

Refereed Articles

An Institutional Evaluation of Perceptions and Expectations for a Portfolio Assessment Program

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Abstract

The use and assessment of the portfolio option in an accelerated degree program was examined in this study. Methods include literature review, document analysis, interviews, and telephone surveys. Findings indicate that administrators and faculty question the academic integrity of the portfolio option yet have little knowledge of portfolio development and assessment; students utilizing the option report significant learning experiences. Recommendations based on the findings of this study and resulting changes in the college's portfolio program are included for practitioners wishing to implement similar programs.

In the 1990s the higher education community continues to search for ways to accelerate degree programs for the adult learner. Because portfolio assessment has a twenty-year history (programs had their greatest impetus for growth during the 1970s and 1980s) as an option for accelerating the time needed to complete a degree, a revisit to and an evaluation of this method of degree acceleration seemed timely. For the purpose of this study, portfolio assessment was defined as an option to receive credit for college-level learning by demonstrating the learning in narrative description and documentation. The portfolio assessment program of an institution with a history of using this process was the focus of this study.

The institution used in this study has taken steps to attract the adult student by developing an accelerated evening program that includes various options to shorten the time needed to complete a degree. One such option, portfolio assessment, was identified in a Middle States Institutional Self-Study Report and in a self-evaluation of the accelerated degree program as being underutilized by the population it was designed to serve.

Both studies indicate that the percentage of adults participating in this credit option was unusually small as compared to the total number of adult students in the accelerated degree program. Utilization of the portfolio assessment program was guided by the college's institutional membership in the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), the guidelines of a position paper issued by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Higher Education (MSHE), and the availability of portfolio courses in portfolio development. Because the institutions had the sanction of CAEL and MSHE in addition to courses to aid the students in the development of a portfolio, this study focused on the meaning of knowledge within the higher education context and the more practical hands on and how to of portfolio assessment.

Methodologies

The methodologies used in collecting the data include a review of the literature, analysis of documents of the College and Department of Continuing Education, intensive interviews, and telephone surveys.

Review of the Literature

The review of literature was divided into three topical areas: 1) learning and participation 2) organization and administration and 3) participation patterns.

Learning, knowledge, and post-learning experience were studied to seek for interrelationships that would relate to portfolio assessment. While the literature was rich with opinions about the meaning of all three when they are considered as separate entities, the literature was ambiguous or nearly silent about their interrelatedness. Little information was found in the literature that could help conceptualize an answer to the chicken/egg question: Which came first in portfolio assessment—knowledge, learning, or experience?

A review of participation patterns in portfolio assessment primarily focused on information available through CAEL resources. In her history of CAEL, Gamson (1989) reported that there had been an increase in institutional participation in portfolio assessment. While this report is accurate, it should be recognized that this participation had been primarily in small to mid-size, tuition-dependent institutions.

Marketing, financing, staffing, and programming were isolated as the components of the organization and administration framework needed for

developing a portfolio assessment model. When the literature was reviewed in the context of these separate entities, strong evidence that each entity crossed over into another was discovered.

The interrelatedness was evidenced in two views of marketing: One view spoke of program development as a primary consideration, while the other view eliminated mention of marketing costs. Finance literature covered costs for programs in place, but did not include program development costs. While administrators and faculty were mentioned in the staffing component, auxiliary areas of program development such as admissions personnel, advisers, or registration were not included.

As many questions were posed as were answered during the review of the literature. The puzzle of the interrelatedness of knowledge, learning, and experience as it pertains to portfolio assessment remains. Information on participation patterns by individuals and institutions lacks detail. Organizational and administrative issues have yet to be developed to a degree of refinement that is particular to portfolio assessment.

Document Analysis

A document analysis was conducted to insure that the study would include a historical perspective and to search for themes to be included in the development of the interview guide. These data were important to the study because they were stable information that already existed and could not be affected by outside influences. Merriam (1988) proposes this philosophy on document analysis: she states that such data "can ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" and that they are "unaffected by the research process" (pp.108-9).

Interviews

Patton (1980) describes the purpose of interviewing: "The purpose of interviewing . . . is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective." The interview was selected as the primary method for data collection for this reason and because it both provides rich descriptions for analysis and gives the opportunity to probe for further information and clarification. The perspectives of policymakers, administrators, faculty, and students were included in the study.

Telephone Survey

After the analysis of the interview data was completed, a telephone survey was conducted to confirm the major findings and to see if any

additional insights emerged. The survey was administered to students and faculty who had not participated in the interviews. Fifty students and ten full-time and ten part-time faculty were chosen by random sample.

Findings

All college constituencies questioned the academic integrity of the portfolio assessment process. This was confirmed by responses both to questions designed to elicit opinions about academic integrity and to unrelated questions. Responses such as, "While it has legitimacy, you know, you have to be very, very able to quantify and justify," and "It can be very, very weak—giving away credits," were typical. The conclusion to be drawn is that this college-wide reservation about academic integrity affected the utilization of portfolio assessment as a credit option.

Another finding, that there is a lack of understanding among academicians about the meaning of a college degree and the criteria to support that meaning, may be related to the question of academic integrity. While the interviewees did recognize that persons with a college degree shared a common body of knowledge, they did not elaborate on how this knowledge was acquired or how this knowledge was assessed; it is reasonable that they would be skeptical about how a nontraditional option like portfolio assessment would fit into a schema that is not clearly conceptualized.

Another significant finding was that all college constituencies lacked sufficient information about portfolio assessment; therefore, they did not develop informed perceptions on issues and processes related to the portfolio option, including the issue of academic integrity. Interviewees offered opinions about a concept they knew little about. Faculty, for instance, needed to know issues related to advising and assessing portfolios. Students needed more information about the option, while policymakers and administrators needed more information to use in the promotion of portfolio assessment.

It was also concluded that leadership in promoting the portfolio assessment option had been held by the institutional advocate of portfolio assessment. These leaders were, in most cases, also the teachers of portfolio development course and, in that capacity, acted as the academic watch dogs for portfolio assessment. As leaders, they instituted practices related to portfolio development that then became accepted as quasi policies. None of these leaders made an attempt to institutionalize portfolio assessment through formal policies or to open the option to

majors other than the accelerated liberal studies degree programs. Whether the leaders promoted control of portfolio assessment or it was thrust upon them, they were perceived to be the source of all information about portfolio assessment.

One other important finding was the personal benefit derived from portfolio assessment for students. In their interviews students gave moving examples of how they felt when they were going through the portfolio assessment process and when the college recognized that they indeed had acquired college-level learning. Students remarked: "It gave me a new perspective on what I already knew" and "You want to be able to put that down and prove to yourself that you do have college-level learning." Such remarks showed that these students had been through a critically reflective process. Like others experiencing this type of process, they did not realize what had taken place until the experience was over.

The following actions were initiated based on these findings: detailed portfolio policies were developed and passed the college's academic review process; students and prospective students now have the opportunity to attend workshops on portfolio assessment; the researcher has been invited to present a workshop on portfolio assessment to the full-time faculty; and publications are planned that describe the portfolio assessment option.

Recommendations

The following six steps are recommended to practitioners attempting to implement a portfolio assessment program:

1. Develop strong institutional policies about portfolio assessment that pass through the institutional academic review process to help ensure the academic integrity of portfolio assessment.
2. Gain the support of the institution's highest academic officer before establishing a portfolio assessment program. This academic defender should oversee the academic integrity of the process.
3. Designate one person to have the academic and administrative responsibility for the portfolio assessment program to ensure across-program maintenance of integrity and quality.
4. Institute information sessions for various constituencies within the institution to familiarize them with the concept of portfolio assessment; faculty, administration, and students need different types

- of information about portfolio assessment.
5. Establish training sessions for faculty who will be assessing portfolios.
 6. Develop literature that describes the requirements for receiving credit through portfolio assessment.

References

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