

### **STUDENT LEARNING PORTFOLIOS: HOW THEY ARE BEING IMPLEMENTED IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

Student learning portfolios have become increasingly popular in educational administration preparation programs. In the 2004 national study being reported here, more than 90% of the sample population indicated that student portfolios were being used in some manner in their administration preparation programs, for such purposes as (a) documenting student growth and development relative to performance and program standards, (b) integrating course work and related field requirements for the purpose of connecting theory and practice, and (c) promoting self-reflection and learning on the part of students. Although student learning portfolios represent only one method of assessing a student's knowledge and personal growth, their many uses and range of application provide the potential for guiding, facilitating, and assessing purposeful student learning outcomes in a more meaningful way than most other methods do.

The term, *portfolio*, stems from the Latin roots of *porta*, meaning to carry, and *folio*, meaning page or sheet. "A portfolio is an organized, goal-driven documentation of your professional growth and achievement experience...Although it is a collection of documents, a portfolio is tangible evidence of a wide range of knowledge, dispositions, and skills that you possess as a growing professional" (Campbell, Cignetti, Melenyzer, Nettles, & Wyman, 2001, p. 3). Evans (1995) defined a professional portfolio as an ongoing collection of personal thoughts about one's goals and experiences that is accompanied by reflection and self-assessment. "It represents who you are, what you do, where you have been, where you are, where you want to go, and how you plan on getting there" (Evans, 1995, p. 11).

Certainly portfolios are not new to the profession of education or to other professions such as architecture, business, law, engineering, art, and sales. For example, architects organize samples of their drawings and work history for the purpose of gathering consideration for work interviews, providing evidence of work quality for consideration as part of the screening process in contractual competition, or documenting the attainment of job requirements for personal advancement and merit evaluations. In the field of education, portfolios historically have been used for such purposes as internship logs, field project journals, activity mappings, specific course learnings, and as a means to reveal personal growth and development. Portfolios used in student teaching, for example, generally have included records of class lesson content, student activities, instructional methodology, and other information that is used for professional counseling and self-reflection (Campbell et al., 2001). Administrative internship logs have been popular instructional tools in graduate preparation for many years. Although the use of the personal resume or vita has been the traditional method for job applications, the interview portfolio has become increasingly popular for this purpose as well (Costantino & De Lorenzo, 2002). For example, while the personal resume most often includes a statement of career goals, a summary of work history, and a listing of references, the interview portfolio consists of a limited number of artifacts that create a showcase of exempla-

ry documents representative of the applicant's best work and accomplishments for the purpose of gaining employment (Constantino & De Lorenzo, 2002). Furthermore, as noted by Campbell et al. (2001), "State departments of education are increasing requirements for compelling evidence of performance" (p. 2).

Until the completion of this study, the extent to which student learning portfolios were being used in educational administration programs was generally unknown. Responding to anecdotal evidence of increased portfolio usage in such programs, this study sought to document the nature and extent of usage nationwide.

### **The Study**

A study questionnaire was sent to 90 universities with graduate programs in educational administration. Sixty of the 90 institutions were randomly selected members of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). Another 30 non-member institutions were selected through the use of a purposeful sampling procedure based on geographical location and the offering of both the master's and doctoral degrees in educational administration. Thus, all participating institutions offered master's and doctoral degrees. Twenty-three of them also offered the Educational Specialists Degree or the 6-Year Certificate in educational administration. The survey return rate was 70%.

An 11-member UCEA ad hoc advisory committee on portfolio utilization in administrator preparation programs served to assess the study instrument for content validity relative to three major content areas: (a) perspectives of program leaders concerning the use of student portfolios in preparation programs in educational administration; (b) the use of student portfolios in specific degree and certification programs in educational administration; and (c) clarifications, extensions, and statements of assessment concerning the use of student learning portfolios in educational administration preparation programs. Their assessment included attention to specific information regarding the successful implementation of student learning portfolio programs.

The primary purposes of the study were to determine the extent to which student portfolios were being used in preparation programs, their specific applications in various preparation activities, and their perceived influence on faculty relationships with students. Specifically, the instrument served to collect data relative to:

1. the extent of portfolio use in administrator preparation programs;
2. the specific uses of student learning portfolios;
3. the primary benefits of student learning portfolios;
4. the underlying purposes of student learning portfolios;
5. the related problems encountered in their implementation;
6. the standards used for the guidance of student learning and professional growth;
7. the implications for faculty involvement in the use of student portfolios; and
8. the opinions of department leaders and faculty members concern-

ing the impact of student portfolios on preparation methods and instructional programming. The study also included the gathering of successful practices for the implementation of student learning portfolios. This related purpose was designed to gain the experience and thoughts of program leaders concerning successful practices in planning, implementing, and administering a student learning portfolio program in educational administration. The study findings for each of these considerations are reported in the following section.

### **Study Findings**

Study results revealed that student portfolios were being used to a much greater extent in master’s degree and certification preparation programs than in other degree programs in educational administration, although portfolios were being used in all degree and certification programs to some extent. As shown in Table 1, 89.5% of the participating institutions were using student portfolios in specific ways in their master’s degree programs. About 47% used them in certification and licensing programs. Approximately 37% of the institutions used portfolios in their educational specialists degree (Ed.S.) program, 26.3% reported their use in Ed.D. degree programs, and 31.6% in Ph.D. degree programs in educational administration. The fact that nearly 90% of the participating institutions were using portfolios in the master’s program and less than one-third were using them in doctoral programs is significant.

**Table 1**

*Programs Using Student Learning Portfolios in Preparation Programs in Educational Administration*

Study sample	90
Respondents	63 (70%)
Respondents using portfolios	57 (90%)
Degree/Certification programs	Percent of subgroup using portfolios
Master’s degree	89.5%
Educational Specialist (Ed.S.)	36.8%
Ed.D. degree	26.3%
Ph.D. degree	31.6%
Certification/Licensing	47.4%

When all degree and certification programs were considered, the five leading uses of student learning portfolios reported by the participants

in rank order were: as a requirement for the administrative internship (73.7%); as part of a course requirement (52.6%); in lieu of the comprehensive exam for a degree (47.4%); as a method of evaluating student skills at various times during student preparation or at the close of a specific program (42.1%); and as a means for reporting and/or assessing field work or for other practicum (36.8%) (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Portfolio Use in Preparation Programs for All Degree Programs*

Specific purposes	Percent response for all degrees
Requirement for internship	73.7%
Part of course requirements	52.6%
In lieu of comprehensive exam	47.4%
Method for evaluating administrative skills at beginning, middle, or end of program	42.1%
Field work or other practicum	36.8%
Entry year assessment requirement	10.6%
Tool for deciding continuation in program	10.6%
Part of state's requirements	10.6%
Admission requirement	5.3%
Vehicle for exploring research/dissertation topic	5.3%

It is evident that the leading three uses of portfolios centered on skill assessment as related to specific course and/or field requirements. Portfolio uses for purposes of student admission, program continuation, achievement of state requirements, or research topic exploration were much less significant. For example, only 10.6% of the institutions used student portfolios to assess entry year performance, to decide continuation in the program, or to assess the achievement of certain state standards.

Although not required to by the state, institutions using portfolios almost always tied them to one or more sets of broad standards (e.g., NCATE, ISLLC, or other program standards relative to administrative competence) to guide and evaluate student learning and growth. Nearly one-half of the institutional programs tied portfolio use to NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) standards for administration and slightly less than one-third focused on ISLLC (Interstate Standards Leadership Licensure Consortium) standards.

It was noted previously that student learning portfolios were in use in the master's degree programs to a much higher degree than at the doctor-

al level. In fact, as revealed in Table 3, 40 participating institutions (69.4%) were using student portfolios in the administrative internship experience in master's degree programs and less than seven (10.6%) were using them for the same purpose in the Ed.D. degree program. As another comparison, while nearly half of the participants were using portfolios in lieu of a written comprehensive examination for the master's degree, only three institutions (5.3%) used portfolios to replace the comprehensive examination at the Ed.D. level and none at the Ph.D. level. Certification and licensure programs were using portfolios at a relatively high percentage level as part of course requirements, administrative internship programs, and various fieldwork activities. As shown in Table 3, data for portfolio utilization in certification programs compared somewhat favorably with data for the master's and Ed.S. degree programs. Of course, these programs almost always are closely related.

**Table 3**

*Uses of Student Portfolios Relative to Various Degree and Certification Programs*

Specific portfolio uses	Percent response				
	M.Ed.	Ed.S.	Ed.D.	Ph.D.	Cert.
Program admission	5.3%				
Comprehensive exam	47.4%	15.8%	5.3%		10.6%
Course requirement	63.2%	26.3%	10.6%	15.8%	42.4%
Internship requirement	69.4%	21.1%	10.6%	15.8%	42.1%
Fieldwork/Practicum	47.4%	21.1%	5.3%	5.3%	42.1%
Independent study					5.3%
First year assessment	5.3%				5.3%
End provisional status					
Final exams in courses	10.6%	5.3%			10.6%

*Implications Prevalent in the Use of Student Portfolios*

The importance of students assuming responsibility for their own learning is emphasized in education generally. If this contention is indeed of paramount importance, then the use of student portfolios would appear to have a major contribution to make in administrator preparation programs. When asked about the prevalent implications of portfolio use, the study participants commented that such usage requires the student to take responsibility for structure and organization on a self-directed basis. Nearly 80% of the respondents were of this opinion. As data in Table 4 indicate, other

important learning implications are possible through the use of portfolio methods. Nearly two-thirds of the study participants stated that student portfolios required the maintenance of a meaningful focus on relevant learning processes and structure. For example, students are able to use various self-evaluation methods for reflecting on administrative standards that may be required and the success levels achieved as a result of the program activities that they experienced. Yet, some participants held reservations about the quality of reflection relative to student portfolios. One participant commented that, "Reflection is often stated as a primary benefit of portfolio use. If so, much of it has to be self-reflection. An internship faculty supervisor could not possibly reflect one-on-one to internship portfolios and Lord knows the on-site administrator isn't going to do so." Others viewed reflection more positively, as indicated by the comments of another participant that "we emphasize reflection as part of the portfolio entry. This reflection is to involve references to the literature."

**Table 4***Implications of Student Learning Portfolios*

Specific implications	Percent response
Requires the student to take responsibility for structure and organization on a self-directed basis	78.9%
Requires maintaining a meaningful focus on relevant learning processes and structure	63.2%
Requires faculty to work differently with students	52.6%
Requires the achievement of standards that often increase the standardization of student responses as well	53.6%
Changes relationships between students and faculty in the assessment process	36.8%

As revealed in Table 4, two other implications prevalent in the use of student learning portfolios received a response of 50% or above. According to the respondents, the use of portfolios requires faculty to work differently with students. For instance, one-way instruction is not as prevalent in that cooperation in the determination of learning objectives, the evaluation of learning activities, and the assessment of learning results necessitates the collaborative efforts of both students and faculty. Also, the use of student portfolios requires the achievement of standards that often increase the standardization of student responses as well (i.e., responses are more specifically focused and more reflective of relationships between theory and practice). Each of the implications noted in Table 4 reveals changing opportunities for increased student involvement in the learning process.

*Other Learning Benefits for Students*

Despite the occasional reservations, such as previously noted, 96.1% of study participants were of the opinion that portfolios were “highly beneficial” or “considerably beneficial” in promoting reflection, transformational leadership skills, and synthesis of meaning (see Table 5). One respondent commented: “My personal view is that written communication is the chief value of the portfolio. It comes through clearly that all too many grad students entering administration lack this essential skill. What we can do about it is the real question. Perhaps student portfolios are an important part of the answer.” And, if individualization of instruction is an important feature of effective graduate programs, then student portfolios appear to have a significant role to play. Of those institutions reporting, 94.1% stated that portfolios were highly or considerably beneficial by allowing for individualization of the instructional program. As a valuable assessment tool, portfolios also received high marks; 83.3% stated that portfolios were either highly beneficial or considerably beneficial for student assessment purposes. Such a contention should lead to an increase in the use of student portfolios to assess student knowledge and skill development at various times during the preparation program, including their possible replacement of traditional comprehensive examination procedures that have tended to be troublesome in the minds of many faculty personnel surveyed here.

**Table 5***Learning Benefits for Students Using Portfolio Methods*

Benefits	Percent response
Alternative to traditional program practices	
Highly beneficial	38.9%
Considerably beneficial	27.8%
Moderately beneficial	33.3%
Not beneficial	0.0%
Allow for individualization	
Highly beneficial	52.9%
Considerably beneficial	41.2%
Moderately beneficial	0.0%
Not beneficial	5.9%
Serve as a valuable assessment tool	
Highly beneficial	50.0%
Considerably beneficial	33.3%
Moderately beneficial	16.7%
Not beneficial	0.0%

*(continued)*

**Table 5** (continued)

Benefits	Percent response
Promote reflection, transformational leadership, and synthesis of meaning	
Highly beneficial	76.5%
Considerably beneficial	19.6%
Moderately beneficial	5.9%
Not beneficial	0.0%
Add to administrative skills (written, oral, judgment, etc.)	
Highly beneficial	43.8%
Considerably beneficial	37.5%
Moderately beneficial	18.7%
Not beneficial	0.0%

Finally, in view of the movement in the field toward competency skill development and the achievement of administrative standards, it is interesting to note that study results indicate that student portfolios have considerable potential for adding to the development of administrative skills such as judgment, organizational ability, written and oral communication, problem analysis, and others. It is clear from an examination of the study data that the use of student learning portfolios cannot be overlooked as an important method for student learning. As stated by one participant, "Portfolios place the student in the very center of the learning process. Learning is more integrated and meaningful." Another respondent commented: "Students and school site supervisors rate the experience outstanding in bridging theory and practice."

#### *Faculty Involvement and Commitments*

The study gave considerable attention to faculty involvement and commitments relative to portfolio use in preparation programs. There is little question that the implementation of student learning portfolios places new demands on faculty personnel. As one participant commented: "Faculty load appears to be the primary deterrent. If implemented, what is replaced?" As indicated in Table 6, the necessity of reviewing student portfolios requires the direct involvement of faculty members. Whether the reviewing of the portfolio is done by the student's advisor, a portfolio review committee, a course instructor, an oral defense committee, or specific faculty members according to the purpose of the portfolio, faculty workload and commitment are important considerations. As one respondent noted: "There is no systematic evaluation of them (portfolios); they are very time consuming for students and faculty, and costs out weigh benefits."

**Table 6***Who Serves as Reviewers for Portfolio Evaluations?*

Who serves as reviewers?	Percent response
Student's program advisor	36.8%
Portfolio review committee	36.8%
Course instructor	36.8%
Oral defense committee	21.1%
Specific faculty members @ purposes	15.8%
Ad hoc committee @ purposes	5.3%
School site supervisors	5.3%
The student or other students	5.3%
Potential employers	0.0%

Depending upon the purpose of the portfolio and the source of its generation, the student's program advisor is likely to be involved in reviewing an advisee's portfolio. Other portfolio review processes—such as the use of review committees, course instructor, oral defense committees, and specific faculty review committees based on portfolio purposes—all require the involvement of the faculty. Although internships were among the most popular programs for portfolio utilization, few school site supervisors were involved in the portfolio review process. The practice of having students review and/or evaluate other students' portfolios was limited at best. No respondents reported the review and evaluation of student portfolios by potential employers.

Study participants were asked if student portfolios were considered important in the determination of faculty load. More than two-thirds of them said that they were not. Portfolios used as part of administrative internship experiences or course requirements were just considered part of the faculty members' workload. As one participant stated, "We just expect it (portfolio review and evaluation) to be done." Nevertheless, faculty load appeared to be a primary deterrent to the implementation and usage of portfolios in administrator preparation programs. In fact, as shown in Table 7, finding time to assess progress and evaluate the quality of student portfolios was the leading problem or challenge confronted in their use; 63.2% of the study participants listed this problem as foremost among those problems and challenges being faced in portfolio utilization.

**Table 7***Problems Being Encountered in the Use of Student Learning Portfolios in Educational Administration Preparation Programs*

Problem or concern	Percent response
Lack of faculty time for supervising and evaluating	63.2%
Lack of student time for reporting periodically on progress	36.9%
Lack of faculty incentives for guiding, advising, and evaluating	36.9%
Lack of faculty interest in their use	36.9%
Lack of agreement regarding quality guidelines for their use	21.1%
Lack of faculty agreement regarding the place of portfolios in the preparation program	21.1%
Too many student complaints concerning their use	0.0%

Besides the lack of faculty time, the lack of student time for reporting periodically on portfolio progress, the lack of faculty incentives for guiding, advising, and evaluating in the area of portfolio utilization, and the lack of faculty interest in the use of portfolios in the preparation program were other important problems inhibiting their use in preparation programs. Related problems included the inability of faculties to agree on the place of portfolios in the preparation program along with the lack of agreement relative to quality guidelines for their use. None of the respondents listed student complaints concerning portfolio use as a problem or concern. One person commented that, "Portfolios are for the most part well received. Students see them as a valuable learning tool as well as a marketing tool when interviewing for a position." And, although "the lack of faculty interest in portfolio use" received a response of 36.9% as a problem being encountered, only 15.8% indicated that "faculty resistance" to their use was an inhibiting factor. The fact that portfolio utilization was not a widely accepted practice on the part of the college or university was noted by 42.1% of the respondents. As one person noted, "Portfolios may have a place; we have yet to find it. I find that the review of 35-40 portfolios of 10 pages plus artifacts is more than I can handle at the end of the semester."

### Study Reflections

The purposes of the study centered on determining the nature, extent, purposes, benefits, problems, standards, impact, and implications of portfolio usage in educational administration programs. Additionally, an effort was made to glean knowledge from the experience of program leaders relative to successful practices for planning, implementing, and administering a student learning portfolio program in educational administration.

The information gathered in this study has implications for several program practices in educational administration. For example, the data make it quite clear that, while student learning portfolios are being utilized generally in the master's degree and administrator licensure programs, their use at the doctoral level is limited. For instance, although nearly one-half of the participating institutions are using student portfolios to replace the master's degree comprehensive examination, no institution in the study is using them in this manner at the Ph.D. level and only three institutions are using portfolios to replace the comprehensive examination for the Ed.D. degree. One could only speculate that dissatisfaction with traditional master's degree comprehensive exam practices led to searches for other alternatives and that dissatisfaction with the comprehensive exam at the doctoral level is not as prevalent. Similarly, nearly 70% of the institutions have implemented the use of portfolios as an internship requirement at the master's degree level, but only 10.6% had done so at the Ed.D. level.

Study results relative to the positive impact of student portfolios on the learning process give strong support for their use in preparation programs. The large majority of the respondents cited benefits such as the promotion of self-reflection, the development of transformational leadership outcomes, the potential for fostering a synthesis of meaning, the individualization of instruction, the addition of an assessment tool, and the extension of administrative skill development for learners as noteworthy outcomes of student learning portfolios.

Finally, it is clear that the key to the implementation of student learning portfolios is faculty understanding and agreement relative to their purpose in the program. As previously noted, the lack of faculty time for supervising and evaluating student portfolios was viewed as the number one problem being encountered in their implementation. If success in portfolio use is to be achieved, faculty personnel must give serious attention to the place of student portfolios in the overall preparation program, their impact on faculty members' workloads, and the detailed procedures necessary for the initiation and completion of the portfolio development process.

As noted above, a related purpose of this study was to gain the experience and knowledge of program leaders relative to planning, implementing, and administering a successful student learning portfolio program in educational administration. Respondents submitted detailed suggestions concerning this purpose and also sent copies of their policies and procedures for their student portfolio programs. The following characteristics of an effective student learning portfolio program are based on the data gathered in this study and a synthesis of the published documents sent by the respondents as part of their participation. Serious discussions of these guidelines will help to build a strong foundation for the successful implementation of the portfolio process in programs of educational administration.

#### *Characteristics of an Effective Student Learning Portfolio Program*

A quality portfolio development process, according to study participants, includes the following characteristics:

1. *A clearly defined purpose:* The specific purpose(s) of the development of the portfolio process must be clearly defined (e.g., to serve as a culminating requirement for supervisor, principal, and superintendent licensure; to replace the master's degree comprehensive examination; to serve as the record of knowledge and experience gained during the principal internship; or to describe the standards for educational leaders, etc.). Student portfolios become purposeful when they are directly connected to a program's progressive and overall expectations for what a student should know and be able to do according to established standards or program goals.
2. *A detailed explanation of procedures related to the initiation and the completion of the portfolio development process:*
  - a. Information as to when and how the portfolio is to be done.
  - b. Information as to who supervises and/or gives counsel regarding the initiation and completion of the portfolios. Portfolios should be sufficiently "high stakes" to assure that they are taken seriously by both students and faculty personnel. At the doctoral level, for example, a first annual portfolio review might not be approved until the portfolio demonstrates the student's ability to carry out high-level, independent research under guidance of an advisor and committee.
  - c. Information concerning the format/contents of a quality portfolio should include:
    - (1) Table of contents
    - (2) Format and style of written materials
    - (3) Appropriate artifacts (e.g., school improvement plan)
    - (4) Documentation of field-based experiences
    - (5) Internship documentation
    - (6) Required papers/research
    - (7) Professional/Personal career statements
      - a. Administrative philosophy
      - b. Professional development plan
    - (8) Documentation of state standards, knowledge, experience, and other specific knowledge areas
    - (9) Readings and research
    - (10) Courses with portfolio requirements
    - (11) Completion requirement and time considerations
3. *Methods of portfolio evaluation:* The specific procedures for evaluating the completed portfolio(s) must be established:
  - a. Faculty evaluation procedures regarding portfolios and completion of evaluation forms.
  - b. Oral defense of the portfolio as fits the purpose; procedures and evaluation processes are detailed and disseminated.
  - c. Procedures to be used in cases of unsatisfactory completion of the portfolio.

*Conclusion*

The results of this study lend support to the successful implementation of student learning portfolios for the master's degree, educational specialist degree, and administrator licensure programs in educational administration. The identified learning benefits would suggest quite strongly that an increase of portfolio methodology will be witnessed in these programs in the years ahead. Just how portfolios will be accepted for other purposes at the doctoral level is difficult to predict. However, the continued successful utilization of portfolios at lower academic degree levels should serve to motivate their additional use in doctoral preparation programs.

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