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Preparing the Teaching Portfolio

By Betty A. Dessants

An increasing number of colleges and universities are requiring job candidates to submit teaching portfolios as part of their applications. In one recent "how-to-get-an-academic-job" booklet, the authors pointed out that more than 500 American and Canadian colleges and universities use teaching portfolios in their evaluation of teaching (Lavon Gappa-Levi and Jay Tapp, "On Getting a Job: What You Should Know," in *The Program for Instructional Excellence*, Florida State University). While the request for a teaching portfolio would be expected from teaching-intensive institutions, a more competitive job market and an interest in effective teaching are making portfolios more common even among research institutions. Creating a teaching portfolio can only work to your advantage as you prepare for the job market. The portfolio is a professional and comprehensive way of presenting an overview of your teaching abilities and potential. It forces you to articulate your teaching goals and strategies, which is, in itself, very useful for a job interview. (And even if you prepare a portfolio and your interviewer doesn't ask for it, you're one step ahead in understanding the process of documenting and evaluating your teaching as you later prepare for tenure after you do land that job!)

What goes into a teaching portfolio? As an overview of your teaching experience and potential, the portfolio should present a picture of your teaching profile. It allows you to present your ideas about teaching philosophy, pedagogy, and the integration of research and teaching. It also gives you a showcase to highlight your teaching strengths. At a minimum, most portfolios include a statement of teaching philosophy and goals, course syllabi for courses you have taught and those you would like to teach, and student evaluations. In addition, you might include an overview of your teaching responsibilities (course titles and numbers, enrollments, level, and whether they are required or elective), evaluations by colleagues who have observed your teaching, teaching honors or awards, and documentation of your participation in teaching development activities, perhaps through your department or a campus teaching center.

Although teaching philosophy statements often elicit groans from their writers, many search committees treat them very seriously, particularly in teaching-intensive institutions. An effective philosophy statement demands thought and honesty. It requires you to think very carefully about your assumptions as to how, why, and what students should learn in your discipline. It also allows you to discuss your general goals for your courses and provide specific examples of how you put these goals into practice in your classroom. You might want to approach the writing of your statement through consideration of a series of questions:

- Why is your particular discipline and/or sub-discipline important for students to learn? How does it fit into the

larger picture of a liberal arts education?

- What larger conceptual issues related to your discipline/sub-discipline do you incorporate into your courses and why?
- How is your research related to your teaching?
- What reading, writing, and analytical skills do you want your students to learn?
- What do you think are the most effective teaching strategies and why? How do you implement these strategies in your classroom?
- How do you address different learning styles in your courses (or do you think it is even important to address them?)
- Do you use technology in your teaching? If so, why and how? How do students benefit from its use?
- After a student has taken one of your courses, what do you expect he or she will have learned? How has he or she become a more educated person?

If parts of your portfolio demonstrate aspects of your teaching philosophy, make reference to them in your statement. It will present the portfolio as a coherent whole that reflects your teaching profile. On a practical side, keep your statement to about two double-spaced pages.

The second component of most portfolios is course syllabi from courses you have taught and those you would like to teach. Include syllabi from courses for which you had full responsibility. If you were a graduate teaching assistant for a professor's larger lecture course, include your syllabus for your section. Arrange all of the syllabi in some rational order, perhaps chronologically in the order you taught them, by subject area, or by type of course (for example, sections for which you were a teaching assistant, large lecture courses, seminars). In addition, think also about courses you would like to teach, courses you are qualified to teach, and courses that a prospective department might want you to teach. Look at the department's web site or the college catalog for a list of courses offered; you can also get an idea of which courses are already spoken for by history faculty. Be particularly aware of required or "service" courses that need to be taught regularly. For your "potential" courses, create syllabi that offer a brief course description, a reading list, topics, and assignments. Try to limit these syllabi to one or two pages per course.

Student evaluations are also an essential part of a portfolio. While evaluations come in various shapes and sizes, most are some combination of quantitative and anecdotal responses. One question is whether you should include all of your evaluations for the courses you have taught or just a selection. (Some candidates provide the statistics and select quotes from all evaluations, sort of a "greatest hits of teaching," as we called it in graduate school.) The answer to this depends on the number of evaluations you have, which in turn depends on how many classes you have taught. To avoid submitting hundreds of evaluations (too overwhelming for a search committee!), you might select a representative

sample for each class.

Should you send only your most positive teaching evaluations? Sometimes selecting only the positive evaluations, with absolutely no criticism from students, might backfire if a search committee member thinks you've vetted your evaluations to present only what you want the search committee to see. On the other hand, you're competing with applicants who may send only their most glowing evaluations. If you do select only a sample of evaluations, try to choose the most reflective comments, those with some substance about the course content, the quality of your interactions with students, and your teaching abilities. Be sure that you organize evaluations according to the course and include a brief course description for context.

Finally, think about the overall presentation of your teaching portfolio. You might include additional items; for example, recommendations written by professors or colleagues regarding your teaching, but don't make the portfolio too long. Use a ring binder or its equivalent, include a table of contents (see box), and paginate if necessary. (Some candidates "tab" separate sections.) Check the readability of anything you photocopy, such as student evaluations; they need to be legible and dark enough to read. The portfolio should be neat and easy to follow. Before you submit your teaching portfolio to a prospective employer, review it to be sure that you have highlighted your strengths and given the impression that you want to make about your teaching.

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