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Becky Sain

Mitchell R. Williams
Old Dominion University

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An Examination of the Use of Portfolios for Faculty Evaluation at Community Colleges

Becky Sain

Cleveland Community College

Mitchell R. Williams

Old Dominion University

This study provides community college leaders with insights regarding how administrators and faculty members perceive faculty portfolios as an evaluation tool in two-year colleges. Utilizing a qualitative design, this study focused on perceptions of administrators and faculty members regarding the use of portfolios as the primary instrument for faculty evaluation. Overall, faculty and administrators found portfolios useful when the process encouraged and allowed for faculty self-reflection and honest feedback from administrators.

Background

While community colleges are required to evaluate faculty for accreditation, the development and, more importantly, the utilization of a faculty evaluation system have become crucial issues in educational institutions (Centra, 1993; McKeachie, 1990). The best faculty evaluation programs, according to Cohen & Brawer (2008), are those designed to improve teaching rather than to determine who receives tenure or salary increases. Boyer (1987) observed that one mark of a good college was its faculty evaluation program. Centra (1993) declared that poor evaluation leads to unfair judgments, while good evaluations provide decision-makers with information necessary for informed choices and teachers with useful feedback for improvement. Centra also noted that constructive reviews from administrators in conjunction with self-reflection could add value to the evaluation process.

Previous studies have focused primarily on faculty evaluation using student and peer evaluations. A review of the literature suggests that student evaluations and peer evaluations are one-dimensional in evaluation. Faculty portfolios, on the other hand, require a comprehensive development process that encourages faculty members to reflect on all aspects of their jobs (Seldin, 2004). Reis and Villaume (2002) reported the use of portfolios facilitated increased skills related to lesson planning, organization, and time management. Additionally, Willis and Davies (2002) identified portfolios as a tool for improving teacher education programs. Portfolios have also served as a tool for documenting teacher performance against state and national standards. This study, however, was designed to

identify how community college administrators and faculty perceive faculty portfolios as an evaluation tool.

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) strives to insure a comprehensive faculty evaluation plan where all stakeholders recognize the value of the evaluation process. Traditionally, faculty evaluations included student evaluations, comments from peer instructors, video and audiotapes, classroom observations, and analysis of course materials. Portfolios were initially recognized as a tool for faculty evaluation when self-reflection from the faculty member was identified as an essential factor in the evaluation process.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative design to examine the perceptions of administrators and faculty members regarding the use of portfolios as the primary instrument for faculty evaluation at four community colleges located in North Carolina. The four community colleges that participated in this study are among just nine of 58 community colleges in the state that use faculty portfolios. Of the nine community colleges, five use faculty portfolios as part of their faculty evaluation process while the remainder used portfolios for excellence in teaching awards, merit pay, promotions, or faculty improvement plans. The four institutions participating in this study had used portfolios for faculty evaluation for a minimum of three years and a maximum of nine years. The colleges differed somewhat in how faculty portfolios were used, the contents of the portfolio, the length of time using faculty portfolios, and geographic location.

The initial interview questions elicited administrators and faculty perceptions of 1) the use of portfolios for faculty evaluation, 2) the accuracy of portfolios for faculty evaluation, and 3) the use of portfolios to improve instruction. Each of these initial inquiries had follow-up questions to probe for deeper, richer data. Administrators and faculty were asked for samples of faculty portfolio guidelines and any assessment tools used by administrators to evaluate the portfolios.

A total of 16 faculty members, 4 from each participating community college, were interviewed. Each of the faculty members interviewed had at least one year of experience in developing a faculty portfolio. Faculty participants taught in a variety of instructional programs, including vocational, technical, allied health, and college transfer, and in traditional, hybrid, and online courses. The four administrators interviewed – 1 from each college – had at least three years experience and had completed the evaluation process using faculty portfolios.

Interviews were conducted in person, by telephone, or through interactive television. To assure accuracy in capturing the responses, each interview was tape-recorded and notes were taken. Follow-up telephone conversations and e-mails were used to assure responses were transcribed and understood correctly. As the interviews were transcribed, responses were analyzed for patterns and themes. To provide an in-depth look at the portfolio process, examples of faculty portfolios, guidelines, and assessment tools were reviewed.

Findings

Overall, the majority of administrators and faculty were in favor of faculty portfolios as an evaluation instrument for faculty. Both administrators and faculty acknowledged that the reflection experience was an essential part of the portfolio process. From the faculty perspective, feedback from their administrator was also a valuable outcome of the portfolio process. Administrators reported that the portfolio allowed them to see a range of activities in which the faculty member had been involved. Administrators also had some level of involvement in establishing or evaluating the requirements for the portfolios, giving them some ownership in the faculty evaluation process.

The main point of discrepancy was in response to the probe about whether the use of portfolios improved instruction. The discussion focused on the idea that faculty portfolios could lead to the discovery of faculty member weaknesses, to subsequent conversations about ways to address problems, and, ultimately, to improvements in instruction. Faculty members suggested faculty weaknesses could be camouflaged within the portfolio while administrators said weaknesses could be identified. How-

ever, both faculty and administrators felt portfolios illustrated the strengths of faculty members.

Administrators' Perceptions

The interview results suggested that administrators valued the self-assessment portion of the faculty portfolios. The portfolios allowed the administrators to view faculty goals and accomplishments and helped administrators to establish a dialogue with faculty members to discuss issues and give feedback. Feedback was listed repeatedly as one of the most important aspects of the portfolio process. Most administrators felt they reviewed faculty portfolios and supporting documentation closely and gave valuable feedback. Administrators generally perceived faculty portfolios as an accurate way to evaluate faculty members; however, most of the administrators strongly felt the portfolio was not an adequate evaluation tool by itself.

Finally, administrators felt portfolios were capable of improving instruction. Those interviewed agreed faculty portfolios improved instruction, but for different reasons. Three ways portfolios improved instruction were identified. First, portfolios encouraged faculty to reflect on their performance and the outcomes of their instruction. Second, portfolios improved instruction by identifying weaknesses and providing faculty training in that area. Finally, faculty improvement occurred through self-reflection rather than an administrative response to faculty portfolios.

Overall, 3 of the 4 administrators interviewed liked the portfolio as an evaluation tool for faculty. One administrator did not see the value of portfolios, although the individual had worked with faculty giving appropriate feedback. All 4 administrators said they were involved in the process of deciding what was required in faculty portfolios. The length of time each participant had been an administrator also determined how involved they had been in the decision process. In one case the administrator said portfolio development was a collaborative effort with faculty input.

Faculty Members' Perceptions

The faculty interviewed indicated that they valued traditional evaluation methods, such as classroom/course evaluations, peer observations and evaluations, and administrative classroom observations. The faculty also acknowledged that the portfolio process added two elements of value for them: self-reflection and administrative feedback.

All faculty members mentioned the value of the self-reflection encouraged by the portfolio process. It allowed them to take a critical look at what they had accomplished, what they needed to do to improve, and how they might set and accomplish goals for the next year. Faculty valued

how the portfolio allowed them to set and track goals to see if they been successful.

Faculty members were proud of their portfolios; they wanted and valued feedback from administrators. Faculty commented on the amount of time it took to include the portfolio as part of the evaluation process, but also noted that the detail required for the portfolio encouraged them to accurately reflect what they accomplished throughout the year. Given the commitment required and the resulting pride in their portfolios, faculty members were insistent that administrators should give honest feedback.

Faculty had different perceptions than administrators concerning the accuracy and integrity of the portfolio process. While administrators thought faculty portfolios provided an accurate account of the faculty member's performance throughout the year, faculty expressed some concern about the integrity of the portfolio. Faculty felt that if faculty members were honest in their responses and documentation of classroom performance and service to the college for their portfolios, they would improve instruction; however, if faculty members falsified portfolios, improvements were unlikely.

Faculty speculated that administrators could manipulate the portfolio evaluation, fearing that the portfolio might be used to give certain instructors a more favorable, or a more critical, review than he or she deserved. Faculty also noted some inequities in the process. For example, some of the required items or questions may not apply to all faculty members. Some disciplines were better suited to different evaluation measures.

Some faculty members lacked an understanding of how their portfolios fit into the overall evaluation process; others said they were not sure how portfolios were utilized once they were given to administration. A few faculty members talked about the lack of direction given for the contents of portfolios, but most stated they were given guidelines but allowed to be creative or add items to portfolios. The majority of faculty commented they wanted to be valued for their contributions to the institution and for the effort they had put into completing portfolios that documented those contributions.

Some faculty members expressed concerns about the amount of time they spent compiling their portfolios compared to the amount of time administrators took to review the portfolios. Faculty concern was based on the perception that some administrators were not reviewing portfolios or giving adequate feedback on the portfolio.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Although administrators generally felt faculty portfolios were more accurate in documenting performance than faculty, both groups agreed that the integrity of the

faculty member was important for an accurate representation of information. Faculty members suggested that weaknesses could be camouflaged within the portfolio while administrators believed weaknesses could be found. Both faculty and administrators felt portfolios could illustrate hidden strengths of faculty members. These observations suggest that establishing a system of checks and balances for the faculty portfolio would be beneficial.

Another suggestion was to incorporate faculty portfolios as a part of a comprehensive evaluation program. Research indicates that portfolios are effective in helping faculty members reflect on their accomplishments during the academic year—their service to students, the college and the community. Requiring portfolios to be submitted in alternating years in conjunction with a professional development plan or another comparable evaluation instrument could enhance the reflective character of the faculty portfolio. For example, portfolios could be compiled every two or three years with other evaluation instruments used in the alternating years. The purpose of the portfolio would be to document the planning process, faculty members' professional goals, and the most important aspects of faculty's work from their perspective.

Participants also suggested that an interview between an assigned administrator and the faculty member should be required. Faculty wanted to know their portfolios were being reviewed by those with an administrative role. The higher the level of administrative review, the higher the perceived importance of the portfolio. Even though the appropriate dean or vice president may not have the time to review and comment on all faculty portfolios, knowing there will be some review at that level adds value to the effort.

Some colleges limited the number of pages in the portfolio. It was suggested that eight to ten pages plus supporting appendix materials would be sufficient for the vast majority of faculty members. Limiting the number of pages does not mean creating a biased picture of the faculty member performance, but rather providing a fair and accurate representation of it.

Portfolios should reveal a practice of continuing professional growth. Portfolios might include an aspect of teaching in which the faculty was not yet proficient and document how the faculty addressed this shortcoming, thereby demonstrating growth and critical thinking. Additionally, innovation or appropriate risk-taking should be recognized by the college.

The current research, along with other studies, suggests that a strong portfolio integrates documents and resources reflective of the faculty member, peer observation, and student learning. The portfolio should include work samples such as a personal statement by the instructor, including instructional goals, course syllabi, examples of graded student essays, and evidence of student learning

such as pre- and post-course examination scores or a video of the instructor teaching a class (Centra, 1993; 1994).

Conclusions

The majority of administrators and faculty members who participated in this study believed portfolios were a useful evaluation tool. At the colleges participating in this study, faculty portfolios generally included teaching philosophy, teaching methods, awards/honors, innovations in teaching, extracurricular activities, and class assessments. Faculty indicated the best part of faculty portfolios was the self-reflection involved with portfolio development. The portfolios provided faculty with an opportunity to review their accomplishments and activities during the year. Additionally, portfolios documented service to the college, students, and the community.

While faculty evaluation methods such as student and peer evaluations are one-dimensional, faculty portfolios require a comprehensive development process, encouraging faculty to reflect on every aspect of their job. Furthermore, faculty portfolios were identified by participants as a catalyst to facilitate conversations between faculty and administrators.

Although portfolios are good tools for evaluation, promoting self-reflection for the individual and communication between administrators and faculty members, there was some concern expressed about the time required for the process. The development of the portfolio is a time-consuming effort, and administrators may lack the time to adequately review and/or discuss the portfolio with the faculty member.

Faculty evaluation at the community college persists because "the institution and the profession are concerned with improvement" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, 100). This study opens the door for additional discussion concern-

ing the use of portfolios for faculty evaluation, including opportunities for community colleges to improve faculty evaluation, faculty retention, and teaching and learning. Based on the findings, administrators and faculty members should collaboratively consider faculty portfolios for faculty evaluation to help community college faculty grow professionally.

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Becky Sain, Ed.D., is Vice President of Academic Programs at Cleveland Community College in Shelby, North Carolina.

Mitchell R. Williams, Ed.D., is Assistant Professor of Educational Foundations and Leadership at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. Questions about this article can be directed to Dr. Williams at mrwillia@odu.edu.