Vermont have participated in this program approval process and, as a result, several different portfolio systems and models are now currently in use throughout the state.

Standards for Vermont Educators and Program Theme

The outcome-based portfolio process flows directly from the "Standards for Vermont Educators" which were developed by the State Board of Education and the Standards Board for Professional Educators. In essence, these standards which define what a good educator should know and be able to do, were designed to guide school professionals to appropriate action based on a defined body of knowledge and skills. Specifically, there are five standards: Learning, Professional Knowledge, Collegueship, Advocacy, and Accountability. For example, the standard of Professional Knowledge can be summarized as the demonstration of a unique body of knowledge that emphasizes current methods and practices of teaching, theories of child development and learning, curriculum development, implementation and assessment, educational research, and an understanding of human relations (Vermont Department of Education, 1994).

In addition to the importance of these standards to an outcome-based assessment system, the program theme is also inextricably linked to the portfolio process. Each post-secondary institution in Vermont with a teacher education program must develop a unique theme statement. The theme represents the program's philosophy about teaching and learning. Ideally it becomes a "living theme" that is a true reflection of the program's goals and objectives at the institution. At Green Mountain College (GMC), the program theme stresses the complimentary learning partnership between the student and the teacher. This is a relationship that extends beyond the immediate college environment and includes teachers and administrators from local schools as well as the surrounding community.

The Three Tier Portfolio Model

While preparing for the May 1994 program approval, the GMC education faculty recognized a need to develop a portfolio model that was not only aligned with the state teaching competencies, program theme, and standards, but one that was also sensitive to the needs of the students as they progressed through the different stages in the education program. As a result,

the faculty identified three main portfolio phases: the developmental, qualifying, and showcase phases which serve as documentation of the growth and progress of a student's work over a set period of time. Appendix A presents an overview of the model.

I. The Developmental Portfolio Phase

Everyone was talking about portfolios and I didn't know what they were or what to expect, but when I saw one from an older (upperclassman), I knew what kinds of things I should be saving from all of my classes. I save everything now! After we do a project or assignment in class, we have to write about what we learned from it. At first, I found that hard to do, but I got used to it because we kept doing them. Now I don't mind, and I feel better about what I'm learning. (Freshman Student Comment)

The developmental component is the beginning phase of the model that is an ongoing process for freshmen and sophomores. At this stage, the students are introduced to the three tier system and are encouraged to review samples of student portfolios at different stages in the program. Students also begin to reflect and make connections between the program philosophy or theme statement, the Vermont Standards, teaching methodology, state competencies, and the teaching profession. This portfolio phase serves as a baseline from which students evaluate future work products for inclusion in their qualifying and showcase portfolios. During this period, students are urged to collect work samples that exemplify successful completion of program competencies, as well as materials from their general education and liberal arts courses and early field experiences.

When we first started with portfolios, we saw this as a process that would develop over time. We were learning right along with the students. We had many more questions than answers. We were willing to take the risk and try portfolios, but some of us were doubtful. (Faculty Comments)

II. The Qualifying Portfolio Phase

I kept hearing about how hard it was to prepare a qualifying portfolio in my junior year. When I met with my advisor, I realized that I already had most of the information I needed in my portfolio. I really had too much material and had to decide what to take out. It wasn't as bad as they said. (Junior Qualifying Student Comment)

The qualifying component is a summative stage for juniors who intend to do their student teaching the following year. With the assistance of their academic advisors, students select appropriate work samples from their developmental portfolios, add, delete, or revise previous materials, and develop a qualifying portfolio that is subsequently reviewed by a team of college faculty (The Teacher Education Review Board). In addition to meeting other program requirements, such as a specific academic grade point average and letters of support from faculty members, receiving a satisfactory rating for the qualifying portfolio is crucial for a student's eligibility to student teach.

The portfolios became a living document of the program. We saw ourselves and the students working toward a common goal. The portfolios told us what the students were learning in our classes. They also showed us what they thought about their own learning. We were watching students take ownership, and it was a great experience. (Faculty Comments)

III. The Showcase Portfolio Phase

I was surprised at how much my portfolio helped me with my teaching and my showcase presentation. I had already kept examples of student work, unit and lesson plans, and a case study and was able to organize my work around the Vermont Standards. Once I got started, it wasn't difficult to know what I wanted to say. (Showcase Student Teacher Comment)

At this stage, students, with the assistance of their advisors and student teaching supervisors, begin to develop a highly individualized product called the showcase portfolio. During this third phase, seniors who are enrolled in student teaching seminar put the "finishing touches" on a document that will provide prospective employers and other reviewers with multiple sources of data relative to a student's progress toward meeting the state teaching competencies, Vermont Standards, and program requirements. As a highlight of this stage, student teachers give a 30 minute oral presentation of their showcase portfolios to their peers during student teaching seminar. Presentations are evaluated by seminar leaders according to five main criteria: content, organization, materials, delivery, and relationship of portfolio components to the Standards for Vermont Educators.

As students progress through the three tiers, they work closely with their academic advisors; this learning partnership is a critical part of the entire portfolio process. Although students are provided with guidelines and suggestions for organizing and preparing their portfolios at each stage, they are encouraged to individualize and include items of work that reflect their own interests and special abilities.

Portfolios seem to be an ongoing process. Every year we revise and refine the procedures for ourselves and the students. The portfolios give us a more holistic view about our students over a longer period of time. Each time we evaluate the qualifying and showcase portfolios, we are able to define more clearly what we are looking for. Our department meetings are centered around discussions related to understanding more about portfolios and how to come to common agreement about what we assess. (Faculty Comments)

A Holistic Guide for Reviewing and Evaluating Portfolios

The education faculty at GMC currently utilizes an "Acceptable/Unacceptable" system for evaluating student growth toward teaching competencies and standards. Appendix B presents a holistic evaluation guide used by portfolio reviewers during the qualifying phase.

Prior to the qualifying portfolio review, advisors offer suggestions and discuss portfolio contents with students. Education faculty members review each student portfolio and furnish individual ratings. All qualifying portfolios are usually evaluated over a two week period, after which students are sent individual letters and informed of their portfolio ratings. If a student's portfolio receives an "unacceptable" rating for any area, the student is required to make appropriate revisions and resubmit the portfolio for a final review. When inconsistencies appear relative to individual faculty ratings, the portfolios are reviewed again to obtain a common rating agreement. Examples of acceptable student work related to the program theme statement in the three tier model are presented in Appendix C.

Overall Benefits and Conclusions

In addition to providing objective data relative to student growth toward meeting the teaching competencies and standards, the three tier model has already delivered the following benefits:

1. The model has become a vehicle for meaningful discussion between faculty and students about the program theme statement. Students have the opportunity in their classes to interact with faculty and peers and to discuss the education theme. This is particularly critical during the early formative phase when freshmen are being introduced to the goals and objectives of the program. During this stage, students are required to write reflection papers related to the theme statement. These reflection papers, kept in the developmental portfolios, are later reviewed and revised as students progress through the different tiers of the model.

2. The model can be tied easily to the Vermont Standards. For example, written case studies, unit and lesson plans, written individualized education programs (IEPs), behavior management systems, research papers, and written diagnostic narratives are all appropriate portfolio pieces, reflecting various stages in the model, that can be linked to the standard of "Professional Knowledge."

3. The model provides students with an opportunity to reflect about their own strengths and weaknesses and tends to increase their responsibility and involvement in the learning process.

4. The model encourages reflection about program goals and stimulates faculty to evaluate their teaching effectiveness. In the process, the model has generated a variety of useful questions such as the following: What kinds of documentation demonstrate student understanding of teaching and learning? What skills should students possess when they exit the program? What are the ways competencies can be assessed? How can faculty help students meet the criteria necessary to become certified?

5. The model creates a vehicle for meaningful dialogue between student and teacher that helps foster the essence of the GMC program theme—a true learning partnership that continually examines and reassesses program goals and objectives.

In summary, since the three tier portfolio model is relatively new at GMC, the education faculty is currently piloting this outcome-based assessment system and plans to continue to collect data and to evaluate the model's implementation over the next few years. The current feedback appears very encouraging.

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