



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

THE DEGREE PORTFOLIO AS A MEASURE OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Community colleges need to design assessment activities that will provide them with information that can be used to improve the teaching/learning process and provide students the opportunity for self-reflection about their educational experiences. The degree portfolio, which is required for graduation in transfer degree programs at Kishwaukee College, has proven to be a powerful tool for assessing our general education objectives and for providing students the opportunity for self-reflection.

The degree portfolio serves two purposes. First, the portfolio provides documented evidence as to how effectively the college is meeting the educational needs of students in our general education offerings. Changes in the learning/teaching process or curricular revisions can be based on documented information. Second, the portfolio offers students unique opportunities for self-assessment and reflection on their educational experiences and growth at the college. Often, students proceed through college with little awareness of how the collegiate experience has contributed to their development as students and as people. The construction of a degree portfolio not only engages students in self-assessment of their own learning products, but also assists students in setting future goals.

General Education Objectives and the Degree Portfolio

The general education objectives at the college are categorized into four broad areas: foundation knowledge, thinking, personal characteristics, and social integration. All four categories may be measured by the degree portfolio experience.

Students are required to include six items in the portfolio. First, students write a cover letter describing how they selected the items they enclosed in their

portfolio and what they learned from the portfolio experience. The cover letter demonstrates thinking in the selection process, begins the self-reflection necessary for evaluating their learning experience, and provides an example of writing ability.

Second, students must provide one work in written or oral form that shows mastery of basic terms, facts, or concepts in a particular course, and provides for a direct measure of a sample of foundation knowledge objectives.

Third, students must provide an example of work in which they have applied mathematical problem solving or scientific reasoning. This is an additional measure of the thinking objectives.

Fourth, students must provide a multi-source paper. Written communication skills are measured by this item; however, depending on the work submitted, other objectives may be measured, as well. It is of interest to note that more than half of the papers submitted are written for classes other than English. Student assignments support the writing-across-the-curriculum initiative.

Fifth, students must provide two works, one from early in their college experience and another more recent work, which best reflect their growth as a thinker, along with an explanation as to how these two pieces reflect this growth.

These items are used to assess whether the students meet reasonable and relevant standards of thinking. Examination of the two items provides the college with information concerning the teaching/learning process. Additionally, by asking the students to explain the inclusion of the two items, a measure of the students' perception of their growth may be ascertained. This item actively engages the students in self-assessment of their own learning products.

Finally, the sixth item gives students a choice. Either students must describe their most personally satisfying experience at Kishwaukee College or a community activity that was an extension of their experiences at the college. If the students choose the first option, their work provides a final measure of personal characteris-



tics and gives the students a final opportunity to reflect on their growth. The second choice is a direct measure of the social integration objectives.

Results of the Degree Portfolio Reading

The 2000-2001 school year will be the fourth year that degree portfolios have been required for graduation. A committee of 12 to 14 faculty and administrators read and score the degree portfolios after the end of the spring semester. A report of the findings is shared with the faculty. The data are further analyzed by the Director of Institutional Research and Reports, and are disseminated by the Assessment Committee. Last year, 220 portfolios were read and evaluated.

Degree portfolios were piloted spring 1997-1998. Pilot data were used to rewrite the guidelines students use to select items to include in their portfolios and to review the scoring rubrics that are used to assess each of the six portfolio enclosures.

Analysis of the 1998-1999 portfolios showed that few students included an item that pertained to cultural diversity. This resulted in faculty's refocusing on the importance of including cultural diversity activities in appropriate classes. The reading of the 1999-2000 portfolios provided evidence of an increase in the inclusion of items reflecting cultural diversity in student portfolios. The curricular focus for this year is to reinforce formal speaking in our courses and to help students document their experiences, by audio or video recordings, so that this documentation may be included in their portfolios.

We have documented evidence that most students are meeting or exceeding our general education objectives and that the faculty are designing educational experiences that support general education outcomes. Nearly all general education departments—plus agriculture, criminal justice, drafting, electronics, and nursing—were represented with items in portfolios.

One unexpected, but important, result is that portfolio reading is a rewarding and enriching staff development activity. The process of sitting down and reading portfolios with fellow faculty members has had a profound effect on the readers. By experiencing firsthand the wonderful instructional activities designed by fellow faculty, there has been an increase in collegiality; further, the reading process has fostered more interdepartmental cooperation. Additionally, new faculty members experience general education from a student's perspective early in their teaching careers.

Students' reflections have been quite interesting. A typical response is that the students never think about how their collegiate experiences have changed them.

The degree portfolio provides an opportunity for students to write appreciative comments about individual faculty members and the college, in general. These comments are shared and serve to increase faculty morale.

Adoption of the Degree Portfolio at Other Colleges

The extent to which other colleges might successfully adopt a degree portfolio is directly related to their commitment to the assessment process. Kishwaukee College is deeply committed to the assessment process at all levels. The Board of Trustees provides both financial and personnel support. For example, readers of the portfolios are remunerated for their service, and the co-chair of the Assessment Committee is given release time from teaching duties for assessment activities.

In addition, faculty support is the key to the success of degree portfolios. The faculty provide information to students about the portfolio activities and the faculty serve as portfolio readers. Most importantly, the faculty institute change in their classes and curriculum, based on assessment data, to enhance the teaching/learning process.

Furthermore, the effort of the support staff is critical to success, as they are responsible for collecting, issuing, and receiving degree portfolios from the students.

Finally, students must take seriously their responsibilities to the assessment process so that useful information can be obtained. The reward for the students is in the self-assessment and reflective processes that allow them to see their growth and development.

If an institution is committed to the assessment process at all levels, the degree portfolio is a powerful tool for the enhancement and measurement of the teaching/learning process. The portfolios provide data on how effectively the college is meeting students' educational needs and provide students with unique opportunities for self-assessment and reflection on their educational experiences. Degree portfolios support a learning-centered environment.

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September 7, 2001, Vol. XXIII, No. 17

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Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu