Portfolio Handbook
August 2006
What is a portfolio? A portfolio is a collection of work accomplished by an artist or a professional that demonstrates the quality and extent of their talents and the skill with which they have met the requirements of their profession or craft.

How are portfolio’s used? A portfolio has many different uses. Among these are:

1. A student portfolio is a way in which a student demonstrates the progress that they have made towards realizing the goals and objectives of their academic program. When the portfolio is prepared in the midst of a student’s course of study, it is the basis for suggestions for the modification of the student’s program or for modifications of the student’s goals and objectives.

2. At the end of a student’s program, a portfolio represents a summary of the student’s work toward meeting the goals and objectives of their academic program of study. But, even more important, it is a demonstration that the student is ready to begin formal professional work in an area. Ministry usually requires further ecclesiastical warrant, usually ordination, before a person begins formal practice.

3. A professional portfolio is a collection of examples of a professional’s or artist’s best work that demonstrates their capacity to take on new responsibilities and the further development of their specialized skills and abilities. Unlike a vita, which is often part of the portfolio, the focus is not on positions held but on projects and achievements.

4. Increasingly, portfolios are kept in electronic form to enable a professional or artist to combine visual, oral, and textual materials.

Why Portfolios for seminarians? Recently, theological schools have become more aware that ministry has much in common with other forms of professional and artistic life. Although ministers do a variety of things, including administering a small charity, the essence of ministry consists of a series of acts of ministry, such as preaching a sermon, arranging a meaningful worship or sacramental experience, or presenting the faith to a confirmation class. While every act of ministry contains and expresses the minister’s and the church’s theology, good ministry is not simply a demonstration that one has read the proper books or subscribed to the most adequate creed. Rather, every act of ministry is in some sense a creative art that uses traditional materials to present its subject matter in a new way. As in any art, acts of ministry involve thorough knowledge of the material, the capacity to select and feature an “object,” and the way in which that object is presented to others. The goal of an academic lecture may be for a person to be able to say, “I understand,” but the goal of an act of ministry is for the person or persons receiving it to say “I see.” The “understanding” that faith seeks is always insight, always the combination of intuition, self-knowledge, and truth.
Portfolios and Institutional Evaluation. Present day education places a tremendous emphasis on institutional efficiency; that is, whether schools are accomplishing their stated goals and purposes. The Portfolio has proven itself to be an excellent tool for schools to use to help measure whether its goals and objectives are being met adequately or not. Schools can set the bar for this evaluation at various levels. At a minimum, the question is whether the portfolio indicates that a person has adequately attained the various goals and objectives that the school has published. Papers from previous classes may be reviewed as part of this process and student responses to specific questions may be considered as part of the evidence that progress has been made. However, the most searching forms of institutional evaluation will go up at least one or more levels to the harder question of whether a student is acquiring a professional understanding of the materials that they have studied. In medicine, this would be the difference between someone who could only list the symptoms of a disease and the skilled practitioner who could recognize the disease in an examination of a patient who may or may not be able to verbalize everything that their bodies have told them.

How does one construct a M.Div student Portfolio at Bangor Seminary?

1. Required items: The seminary requires that you have the following items in your Portfolio.
   a. Academic Transcript and Check List
   b. Mentored Practice Items
      i. The covenant agreement
      ii. The learning goals and objectives
      iii. The final evaluation papers
   c. The Goals and Objectives Form available from the registrar.
   d. A clear statement of your ecclesiastical relations or relationships.

2. Your Reflective Essay:
   a. For the Mid Program Review the reflective essay should be between 5 and 10 pages in length.
   b. For the senior integrative experience the reflective essay should be between 15 and 20 pages in length.

3. Particularly, for the S.I.E but also if available for the mid-program review, specific examples of acts of ministry that you have performed. While some of these can come from mentored practice or a practical theology course that required specific acts of ministry, they also can come from other sources: work in a church, a preaching assignment in a local church, a experience leading a seminary chapel, your personal experience as a spiritual director or guide, CPE, or other any other place where you have functioned professionally.
   
   i. A video or videos of sermons and worship experiences
   ii. The plans for a class conducted in a church.
iii. Materials related to any projects in ministry.
iv. Various verbatims of counseling or spiritual direction sessions
v. Children sermons on tape or video
vi. Prayers.
vii. Liturgies that you have written.

5. For the Mid-Program review, a restatement of your personal goals and objectives or the SIE, a clear statement of your vocational goals.

6. Selected papers and work from classes.

How do I focus my Portfolio? The key to a successful portfolio at any level is the extent and quality of the self-reflection that is done in preparation for the Portfolio. While different people work in different ways, the following suggestions may be helpful in preparation for the process.

1. If the Portfolio is part of a mid-program or final degree review, use the Goals and Objectives form to help you evaluate where you are in the process. Are there areas that clearly need work? Where have you gone beyond the minimum expected? What unexpected strengths have you discovered? Where have you failed to reach a personal or corporate goal?

2. As you go through this process, review the papers and other work that you have done for your classes. Look for evidence or confirmation that you have attained the goal or objective. If some of the evidence is missing, such as a class presentation that you felt strongly demonstrated your communication skills; try to remember who might have been present who could provide some feedback.

3. Use your advisor carefully. If the Portfolio is your SIE, you should remember that it is a three credit course that you pay for. You should have three or four meetings with your advisor to discuss the conclusions that you are reaching and to receive some feedback on your progress. If the Portfolio is for the mid-program review, you should see your advisor as often as necessary to form a clear picture of where you are in your education.

4. Find and identify a theme or themes that run through your work and your current theological thought. That theme might be drawn from your emerging understanding of ministry. Thus, one student might elect to use the theme of “Making Christ Manifest,” while another might elect “One More Mountain: Stages in the Pilgrimage of a Seeker.” Another might see a central problem for their life and ministry as providing the best unifying theme. Thus, the theme might be “Gay and Called: Struggling with My Vocation in a Straight World.” The key is, of course, that you can use this theme to make selections from your material, use it to illustrate the importance or lack of importance of parts of your education, and, above all, use it as an effective mirror to examine your own vocational growth.

5. Remember that your theme does not have to be addressed directly in a paper or exhibit for that item to have been important for your own development for the theme to be useful in interpreting that work. A good theme is not the least common educational denominator.
6. As a general rule, the best materials that you will present in your Portfolio are not classroom papers, although some of these will be important, but examples of the use of your material in your ministry. A hospital verbatim where you demonstrated spiritual sensitivity to the religious concerns of a conservative Catholic might be a better illustration of what you learned in Church History than a paper on St. Thomas!

**How do I write a Reflective Essay?** Serious reflective thought and writing is a difficult task. Like all good essay writing, reflective writing follows a standard format of introduction and theme, body or argument, and conclusion. In that sense, it requires as much rigor, perhaps more, than a classical term paper. All of the various marks of good academic writing are in play in a reflective essay: mastery of material, critical appropriation of ideas, and conclusion. Perhaps the most difficult form of reflection is the personal narrative in which the author sees to see her/his self as the subject of the paper. It is very difficult to use this form without falling into a somewhat simplistic “first then and then that” format.

**Do I need to do ‘research’ a good reflective essay?** One of the myths about reflective writing is that the paper only contains what the subject has ready to hand in their own experience. Any serious examination of one’s education or one’s personal development raises questions that can best be approached through the writings and studies of other people. In fact, the deeper the reflection, the more a good author will want to draw on the widest possible body of literature to develop that perspective.

One of the things that makes the reflective essay so valuable for ministry is its similarity to the types of theological thinking that will underlay your future practice of ministry. In a classical term paper or essay, the student has the comfort of being able to define their research according to one or more standard procedures that move from the use of standard reference resources to monographs to original sources to more cutting edge journal articles. Within this framework, the author can moderate a “discussion” between the various perspectives and arrive at a conclusion. While much of this process is slug work—reading in many different sources, comparing conclusions, tracing ideas back to their source—how to do good research is well-known. Most graduate level students, in fact, have those skills.

The reflective paper does not have such a standard approach. The image of reflection is drawn from the metaphor of a mirror in which a person sees themselves physically. The reflective essay, consequently, receives much of its form or outline from the person writing it. The questions for research, thus, arise in the context of a self-directed argument and the needs of that discussion. At other times, research interests may be intuited. What do I need to know in order to make sense of this experience or study? If the issue raised in the Corinthian’s course was partially the question of the nature of Christian leadership, what do contemporaries think about leadership? How is leadership related to authority, whether of Paul as an apostle or of the ministry?
No one can accomplish everything in one assignment. In a mid-program review, more of the research may be easily deferred or located as issues to be studied or taken up in subsequent classes. And while you should have more space in the SIE for research—it is after all, a three hour course that does not require class attendance—more perspective students will end the process with a list of questions that remain unanswered. If you have done the essay well, those remaining questions can be posed at the end of the reflective essay as issues yet to be studied in depth.

**How do I express thoughts beyond words in my reflective essay?** Not all ideas are easily conveyed in verbal form. Particularly when it comes to the integration of large amounts of material, we find that we need to use some non-verbal means of communication. Perhaps one such might be the design of a worship center or the preparation of a series of slides of great art expressing a theme or a poem or even a piece of music. Many of Hildegard of Bingen’s songs, for example, mirror in their musical form the theme of mystical ascent that was so much part of her and of much contemporary mystical experience. Personally, I would find it difficult to reflect on my own pilgrimage without reference to Picasso’s great painting, Guernica that expresses the horror of ideological war. Good reflection not only permits but encourages reflection across the whole range of human and Christian expression.

**How do I express personal faith and commitment?**

Ironically, one of the most important indicators of success in the ministry is the strength of a minister’s own personal faith and religious integrity. Parishioners can apparently forgive much theological ignorance, if they are confident that their spiritual guide is a person whose own faith serves as the guiding star of his or her life. Equally, they cannot forgive real or perceived religious inauthenticity. Yet, seminary often seems to put personal faith at a distance. Matters of import are reduced to issues that can be treated objectively and evaluated rationally.

The Portfolio is one place where you can step outside of the seminary box. Both in the mid program and the SIE, Wesley’s question to his preachers, “how is it with your soul” is important. You cannot preach a faith you do not have, and you cannot inspire people to make sacrifices that you will not make. This is as true for Unitarian-universalists, who may travel light theologically, as it is for evangelicals, who often carry much theological baggage. A good reflection paper always includes some material that explicitly deals with the issue of personal faith, either as a short credo, or part of a description of an experience or learning occasion.