

## **THE GRADUATE PORTFOLIO AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL**

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### **The Student Portfolio: What it is and What it Does**

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#### **Background: The Challenge**

As an accredited professional graduate training program, the Nova Southeastern University Programs in Speech-Language Pathology and Communication Disorders (SLCD) was presented with the challenge of developing an organized system of student formative assessment which satisfies knowledge and skills acquisition standards requirements set forth by three primary organizational entities to which the university program is responsible. Specifically, the program was asked to provide authenticated responses to required professional standards set forth by The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), the Florida State Department of Education (DOE), and the SLCD Program Learning Outcomes.

#### **The Student Portfolio**

The student portfolio is a selective form of authentic assessment which appears to be well-suited for evaluating the application of theory into practice. It contains a collection of evidence of the student's learning outcomes attained throughout the graduate program, indicating an acquisition of knowledge and a mastery of clinical skills which meet professional standards for the Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC) recognized by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association as well as achievement of the twelve Accomplished Practices set forth by the Florida State Department of Education and the ten Program Outcomes of the NSU Program in Speech-Language and Communication Disorders.

The portfolio provides a tangible linkage between subject areas within the SLCD

curriculum and demonstrates the interrelationship between academic coursework and guided field experiences. All students enrolled in the SLCD Master's Degree program are required to submit a portfolio at the end of the program as a requirement for graduation.

**Portfolio Content:** The SLCD Student Portfolio is a formative assessment tool used to encourage professional development and reflective learning. It is a selective form of authentic assessment which appears to be well-suited for evaluating the application of theory into practice. The portfolio contains a collection of **evidence**, also called **artifacts**, of the student's learning outcomes attained throughout the graduate program, indicating an acquisition and mastery of professional knowledge and clinical skills. Each student is responsible for selecting portfolio evidence which demonstrates the student's **best work**.

For each selected piece of evidence, the student must complete an "*Evaluation Classification and Reflection (ECR) Form*." Specific assignments, projects, examples of clinical performance, and tests designated in each SLCD course syllabus are listed in a "*Portfolio Evidence Table for SLCD Course Assignments*" to assist students in the selection of appropriate evidence to demonstrate achievement of targeted standards, competencies, and outcomes. An ECR form is submitted to the instructor or supervisor with the evidence.

The Student Portfolio is divided into five (5) sections:

1. Student Introduction - contains information such as a Statement of Purpose, a professional resume, letters of reference or commendation, and student awards or honors.
2. Accomplished Practices - contains a subsection for evidence demonstrating acquisition of each of the 12 Florida State Department of Education Accomplished Practices for Teachers.
3. Standards for Certificate of Clinical Competence - contains a subsection for demonstrating acquisition of appropriate, selected sections of Standards III and IV.
4. SLCD Program Outcomes - consists of a single page cross-referenced Programs

## Outcomes Checklist

5. Student Reflections - Two student reflection essays:
  - a. The first essay describes the student's personal philosophy regarding the clinical process.
  - b. The second essay describes what the student has learned from the clients through clinical experiences.

Students are required to develop a portfolio and collect evidence at the beginning of the student's graduate coursework. Evidence from pre-requisite coursework may not be included in the portfolio.

**Portfolio Evaluation:** Evaluation of the evidence created for the portfolio is an ongoing process throughout the SLCD program. Different faculty members will evaluate the student's work (evidence) dependent upon the course or the clinical assignment. Designated departmental Student Portfolio Evaluators will review the portfolio at three major checkpoints throughout the program.

The following is a brief summary of the role of the SLCD faculty in the student portfolio review process. A comprehensive description of the review process is clearly defined in the 129–page **Student Portfolio Guide**, which includes portfolio forms as well as specific criteria for evaluating evidence.

1. **Each time a new piece of evidence is created by the student**, it is evaluated by the SLCD course instructor or clinical supervisor for which the evidence was created. The evaluator reviews the *“Evidence Classification and Reflection” (ECR) Form*, and, if it is found to be satisfactory, the evaluator signs the form.
2. **During the student's enrollment in the first clinical practicum**, an *Initial Portfolio Presentation Review (IPPR)* is conducted.
  - a. The purpose of the initial review is to ensure that the student understands the process and to provide guidance for further portfolio development.

- b. After reviewing the portfolio format and contents, the Evaluator completes the *IPPR* form and discusses the evaluation with the student.
3. **During the student's first externship site visit**, an *Interim Portfolio Evaluation (IPE)* is conducted by the Externship Coordinator or designee.
  - a. After reviewing the updated portfolio contents, the Evaluator completes the IPE, and any problems or deficiencies are discussed with the student.
  - b. An *Interim Portfolio Action Plan (IPAP)* is developed to address areas of deficiency and to assist the student in working toward the successful completion of the portfolio. Follow-up procedures and timelines are determined at the meeting.
4. **During the student's second externship site visit**, the completed portfolio is reviewed by the Externship Coordinator or designee, for a *Final Portfolio Evaluation (FPE)*.

After a comprehensive review of the format and contents of all five sections of the completed portfolio, the Evaluator completes the Final Portfolio Evaluation form and provides verbal feedback and written comments.
5. **Completed copies of the following documents are then submitted to the Formative Assessment Coordinator:**
  - a. FPE form, including evaluator's comments
  - b. Two Student Reflections Essays
6. **The Formative Assessment Coordinator reviews and evaluates the documents, and then determines a Final Portfolio Grade.** A "Pass/Fail" evaluation system used.
7. **If a student receives a grade of "Fail" on the final portfolio submitted**, the portfolio is sent to the Program Director for review, and the following procedures are followed:
  - a. Suggestions are made regarding how to make up the deficiencies and/or inaccuracies.
  - b. The student submits the revised portfolio **within four weeks** of the review for

further evaluation.

- c. The student must earn a grade of “Pass” on the portfolio in order to graduate.

## **Conclusion**

In addition to specific benefits to the students, the entire portfolio process enhances the Programs in Speech-Language and Communication Disorders curriculum by ensuring that the courses are current, relevant, and responsive to state requirements as well as to current trends in education and national standards in speech-language pathology.

The portfolio provides tangible linkage between subject areas within the SLCD curriculum, thereby strengthening the knowledge and skills content of the SLCD curriculum and fostering partnerships and communication between faculty members to ensure quality education to students enrolled in the program.

The student portfolio requirement reflects the commitment of Nova Southeastern University's Programs in Speech-Language and Communication Disorders to authentic, formative assessment of students' academic and clinical skills outcomes needed to meet university, state, and national certification standards in speech-language pathology.

## **Portfolio Assessment: Formative and Integrative**

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The portfolio was adopted in 1997 as an option for the comprehensive evaluation at the graduate level. The other options are a written examination and a thesis. Thirty-four students have completed the portfolio option since its inception with the number in any graduate class varying from two to fourteen. The portfolio was conceived as a way to influence students to become more active, self-directed, and reflective. By requiring students to begin the portfolio in their first semester, they are pushed to set goals and reflect on the progress toward those goals and, thus, to take responsibility for their education and become more self-aware. This, of course, is the goal of formative assessment.

In addition, we hoped that the portfolio would have an impact on the departmental curriculum. We hoped to move from a preponderance of assignments that were more discrete, like exams over memorized information, to assignments that produced products that the students created and that required integration of several learning skills. We wanted to move to more authentic work in our courses. This has happened and now all of our courses, even ones that necessitate exams, are including work that is more applied and, like real work, requires the application of several learning skills.

Lastly, by requiring the portfolio to have an overarching thematic structure (it's not a scrapbook) we hoped to teach students some of the thinking skills that they might have learned from doing a thesis or a major integrative paper. These skills are, among others, organization, analysis, and the ability to see relationships among discrete ideas. For most course assignments, the teacher gives the students the organizational shape and relational threads needed. The portfolio requires the students to find the shape and threads themselves.

### **Phases in Portfolio Building**

Each phase in the building of the portfolio is done in collaboration with peers and with faculty members who are facilitating the work. Group meetings are scheduled once a semester in which students' work is read and reacted to. Students also often meet with small groups of their peers or individually with their faculty facilitators. There are three phases.

**The first phase** begins with the student's application to Redlands, for which their letter of intent asks them to write on the questions that form the first phase:

what are you interested in learning?

what kind of learner are you?

how do you plan to study your interests in light of your learning strengths and challenges?

At the beginning of each semester, students prepare a plan for learning. During the semester, they execute that plan and at the end of the semester, they reflect on and adjust the plan. They

set goals for the semester in light of what they want/need to learn and how they learn plus the courses they are taking and the clinical experiences they will have. They consider what they plan to learn, including process as well as content, what they plan to do to insure that they learn it, and means to evaluate their learning. At the end of the semester, they evaluate whether they have learned what they planned and how they can show that; also whether their plan was successful or not and how it needs to be modified or not.

**The second phase** of portfolio building involves collecting the evidence the students will include in their portfolios and using that evidence to document four areas of content and six learning processes. Evidence consists of such things as their reflective narratives of each semester's goal setting and attainment; course assignments; clinical work such as lesson plans, teaching programs, reports; reflections on learning related to coursework; extracurricular research and other signs of active learning. There are four areas of content that must be present:

1. Clinical practice in evaluation and intervention
2. Applied or library research
3. Theory
4. Clinical populations – different types of disorder (a breadth of knowledge)

There are six learning processes, which students must show they have applied:

1. Reflecting by critically evaluating one's own performance, learning, and thinking
2. Growing over time -- demonstrated by documentation of acquisition of knowledge, improvement in clinical skills, and changes in ways of thinking
3. Acquiring knowledge and skills -- demonstrated by such activities as using the library and internet, reading, attending classes, asking questions, observing master clinicians, participating in a mentor relationship
4. Recognizing problems -- demonstrated by such activities as evaluating issues, identifying differences in opinion, failing and making change, monitoring one's own

interpersonal behavior

5. Seeking solutions -- demonstrated by such activities as reading, creating, synthesizing and differentiating, collaborating, recognizing and bridging differences across culture and opinion, modifying one's interpersonal behavior
6. Using knowledge and skills -- demonstrated by such activities as seeing relationships, writing, interacting with individuals and groups, manipulating ideas, applying methods, framing problems and creating ethical solutions in collaboration with others

**The third phase** in building the portfolio has to do with its organization. The portfolio should comprise a unified whole where each part is related to other parts. The portfolio is not a collection of the products of courses and clinical practice. The organization should not be a list of goals or experiences. It is not a resource book or a scrapbook. Over the years, we have found that the organizations that students have developed have fallen into three types:

- 1) a metaphoric theme – as in making a quilt where there is a pattern to follow, materials to gather, a sewing bee, and plans for use (Jennifer Hamilton)
- 2) a theory of learning – as in change across alteration, evolution, and revolution (Erin Nagashima)
- 3) a development of goals, either in content or process or both

Portfolios must demonstrate students' abilities in analyzing their education, seeking distinctions and connections in the experiences they have had, the content they have studied, or the learning processes they have acquired. They should present their graduate education in such a way as to reflect their values and understandings so that a reader can appreciate them.

### **Portfolio Evaluation**

An excellent portfolio will demonstrate the following:

- Completeness – the scope of content and demonstration of processes that are required are included and easily accessed; goals and interests are apparent and their development over

the two years is reflectively considered; future goals are present.

- Organization – contents are well organized and can be found easily.
- Inclusions – carefully selected and clearly related. There is a variety in the quality of the entries and a discussion of that variety.
- Demonstration of active learning – a personal response to learning is clearly evident
- Reflection – writings show the effect of reflection on the development of goals, learning skills, or interests; inclusions support the results of reflection.
- Cohesiveness – there are clear threads of meaning that are well integrated into the whole; there is a well-conceived structure that makes the sections and the purposes of inclusions clear.
- Creativity and critical analysis – the writer is a creative and/or critical thinker who produces a unique and compelling portfolio. There is an organization that is analytical in that it shows the ability to find similarities and differences across content and process and presents a creative or critical response to those similarities or differences.

### **Presentation and Final Grading**

In the final month of the graduate program, a presentation is scheduled and students and faculty are invited. A half hour discussion (20 minute presentation and 10 minutes for questions) presents the organization of the portfolio and its unique, significant parts. After the presentation, the faculty meet and each portfolio is evaluated. Four judgments may be made: High Pass, Pass, Pass with revisions, or Fail – after significant revision, the portfolio is presented in the following semester. In the years since its inception, one student has failed and five have passed with revisions.

The faculty met in an afternoon and reviewed six portfolios that represented differing quality. The faculty were asked to review each and determine into which of three categories it fell: excellent, average, or weak. There was remarkable agreement in the ratings, with some overlap between the categories of excellent and average and the categories of average and

weak. No portfolio was rated excellent by some and weak by others.

### **Alumni Responses**

This year we surveyed our alumni who graduated after completing the portfolio option. We sent a survey that contained forced selection as well as open-ended items. Fifteen of the 34 were returned, no doubt a return rate that reflects our inability to retrieve up-to-date addresses for some of them. One of the items on the survey asked “was the portfolio process a valuable experience in your graduate program?” All 15 responded “very valuable,” none responding “somewhat valuable.” Another item asked if they had to do it again, would they choose the portfolio option. Again, all 15 responded “yes.” Some of the comments they wrote are:

“I was able to guide myself toward opportunities that I believed would create a challenge or a growing opportunity – something I knew would be important in a portfolio.”

“It allowed me to consciously observe my learning throughout my graduate program, as well as actually participate in it.”

“The portfolio taught me the most about working towards goals to continually better myself both personally and professionally.”

“Honestly, the concept of reflection wasn’t really a part of my vocabulary before grad school. My life was a checklist and once an item was checked I didn’t revisit it.”

“Portfolio helped me ‘tailor’ my learning to my interests and needs by identifying my learning style.”

The portfolio option requires a commitment of a lot of time on the parts of both faculty and students. But it offers rewards that are hard to build into any other curricular component. We are glad, as are our students, that we have pursued portfolio building.

Copies of the directions for the portfolio can be obtained from [Julia\\_shuler@redlands.edu](mailto:Julia_shuler@redlands.edu)