

The Student Portfolio: A Tool for Active Learning and Success

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Kennesaw State exemplifies several trends in higher education. Growth of the student population, service to commuter students who often have family and job responsibilities, and the development of distance-learning instructional modes all provide both opportunities and challenges for KSU. One consequence of these trends is the loss of continuity and connectedness in the educational experience of many students. Instead, students may view their college experience as a set of arbitrary requirements and isolated courses, which they complete by selecting those that best fit the scheduling constraints of family and jobs. With the accumulation of credits and grades as the primary goal, intellectual growth and personal development may be left to chance and contingency rather than conscientious and guided effort. Also, many students do not experience the significant dialog with faculty that could help them match productive experiences with career goals. In fact, many students are so busy completing degree requirements that they wait until after graduation to explore their employment options or apply to graduate/professional programs. In short, some current trends in higher education make it difficult to help students take active charge of their personal and professional development and move successfully to the next stage of their careers.

The Department of Biological and Physical Sciences has addressed these challenges, through its portfolio initiative. We believe that this initiative will encourage an ongoing dialog between faculty and biology students and a shared commitment to professional development that will result in more confident and successful transitions to jobs and advanced education. The initiative's culminating event and the focus of this article is the Portfolio Course.

Portfolios are collections of the tangible products of learning, selected by the student, which represent the best products and evidence of that student's learning. Portfolios can help students define and distinguish themselves by emphasizing their best work in a way that cannot be done with the academic transcript. Portfolios have been valued in visual arts education for many years and are used in place of grades at some non-traditional colleges. Now the portfolio represents a new tool for student development among biology majors at KSU. As the primary activity of the one-credit Portfolio Course, senior biology majors gather the evidence that demonstrates their best learning, skills and accomplishments. They present their portfolios in a form appropriate for potential employers and professional/graduate schools, using appropriate formats (from hard copy to web page).

The portfolio concept emphasizes all the students' significant experiences. Students make the final selection of materials with their career goals in mind, but all accom-

plishments including family, military, employment, skill certifications and community service activities are potential components of the portfolio. In addition, students summarize and reflect on the meaning of their experiences, through discussion and autobiographical writing. Then they write a narrative that introduces them and shows how their accomplishments prepare them for success in the next stage of their careers. Students also prepare one or more Curriculum Vitae, in formats appropriate for careers in the sciences. The narrative and CV are included in the portfolio.

As part of the course, students utilize opportunities such as the videotaped mock-interviews offered by the Career Services Center. Many develop their presentation skills further, through on-campus interviews with potential employers. Finally, students formally present their portfolios for examination by biology faculty.

Our experience during the two terms the Portfolio Course has been offered suggests that it is effective. First, it helps students present their achievements and goals in a way that is useful to them and to others. As one student noted in the course evaluation, "My experiences and accomplishments are concrete and crystallized." Another wrote, "The PF itself is very useful, not only to show prospective employers or grad school admissions officers, but for myself." Portfolios shift the emphasis from grades to demonstrable skills and accomplishments and reinforce behaviors that produce work judged worthy of inclusion in the portfolio. Students wrote, "It provides a much-needed motivation to do an extra good job on work, so that it can be put in PF," and, "It helps direct, clarify, motivate, simplify, support, reinforce etc., my future and where I am going."

Portfolios may provide students with insights into the next steps in their development. One wrote, "Portable, life at a glance, and helps us see where we've been and where we are going and what else we need to get there." Another wrote, "As I look at it (the PF) and think about my goals, it shows me where I could augment..." Constructing the portfolio helps students see their development as a dynamic, self-directed process. Consequently, they do not think of their portfolios as finished products to put on a shelf after achieving the first job or graduate placement. Rather, the portfolio attitude reinforces the concept of life as a "work in progress." On receiving his first promotion six months after graduation, a former student wrote, "First, I wanted to let you know that I am still adding to my PF. It has been very helpful in giving me the courage to be successful in the post-college world."

The Portfolio Course is only the culminating event of this Department's larger portfolio initiative. Our long-term goal is to encourage continuous commitment to growth throughout each undergraduate's experience. From their

first contact with the department, biology majors will be encouraged to demonstrate their growth and accomplishments by accumulating materials appropriate for a portfolio. Aware of the portfolio as a repository of work that will be useful in achieving their goals, students may be more attentive to the self-reinforcing behaviors that contribute to effective learning and to polished portfolios. The locus of control and critique of learning will shift from faculty to the student, as the student takes charge of creating his best portfolio. We believe that the portfolio's usefulness to indi-

viduals will be reinforced among biology majors, as they see their diverse experiences connected by the theme of personal development and by the document's tangible reality. We expect to see greater quality and quantity in future portfolios, once this initiative becomes part of the common culture of biology majors at KSU. In a competitive world, where tangible output is the criterion of success, we believe the portfolio initiative will connect the disparate parts of our students' educational experience in a way that encourages commitment to growth and ensures their success.

Student Learning Outside the Classroom: Transcending Artificial Boundaries

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Plagued by meager budgets, limited resources, and a decrease in state and federal expenditures allocated to colleges and universities, institutions of higher learning are now faced with the grim reality of a depressed economy. To further complicate matters, at a time when colleges and universities should be focusing their efforts on preparing students to compete in the global marketplace, institutions are being watched by "people [who] want evidence that higher education makes a difference." As a result, demands for institutional accountability and positive learning outcomes for students are being scrutinized more than ever.

In ASIE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 8, 1994, *Student Learning Outside the Classroom*, authors Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek offer plausible evidence as to why colleges and universities should not despair—that is, if institutions follow the key tasks for success. For example, the authors generally recommend that institutions develop a common view of "what matters" in undergraduate education, cultivate an ethos of learning throughout the institution, and address the importance of out-of-class experiences explicitly in the institution's mission.

Wingspread Group (1993) cited in Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek suggests that "colleges and universities can become more productive by making better use of existing resources so that students learn more without institutions spending more." (p. 3). To accomplish this task, the authors indicate that students' learning can be enhanced by actively engaging them in educationally purposeful activities outside the classroom.

Educationally purposeful activities as defined by the authors: "Include all activities in which students engage during undergraduate study that are either directly or indirectly related to their learning and performance and occur beyond the formal classroom, studio, or laboratory setting." (p.9).

Authors Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek provide an elaborate, yet exhaustive litany of conditions based on the literature researched that characterizes ideal out-of-class environments. Such environments, state the authors, encourage students to integrate what they are learning through their out-of-class experiences with their academic studies, and vice versa. To address the importance of out-of-class experiences and the development of a common desired goal, the authors organized five clusters: (1) cognitive complexity, (2) knowledge acquisition and application, (3) humanitarianism, (4) interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, and (5) practical competence.

In the arguments of the authors emphasizing the applications of learning outside the classroom, the authors have failed to recognize the benefits of formal classroom experiences that promote higher order thinking, cooperative learning, communications skills, and active learning. Unlike the out-of-class experiences that are sometimes vague, unorthodox, and haphazard, these "teachable moments" outside the classroom are not beneficial. Structured learning environments, however, offer accommodations for different learning styles, diverse capabilities, and a greater appreciation of ethnic and cultural background in the classrooms.

In the classroom, Kuh, Douglas, Lund, and Ramin-Gyurnek admit that additional research is needed to discover the contributions of out-of-class experiences to student learning and personal development. Yet the authors provide sizeable evidence to support the need for out-of-class experiences that are certain to become a valuable asset in the future. Readers are, therefore, advised to heed the call of the authors to transcend the artificial boundaries that bind us and view the applications of learning as a "seamless web of opportunities."

Student Learning Outside the Classroom is highly recommended reading for faculty, administrators, and staff who wish to transcend artificial boundaries.