

# Faculty Development: The Educator's Portfolio: Its Preparation, Uses, and Value in Academic Medicine

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## Abstract

The educator's portfolio is of value for both university and community-based academic faculty. It can be used to document scholarly activity and teaching and to prepare for periodic evaluations. Many faculty members use it to assist them in managing their careers and to reflect on activities and teaching efforts to ensure continued growth in

competency as teachers. Promotion and tenure committees of many institutions now use this document to aid them in making promotion decisions. **Key words:** educator's portfolio; promotion; emergency medicine; education, medical. ACADEMIC EMERGENCY MEDICINE 2004; 11:307-311.

During the past century, medical schools and universities have increasingly measured productivity by the number of research grants and publications garnered by faculty members.<sup>1</sup> The reward for this type of productivity has been promotion through the traditional tenured system embraced by the academic community. Faculty, responding to the obvious importance universities, medical schools, and their colleagues placed on peer-reviewed publications and grants, and wishing to obtain promotion, began to devote more of their time to research. Measurement of productivity using this model was relatively simple: a curriculum vitae (CV), which listed all research grants and peer-reviewed publications as well as any awards or honors, could be submitted at the time a request for promotion was submitted to the promotion and tenure (P/T) committee. Faculty members became adept at writing grants, publishing original research, and determining which journals were considered the most prestigious and would look the best when included on a CV.

The result of this system was that faculty, realizing that rewards were granted for research and not teaching, devoted less time and importance to educating medical students and residents. Physicians who were interested in the practice of clinical

medicine and teaching but not research tended not to enter academic medicine.<sup>2</sup>

Although the model of P/T, which measured and rewarded productivity for original research, has served well the medical community in the past, there are two factors that have caused academic health centers (AHCs) to search for new ways to measure and reward productivity. Changes in the financing of health care have forced AHCs and physicians to place more emphasis and time on the delivery of patient care to finance the cost of educating medical students and residents.<sup>3,4</sup> In addition, many educators began to question whether the medical community was well served by deemphasizing the value of teaching, a mission that is supposed to be at the core of the medical school culture.<sup>2</sup>

Responding to the need for physicians to teach and see patients, AHCs recruited faculty whose primary interests and responsibilities were in the areas of patient care and teaching rather than research. The traditional model of the "physician-researcher," whose primary focus was clinical or bench research, was joined by the "clinician-educator," who performed relatively little research compared with colleagues who had risen through the tenured system as a result of success in research.<sup>5</sup> However, retaining these clinical faculty members has proved to be difficult. They cannot compete with their colleagues for P/T if productivity is based almost exclusively on original research. Their response has been to leave academic medicine.<sup>6</sup> Academic health centers, faced with the loss of talented and necessary faculty members, have responded by creating promotion tracks that emphasize clinical service and teaching as activities meriting promotion rather than pure bench or clinical research.<sup>5,7</sup>

Promotion and tenure (P/T) committees, experienced only in evaluating research when determining merit for promotion, are now faced with the need to

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measure the productivity of faculty in a variety of settings and activities, a task that has proved to be difficult.<sup>8</sup> When trying to implement new criteria for judging the quality and quantity of scholarly activity of clinical faculty in the clinician-educators track, both P/T committees and institutions are frequently frustrated in their attempts.<sup>9</sup> Clinician educators are not proficient in documenting the variety of educational activities in which they are engaged and there are few standardized measures of the quality and quantity of teaching performed.<sup>10,11</sup>

A survey of medical school deans, departmental chairs, faculty, and members of P/T committees revealed that many are frustrated by nonuniform methods of measuring educational productivity. The most frequently cited problem was the perceived inability to evaluate the quality of teaching, but other concerns included 1) sporadic faculty evaluations whose quality and frequency are dependent on the interest and competency of the departmental or divisional chair, 2) lack of standardized methods for gathering peer evaluation of teaching, 3) lack of clear understanding, on the part of the faculty, of the requirements for promotion and tenure, and 4) lack of provision of documentation of excellence in educational activities to the P/T committee at the time of request for promotion.<sup>8</sup> The CV, which is a listing of professional activities, had proved inadequate to the needs of P/T committees when trying to judge excellence in educational endeavors.

A proposed solution to the problem of documentation of scholarly activity is the use of a teaching or educator's portfolio. The use of portfolios by artists and architects to display examples of their work has a long tradition. The use of a teaching portfolio in Canada (called a teaching dossier) has been of value for documentation purposes for the past 20 years.<sup>12</sup> American educational institutions, including medical schools, are increasingly adopting the use of this tool. A survey of medical schools by Beasley et al. revealed that the four most important criteria for judging the clinician-educator's performance were awards, peer evaluation, learner evaluation, and teaching portfolios. Furthermore, 70% of schools used these items frequently or always.<sup>7</sup> In light of these criteria, it is easy to understand why the CV has proved to be inadequate. The CV has no areas for evaluation of work performed. The conventional CV lists peer-reviewed publications, which can be accessed by P/T committee members from libraries. This is not true of teaching activities and perhaps explains some of the problems of the P/T committees.

Promotion/tenure committees want to ensure that the faculty member can be innovative, advance his or her chosen field, make an impact, develop a national reputation, and lead thinking. The portfolio is an ideal vehicle that allows P/T committee members to determine what impact a faculty member has had in

medical education. By allowing them to read a narrative discussion of the educator's philosophy of education, examples of work, and evaluations of that work by both learners and peers, it is possible to make a much more informed promotion decision than would be allowed if only viewing a CV.

Educational activities are being developed that help faculty to understand promotion criteria and aid them in documenting and recording the activities in which they engage. Success in the promotion of faculty who have been taught to construct and use portfolios, as well as other documentation tools, has been shown.<sup>13,14</sup> The purpose of this article is to describe the construction and implementation of a clinician-educator's portfolio and its use for purposes of documentation and evaluation.

## CREATING THE EDUCATOR'S PORTFOLIO

Seldin<sup>15</sup> has noted that a portfolio is a highly individualized product that reflects the activities and philosophies of its creator. He has compared portfolios to fingerprints in the sense that no two will be exactly alike. However, every good portfolio should contain, at a minimum, materials that are the products of good teaching, evaluations and comments from others about these products, and a personal statement reflecting the faculty member's philosophy of education.<sup>16,17</sup> A number of publications present actual examples of portfolios and a discussion of why their authors included certain materials.<sup>12,18</sup> These examples demonstrate the wide variety of materials that can be included and may be of great help to those whose institutions do not dictate contents and format.

It is critical for faculty members to ascertain whether the institution in which they teach requires a portfolio and whether the format and contents are mandated or whether the faculty member has discretion in construction of the portfolio. If the institution has set rules, they must be followed when constructing the portfolio to avoid future problems.

The following guidelines are suggested if the educator has discretion in formatting the portfolio. As already noted, the contents of the portfolio will vary from one educator to another because of the many activities in which educators are engaged.

**Format.** One of the easiest ways to create a portfolio is to use a tabbed three-ring binder. The binder can be kept in a prominent or easily accessible place so that materials are entered whenever they are generated. This material can then be scanned so that electronic copies are generated. Other educators may wish to keep a record of all teaching and scholarly activities on their computers for easy updating. The software Front-Page (Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA) can be used to make the format of all electronic contents of the portfolio look professional and neat. It can even allow

links to be created so that a reader can see examples of the educator's presentations or publications.

Some educators may want to create a CD-ROM that contains an electronic archive of all of the materials in the portfolio. In reality, many will use a combination of all three formats—the binder to archive letters and documents as they are received, the computer for rapid updating of activities, and the CD-ROM for yearly archiving. Whatever the format, the contents should reflect the activities in which the educator is engaged as well as evaluations of these activities and should be kept for future use and reference.

**Contents.** The portfolio should contain the following sections: 1) Narrative of the Philosophy of Education, 2) Teaching and Scholarly Activities, 3) Recognition of Excellence, 4) Courses and Study to Increase Expertise as an Educator, and 5) Publications. The materials prepared and gathered for each of these sections will reflect the activities of the educator.

The section dealing with the educator's *Philosophy of Education* may be the hardest to generate, but doing this on a yearly basis will pay huge dividends in the future. The end of the academic year is a perfect time to look through the contents of the *Activities* section and reflect on what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. At this time, it is relatively easy to write a short statement as to what the educator feels is the most effective way to teach and how his or her activities were used to ensure the learning of students and residents. The narrative should also contain information on how these activities furthered the goals and mission of the department/institution and how they were shown to be effective. Alternatively, if they were not effective, the educator can discuss how methods were changed and improved as a result of evaluations by learners. The discussion should take only a few pages, but it needs to articulate the beliefs, activities, and values of the educator. This statement is then placed in the Philosophy of Education section. This is also a good time to look at both activities and evaluations to determine if they are in line with career goals. This section should be updated periodically to ensure that it reflects the current beliefs of the educator.

The *Activities* section should include the educational activities, any materials generated as a result of the activity, and any evaluations by peers or learners. Examples of activities might include curricula developed, courses taught, lectures given, a list of students advised, committees or panels on which the educator was asked to serve, and evaluations generated as a result of clinical supervision of medical students and residents. It is important to remember that many institutions require national and even international recognition for promotion to full professor. Educators may want to have separate areas in their Activities section for national and international endeavors.

The section for *Recognition of Excellence* will depend on how the educator has been recognized during the year. It should include any awards or honors, whether national, local, or institutional. Recognition by residents and medical students for excellence in teaching is of great value.<sup>7,13</sup> Many educators will include any thank you letters received as a result of educational activities from course directors or students they have supervised, mentored, or advised. Although these are not formal awards, they document excellence in teaching from a variety of sources and have been used successfully, among other materials, for purposes of promotion.<sup>18</sup>

The section on *Courses and Study to Increase Expertise as an Educator* should list any formal courses taken to increase expertise in teaching. It demonstrates commitment to increasing expertise as an educator and reveals the credentials that have been accumulated in the area of education.

The section on *Publications* should include all peer-reviewed publications pertaining to education as well as authored educational materials such as educational software, published curricula, videotapes, or multimedia materials. If the material has not been published in a peer-reviewed venue, there should be a clear description of the manner in which the material was used and evaluations by learners and/or peers as to its effectiveness.

## PREPARING A PORTFOLIO FOR THE P/T COMMITTEE

The first step should be to examine the contents of the portfolios that have been collected and archived over the past years. Educators should compose a narrative of three to eight pages that discusses educational philosophies, accomplishments, growth as educators, and activities of which they feel proud. The portfolio can include tables or graphs that display successes.<sup>18</sup>

Members of the P/T committee should be able to understand easily what the educator wanted to achieve and how he or she went about ensuring success in these endeavors. Seldin<sup>12</sup> has emphasized that the portfolio is not an exhaustive collection of every activity in which the person has been engaged but rather "...presents *selected information* on teaching activities and solid evidence of their effectiveness." Examples of work that reflects the expertise and competence of the educator may be presented in clearly labeled appendices.

It is of great value to ask someone who has been successfully promoted and who has prepared a promotion portfolio to look at a portfolio and give advice before it is submitted to a promotion committee. Frequently, members of a departmental peer review committee are willing to look at the portfolio and give advice prior to its official submission to see if there are any suggestions as to contents or format. Their

suggestions can then be used to strengthen the document. It may be possible to ask members of the P/T committee for advice about the portfolio before official submission. If they are not comfortable doing this, past members may be happy to help. Some institutions not only allow for this but hold periodic formal lectures on preparing a portfolio.<sup>13,14</sup> Attending these sessions and asking for guidance may be very helpful. Finally, it is wise to begin preparing early to allow for ample time for preparation and revision.

## USES OF THE EDUCATOR'S PORTFOLIO

The primary purpose of the educator's portfolio is the documentation of excellence in teaching when submitting credentials to P/T committees. While fulfilling this primary goal, the portfolio has also been useful for 1) demonstration of productivity during periodic evaluations by supervisors, 2) proof of excellence resulting in teaching awards and awarding of grant applications, 3) demonstration of past achievements when applying for new positions, and, perhaps most importantly, 4) critical self-reflection on teaching for the purposes of continued improvement.<sup>19,20</sup>

**Evaluation and Management of an Academic Career.** Department chairs can use the portfolio when performing periodic evaluations of their faculty members. The portfolio aids the faculty member and chair to put past accomplishments in perspective when used for this purpose. Future goals and activities can then be planned, which will build on the knowledge gained during past activities. It aids the chair in determining the productivity of department members and in generating a report to the dean of the productivity of the whole department. From the perspective of the faculty member, it makes preparing for periodic evaluations very easy because all of the material is already assembled. One of the major complaints of both faculty members and P/T committees, in the past, has been a lack of evaluation of the productivity and degree of excellence displayed by educators. Frequently, educators who sought promotion found that evaluations of their activities might be scant, be nonexistent, or reflect only negative evaluations.<sup>8</sup>

Faculty who teach in community settings will find that portfolios are of value to them for promotion and management of career, as well as reflection on teaching. Many community hospitals are affiliated with universities or medical schools. Portfolios will have the same value for these faculty members as those who are based at university teaching hospitals when seeking promotion. Indeed, many universities and schools of medicine have created clinical promotion tracks so that voluntary faculty working in the community can be recognized and promoted for their accomplishments.<sup>3</sup> Chairs of community departments

often need to submit a statement of productivity to the hospital chief executive officer, a task made easier when faculty have portfolios.

**New Positions.** The faculty member can use the portfolio when applying for a new position to demonstrate scholarly accomplishments and experience. This was the original purpose of portfolios as used by artists and architects to display their best work to a potential patron or client.<sup>12</sup> Many teachers in nonmedical professions use the portfolios they have assembled when looking for a new job or applying for a promotion. One of the most valuable uses of the portfolio is to assist faculty members in rapidly updating and keeping current their curricula vitae, an activity that is necessary for any application.

**Reflection on Teaching.** Many of those who have assembled a portfolio have stated that it has aided in their growth as an educator.<sup>19</sup> The very act of looking at past accomplishments and activities has led them to examine what actions have been successful and why, what they would change in the future, and what direction their careers have taken. This act of self-reflection often results in growth as a teacher and leads to a higher level of ability. Educators also note that when instructional activities have been less than successful, the portfolio has helped to make this apparent to them. They then have had the opportunity to devise methods that have proven more successful in accomplishing their teaching goals. It has been argued that this reflection on teaching and the resultant growth in ability as an educator are the most valuable aspects of the portfolio.<sup>21</sup>

**Incentive and Reward.** Most educators in medicine are highly motivated. They do not want to have an empty portfolio. The very existence of the portfolio acts as an incentive toward accomplishing goals. Having a list of goals, both short-term and long-term, in the portfolio is a constant reminder to educators of what they want to accomplish and helps them remain focused and on task. The self-reward occurs when the educator is able to look at past activities and see the many accomplishments and career goals that have been attained. It also helps him or her to determine what future goals will be needed to build on past success.

## CONCLUSIONS

The educator's portfolio has become a valuable tool for documenting the activities and accomplishments of educators. It can be used to assist in evaluation, setting of goals, and reflection and growth in faculty. Many institutions now use the portfolio to assist them in determining promotion decisions. Although no one is promoted simply because he or she creates

a portfolio, the portfolio is an ideal vehicle to display the quality and quantity of the educator's work in a format that makes it easily accessible to evaluators whether they are on a P/T committee or chair of a department.

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