

## CAN A METAMORPHOSIS BE QUANTIFIED?: REFLECTING ON PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

The fall 2001 semester was behind us at Mid-Atlantic, as was the first stage of the Writing Studies Department's three-stage portfolio pilot for its first-semester writing course—College Composition I (CCI). It had been a difficult semester. I, as the department's Portfolio Coordinator and developer of the portfolio pilot, had been inundated by complaints about many aspects of the process, if not about the very concept of portfolios itself. Much of my semester had been spent explaining, noting suggestions for improvement, and reciting my portfolio mantra to the doubtful. Throughout the semester, I had maintained my stamina by reassuring myself that most of this discontent was due more to the human dislike of change than the impracticality of portfolio assessment.

On this afternoon, so early in the process, however, my confidence flagged. The department was meeting to share its portfolio experiences *en masse*, and I realized there was a distinct possibility that all those individual complaints could swell into a voice of doom for portfolio assessment. What happened, though, was stunning. Yes, there were problems with the semester's process, but that was not what the department energetically discussed. A metamorphosis had taken place, even among those most resistant to portfolios; instead of damning portfolio assessment, they were making suggestions to improve it. Where I was prepared with data and reminders of the faculty's commitment to a three-semester pilot to keep portfolio assessment alive, it had become a life force of its own. Our faculty, on the whole, had moved on to a new place and had developed a new mindset on the issue of portfolios, one which has allowed our department to institute portfolio assessment for the first-semester writing course for the foreseeable future.

The department had finally decided to test portfolio assessment with a three-stage pilot after several years of sometimes rather intense debate. For

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over ten years, the Writing Studies Department had relied on a single-essay exam as the assessment method for its CCI course. The test was a 40-minute, in-class essay based on a question relating to a common non-fiction text all CCI students read. To pass CCI, and to move on to College Composition II (CCII), students had to pass this single, in-class essay or pass on an appeal initiated by their instructor.

The single-essay exam had gone through various manifestations in the ten years of its existence and had become a finely honed and entrenched procedure within the department. Several reasons existed for its popularity, some which the department overtly stated, and some they did not.<sup>1</sup> Officially for the department, the exam performed a sorting function, a function that the department was the least willing to give up (in fact, a significant number of faculty insisted that portfolios must contain this essay to provide a “baseline” for evaluating students against each other). Additionally, the exam showed the Mid-Atlantic University community that the department practiced assessment, revealing a desire to show that what can be assessed can be taught (Yancey, “Situating”). While the department and what it teaches are highly respected throughout the university, such was not always the case. With a testing methodology that emphasized high reliability, the message was that grading writing was not subjective and could be quantified.

Still, despite the historical identity of any department, change is unavoidable. For the Writing Studies Department, several years of new hires with specialized Ph.D.’s in Composition and Rhetoric had brought new perspectives, training, and experiences to the department. Additionally, within the department there was a growing contingency of all faculty who strongly believed in portfolio assessment. These faculty favored programmatic assessment, one that was “active, engaged, and dynamic” and potentially brought teaching and assessment together over student assessment that was product-focused and punitive.

To those who have come through or are currently in composition and rhetoric doctoral programs or involved in portfolio assessment, portfolios may seem so obvious as to deny question. However, in the Writing Studies Department as well as in many other two- and four-year schools across the country, composition is taught by a combination of permanent and adjunct professionals, some without a composition and rhetoric background or a social-epistemic predilection, portfolios are not a foregone conclusion. This was particularly the case for some of the department’s seasoned practitioners, many of whom were warriors in the previous assessment debate where the question was between objective tests and direct writing (Yancey, “Looking Back”).

When I joined the department in 2000, it was quite clear that, not surprisingly, the department debate about assessment was rooted in differences of ideology, and these differences are what had made it difficult in the past for

faculty to listen to opposing ideas. Whether these differences might be simplistically categorized as foundationalism rooted in empirical positivism versus the relativism of hermeneutical/situational approaches rooted in postmodernism, members of the department clearly had different points of views on writing assessment. Opponents to portfolios saw (and some still do) the exit exam as a method for maintaining concrete standards of student writing. In essence their view represents what Pat Belanoff says many instructors have: a desire for univocality, a desire to believe “that one piece of writing” can represent students well (“Portfolios” 22). The exit exam had at least partially represented a department culture that valued uniform, timed testing situations; blind readings of student writings; and norming sessions for quantitative evaluation. The result was the popular belief among many faculty that timed student essays represented students’ real writing ability, which good readers (translate good teachers) could identify and agree upon. Evidence of this stance was apparent in faculty statements gathered early in the pilot, such as, “[portfolios will] devalue the importance of producing quality work on demand, a vital work-place skill and de-emphasize the importance of in-class writing as one common indicator of achievement.” Additionally, several faculty were suspicious of student writing done outside controlled situations. As one instructor stated, “Weak students will simply have other students rewrite their papers for them and learn nothing in the process.”

On the other hand, proponents of portfolio assessment agreed with the view that “no one can make a trustworthy judgment about a student’s skill or ability in writing without seeing multiple pieces of writing” (Elbow 44) and writing that emerged from a process. Furthermore, to many within the department the disconnect between the single-essay exam and the curriculum goals of the course, which emphasized revision and the writing process, was untenable.

Despite the existence of these rather significant ideological and pedagogical differences, the most vocal concern within the department about portfolios focused on their logistical viability. Mid-Atlantic University is a regional state university with approximately 10,000 students. The Writing Studies Department is housed in the College of Communication. All ongoing faculty (with the exception of two who have administrative positions) regularly teach in the first-year composition program and teach two to three sections of first-year composition courses a semester (within a four/four load). Furthermore, there is neither a Ph.D. program nor TA’s; all contingent labor in the department are adjuncts. In fall 2003, the department ran sixty sections of CCI, and of the thirty-two instructors teaching those courses, fifteen were returning adjuncts and five were new adjuncts. These numbers are typical for the department.

## A NEW PARADIGM

The three-stage pilot under discussion here was to determine if portfolio assessment for the CCI course was logistically possible and whether it would provide a better method of assessment for CCI. What “better” would mean is whether portfolio assessment would achieve the goals normally associated with it. What the department wanted was an assessment process that complemented the process-based writing philosophy for its writing courses, that integrated assessment and teaching to improve individual instruction and provide a method of curriculum development that would acculturate adjunct faculty into the department, and that would maintain shared “writing standards” for CCI within the department. In addition to these very broad-based goals, portfolio assessment would have to be logistically possible in the demands it made in regards to time and work for all faculty.

The actual pilot began in fall 2001 and ran through fall 2002. Perhaps because I was the new hire in the department, and thus entered the department’s portfolio debate without a history, the pilot was placed under my guidance. Supporting the pilot were five other committee members. Preparatory work began in spring 2000. The plan was to begin slowly to identify and respond to the department concerns and recommendations about portfolio assessment that were gathered formally through surveys and informally through meetings and personal one-on-one conversations. After an initial planning period, the transition to portfolios began in fall 2001. For the first trial semester, the traditional exit exam remained in place; however, all instructors would implement portfolio pedagogy in their courses and have their students prepare portfolios. For spring 2002, the second trial semester, large-scale portfolio assessment would run concurrently with the traditional exit exam. The spring semester was selected as the first dry-run of portfolio assessment because spring involved only a few sections of the course (generally seven sections as opposed to fifty in the fall.) Finally, in fall 2002 portfolio assessment would be fully implemented and the exit exam eliminated.

The portfolio assessment pilot additionally included the formation of cluster groups. These groups would replace the department group-grading component of the traditional exit exam. Each semester of the pilot, CCI instructors were placed in small groups. The major goal for cluster groups was for faculty to familiarize themselves with each other’s assignments, grading approaches and practices, and course goals so as to be able to read student portfolios within the context of their creation. At each stage of the pilot, information would be gathered (again formally through surveys and informally through meetings and conversations) to gather faculty reactions, to identify problems and elicit suggestions, and to gauge the success of portfolios. Ultimately, the goal of this

data gathering was to provide the department a method of self-reflection as the pilot developed and a foundation upon which the department could make an informed decision on the permanency of portfolio assessment.

It was not difficult to determine how a student's portfolio would function in CCI. To pass CCI a student had to produce a passing portfolio regardless of any other coursework or any grades given by the instructor. However, since the portfolio represented coursework, theoretically a direct relationship should exist between course grades and the quality of the portfolios, which was not the case for the exit exam. What was difficult was developing the assessment process for portfolios. The goal for developing this process was to incorporate the best existing theories of portfolio assessment; there was no need to reinvent the wheel. Still, while adopting existing practices, the assessment process would have to respond to the specific situation and needs of the Writing Studies Department and students. In the process of developing the pilot, I became concerned, as many others might, that such an approach would result in a less than theoretically justifiable assessment tool. Still, the committee and I strongly recognized that our method of portfolio assessment needed to acknowledge "situation and context" so that "portfolios are valued and reliable within the classroom contexts in which they are created" (Belanoff 23). We also recognized, however, that certain principles would have to be inherent in the assessment design if the portfolios were to realize their claimed benefits.

### **Developing a Portfolio System**

While there are many claims for portfolios' superiority as an assessment tool, there is little hard evidence that portfolios achieve what they claim to achieve, especially in large-scale assessment. As many composition and rhetoric practitioners and scholars note, portfolios' superiority has been accepted primarily on faith; the evidence has been theoretical, anecdotal, and often based on a feeling. As Liz Hamp-Lyons and Bill Condon have pointed out, there has been little "real evidence that establishes the portfolio as a more valid or reliable assessment instrument" (*Assessing* 277). For the Writing Studies Department's faculty to achieve a positive consensus on portfolio assessment, faculty would not only have to be persuaded to buy into the pilot, but also to experience portfolio assessment in way that instilled faith in it. Moving, however, from an assessment method based on a single-essay exam to one based on portfolios represents a paradigmatic change in assessment and curriculum. It became very clear in the planning stages that there was a strong desire among some of the Writing Studies faculty to simply superimpose portfolios onto the existing single-essay paradigm without critically examining either system.<sup>2</sup>

The methodology of single-essay assessment, however, would not work for portfolios. Single-essay exam evaluation followed an ETS-style method. Es-

says were scored blind in a group-grading session where all faculty gathered in the same room and scored student essays using a numerically-based rubric (one through six). Every essay was read by two readers who were not the student's instructor, and prior to group readings, sample essays were selected for the norming period that preceded the actual reading. To read or "score" portfolios in this manner would neither be effective nor efficient; furthermore, it would not accomplish the goals of programmatic assessment including faculty and curriculum development. To ensure that the portfolio system reaped the fullest benefits possible and would provide a feedback loop into curriculum and faculty development, it became clear that before the mechanics of how portfolio assessment would be done, principles and goals for portfolio assessment needed to be identified. Otherwise, no criteria would exist to evaluate competing approaches within the department to portfolio assessment design or to compare the results of the pilot to the single-essay exam approach. Also, without such stated principles and goals, there was the real possibility that portfolios could, for our department, become only a collection device and not an active and dynamic form of assessment (see Bonita Wilcox's "Writing Portfolios: Active versus Passive").

The principles and goals we defined for portfolio assessment were not in themselves innovative. What was important in having these goals and principles, however, was to have a foundation based on the discipline's scholarship and, thus, authenticity inside and outside the department. It was obvious that the portfolios should include multiple pieces of writing. Additionally, the portfolios should reflect writing processes and, thus, emphasize revision. For valid assessment, the portfolios would need to contain work actually created within the context of the classroom and that, in doing so, would reflect the combined aspects of teaching and learning. To engage students in their own assessment and, thus, learning, students would have some choice about what to include in their portfolios. There were also practical considerations that all who have implemented portfolio assessment realize: the system had to be efficient.

Two levels of what were defined as non-negotiable principles were established. Level one required portfolios to be

- Longitudinal in design
- Diverse in content
- Collaborative in ownership
- Reflective of writing processes

Level two required that they be

- Demonstrably valid
- Demonstrably reliable
- Cost-effective

While all seven of these principles could be combined into a single list of principles, a hierarchical ranking seemed preferable on several counts. First, it sorted the principles. Level one principles represent compositional concepts which affect writing instruction. Level two principles represent the methodology and necessary quantitative aspects of assessment as well as available resources. Furthermore, while portfolio assessment for the Writing Studies Department had to meet the criteria for all seven principles, the principles related to the quantitative nature of assessment could not supersede principles related to composition theory. In other words, assessment would not drive compositional theory/pedagogy; rather, compositional theory/pedagogy would drive assessment—for example, cost effectiveness (or time) would not eliminate the portfolios' emphasis on writing process.

In addition to the principles that would guide our portfolio process, what the department would want to accomplish with portfolio assessment was articulated. The goals for portfolio assessment were that they

- Involved students in the assessment system
- Decreased emphasis on student assessment and emphasized programmatic assessment
- Integrated assessment and instruction
- Were useful beyond the classroom by providing programmatic feedback for curriculum development, with the specific goal of increasing the cognitive complexity of the CCI curriculum
- Provided a check and method of accountability for teaching and improving the overall level of instruction
- Provided a forum for faculty development
- Provided an effective and efficient (in terms of time and cost) assessment program

These principles and goals were necessary for the department to transition into a new paradigm of writing assessment. Once acknowledged, these practical and theoretical concepts would provide a flexible foundation on which portfolio assessment would hopefully evolve and be sustainable for the long run. Still, in developing our model for portfolio assessment, faculty resistance and concerns had to be addressed—particularly the evaluation process (who would read and grade portfolios and how) and the role of the former exit exam essay. A new evaluation format would have to be developed since readers of portfolios dis-

agree much more over a single score or value than readers of individual essays (see LaRene Despain and Thomas L. Hilgers).

As Peter Elbow states, when a portfolio gives us a selection of diverse pieces, and one writer's selection process is different from another, it is vain to think that we can trust a single holistic score that pretends to sum up this diversity of performances by each writer and compare all writers along a quantitative scale ("Virtue"). Furthermore, Robert Broad implies that even to attempt to judge portfolios holistically and numerically actually undermines the concept of portfolio assessment: "To what exactly does the number assigned to a portfolio refer? How can requiring all readers to produce the same number in response to the same texts account for the differences among raters and their varying responses to the powerful content and context offered by the writing portfolio?" ("Portfolio" 266).

Many Writing Studies faculty found it difficult to abandon the familiar six-point scoring rubric used for the exit exam and perhaps understandably so. On the surface little had changed; instead of producing a single essay to pass CCI, a student now would simply produce a portfolio to pass the course. Additionally, since the portfolio would be closely tied to the student's grade for the course, a scaled scoring system would in essence "grade the portfolio," addressing department concerns about standards and grade inflation. However, the argument that quantification and rubrics emphasize the sameness of writing and thus squelch the social context and difference of each student's portfolio was ultimately persuasive. The department's historical data already showed that single essay scores had minimal correlation to grades that students received on revised essays or final course grades and that these essay scores bunched around the middle two scores (or rather pass and fail). Thus upon closer analysis, the department realized that the primary purpose of the exit essay (for us and our students) was to identify failing students and provide them with additional writing instruction.<sup>3</sup> It was also especially persuasive for the department to realize that if portfolios were to be numerically scored, all portfolios across CCI would have to be standardized, an approach that is often undertaken with portfolios in large-scale assessment. This option was extremely distasteful to all faculty. Thus the department agreed that student portfolios would be evaluated by a second reader on a pass/fail basis.

A compromise had to be made, however, as to how much leeway students would have in choosing their work for the portfolio. While many other institutions using portfolios require only two to three pieces of student writing, the Writing Studies Department wanted four, one of which would be an in-class, common essay. The in-class, common essay essentially was the former single essay; however, now it would only be one of the essays evaluated in the portfolio. The argument for a baseline and the commitment the department and



individual faculty members had made to this essay through the years was so strong as to demand its inclusion in students' portfolios.

### **THE PORTFOLIO PLAN AND CLUSTER GROUPS**

Based on data collected and the experiences of the first two stages of the pilot, a complete portfolio system was designed and presented to the faculty in summer 2002. Students were required to prepare a portfolio that contained 2300 words, four essays (three revised and the in-class, common essay) and drafts and revisions for three essays. All portfolios would be read and graded by the course instructor and second read on a pass/fail basis by another CCI instructor (from within the course instructor's cluster group). To clarify and coordinate portfolio assessment across the department, two guides were prepared—one for instructors and one for students. These guidelines outline the processes for portfolio assessment to their respective audiences. Additionally, they provided an introduction and rationale for portfolio assessment as well as support material to instructors for implementing portfolio pedagogy.

#### *Cluster Groups*

Very early in the pilot, portfolios made their influence felt on faculty and curriculum development, instigating changes that the department might not have previously accepted. One such major innovation was the institution of cluster groups. Modeled on the cluster system developed by Liz Hamp-Lyons and Bill Condon, these clusters broke faculty down into small reading groups.

In the old system, after students had written the essay exam, a collection of model student work would be chosen by three or four faculty members. The entire faculty would then assemble for norming and reading. Small cluster groups were needed because it was clear that the norming process used with the single-essay exam system was incompatible with the principles or goals for portfolios for several reasons. One was it lacked effectiveness and efficiency since reading portfolios would take much longer than reading a single essay. Another reason was it didn't achieve the goals associated with curriculum development and integrating assessment and instruction. If faculty were only concerned with the portfolio as a final product and only met after they were written, instructors would not be assessing as they were teaching. Additionally, meeting only to norm and to read offered little opportunity for discussion about curriculum or what instructors were actually doing in the classroom throughout the semester. Thus assessment and teaching would not be interactive activities.

Also, it would be from within cluster groups that writing expectations would be defined and enforced, thus establishing and maintaining "writing standards" for students passing CCI. Evaluating portfolios would be very different

from evaluating individual essays with their numerous variables. These writing expectations (or standards), formed communally, would, across time, percolate throughout the department to become writing standards and expectation for the program as a whole. Thus the expected writing standards for portfolios would emerge from the process of “calibration,” a consensus-based approach, instead of the previous process of “norming,” a top-down, authoritative approach. Other goals for the cluster groups were to more fully engage contingent faculty in the department and to serve as a space where all faculty would share, discuss, and support each other in order to better define and achieve department curricular goals for CCI.

As they currently function, cluster groups consist of five faculty members with an intentionally different mix of teaching experience and positions (adjuncts, ongoing, junior and senior faculty). Each cluster elects a cluster leader who oversees the cluster meetings. Each of the four meetings has a specific agenda, in addition to faculty development and feedback to individuals on their classroom practices.

### *Effects of Cluster Groups*

As portfolio assessment has evolved in the Writing Studies Department, cluster groups have attracted the most discussion, with faculty seeming to express a love/hate relationship with them. From the beginning of the pilot, what faculty liked best, particularly adjuncts, was the interaction that cluster groups provided. Adjuncts stated that the effectiveness of cluster groups was that they “provided interaction with full-time faculty,” they “[helped me] design an assignment in a more precise way,” and they provided “a nice format for discussing problems and getting additional ideas.” Table 1 below shows that after the first semester, cluster groups were providing mentoring and support to faculty and that a majority of faculty felt cluster groups had potential as an assessment process.

Table 1 Faculty Reflections on Cluster Groups

	Percentage Agreed Totally or Somewhat	Percentage Disagreed Totally or Somewhat
<b>Cluster groups provided the opportunity to discuss classroom practices.</b>	66	33
<b>Cluster groups provided useful information on teaching and grading.</b>	42	42
<b>Cluster groups allowed me to interact with colleagues in a meaningful way.</b>	67	33
<b>Cluster groups could be effective in developing and maintaining department standards.</b>	66	34
<b>Cluster groups have potential but changes need to be made.</b>	100	0

Creating a cluster group system that effectively and efficiently achieved the multiple goals of integrating assessment and teaching while also providing programmatic feedback and a forum for faculty development was a new process for the department—it was reflective, but it was also slightly chaotic. Still, very early in the pilot, through cluster groups, portfolio assessment began to affect curriculum for the CCI course, and was the impetus to changes that the department was previously reluctant to accept. Through cluster groups, faculty individually realized very early on that a significant variability existed in the complexity of tasks for portfolio assignments across sections. Overall, faculty realized that a major difficulty in shifting to portfolio assessment would be that students’ portfolios would differ across sections because of the difference in assignments and approaches of individual instructors, not to mention variation between students’ portfolios in the same course because students chose different work to include and used different approaches to revision. Some faculty, initially, saw this as a flaw with portfolio assessment, one which proved the single-essay exam superior in effectiveness and efficiency to portfolios. The fact was that this variation was a curricular issue that portfolio assessment had made apparent to the department’s faculty.

Daniel Koretz has pointed out that this variation in coursework, which is what our students’ portfolios were to now represent, is one of the major hurdles

in using portfolios for large-scale assessment. Our faculty realized, as Koretz says, that a student who gets a given score on an easy task may be much less proficient than another who gets the identical score on a much more difficult task. Similarly, differences in the difficulty of assigned tasks might lead to two students, whose actual proficiencies are similar, receiving very different scores. Through cluster groups, however, CCI instructors also discovered a significant difference in the level and type of writing feedback they gave student essays, which in turn affected the quality of student writing.

Portfolios would, as Edward White has pointed out, more fully reflect the “complexity of an individual’s writing,” and, in doing so, “they also reflect the classroom teacher more” (22). And as Belanoff says,

Portfolios engender the literacy within which they are created and evaluated: like language, portfolios both reflect and create the culture within which they communicate. As students produce the contents of a portfolio, the portfolio becomes an ever richer context for each of its elements. The teacher who reads and grades a classroom portfolio is forced to recognize the complexity of the author who produced the pieces. . . . [I]f this teacher shares portfolio reading with another teacher or teachers, the environment for the portfolios doubles and triples. (21)

The fact was that the difference in assignment design and instructor feedback, which had a direct impact on the quality of student learning and writing, had always existed in the department. The exit exam had only masked it. Portfolio assessment, on the other hand, was revealing the complexity of both writing and teaching writing, and providing feedback on teaching and differences within the program. In effect, it was achieving the desired goals related to programmatic assessment and instructor accountability, thus integrating assessment and instruction. This revelation, however, while an “aha” moment for some, also created a degree of anxiety or unease among instructors for various reasons. Instructors of any subject enjoy a degree of autonomy and independence in their work. Once the classroom door is closed, we have, for the most part, no one, except our students, questioning our methods and approaches (which often is daunting enough). Sharing individual assignments and teaching methods with colleagues for evaluation and discussion placed a spotlight on classroom practices and complicated philosophical assumptions about the teaching of writing.

This is not to say that all cluster groups have functioned or continue to function well. The major problems with cluster groups continue to be attendance, leadership, and a willingness on instructors’ parts to engage in meaningful discussion with an open mind. As one instructor stated about her

cluster group’s experience, there were “too many resistant members in groups to help me implement portfolios; no discussion of differences, merely stated opinions.”<sup>4</sup>

**EFFECTS OF PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT**

One very persuasive result of portfolio assessment affecting the department’s decision to permanently adopt it was the effect that portfolios have on students, and regardless of their ideological stance on portfolios, all the Writing Studies faculty prioritize student learning. At the end of the first two pilot semesters (fall 2001 and spring 2002), 74% of faculty agreed that students were the primary beneficiaries of portfolio assessment. By the third semester of the pilot (fall 2002), instructors overwhelmingly responded that they felt students were writing and revising more, were writing better, and had improved attitudes towards writing, as table 2 below shows:

Table 2 Faculty Opinions on the Effects of Portfolios on Students

	Percentage Who Agreed	Percentage Who Disagreed or Couldn’t Tell
<b>Students write more</b>	52	46
<b>Students produce better writing</b>	86	14
<b>Students improve their writing</b>	90	10
<b>Students revise and edit more</b>	86	14
<b>Students’ attitude toward writing is improved</b>	86	14

The above results reveal that the majority of faculty found through experience (if they hadn’t already) that portfolio assessment, and not the single-essay exam, fostered improved writing pedagogy. The real test for portfolio assessment at Mid-Atlantic, however, was whether the department would realize the promised benefits of portfolio assessment, which were the reasons for adopting it: Would portfolios and the communal assessment approach of cluster groups provide an effective evaluation of student writing? Would this approach integrate teaching and assessment? Would it provide a forum for faculty and curriculum development? From our experience with portfolios, we found that the answers to all three of these questions are a qualified “yes.”

The Writing Studies Department has adopted, and for the most part embraced, portfolio assessment because it provides an effective way of evalu-

ating student writing abilities while also improving writing instruction. The majority of faculty (81%) were convinced that moving to a pass/fail evaluation of portfolios within cluster groups provided an adequate assessment for passing students. Furthermore, one major change to assessment of the CCI was a significant number of faculty (57%) concluded that a second reading of all student work was not necessary. As a result, faculty agreed that only marginal portfolios should be read by a second reader.<sup>5</sup> This was a dramatic shift in department philosophy, and two aspects of portfolio assessment appeared to be responsible for this opinion. One was the high agreement among faculty on what was a passing portfolio; the second aspect was the time required for second readings.<sup>6</sup> Another faculty opinion, while in the minority (29%), recommended eliminating the in-class essay or, at least, allowing students to revise it for the portfolio. The general explanation for such a move, shared by several faculty, was that with portfolios' emphasis on writing as a process, the in-class essay seemed an anachronism and difficult to justify to students.

Furthermore, as a result of portfolios and cluster group experiences, a significant number of faculty reported that they were reevaluating and changing their approaches to teaching CCI. While part of this change would have been required by the shift to portfolio assessment in itself, and even while realizing that change does not necessarily, in itself, mean improvement, such faculty activity reveals a willingness to embrace the change. The changes that faculty reported were focused on course and assignment redesign, with the most common indicated below:

Table 3 Changes Implemented by Faculty  
as a Result of Portfolio Assessment

	Percentage of Faculty
<b>Length of Assignments</b>	30
<b>Type of Assignment</b>	35
<b>Number of Assignments</b>	35
<b>New Grading Approach</b>	22
<b>Number of In-Class Essays</b>	26

Additionally, the effects of portfolio assessment extended beyond individual classrooms and directly affected CCI curriculum, specifically in the type of writing students should engage in. Prior to portfolio assessment, CCI curriculum focused on expository writing, primarily mode-based, with students expected to write at least eight essays (which included the single-essay exit

exam). Portfolio assessment not only shifted the focus of CCI essays away from in-class essays and to revised essays; it caused the department to realize that 500-word, mode-based essays were insufficiently challenging; given the opportunity to revise, students were able to engage in more complex, developed writing. Of course, there is no inherent reason why the CCI student portfolio couldn't contain three modal essays and the in-class, common essay (or even 6 essays) except that portfolios were to emphasize process and revision. The majority of the faculty realized that if students were allowed unlimited revision opportunity, turning a mediocre 500-word, in-class compare-and-contrast essay into an above average essay would be a fairly easy task for most students. As a result, the department moved to looking at student writing expectations in a new way—one which wasn't so concerned about the number and length but about the quality of essays, as the following new descriptors for CCI writing show:

- The essays are too complex to be successfully completed in one draft.
- They move students beyond their own personal experience/personal opinion.
- They require students to use higher thinking skills: summary, analysis, and synthesis.
- They address complexities and subtleties of analysis.
- They allow students to see an audience (other than themselves) and purpose for their writing and/or they introduce students to different formats and audiences.
- Revisions will usually focus on issues of content, synthesis, analysis, and organization, as well as style, voice, and mechanics.

Essentially, portfolio assessment moved the CCI curriculum to an emphasis on fewer but more complex essays and on student writing that was purpose-driven as opposed to modal.

## CONCLUSION

On the whole, the Writing Studies Department's implementation of large-scale portfolio assessment was a success. We were able to replace the former single-essay exam with a portfolio system that has been accepted as an effective form of assessment by the faculty, students, and university administrators. In our approach to portfolio assessment, we have instituted a process that is reiterative and that "provide[s] mechanisms for 1) prompting readers to be aware of the process they are going through, 2) gathering appropriate data about the process, and 3) making the changes or accommodations which each new iteration shows are necessary" (Hamp-Lyons and Condon, "Questioning"

177). This success, however, is not unequivocal and it will take significant effort to maintain it. Additionally, we have achieved our goals of placing assessment within the context of the classroom, integrating assessment and teaching, and faculty development for ongoing and adjunct faculty.

Transitioning from a static, linear, and well-entrenched system to what sometimes feels like organized chaos has not been easy. All the issues and problems associated with portfolio assessment itself have not been resolved in our department, but then portfolio assessment is a process, not a method, and ongoing change and reflection, as well as the appearance of new challenges, should be part of its nature. Central to our portfolio assessment are cluster groups, and they need continual attention to ensure they work. Faculty need ongoing motivation to participate while at the same time accountability for their participation. Our experiences have shown productivity is not always consistent across cluster groups, particularly in the areas of articulating writing expectations and faculty development. Reflective discussions about course goals, outcomes, and measurement and classroom practices take more time than the cluster meetings. Thus the department has recognized that cluster groups cannot and should not take on all these responsibilities nor operate in a vacuum. Cluster groups need organized forums where information from individual cluster groups can be shared with the faculty as a whole and curricular development can occur. Of course, these forums mean more meetings, which our faculty are very resistant to, even as they state a need for them.

Another concern the department is addressing is the connection between portfolios and grade inflation. Recent data indicate that since portfolio assessment was implemented, students are receiving higher grades than their non-portfolio predecessors. Part of the preferability of portfolios to many is the emphasis on revision, and, generally, revision results in better writing and, thus, better grades. Our students have no restrictions on how often or how much they may revise their essays, and while some are concerned about how these students are revising (or rather who might be helping them), limiting or controlling revision is not an acceptable option (although many instructors have instituted policies as to the number of revisions they will review). However, some evidence exists that it might be instructor expectations for student writing which is resulting in higher grades. In rereading some early student portfolios, the department has discovered that writing expectations have shifted: we found that portfolios from 2001 would consistently receive lower grades if graded today. While this finding does not conclusively dismiss the issue of grade inflation, it does indicate that one of the dynamic elements of portfolio assessment for student writing is ability and our expectations for it.<sup>7</sup>

The good news is that Mid-Atlantic's transition to portfolios can provide insight about how to validate portfolio assessment; the change in our



department has been real and tangible. This qualified success story, however, comes with two caveats. One is that an effective program of portfolio assessment depends on a carefully designed portfolio system that can achieve what it is intended to achieve. The other is that, while supporting the claims of portfolios, it is important for the composition community as a whole to realize the primary audiences for proving that portfolio assessment is effective are local: the faculty and students who will participate in it and the university administrators who must deem that it fills their needs for assessment. Local situations, history, and context are also important elements in designing portfolio assessment and the systems that move composition programs towards portfolio assessment. In this sense, the transition to portfolio assessment at Mid-Atlantic was more than a change in an assessment tool; it was a metamorphosis.

Because the department was clearly conflicted, almost polarized on portfolio assessment, I initially thought that before the department would agree to such assessment, clear and hard evidence would have to be provided. Now it seems obvious that the Writing Studies faculty could not have been convinced solely by data analysis. They needed a felt experience, one where the tangible and intangible benefits of portfolio assessment could be personally experienced. Of course, such conclusions return us to the concern about the value of anecdotal evidence, but perhaps when it comes to portfolio assessment research, the anecdotal is too valuable to be dismissed.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> These justifications are perhaps universal to writing departments who rely or have relied on a single-essay exit exam and are certainly not unique to Mid-Atlantic, nor are they completely without some merit (either historically or currently).

<sup>2</sup> Proponents of portfolios (such as Yancey, Belanoff, and Elbow) warn against the uncritical adoption or promotion of portfolios, even while claiming substantial benefits for them.

<sup>3</sup> This additional instruction is provided either through the student repeating the course or enrolling in the Writing Lab Experience course where the student works one-on-one with a tutor to improve writing skills.

<sup>4</sup> In the first meeting, held within the first three weeks of the semester, cluster groups review, discuss, and evaluate individual assignments. For meeting two, held shortly prior to semester mid-point, instructors exchange graded student essays to discuss evaluation and feedback approaches. Cluster group members use departmentally created evaluation forms and grade descriptors to calibrate grading. At meeting three, after student portfolios have been collected, cluster members exchange their graded student portfolios with their designated cluster reader. Currently,

instructors exchange a sampling of A through F portfolios as well as marginal and failing portfolios. At the final meeting, usually held the first day of finals, cluster groups meet to discuss second reads and any problem portfolios. There is also an appeal process through which disagreements about passing/failing portfolios are reviewed.

Beginning in fall 2003, in addition to individual cluster meetings, the department has held CCI faculty meetings that expound on the issues discussed in each of the cluster meetings. In these meetings instructor assignments and student essays are shared with the faculty at large. Unfortunately, these meetings have met with limited success, primarily because they add another time requirement.

<sup>5</sup> Still, when surveyed, 71% of faculty responded that cluster groups increased faculty interaction.

<sup>6</sup> This opinion has been confirmed by statistical, historical data. In the three-and-a-half years of our portfolio assessment, the pass/fail rate of CCI students is comparable to the pass/fail rate of the last three years of the exit exam. Faculty agreed that only a sampling of CCI portfolios need be second read, along with all failing and marginal portfolios. The decision to read failing and marginal portfolios was made to give students a second opportunity for review and to integrate assessment and instruction. In reading sample portfolios (five to six per instructor), second readers would additionally provide feedback on instructor practice (on grades and assignments), fulfilling a programmatic check on instructor practice, not a punitive assessment of student performance.

<sup>7</sup> Below is the historical data on pass/fail rates for the last six years. Fall 2001 was the last semester the exit exam was administered. Spring 2002 was the first semester for complete portfolio assessment. Students have been counted as failing if they withdrew from the course, failed the course, or received an incomplete (which in CCI is always associated with students who are placed in Writing Lab Experience due to marginal work).

Table 4 Statistics on Number of Students  
and Passing Failing Ranges 1998-2003

Fall Semester	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Students Enrolled	965	1146	1098	1160	1228	1162
Students Passing	821	1001	967	1052	1087	1042
Percentage Failing	15	13	12	9	11	10

Spring Semester	N/A	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Students Enrolled	N/A	369	212	166	195	150
Students Passing	N/A	257	163	114	129	96
Percentage Failing	N/A	30	30	31	34	36
Total Yearly Percentage Failing		19	14	14	13	14

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