

The Use of a Portfolio System as a Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract

Due to the diverse nature of the leisure services field, it is important for educators to assist students in developing a format to plan and document their career development paths. Such a format should be designed to assist students in the on-going pre-professional experiences (academic and experiential) to others both inside and outside the profession. The purpose of this article is to present one such method, a portfolio system. The philosophy, make-up and organization of a system is presented along with the pedagogical implications of implementing such a system into a leisure services curriculum.

Key words: Assessment, Evaluation, Portfolio, Self-assessment system

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Introduction

When students consider a professional career, many are uncertain and wonder where to begin the search process. They have questions about finding the right position in a professional setting that will meet their needs and interests, and they may have concerns about the challenges they will face in the job market. This scenario is certainly the case in the diverse field of leisure services. A number of different pathways exist for students to take to success, and by carefully assessing future interests, desires, and career aspirations, an appropriate plan may be developed. Many settings within the leisure services industry are highly competitive with large numbers of individuals seeking employment for similar jobs. Without proper planning and preparation, it may be difficult to achieve a position within the most desirable agencies. On the other hand, many opportunities exist for individuals who have prepared themselves and who have planned effectively for the future.

The task for educators is to develop a format to assist students to plan for and document their career development path. A portfolio system is one way to assist students in the documentation of their pre-professional careers. The use of portfolios to document past learning and accomplishments for future employment has a strong history in many fields including art, architecture, journalism, and fashion modeling (Olson, 1991). Portfolios have

increasingly been used in the field of education as elementary, secondary and post secondary educators develop portfolios as a means for integrating instruction and assessment (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; McLean, 1990).

This article will examine the use of a portfolio for leisure services students and professionals. Specific attention will be paid to describing how a portfolio could be used as a comprehensive method of documentation that includes identifying components and materials which would be suitable for a resource file and the development of individual portfolios from those resources.

Career Assessment and Exploration

For students to be successful, they must have a sense of their professional career endeavors. Students need to identify their professional direction, to determine a focus for their professional career, and to have assistance in career-related decision making. First, an individual needs to decide in a broad sense whether her or his career interests will be served by seeking employment in the leisure services field. Once that decision is made, it is important to hone in on the area in which one is interested. The leisure services field presents varied opportunities with the potential for multiple career ladders to be pursued. Since it is impossible to pursue a number of different career paths simultaneously, students should be encouraged to concentrate on one or two career ladders that are particularly interesting to them.

Many opportunities exist in leisure services including working in government (local, state, federal), nonprofit organizations (youth serving organizations, voluntary agencies, clubs), and/or the private commercial sector (resorts, theme parks, hospitality industry as well as travel and tourism). Each of these sectors requires a specific strategy for career development. For example, a unique set of educational competencies or a combination of professional work experiences might be required by a particular agency. Helping students identify the types of experiences needed as well as documenting these experiences is the focus of maintaining a resource file. This first step articulates one's pre-professional experiences to potential employers. A professional portfolio is a specific subset of a resource file that allows one to interpret experiences toward specific career goals.

The Portfolio Development System

The strong emphasis on experiential learning has been crucial to the success of many academic recreation and leisure services programs and is often a selling point for students and parents, alike. To fully integrate experiential and theoretical education and to be able to present the subtleties of one's practical learning, interpretation of experiential efforts is a must. Interpretation of experiential activities in which one has participated is important to the individual (self), parents, potential employers, and faculty. A resource file and subsequent portfolios can assist students in identifying the needed information to create individual interpretations of student experiences to a specific person, group, or agency.

Portfolios can serve both a product and process function. As products, portfolios demonstrate a student's effort, progress and/or achievement in a given area(s). As a process,

however, portfolios can be significant in developing reflection and critical thinking in students (Bernhardt, Cole, & Ryan, 1993). The process of developing a portfolio forces the compiler to evaluate what goes into the portfolio. The very nature of judging what to include mandates reflection and critical thinking (Nettles & Petrick, 1995; Olson, 1991).

A portfolio development system is designed to assist students in the on-going process of compiling and organizing the resources needed to interpret their pre-professional experiences (academic and experiential) to others both inside and outside the profession. This on-going process takes place throughout one's academic and professional career. It is important to remind students throughout their course work to collect and save materials appropriate for portfolio use (examples of these materials are identified later in this article).

Two primary elements form a portfolio development system—a resource file and a portfolio. A resource file is a collection of documents, papers, pictures, certificates, letters, work samples, references, recommendations, professional involvement logs or records, course descriptions, creative endeavors and other pertinent materials that relate to the educational and career goals established by the student.

A portfolio is a smaller collection of materials purposely drawn from the resource file to meet a particular purpose (e.g., to apply for a position as a programmer in a municipal recreation organization or to provide documentation in a specific skill area). A portfolio is an authentic measurement or assessment strategy that allows an individual to document her/his unique skills and abilities related to lifelong learning (Bernhardt, Cole & Ryan, 1993; Nettles & Petrick, 1995). The portfolio is considered a professional self-portrait and should illustrate an individual's proficiency in areas deemed important to the leisure services profession.

Moore (1994, p. 1) states, "that a portfolio is a purposeful collection of student work that tells the story of a student's efforts, progress, and achievement in a given area(s)." Key characteristics of a portfolio system include:

- Systematic collections with contributions from both students and teachers that illustrate the evolution of student's skills, achievement and progress;
- Dynamic evolution that actively involves the student in creating, assessing, evaluating and revising portfolio entries;
- Joint responsibilities between the teacher and the students and the resulting basis for constant communication;
- The inextricable links with instruction as the portfolio-teaching process is cyclical;
- A multi-dimensional documenting process that illustrates progress within the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains; and
- An anchor to authenticity (Lescher, 1995).

By encouraging students to use a portfolio during their college experience educators can present a model for documenting learning as well as self evaluation throughout one's

lifetime. With the key principles listed in the preceding paragraphs, faculty in conjunction with students, may begin the development of a portfolio system that meets the needs of their students. This requires several steps including deciding on:

- the purpose(s) for using the portfolio in the curriculum, e.g., will the portfolio be an alternative assessment technique, a supplement to a resume, or both?
- outcomes that reflect the curriculum and departmental focus, e.g., what kind of graduate does an academic program want to produce? How could a portfolio help students and faculty document these outcomes?
- how students can be assisted with decisions about what should be included in a portfolio.
- a process of implementing portfolios, e.g., how will the portfolio system be incorporated throughout the curriculum?
- The use of a manual to serve as a guide for students and faculty (Nettles & Petrick, 1995).

Organizing the Resource File

The resource file and subsequent portfolios may serve as a culminating experience for professional preparation. The bringing together of one's work and interpreting it in a cohesive and complementary fashion provide a synthesis of experiential learning difficult to get through any other method. The often perceived piece-meal approach to learning is somewhat lessened through reflection, compilation, and organization of one's personal and professional growth over the course of study. Student writing and organizational skills also may be ignored through such a synthesizing experience.

The maintenance of a resource file that contains materials to be selected for portfolios seems to hold much promise for students for many reasons. As stated by Olson (1991),

"The very act of compiling a portfolio develops reflective thinking, decision making, and evaluation skills. Portfolios offer a more complete picture of student achievement than a single measure from standardized tests. They also display a record of accomplishments. Portfolios also reflect growth and development over time" (p. 79).

In addition to providing students with a product that may be used in a variety of professional situations, the process of creating and maintaining a resource file can foster in students the habit of reflecting on their experiences and enhance development as a professional. In addition, the skills involved in the maintenance of the resource file are central to the career advancement requirements found in many employment situations. For example, the ability to gather and maintain coherent documentation is utilized in programming (the development of program plans, inventorying and ordering equipment and supplies) and in administrative (fund raising plans, master plans for development, and long-range budgeting) positions.

The resource file should be assembled in a manner that allows an individual to evaluate her/his strengths as well as areas for growth. It might be wise to have a system whereby periodic reviews of one's resource file occurs (i.e., every six months the individual goes through the file to determine progress, weak areas, and strengths). The smaller, more select portfolio should assist the fellow professional or potential employer in determining one's potential for success in the profession.

The more organized a resource file, the easier it will be to find information and develop a distinct and well designed portfolio. A format should be developed that is easily understood as well as easy to use. In addition, a convenient and safe place to organize and store materials should be selected. A file drawer or sturdy box are both possibilities; the space should be flexible to allow for room to expand the file and its resources. A method to organize and file materials such as hanging files or manila envelopes is desirable. As it becomes possible to write to CD ROM computer disks a desirable method of compilation and storage may be on disk. Written work, scanned in photographs or other visual media, and personally designed audio recording will soon be available and may serve as the most convenient, safest, and easily organized of the various forms of resource files. Ideally, sub-files could be easily retrieved for use as portfolios.

Competency Categories

Many general skills and competencies are desired by employers. Typically, an employer hires an individual who has basic job skills, good interpersonal skills, and a positive attitude toward learning. Skills specific to the agency (e.g., knowledge of particular computer programs) generally are taught to an individual after hiring. In that light, the resource file and specific portfolios can be organized according to three basic competency categories: technical skills, human relations skills, and conceptual skills.

Technical skills are described as skills that use knowledge of various content areas (e.g., behavior management, outdoor pursuits, festival management) and directly relate to the delivery of leisure services. Technical skills tend to be somewhat tangible, are directly observable, and involve a task orientation. Competencies that fall under this category include such skills as developing program brochures, activity leadership, budgeting, charting, and evaluation, and planning. Materials that would likely provide evidence of these types of competencies include such things as:

- class projects: program outlines, activity cards/files, charting, sample budgets, research reports, etc.;
- an annotated list of degree-related course work (course descriptions written by the student);
- documentation and explanation of pre-professional experience: 500 hours of volunteer or paid pre-internship work, internship, volunteer experiences, etc.;
- evidence of certifications: CPR, first aid, universal precautions, child abuse reporting, CPO, CLP, CTRS, etc.; and
- evidence of familiarity with computers: forms, schedules, desktop publishing, etc..

Human relations skills are described as skills that involve social skills, the ability to relate to and understand people, and communicate. These skills are critical to the successful delivery of leisure services. Human relations skills tend to be somewhat nebulous and, while observable, are not easily documented. Competencies that fall under this category include such skills as working with groups, written and oral communication, and treating others with equity and dignity. Materials that would likely provide evidence of these types of competencies include:

- evidence of written work: copies of business letters, requests for information, reports, public service announcements;
- evidence of formal presentations: presentation outlines, evaluation summaries of presentations, transparencies, computer generated slide shows, handouts, etc.;
- references and letters of recommendation that speak to one's ability to work well in groups, to lead or direct people of all ages and skill levels, etc.;
- evidence of understanding of people and their differences (e.g., training in diversity, evidence of working with people who have disabilities);
- personnel and program evaluations; and
- awards and honors which address leadership, teamwork, group skills, and the like.

Conceptual skills are described as those skills that form the backbone for professional integrity and commitment. They relate to a sense of professionalism and the ability to think for one's self. Conceptual skills tend to be somewhat internal to an individual and are observable over time. Competencies that fall under this category include such skills as being able to articulate a personal leisure philosophy, involvement in the profession, evaluation of self or others, and critical thinking. Materials that would likely provide evidence of these types of skills include:

- record of professional involvement: membership in local, state, or national organizations, attendance at conferences, presentations at conferences, and publications in professional journals;
- a personal philosophy statement of leisure, recreation, tourism, etc., related to one's professional area of interest;
- pre-professional synthesis paper: a reflection on one's academic experience to identify personal and professional growth while engaged in formal study. Typically, a synthesis paper includes a reflection on one's strengths and areas needing improvement, identification of future goals, and a plan to reach those goals;
- annotated professional bibliography: brief descriptions of textbooks, journal(s) articles and appropriate computer software that relate to one's professional goals; and
- evidence of continuing education: workshops, special training, transcripts indicating additional schooling, etc..

Organizing the Portfolio

As a subset of the resource file a portfolio often is organized in an employer-friendly fashion, for example, often in a three ring binder. The portfolio typically begins with a title page, followed by a table of contents. Plastic page protectors are effective for keeping documents looking neat and professional over time. Most importantly, the contents should be organized so the portfolio is an attractive presentation of professional materials and reflects the individual's personality. In the development of portfolios the overriding consideration should be the purpose for which the portfolio is being developed. The purpose of the portfolio determines the contents that are included, the way it is organized, and the way that it will be used (Olson, 1991).

An example of a specific format would be to organize one's materials into content areas. Within each content area a narrative self reflection/evaluation might be presented first, followed by material organized in chronological order from the most recent material to more dated material. This organization allows a student and potential employer ready access to contemporary experiences.

Pedagogical Implications

The pedagogical implications of implementing a portfolio development system within a curriculum are numerous. First and foremost, a portfolio development system emphasizes personal responsibility on the part of the student for record keeping and documenting experiences. Students are empowered to be self directed as they identify personal professional goals, develop a plan to meet these goals, identify potentially beneficial experiences outside the classroom, and integrate these experiences with their academic experiences. Such an approach is beneficial to the student as well as to the university in which the student is enrolled. With the move toward competency-based learning (student based outcomes), portfolios could be used as documentation as to the competencies students have obtained while at a particular institution.

To be successful in implementing a portfolio development system, the process of building a resource file and designing individual portfolios must be integrated into the overall curriculum. A resource file or portfolio is not a one-time assignment or project. Rather the portfolio development system should be seen by the students as a lifelong process of self evaluation and documentation of learning. With this idea in mind, faculty members need to evaluate how the portfolio development system can be encouraged and promoted in all levels of the curriculum. For example, the portfolio concept could be introduced in the first class students take in the major. One assignment that encourages the reflective skills necessary to develop a resource file is presented in Figure 1.

Self Assessment. The self assessment is designed to help students identify pre-professional goals as well as develop a plan to achieve those goals. Students are expected to complete the tasks described in Figure 1.

- A. Write a paper (2 to 3 pages) which addresses the following questions:
1. Why you are interested in recreation and leisure as a career? Explain.
 2. Where do you see yourself in the field of recreation and leisure in five years?
 - ✓ What do you see as your strengths as a potential leisure service professional? Explain.
 - ✓ In what areas do you see yourself needing the most growth and development? Explain.
 - ✓ In what type of organization would you be interested in working? Why?
 - ✓ How would this maximize the strengths you identified earlier?
 3. Identify 3 to 5 of your professional goals.
- B. In addition to your paper, use the Leisure Services Division student handbook as well as consulting with your advisor to create a plan which will allow you to reach your professional goals. This plan should address the following:
1. Class work while at your University
 - ✓ What classes have you taken in the Department?
 - ✓ What classes do you need to take? Identify at least three electives (outside the major) you would like to take and explain why.
 - ✓ Create a semester-by-semester guide of the classes you will need to take to finish your leisure services/recreation degree.
 - ✓ Is graduate school something that interests you in the future? Why or why not?
 2. Pre-professional experiences
 - ✓ The leisure services major requires 500 hours of experiential learning prior to internship (see p. 6 in your handbook). How many hours do you presently have toward the 500 hours? Do those hours represent diversity of experience? What types of additional volunteer and/or paid experiences would you like to obtain to round out your experiential learning? Where and when can you obtain these experiences?
 - ✓ The leisure services major requires students to engage in a semester long internship (see p. 7 in your handbook). Identify 3 possible types of places or organizations you would like to do an internship. How would working in these places help you achieve your professional goals?
 3. Professional Organizations
 - ✓ Of the professional organizations listed in your handbook what organization can you envision yourself joining? Explain the benefits you think you would receive by joining a particular professional organization. What types of professional development opportunities would you like to experience?

Remember, the possibilities are endless and you must begin to focus yourself to get the most of your education and other experiences. This plan is not “set in stone,” but will help you begin to identify what you need to do to be successful in the leisure services/recreation field.

Figure 1. Self-Assessment Assignment

This initial exposure to the portfolio development system could be followed up in a variety of classes such as programming or management where students could examine portfolios as a means for hiring staff or evaluating specific programs or individuals. Within senior level classes, such as a research and evaluation class, the portfolio could be utilized as a qualitative evaluation tool as well as a means of self evaluation.

Just prior to internship students could examine the process of designing individual portfolios from their resource files. In addition, students could discuss the "nuts and bolts" of creating a portfolio as well as how and when to use portfolios. Assignments could be tailored to assist students to reflect on their academic career and present their own philosophy of leisure and delivering services as well as to identify their own strengths and weaknesses within specific career paths.

Conclusion

The varied use of portfolios is attractive for leisure services curricula for several reasons. First, from an educational standpoint a portfolio system offers an alternative to traditional evaluation techniques and involves the students in their own assessment. Second, from a professional viewpoint students can document their varied backgrounds and assist themselves in finding employment after graduation (Bernhardt, Cole, Ryan, 1993).

Due to the diverse nature of the leisure services field, it is imperative that faculty find the means to assist students in focusing their energies on their professional goals. Such an approach needs to be flexible to meet individual needs as well as create a system that can grow with the individual. A portfolio development system is one approach that can be integrated into a curriculum and give students a jump start into the profession. Portfolios can and should be a win/win situation for everyone involved. For the student, portfolios are a means to document a personalized career development path; for the university, portfolios may serve as one method of accountability; and for employers, portfolios are a means by which to make well informed employment decisions.

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