

## Harnessing the Power of Digital Portfolios

By Tim Martin, Coordinator of Secondary Education & Technology, and Assistant Professor of Education

For the College of Education (COE) at UA Fort Smith to become fully-accredited and nationally recognized, the COE philosophies must rest on a collective vision and mission that comprises the UA Fort Smith COE Conceptual Framework. The conceptual framework establishes the shared vision for the college's efforts in preparing future educators to work effectively in P-12 schools. It provides direction for programs, courses, teaching, *candidate performance*, scholarship, service, and college accountability. The conceptual framework is knowledge-based, articulated, shared, coherent, consistent with the college and university missions, and continuously evaluated. While it may appear the college can exist solely upon its conceptual framework, it can't.

The college must also have an assessment system that is based on the UA Fort Smith conceptual framework. This system must represent an ongoing process that uses *authentic*, comprehensive, and integrated assessment measures to evaluate the achievement of the COE mission and goals. This system must be created by the collaborative efforts of COE faculty and public school personnel. The assessment system is designed to monitor candidates as they progress through their approved programs. Monitoring is achieved through ongoing assessment of the content, knowledge, pedagogical and other professional skills, and core dispositions of the candidates throughout their enrollment at UA Fort Smith. Some assessments are qualitative (portfolio artifacts), and others are quantitative (GPA, course completion, or Praxis scores). Most of the qualitative assessments are

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completed and assessed through the use of electronic artifacts stored in portfolios for the three major field service courses: Practicum I, II, and The Internship all require the creation of an electronic portfolio. While every student will have unique and personal materials in his or her portfolio, each portfolio is designed following a template created by the COE. Thus, by using this uniform template, the COE possesses the ability to assess all portfolios with a common rubric or set of rubrics and link the rubric(s) to a set of standards electronically. This eliminates the need to write, re-write, and copy the "grade" into and onto various recording documents.

By utilizing an electronic format, COE can store, review, and present the entire portfolio digitally. The digitized portfolio can reside on a local computer, a CD, or a website. The COE at UA Fort Smith utilizes a web-based portfolio to increase access and adjust to platform differences between students, the university, libraries, and other locations where a student has connectivity. This ease of access allows the COE to require this form of portfolio for all students since it is not dependent on the candidate possessing a particular type of computer or software. Students merely need internet access. The digital format allows students to organize lesson plans and other paper documents into the portfolio. While this could be conducted in a traditional format, the beauty of the digital world allows students to

include more authentic items such as video clips, multimedia presentations, and other various artifacts that demonstrate the students' knowledge of the standards being addressed by the artifact and assessed by the rubric for that standard. The future success of all university-level students revolves not only around their use of technology but their ability to integrate technology into their everyday lives to enhance personal knowledge and productivity.

By having everything in a single digital location, an instructor can review, provide feedback, and assess various components of the portfolio, or its entirety, from one location. Gone are the days of using a wheel barrel to haul all the portfolios home, attempting to look at all the artifacts, organizing the overall results of the portfolio, and returning the portfolio in a timely manner. Faculty have access to the portfolio through a sharing process. As a result, faculty possess the ability to assess, provide feedback, and record the "grade" all within a single environment.

While the digital environment reduces the time frame required to assess portfolios, the most important component is the ability to allow different instructors to assess large numbers of students simultaneously and have all the results instantly available to review.

With this increased speed, faculty can begin concentrating on analyzing the information garnered from the "grade" for course, program, and university-wide improvements. What better way is there to demonstrate the value of portfolios than to improve student achievement at each level? Even though portfolios and their analysis are not new concepts, the use of the results to provide authentic feedback to programs and courses is relatively new. If portfolios are how we assess ourselves in the academic community, then why can't portfolios be used in all disciplines to assess authentic student achievement and improve the learning environment for all students?

With this new digital environment comes the ability for students to be assessed against various standards at the same time. Candidates in the COE are assessed against six sets of standards not including the UA Fort Smith General Education Competencies. This cumbersome process could not be accomplished under the old paper portfolio process. Now candidates in the internship phase of their preparation can have their portfolios assessed against all of these standards with a click of a button. The faculty member utilizes an agreed-upon rubric and assesses each assignment for meeting these standards. The results are recorded against each standard that is identified with the artifact the student has presented to be reviewed. Students still have to collect, create, and provide written analysis on all artifacts. However, each artifact and written analysis can now be assessed simultaneously, thus eliminating the repetitive nature and cumbersome process of recording the results and then compiling them in a student's "grade."

As faculty preparing, training, and educating students for a world that increasingly utilizes technology, universities must learn to harness the digital technologies to enhance the learning process. Computers and computer technology are not the panacea many believed they would become, nor are they the pariah that many faculty wish they were to justify antiquated assessing techniques. As in the past, faculty will continue to assess students through portfolios, faculty will continue to be assessed by personal professional portfolios, and universities will be assessed by the quality of their self-study portfolios. The only difference now is that portfolios can possess greater meaning for all and can be used to truly change student learning and prepare students for the future.

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## Student Learning Committee Research—Spring 2004

By Marion Dunagan, Institutional Effectiveness

Student learning matters most at UA Fort Smith, and we are challenged with finding effective ways to measure it. The Student Learning Committee is sponsoring a series of research initiatives that work toward both effective and nationally significant means of measuring the learning experiences our undergraduates have at UA Fort Smith. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, pronounced “Nessie”) and the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE, pronounced “Fessie”) are two important pieces in this semester-long research endeavor.

Right now, approximately 700 randomly selected first year students and seniors are sharing their views about their higher education experiences at UA Fort Smith by taking part in the NSSE. Beginning March 22, 2004, UA Fort Smith faculty will have the same opportunity to share their opinions about the levels at which students are engaged in learning, both in and out of the classroom, by participating in the FSSE. Since the surveys are similar in content, the Student Learning Committee will be able to review parallel data regarding student and faculty perceptions of learning at UA Fort Smith.

What makes these surveys so important? First, the surveys deal with real practices taking place on our campus right now. These practices range from the simple – how much reading and writing are students doing? – to the complex – at what level are students interacting with people of different backgrounds and cultures? The surveys measure how students spend their time on and off campus and how these activities shape learning for better or for worse.

What's more, these surveys are administered nationally, allowing the Student Learning

### Important Dates

April 5, 2004

Student Learning Day—  
*A New Twist on Learning*  
11 a.m. - 1:30 p.m., Campus Center

April 8, 2004

Student Learning Committee Meeting  
3 p.m., Math-Science 101

May 1, 2004

Levels of Implementation Survey due  
to Institutional Research Office

Committee to compare student engagement at UA Fort Smith with similar institutions. Although the FSSE is only in its second year of piloting, the NSSE is a well-established survey that has received notice nationwide in publications like *The Washington Post*, *Change*, the *Atlantic Monthly* and *US News and World Report*. In 2003, approximately 348,000 students participated in the NSSE from 437 four-year institutions. We are confident that the findings of the FSSE will be a valuable companion to the NSSE results. As our institution participates annually in both of these surveys, the Student Learning Committee will be able to measure our progress in improving the activities that lead to student engagement and success.

The surveys take fewer than fifteen minutes to complete, so encourage your students and your colleagues to participate when they receive an invitation. All individual answers are compiled by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University and are completely confidential. UA Fort Smith will receive aggregate reports and benchmarking documents this summer that will allow us to compare learning here with learning at similar institutions across the nation. NSSE is co-sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

and the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning. If you are looking for more information about NSSE or FSSE, access it on the web at <http://www.iub.edu/~nsse/>.

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## Higher Learning Commission's New Criteria for Accreditation

By Carol Westcamp, English instructor

Practically every member of the faculty, staff, or administration at any university or college is familiar with the accreditation process. In preparation for the upcoming Spring 2005 visit, five faculty members of our university became even more familiar with this process. On Friday, January 16, 2004, five representatives from the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith attended a workshop sponsored by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Bernie Elec, Dan Mahar, Tim Martin, John Martini, and Carol Westcamp left for St. Louis on Thursday and arrived home late Saturday. Aside from forming bonds with one another over the long, bouncy drive, the group made connections with representatives from other universities and colleges and learned about the new criteria, their core components, and ways of demonstrating that UA Fort Smith meets these criteria.

The opening session of the workshop introduced everyone present to the new criteria; speakers from the HLC focused on the fundamental shifts from the old criteria to the new criteria. Those shifts showed a movement from inputs and resources to results, from teaching to teaching and learning, from a look backwards to a future focus, from autonomy to connection, and from uniformity/stratification to distinctiveness, flexibility, and differentiation.

After a working lunch, concurrent sessions were held. Each of the five representatives from UA Fort Smith joined a different group, each

group focusing on one of the new criteria. Thus, each UA Fort Smith faculty member brought from the workshop intense information concerning each of the five new criteria: Mission and Integrity, Preparing for the Future, Student Learning and Effective Teaching; Acquisition, Discovery, and Application of Knowledge; Engagement and Service.

Not only did the group learn about the five criteria, they also gained information about the commission statements on diversity, general education, and assessment of student learning. After the trip, on Friday January 30, the group presented their findings to members working on the different strategy teams.

Although members of many universities dread such accreditation visits, our university seems well prepared. We certainly have much work to do, but as the HLC reiterates, the process is more important than the final product, the self-study. The process that this university has been undergoing, which includes focuses on student learning, assessment, and general education, certainly bodes well for our final product, the self-study.

In summary, I would like to go back to the title of this article. If assessment is designed properly, students can demonstrate realistically their mastery of the outcomes (competencies) of any course. The challenge comes in the selection of a scenario, problem, situation, etc. that places the student into the “real world.” This is where a faculty member needs to use the research tools at his/her disposal such as the Internet, industry partners, and experience to develop the assessment. Authentic Assessment is not just another fad but an excellent method in evaluating the true worth of student learning.

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Student Learning Matters is published by the Student Learning Committee of the University of Arkansas – Fort Smith.