The Swiss Army Knife Approach
The Challenges of the ePortfolio as a Multidisciplinary Assessment Instrument

Michael Charlton
Missouri Western State University

Abstract. This article presents a case study of the ePortfolio being used for programmatic and professional development assessment of senior-level undergraduates in a diverse professional writing program. It describes the evaluation methodologies used to assess professional writing students’ preparation for graduation and for the workplace as well as the challenges of maintaining “best practices” for assessment. An investigation of these methodologies also reveals the challenges faced by smaller programs that attempt to use a single assessment instrument to measure student work in fields as diverse as public relations, technical communication, print journalism, and convergent media studies, particularly in a climate of shrinking budgets and shifting assessment and portfolio technologies.

Keywords. assessment; programmatic assessment; multidisciplinary assessment; portfolios; eportfolios

Teachers interested in the ePortfolio as a tool for assessment may face challenges when only this one tool is used to measure student learning outcomes across a diverse set of degree programs. This case study illustrates how one undergraduate department adopted the ePortfolio for programmatic assessment of their senior-level professional writing majors. Starting with a discussion of how this portfolio system was developed in light of current research into portfolio assessment, it offers suggestions for ways an assessment instrument can be shaped to address professional and disciplinary diversity, including the importance of external evaluation and revising portfolio rubrics to reflect desired student learning outcomes. Of particular concern are budget issues in an era when programmatic assessment is both increasingly mandated and largely unsupported by systemic funding.

Background for the Portfolio System

The portfolio system of assessment is well established in writing studies. Kathleen Yancey (2009) has argued that “because e-portfolios link curriculum and assessment in ways that acknowledge and build on students’ experiences, they provide new sites for learning about how we assess, about how we teach, and perhaps most importantly, about how we all learn” (p. 32). Portfolio research is “both wide and culturally complex” and allows students and faculty to reflect on both their own work and work across the discipline (p. 32). Crucial to the ePortfolio is the idea of contexts and understanding how, where, and why writing and communication take place; the ePortfolio’s ability to include multiple contexts is one of its great strengths (p. 31). Yet for all their opportunities, ePortfolios also pose challenges both unique to the medium and common to assessment in professional writing.

Assessment has been a central topic of debate in the field. As Norbert Elliot (2010) has eloquently argued, assessment is an especially vexing and crucial issue in a field faced with both internal and external pressures: “The pressure of institutional and communal forces is enormous where accountability is concerned, and it is time to understand these forces, identify our traditions, and make up our minds about the directions we need to take in the assessment of technical communication” (p. 18). The need to assess our pedagogical, programmatic, and disciplinary successes and failures has taken many directions, with some adopting this call to interrogate larger social and theoretical paradigms and the institutional history of the discipline. Nancy Coppola and Norbert Elliot (2010) extended these concerns to the discussion of portfolio assessment as part of a “relational” model that ties together the core competencies of the discipline with “measurable student performance” through faculty evaluation of student work (p. 131). The relational model was envisioned as a model that did not so much reject as supplement an “auditing” model focused on demographics, grades, and other more quantitative measures (p. 128). Jeffrey Jablonski and Ed Nagelhout (2010) have suggested that one major focus of programmatic assessment must be located in technology because the field is necessarily a part of the information culture, and “stakeholders,” including both faculty and students, play roles in the technological products and processes of programs (p. 171). Challenges to the core competencies model include Gerald Savage’s (2010) question about whether the field in fact has an “agreed-upon body of professional knowledge” that would “necessarily be manifested as core competencies” (p. 164). As the field continues to change and grow, this is a challenge worth posing again and again, as the expectations of the workplace and the public sphere cause realignments and reconceptions in the academy.
Miles Kimball’s (2003) *The Web Portfolio Guide* begins by arguing that portfolios are “a natural fit with the rapidly proliferating web courses and programs” (p. xvii). Reflecting how academic curricula and pedagogies have expanded to include developing information technologies, including instruction rooted in those technologies, the ePortfolio uses the same linked, “hypertext” approach as other web-based texts: “By creating web portfolios, which include not only implicit links but active hyperlinks between artifacts and reflections, authors in effect synthesize the products of their learning” (p. xvii). Students who have been asked to create websites for their coursework can reflect on that exercise within a similar framework rather than in the outmoded, paper-based portfolio. As Kimball noted, other advantages to the Web portfolio include their creation of a “definite audience” for the portfolio; the ease of posting and archiving; and the ability to access and evaluate the ePortfolio from multiple locations, making them a potential tool not only for faculty evaluators but also for potential employers (p. xvii). The modality of the ePortfolio remains one of its great strengths. It is able to encompass and present works in a variety of audio, visual, and interactive formats. Writing technologies themselves have become a crucial context for program assessment. According to Carol Siri Johnson (2006), students benefit from the ePortfolios because “they are not only learning to write, but they are learning to communicate in the medium they use the most—electronic communication on the internet” (p. 283).

Darren Cambridge (2008) argued that the ePortfolio has been seen as a central avenue for assessment on both the course and programmatic levels: “They have the potential to provide multidimensional assessment data while remaining firmly grounded in the diversity of learning activities and their products with which faculty and students engage in the classroom” (p. 51). The ePortfolios provide “quality assurance” for the program as a whole by providing a tool for reviewing student achievement (variously described as outcomes, competencies, objectives, and so on) across a range of classes through submission of and reflection on work done in those classes (p. 51). Assessment data can be used not only to track individual progress but also to determine the success of the curriculum in preparing students to meet outcomes. “Program improvement” has been one of the major proposed benefits of the ePortfolio system, in that it creates trace evidence that can be used for everything from accreditation to curricular revision (Wilhelm et al., 2006). The ePortfolio also offers pragmatic benefits. Depending on the software used, electronic portfolios can be a cost effective means of collecting and archiving data about a broad range
of students (Burnett & Williams, 2009). However, considering the conflict between a growing desire for assessment and shrinking operating and research budgets, cost is a serious issue.

Beyond their usefulness as tools for programmatic assessment, ePortfolios are designed to be helpful to students reflecting on their academic progress and their professionalization. Diane Goldsmith (2007) noted that this process is not only about internal “quality assurance” but also about the student’s growth: “Students have access to a virtual platform for sharing their goals, achievements, and insights with advisers and counselors to ensure that they are meeting their career and educational goals” (p. 31). A portfolio system should be designed for internal, institutional validation as well as for students’ personal reflection and the opportunity to prepare for the job market. Marjorie Davis, Gominda Ponnamperuma, and Jean Ker’s (2009) research in medical schools, where such portfolio-based evaluation has become increasingly common, suggests that student resistance and even negativity towards constructing the portfolio can be assuaged by focusing on “their understanding of the exit learning outcomes” and “reflection on their work” (p. 89). Students can be helped to understand the portfolio not as “paperwork” or busy work but as connected to their preparation for professional practice. Maryl Gearhart and Ellen Osmundson (2009) argued that teaching portfolios helped to increase portfolio writers’ awareness of the need for assessment practices and their ability to assess the professional competence of their own work. Yao-Ting Sung, Kuo-En Chang, Wen-Cheng Yu, and T. H. Chang (2009) came to a similar conclusion about how portfolios increased writers’ awareness of the need for reflection and assessment and extended this to digital portfolios, arguing that the multiple types of texts included in digital portfolios make them even more useful for reflection and assessment. The portfolio can also teach students about professional expectations. As Zubin Austin, Anthony Marini, and Bernie Desroches (2005) put it, “in the 21st century, all professionals will need to produce evidence of their continuous professional development activities” and the portfolio acclimates students to creating a “concrete paper-trail” for this process of growth (p. 176).

Jo Allen (2010) has stressed that, while “determining appropriate assessment strategies,” it is crucial to ground that assessment in “institutional values…the defining characteristics of a particular institution’s approach to education” (p. 40). Rather than seeing assessment as a “one-size-fits-all” process, Allen contended that assessment should be framed as a highly individualized process that responds to the program’s history as well as the history and “core values” of the college or university (p. 39). At the
most basic level, this would include the type of institution being assessed (research-oriented, teaching-oriented, undergraduate, and so on) but also “desired outcomes” for students (p. 40). Institutional goals should be reflected in the more specific programmatic goals, largely on a curricular basis. If the school desires to produce effective policy makers, then degree programs within the school and individual courses within the degree programs should promote this focus in desired student outcomes. Institutional outcomes are reflected in programmatic outcomes, which are reflected in course and curricular outcomes. When grounded in the specific exigency of the particular university and program, assessment tools such as portfolios can “help articulate or stabilize the priorities of the program” (p. 53). Testing students for mastery of concepts drawn from this specific exigency can indicate whether students are being given the curricular and pedagogical support to learn these concepts and apply them in an appropriate context. The results of testing can then be used for programmatic change. For example, if the program decides on “mastery of basic web design” as an outcome but finds through assessment that students are not achieving the desired mastery, courses can be created or syllabi rewritten to reflect the need for pedagogical improvements in this specific area. In broader terms, the program can use the assessment data on “mastery of basic web design” to show the university how it is either supporting or challenging a larger institutional outcome, such as “increased communication skills” for all students. To function properly, assessment must start with clear and specific learning outcomes and these learning outcomes must come from an active investigation of the program itself. Assessment strategies imposed from without can strike programs as “alien to their needs,” weakening the amount and quality of internal assessment and casting doubts on the reliability of the scores themselves (Minelli, Rebora, & Turri, 2008, p. 170).

In his response to Allen’s contention that programmatic goals be grounded in institutional goals, Paul Anderson (2010) praised the focus on outcomes and context but questions the ease of assessing institutional values in these terms. As he pointed out, it is relatively easy to determine how a professional writing program would assess students’ “communication skills” and other outcomes generally shared between the program and the institution, but it is more difficult to see how an institutional value such as “moral conduct” could be translated into concrete disciplinary terms (p. 61). Such concepts are highly variable in meaning and application, as well as subject to changes in funding, emphasis, and administration. Although Allen’s rubric is useful in stressing the need for internal inquiry and articulating outcomes, some tension remains between institutional and
programmatic emphases, as well as an awareness that institutional values and priorities can shift and change over time. A further tension, which this case study will illuminate, is the possibility that programs within a single academic department might not always share the same values and priorities. Though in a broad sense, all are interested in the professionalization of students, programs might have differing ideas about desirable professional outcomes and might even face difficulties in how an outcome that might be clear to one program (e.g., “moral conduct”) might seem nebulous to another. Thus, the consideration of how departmental and institutional values might not reflect each other should be extended to a consideration of competing programmatic values.

The ePortfolio system faces additional challenges, particularly in defining standards for student work and implementing a consistent process for portfolio assessment. Questions include whether all faculty will use a single unified standard or develop their own, whether the portfolio is assessed as a whole or broken up into component parts and assessed by different faculty at different times, whether external evaluators will be brought in, and whether these external evaluators should be faculty or workplace practitioners (Bowers, 2005). Charles Secolsky and Ellen Wentland (2010) have noted that something as seemingly neutral as topic selection can affect the scoring of a portfolio in that certain writing topics may be more conducive to a scoring rubric’s criteria (e.g., organization) than others. The formulation of rubrics is important when considering how students will be guided in the selection of representative documents for portfolios and whether the writing topics assigned in courses are actually reflected in the rubric. The use of external evaluators to score portfolios has been questioned, as some might argue that “familiarity with the learning and assessment context” can actually contribute to the validity of scores; others argue that familiarity (in this case, professors within the department grading portfolios) might produce a bias for higher scoring (Johnston, 2004, p. 403). Any rubric system is open to question in terms of scoring validity, including how the evaluators’ “expectations” for students can affect how they apply and “adapt” the rubric’s categories in different ways for different students (Osbourn Popp, Ryan, & Thompson, 2009, p. 267).

In the next section, I provide a case study of how one midwestern university implemented the ePortfolio system.

**Programmatic Background**

Missouri Western State University (MWSU) is an open-admission state university forty miles north of Kansas City. It enrolls approximately 6,000
students annually and is predominantly an undergraduate institution, having gained the university designation and a handful of small graduate programs within the past decade. MWSU’s professional writing degrees are located within the English, foreign languages, and journalism department. Approximately seven tenured or tenure-track professors, all of whom hold terminal degrees in relevant fields, share the responsibility for undergraduate majors in technical communication, public relations, journalism, and convergent media. Convergent media is the newest of these degree programs, with its first graduates in the fall of 2009 and the only program designated as a BS rather than a BA. In recent years, the professional writing degrees have faced pressure from the state department of higher education due to budget constrictions, enrollments, and the cost of maintaining and updating equipment and software required by the curriculum.

Students in these four degree programs are required to enroll in the one-credit senior portfolio course the semester before they graduate. Responsibility for teaching the course rotates among the professional writing faculty as load allows. Enrollment in the course varies widely. Average enrollment over the past ten semesters was approximately seven students, with a high of twelve students in a semester and a low of one, when the course was taught as an independent study. Most sections of the course have used the same textbook (Miles Kimball’s *The Web Portfolio Guide*). To further ensure some continuity in how the course is taught, professional writing faculty also developed an internal instructor’s guide and a student handbook.

Since 2005, students have constructed and presented their portfolios electronically using server space provided by the university. These ePortfolios are built as websites meant to represent the student’s best and most representative work as a major in the department. All these websites share the same basic architecture. An indexed homepage contains links to the student’s current resume, a reflective essay, and several cover pages for their representative documents. The resume is meant to stress the portfolio as a measure of preparation for the job search and for holding a professional position in the student’s chosen field. Reflective essays focus on a self-evaluation of the student’s development as a writer, including a discussion of how the chosen representative documents demonstrate the skills and abilities necessary to be a professional writer. Cover pages for the representative documents provide further context for and reflection on these texts, with discussions of what assignment and/or course prompted the text, what composing skills and equipment were used in the creation of the text, how the text was received and evaluated, and how the text was revised before its inclusion in the portfolio.
Students in the course use the first half of the semester to construct their portfolios, with feedback provided by the professor, peers, and occasionally evaluators from outside the classroom (for example, many professors require their students to submit a draft of their resumes to the university’s career services coordinator). After revisions based on this feedback and a final usability study to determine whether the ePortfolio is functioning properly (for example, all links are active, all video can run from the website, and so on), students submit their final portfolio at midsemester.

The professor e-mails the URLs for these ePortfolios to that semester’s external evaluators to begin the scoring process. Two evaluators are chosen from a pool of professional writing instructors at other universities (for example, past evaluators have come from programs at Texas Tech University and Grand Valley State University) and are paid a nominal fee to review that semester’s portfolios. After receiving the links, evaluators are given four to five weeks to view the ePortfolios, to score each according to a rubric provided by the department, and to return their final scores and comments to the professor. Portfolio students, who have meanwhile been working on application materials such as cover letters and converting the ePortfolio to a tool for the job search, are given a single rubric with averaged scores and comments from both evaluators. Students receiving a passing score have essentially completed the course. Students receiving a failing score may be asked to revise and resubmit the portfolio or to retake the course.

Portfolios are archived to disk to preserve them, to provide examples for future portfolio students, and to serve as an assessment tool for the professional writing programs. The total number of students in each of four broad scoring categories (Polished, Competent, Developing, and Unacceptable) is e-mailed to the entire department. Scores from external evaluators are also used in annual assessment reports created by the professional writing faculty to measure student achievement according to key criteria for the degree.

The website-based portfolio has in recent years been supplanted by a growing number of Web entities, such as ProSite, dedicated to portfolio development. These are meant to be professional outreach resources for novice and experienced writers and designers. The predetermined or template-based architecture of these sites have made the portfolio building process simpler for many graduating students. Yet these entities also present challenges. First, the very simplicity of constructing a portfolio in these sites may work against curricular goals. Students in professional writing are being evaluated partly on their ability to construct appropri-
ate frameworks for presenting their sample works. Templates negate the
need for thoughtful reflection on what frameworks would be rhetorically
appropriate given the audience and context. In fact, ProSite’s homepage
boasts that people can build their sites “without touching a line of code”; a
program that requires courses in website design and architecture is un-
likely to see the benefit of this approach. Second, many sites of this nature
require subscription fees for “live” or publicly available sites. Taking the cost
for subscriptions out of course technology fees may require considerable
administrative wrangling, and although administrations often request
assessment data, funding such assessment is rarely a priority in times of
departmental budget tightening. Students facing greater uncertainty in
the job market and record student loans may also appreciate less expen-
sive alternatives to subscription-based services, such as the website based
on university server space. Third, the broadness of the program can make
it difficult to find one universally appropriate portfolio system, as many
such subscription services are organized by discipline or job field. Certainly
instructors involved in portfolio courses should introduce students to alter-
natives such as ProSite, though cost effectiveness and accessibility should
not be left out of “best practices” discussions.

Crafting the Rubric

The portfolio-scoring rubric was developed by the department’s profes-
sional writing committee in consultation with alumni and experienced
faculty from other universities. Because the portfolios were always meant
as a tool for programmatic as well as individual assessment, the rubric was
designed to focus on student learning outcomes. Thus, feedback from
external evaluators would indicate not only the student’s level of prepara-
tion for the professional writing workplace but also the level to which the
program is functioning to prepare students. Because portfolio feedback
is used by professors teaching the senior portfolio course and the profes-
sional writing committee as well as to construct annual assessment reports
on programmatic outcomes, the rubric must focus on measuring the key
skills inherent in the practice of these disciplines.

The rubric also became a tool for curricular and pedagogical change.
For example, it could be used as a partial justification for requiring further
prerequisites or even for the creation of new courses (such as developing a
technical editing course to focus on consistent problems in editing, proof-
reading, and polishing in the senior portfolios for technical communica-
tion students). For that reason, it was essential that the portfolio serve not
as a single, one-size-fits-all tool, but rather as a diverse, Swiss Army knife of
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assessment. Although programmatic size and pragmatic concerns, such as budget and teaching load, dictated that four diverse professional writing programs are taught with a singular portfolio course and result in similar ePortfolio architectures, the assessment must recognize the differences and distinctions among these programs if student outcome information is to be reliable and useful.

Recognizing these differences began by differentiating among the types of documents submitted by students in these programs. Students in each program are given a list of six criteria for the portfolio (for a complete list of criteria for each program, please see Appendix A). These criteria, which had been developed by the professional writing committee in consultation with the faculty in each program, represented six distinct student learning outcomes expected of every student in these programs. Students would prove their success in meeting these academic and professional expectations by submitting a representative document for each criterion. The reflective essay and the cover page, in combination with the document, demonstrate whether the student has achieved the desired outcome.

The three professional writing programs in place at the creation of the ePortfolio system shared two common criteria and thus two student-learning outcomes expected of every professional writing student:

- Ability to conduct research and present the results in appropriate written form
- Ability to create documents with an awareness of expectations of “real world” discourse communities

Students in public relations, technical communication, and journalism were all expected to submit a traditional research paper appropriate to a college context, because this requirement was seen as a mutual goal of all these programs as well as a general expectation for any English major. The second shared criterion, which stressed those “real world” audiences, required that students submit work created for a client outside the university setting. Usually, students presented the document generated during their mandated internship experience.

Unlike the research paper, the focus on “real world” audiences and clients separated professional writing majors from typical English literature or English education majors. Again, the distinction primarily focused on student learning outcomes and programmatic assessment. Because one of the central components of a professional writing program is preparing students for professional writing outside an academic setting, requiring students to reflect on their internships seemed not only to help students
focus on how their internship might be used as a tool for professional development (and as a potential positive in job applications and interviews) but also to help professors gauge how well the internship was contributing to student learning outcomes focused on professional development. Even with this shared criterion, the documents submitted varied widely according to discipline and the types of documents professionals in these disciplines create. Whereas public relations majors might submit press releases, journalists might submit articles, and technical communicators might submit process documentation. Thus even the selection of documents could be used to reinforce programmatic expectations and help students develop a professional identity. Reviewing their peers’ portfolios, students could see how a single criterion could result in an exciting plurality of genres.

Four criteria were unique to each program and reflected how one relatively small department could work to gear assessment and outcomes to very diverse and distinct disciplines even when working with a single assessment tool of the ePortfolio. For example, the journalism portfolio included the following criteria:

- Mastery of traditional journalism conventions such as the inverted pyramid.
- Ability to write extended journalism stories for specific target audiences.
- Mastery of layout and design principles.
- Understanding of ethical and legal issues for journalists.

The first criterion stressed the importance of field-specific terminology, as well as the importance of applying journalistic concepts such as the “inverted pyramid” to representative documents such as a news article. The second criterion stressed the importance of audience as well as how the structure and language of representative documents such as feature stories mirror the concerns and expectations of possible readers. The third criterion stressed the importance of visual language, illustrating the professional’s mastery of style and aesthetics as they contribute to the reception of representative documents such as magazine spreads. The final criterion stressed the importance of the social implications of professional writing, with students presenting an assignment in media law and ethics as evidence of their preparation for addressing such ethical and legal issues as writers in the workplace.

In many ways, the criteria for public relations and technical communication portfolios were closer to each other than to the criteria for journal-
ism portfolios. The similarity may be expected, as in many ways the written genres, audiences, and purposes of these two professions are closer to each other than to journalism. Both sets of criteria stressed the importance of written genres, just as the language used ("mastery") stressed the importance of growth, professionalization, and student learning outcomes:

- Mastery of public relations and business writing genres.
- Mastery of technical and business writing genres.

Both sets of criteria also included a criterion focused on using "technical tools" available to professionals in the field "to create documents that are visually effective," as well as a criterion focused on the "ability to work in teams to create written projects." The final criterion for the portfolio was quite distinct. Whereas public relations majors were asked to show the "ability to write persuasively," technical communicators were asked to show the "ability to guide users through processes and procedures."

Even given the similarities in many of the requirements for the public relations and technical communication portfolios, the portfolio criteria clearly showed a focus on differentiating between the programs to better assess student-learning outcomes in each and to prepare students for the distinctions between these two professions in the workplace. Clearly, the most obvious difference is between the request for persuasive writing on the one hand and procedural writing on the other. Whereas public relations majors needed to know how to write promotional material for a company to secure a job in their field, technical communication majors needed to know how to write instructions and process explanations to secure a job in their field. The former could be used to assess a course in advanced public relations writing and the latter could be used to assess a course in documentation. Suggestions for representative documents often reveal these types of disciplinary differences. For example, when discussing tools for creating visually effective texts, many of the tools (computer programs) mentioned for public relations and technical communication majors were the same (e.g., PAGEMAKER). Other suggestions for representative documents reflected the separate curricular and degree plans. Technical communication majors were expected to produce texts using ROBOHELP; public relations majors were not. Public relations majors proved their "mastery" of genre through proposals and correspondence. Technical communication majors proved similar competence through formal reports. In this way, by fine-tuning criteria where necessary and suggesting different types of representative documents where applicable, the same basic framework for assessment could be used for these very different student writers.
As mentioned before, external evaluators are sent a rubric to score students’ ePortfolios and to gauge how well students are meeting the learning outcomes stated in the criteria. Evaluators review the websites (resume, reflective essay, cover pages, representative documents) and grade students in a number of different categories. These categories were meant to reflect the focus on genre, audience, style, and visual appeal found in the criteria (see Appendix B for the complete convergent media rubric and Appendix C for the complete journalism, public relations, and technical communication rubric). For each of the six categories, students can receive a score from “Unacceptable” (the lowest, worth 0 points) to “Polished” (the highest, worth 3 points). Their total for all six categories will determine their overall score, also ranked from “Unacceptable” (failing) through to “Polished.” In addition to creating this scoring system and the rubric’s categories, the programs crafted definitions for levels of achievements in each category. For example, evaluators are told that a rating of “Polished” in the “Rhetorical Strategies/Audience” category signifies that the student has a “mastery of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image.” A rating of “Unacceptable” in the same category signifies that the document shows “little evidence of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image.” A “Polished” document is exemplified by “language (vocabulary, reading level) and detail... appropriate to reading level and professional context;” by contrast, an “Unacceptable” document is exemplified by “language (vocabulary, reading level) and detail... inappropriate to reading level and professional context.”

The rubric, in many ways, is the most “one-size-fits-all” part of this process. Majors in public relations, technical communication, and journalism are given diverse sets of criteria and even more diverse sets of representative documents and software programs from which to draw but are given their final evaluation with a single instrument of the scoring rubric. This singular rubric is a product of necessity. Given the relative smallness of the programs, the need for a programmatic assessment tool to measure professional writing studies as a whole, and the stresses puts on external evaluators (including nominal rewards and a comparatively short time to review all of the portfolios), the singular rubric simplifies the process. The single rubric also makes it possible to teach the portfolio course as multidisciplinary, which is a budgetary and staffing necessity. A rainbow of rubrics might hopelessly complicate in-class activities such as peer review, in which students are attempting to assess each other’s portfolios during the drafting stages.
Safety guards are also built into the portfolio system. Because evaluators are chosen largely because they are familiar with all the disciplines in question, individual evaluators have the experience to interpret the rubric in terms of disciplinary difference. For example, an evaluator familiar with public relations and technical communication would understand how the rubric’s call for “skillful use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice” means quite different things in these differing contexts. Though a press release might skillfully use an extended metaphor, figurative language is less appropriate in a document such as operating instructions. The fact that external evaluators are encouraged to add written comments also allows them to give context to their scores. Evaluators can comment not only on student texts but also on the rubric itself, as demonstrated in the case of convergent media, discussed in the next section. Figure 1 reproduces an example scoring rubric with evaluator’s comments for a graduating journalism student.

Of course, there can be discrepancies in scoring between the external evaluators. Tables 1 through 3 illustrate this discrepancies by showing how the three students evaluated in fall 2009 (two journalism students and one convergent media student) fared in each rubric category with both evaluators. Although Table 2 might demonstrate inter-reader reliability, in that the scores for both evaluators in each category are identical, Tables 1 and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Document</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>The documents are coherently organized and remain focused on the topic at hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Conventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>You make good use of generic conventions such as the inverted pyramid in your feature stories. Work on citation conventions, as there is a faulty paraphrase on page 3 of your research paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Strategies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Your small business website in particular shows a knowledge of the expected users of this information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Work on varying the sentence structure in your writing. Your overuse of complex sentences can grow confusing for readers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Your brochure shows a poor use of contrast, with dark red text being used against a black background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Correctness</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>The documents are well proofread throughout the portfolio.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Rating (sum)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Your awareness of audience and journalistic conventions is admirable. Work on introducing variety from sentence to sentence in your writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Example Scoring Rubric for Journalism Student
3 raise red flags. In a system with only eighteen points possible, a five-point discrepancy separates the two evaluators in Table 1, with the second evaluator consistently rating the student higher. Though less glaring, Table 3 notably shows one evaluator giving the highest possible score to the student in four out of six categories though the other evaluator never gives the highest possible score in any category.

Standard departmental practice of splitting the difference between evaluators to arrive at the final overall score would give both the first and

**Table 1: Evaluator Scores for Journalism Student #1 (Fall 2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric Category</th>
<th>Evaluator 1</th>
<th>Evaluator 2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Document</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Conventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Strategies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Correctness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Rating</td>
<td>11 (“Competent”)</td>
<td>16 (“Polished”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Evaluator Scores for Journalism Student #2 (Fall 2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric Category</th>
<th>Evaluator 1</th>
<th>Evaluator 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Document</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Conventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Strategies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Correctness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Rating</td>
<td>12 (“Competent”)</td>
<td>12 (“Competent”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Evaluator Scores for Convergent Media Student (Fall 2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric Category</th>
<th>Evaluator 1</th>
<th>Evaluator 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Document</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Conventions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Strategies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Correctness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Rating</td>
<td>12 (“Competent”)</td>
<td>15 (“Competent”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
third students a final rating of 13.5 ("competent"), though the adjusted score does not really reflect the differences between evaluators in both cases and the differences in category scores between the two students. Despite an admittedly small sample size in one semester, a cursory examination of differences between evaluators over several semesters indicates that such discrepancies are more common than anecdotal evidence has suggested. A detailed statistical comparison is suggested as a precursor to changes in the training and instructions given to evaluators, as insuring inter-reader reliability requires immediate attention and overhaul.

Because the assessments are used both for individual students and for the program as a whole, reliability is an important question and an area in which the program could stand to improve. Anecdotally, members of the department can cite few examples of wide discrepancies between scores (for example, a portfolio rated as “polished” by one scorer but “unacceptable” by another), but few attempts have been made to study scoring distributions and determine the actual level of variation between evaluators. In the case of varying scores, standard practice has been to take the mean as the final score, which clearly presents major problems. The program has placed faith in the process of developing the criteria and rubrics in the first place, with feedback from professionals both inside and outside the university. Yet, largely due to problems of distance and budgetary constraints, few measures such as norming sessions have been implemented to determine whether the criteria and rubrics are as transparent and normative as hoped and whether evaluators are interpreting and applying the rubrics in comparable and consistent ways. Traditionally, evaluators have not been provided with examples of previous portfolios and their accompanying scoring rubrics that demonstrate levels of achievement and standards for rating. Scoring using the rubric is an area in which programmatic changes are obviously necessary.

Programmatic Challenges to Assessment

Convergent media is the most distinct of the professional writing programs. It is by far the most recent, the only BS, and the least traditional in terms of genres and documents. Though the curriculum and the degree plan tie it in many ways to journalism, with shared classes in subjects such as publication design, convergent media is conceived as far more cutting edge than the print-focused journalism BA. Incorporating aspects of video and multimedia production, convergent media is in some respects more interdisciplinary than the three other, more established programs. Graduates of the program are prepared for innovative careers in diverse fields.
ranging from digital photography to web design. Unfortunately, in many ways, the senior portfolio course proved to be unprepared for them.

By the fall of 2009, when the first convergent media seniors entered the portfolio course, the department had been using the ePortfolio system, the criteria for each program, and the scoring rubric for four years. However, in a programmatic oversight, criteria had never been developed and approved for convergent media majors. Convergent media students were forced to wait to select their documents and create the basic architecture for their portfolio websites while students in the other programs forged ahead. An emergency meeting of the professional writing committee and later conferences with convergent media faculty led to criteria being developed within the space of one week. The urgency of the process meant that the criteria had to be approved and handed to students quickly, without much of the discussion and external review that had preceded approval of the criteria for the other programs. A statewide call for greater assessment in higher education added pressure that meant these hastily developed criteria and the resulting rubric scores would be used to draft programmatic assessments before the new criteria could be revised.

Two major changes stood out in these new guidelines. The first was that the number of portfolio criteria for convergent media (and thus, the number of representative documents to be included) dropped from six to five. The second major change resulted from the first. Previously, all the programs had shared criteria that asked for a research paper and an internship document. Convergent media guidelines retained the internship document but dropped the research paper.

The elimination of the research paper probably should have signaled the need for a deeper investigation of the ePortfolio as an assessment tool because, until its exclusion from the convergent media portfolio requirements, the research paper had served as the cornerstone for all professional writing portfolios. It was the one document whose features, such as constructing logical arguments and locating and citing relevant sources, united the student learning outcomes across technical communication, public relations, and journalism. The scoring rubric had been written with the assumption that a research paper, as well as the student learning outcomes embodied in the research paper, stood front and center in the portfolio.

Other signals indicated that the ePortfolio required revision. Some of the criteria for convergent media were familiar, as they had been drawn from journalism. For example, students were required to submit news stories, magazine spreads, and an assignment on media law and ethics. The major new criterion called for a “mastery of convergent media prin-
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ciples.” In itself, this indicated a shift away from the essay- and article-heavy portfolios of the other programs and toward the more innovative new media students were expected to utilize as part of their professionalization. Websites had long been listed as an example representative document for other portfolios; suddenly they were joined by newer beasts such as video packages, flash videos, and interactive graphics.

Despite these challenges, students in convergent media completed their portfolios and submitted them to the external evaluators. At that point, the ePortfolio as programmatic assessment tool went into virtual meltdown for one of the most familiar, if frustrating, of reasons: technology. Because the ePortfolios had been designed as largely text-heavy, if also containing to some degree interactivity, visual appeal, and the occasional audiovisual document, the school’s server had never been thoroughly tested for the types of materials convergent media students were now required to submit. The student server would not run videos and, in some cases, would not allow them to be uploaded in the first place. Compatibility issues between computers and the sheer size of media files proved disastrous. Problems caused by the server seizing up after view requests led to some shutdowns of student portfolios. Students whose degrees were meant to ensure their success as multimedia experts and website designers could not share their work because facilities simply did not allow for it. The assessment tool had not kept up with the texts it was meant to assess, largely due to a lack of funds to improve system functionality. Suddenly ePortfolios were being burned to disk and snail-mailed to evaluators so that they could score a portfolio offline.

Though all the convergent media students passed, comments from external evaluators over e-mail and even on the scoring rubrics themselves expressed concern with how the addition of convergent media had made the portfolio system more problematic. Technological issues were in some sense the least of the problems and could be solved in the future with slight changes to architecture and a greater focus on usability testing before the final portfolios were submitted. The larger question was whether the systematic combination of the differing criteria and the shared scoring rubric, which had proven successful in the past in addressing the three older professional writing programs, was simply stretched too far with the addition of a program as different as convergent media. Was this assessment tool expected to do too much? As evaluators noted, the program description posted on the department’s website stressed interactivity and multimedia but these were largely absent from the criteria and completely absent from the rubric. The advertised student learning outcomes were not reflected in this final evaluation.
The professional writing committee took these concerns seriously, meeting as a whole and then as a smaller group of the convergent media faculty to discuss the criteria and the rubric for the ePortfolio. The faculty first decided that the convergent media criteria needed to be expanded to six, both to bring them in line with the number of criteria for the other programs and to better represent the program’s learning outcomes. A singular criterion covering “mastery of convergent media principles” was subdivided into two criteria, with the first focusing on multimedia production and design and the second focusing on website production and design. This distinction would allow students a clearer picture of the program’s main goals and the types of documents a graduate would be expected to create. It also clarified the difference among convergent media, with its emphasis on interactivity and multimodal artifacts, and the other programs, with their emphases on writing.

A more fundamental shift occurred as convergent media was given a separate scoring rubric. Though this rubric would retain some of the categories from the original, it would add a major new category. Convergent media’s rubric would contain both visual design and multimedia whereas the old rubric had lumped these concepts into a broad “visual design” category. Again, this change would reinforce the program’s move away from traditional, print-based texts and provide clearer data on programmatic outcomes in creating multimedia products. Tables 4 and 5 illustrate this change with two students from spring 2011. Table 4 is the rubric for a journalism student scored using the traditional categories. Table 5 is the rubric for a convergent media student, where the “visual design” category has been divided into the two separate rubric categories of “visual design” and “multimedia,” and the “rhetorical strategies” category has been eliminated. Note the continuing problem of inter-rater reliability in the divergent overall ratings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rubric Category</th>
<th>Evaluator 1</th>
<th>Evaluator 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Document</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre Conventions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Strategies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Design</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface Correctness</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Rating</strong></td>
<td><strong>16 (&quot;Polished&quot;)</strong></td>
<td><strong>14 (&quot;Competent&quot;)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Evaluator Scores for Journalism Student (Spring 2011)
The changes in the rubric have been a success. Portfolio guidelines are now in line with the program description and students are given clear and immediate guidance in their criteria and selection of representative documents. Technological issues of access and accessibility have been minimized. Most importantly, the single instrument of the ePortfolio now provides useful data for outcomes it is meant to measure. Portfolio scores and comments continue to be used internally for annual programmatic assessment reports and the revised rubric and criteria guarantee that a more meaningful set of data emerges from convergent media. For example, Appendix D reproduces an excerpt from the student learning outcomes report for spring 2012. This report, which is compiled from the category scores in the senior portfolio rubrics, is submitted both to the university and to the state as a measurement of how well students in each of the professional writing programs are meeting key learning outcomes for that program. Deficiencies in any category (for example, a number of students rating below “competent” in graphic design principles) would be considered grounds for reassessment of curriculum and instruction in that area. The department also compiles data on overall scoring trends for each program to determine whether student portfolios compare favorably over time and across the four professional writing degrees. For example, Tables 6 and 7 list overall scores for the spring and fall 2011 semesters. If the overall scores had shifted notably (for example, a sharp trend away from “competent” and “polished” to “unacceptable” or “developing” in one or more programs), this would also be considered grounds for reassessment of curriculum and instruction.

**Conclusion**

In many ways, the MWSU professional writing programs portfolio can be seen as a mixed case in terms of “best practices” for ePortfolio assessment.
Its approach is indebted to the existing research, including facets such as gearing criteria and rubrics toward individual disciplines, making sure assessment tools reflect desired student learning outcomes, using the ePortfolio as a means of both individual and programmatic evaluation, and using portfolio data to make curricular changes. The assessment tool was designed with feedback and critique built into the system. Not only the professional writing faculty but also alumni, evaluators, and even the students constructing the portfolios were allowed to test the system for its effectiveness.

As with all assessment systems, the ePortfolio has flaws and oversights. Budgetary and curricular constraints have kept the department from fully embracing more recent developments in ePortfolio systems. Cursory reviews of inter-reader reliability measures have raised cause for concern and further investigation. Internally, the department did not adjust to the changing nature of its programs and the consequent need for revisions to rubrics, criteria, and even the technology used to support and publish the ePortfolios. However, this failure ultimately illustrated the strengths of the system. Once fundamental problems became evident, faculty could adjust the assessment tool to align it with programmatic goals. In many ways,
changes were facilitated by the presence of external evaluators, whose position outside the department allowed them to grasp emerging problems in a way an insider might not have been available to do. Assessment tools require vigilance. Essentially, the measurement itself must be measured and recut to fit new situations, including shifts in professional expectations and technology.

Overall, this case study demonstrates the usefulness of a single assessment tool for small, diverse programs. Because these programs may lack the resources to do much longitudinal and large-scale assessment, they are left with few options in terms of how the evaluation of student work is used to track and adjust their guidance in professionalization. The ePortfolio is an inexpensive, accessible method for presenting student work and for soliciting programmatic feedback from external evaluators. This single tool, if properly adjusted to meet the needs of programs with different goals and desired student learning outcomes, can prove to be an essential asset.

References


Appendix A: Criteria for All Programs

[Note: * indicates suggested documents for meeting the above criterion]

Convergent Media

1) Mastery of traditional journalism conventions and genres
   *News stories (2–3)
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2) Create documents with an awareness of expectations of “real world” discourse communities.
   * Anything created for an internship
     OR  
   * Document/project created for a client or organization

3) Mastery of layout and design principles
   * Newspaper spread
   AND/OR
   * Magazine spread
   AND/OR
   * Website (journalistic or non-journalistic)

4) Mastery of multimedia production and design principles
   * Video package (1–5 minutes)
   * Journalistic slideshow
   * Flash video
   * Interactive graphics

5) Mastery of website content creation and design
   * Website

6) Understanding of ethical and legal issues for journalists
   * Major assignment addressing issues of media law and ethics

Journalism
1) Ability to conduct research and present the results in appropriate written form
   * Any research paper (any paper with a bibliography or works cited) for any course 200-level or higher

2) Mastery of traditional journalism conventions such as the inverted pyramid
   * News articles (4–5 items, no longer than 10 pages total)

3) Create documents with an awareness of expectations of “real world” discourse communities.
   * Anything created for an internship
   * Document/project created for a client or organization

4) Ability to write extended journalism stories for specific target audiences
   * Feature story
The Swiss Army Knife Approach

6) Mastery of layout and design principles
   *Newspaper spread
   *Magazine spread

7) Understanding of ethical and legal issues for journalists
   *Major assignment addressing issues of media law and ethics

Public Relations

1) Ability to conduct research and present the results in appropriate written form
   *Any research paper (any paper with a bibliography or works cited) for any course 200-level or higher

2) Mastery of public relations and business writing genres
   *Example of a longer form such as a backgrounder or proposal
   *Collection of news releases (4–5 items, no longer than 10 pages total)
   *Collection of correspondence (4–5 items, no longer than 10 pages total)

3) Create documents with an awareness of expectations of “real world” discourse communities.
   *Anything created for an internship
   *Document/project created for a client or organization

4) Use the technical tools available to public relations professionals to create documents that are visually effective (include description of tools used, i.e. HTML, PAGEMAKER)
   *Brochures, newsletters created with QUARK, PAGEMAKER, and so on
   *POWERPOINT presentation—including text of presentation
   *Web site/pages

5) Ability to work in teams to create written projects
   *Collaborative project—including information about contribution and thoughts on working in teams in cover sheet

6) Ability to write persuasively
   *Promotional material for an organization, department, or business
   *Proposal
   *Persuasive essay or research paper
The Swiss Army Knife Approach

Technical Communication

1) Ability to conduct research and present the results in appropriate written form
   * Any research paper (any paper with a bibliography or works cited) for any course 200-level or higher
2) Mastery of technical and business writing genres
   * Formal report
   * Collection of correspondence (4–5 items, no longer than 10 pages total)
   * Proposal
   * Case study
3) Create documents with an awareness of expectations of “real world” discourse communities.
   * Anything created for an internship
   * Document/project created for a client or organization
4) Use the technical tools available to technical communicators to create documents that are visually effective (include description of tools used, i.e. HTML, FRAMEMAKER, ROBOHELP)
   * Brochure or document created with QUARK, FRAMEMAKER, and so on
   * Web site/pages
   * Index/help file created with ROBOHELP
5) Ability to work in teams to create written projects
   * Collaborative project—including information about contribution and thoughts on working in teams in cover sheet
6) Ability to guide users through processes or procedures
   * Instructions
   * Procedure guide
   * Explanation of a process

Appendix B: Convergent Media Rubric

Whole document issues

Polished (3 points): Displays mastery of organization, coherence, focus, and unity.
Competent (2 points): General control of organization, coherence, focus, and unity.
Developing (1 point): Some major breaks in organization, coherence, focus, and unity.
Unacceptable (0 points): Lacks competence in organization, coherence, focus, and unity.

Genre Conventions

Polished (3 points): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) and attributions of information and quotations are used effectively and appropriately in the documents. Cover essays clearly explain conventions of the genre.

Competent (2 points): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are used somewhat effectively and appropriately in the documents. Cover essays inadequately explain conventions of the genre.

Developing (1 point): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are used occasionally in the documents. Cover essays’ descriptions of conventions of the genre are incomplete.

Unacceptable (0 points): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are not used in the documents. Cover essay fails to explain conventions of the genre.

Style

Polished (3 points): Skillful use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document. Follows correct Associated Press style conventions.

Competent (2 points): Somewhat strong use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

Developing (1 point): Some use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

Unacceptable (0 points): Inadequate use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

Visual Design

Polished (3 points): Excellent use of layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space, as appropriate.

Competent (2 points): Some use of appropriate layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.

Developing (1 point): Inadequate use of layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.

Unacceptable (0 points): Little evidence of an understanding of layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.
Multimedia

**Polished (3 points)** Multimedia integrates multiple media to effectively tell a story. Where appropriate, combines quality sound, video, photos, graphics and text seamlessly to present information in an appealing way.

**Competent (2 points):** Uses multimedia effectively, but may have some weaknesses in the acquisition, editing or integration of the multiple media.

**Developing (1 point):** Some integration of different media, but may have significant weaknesses in the acquisition, editing or integration of the multiple media.

**Unacceptable (0 points):** Little evidence of an understanding of how to acquire, edit and integrate multiple media.

“Surface” Correctness

**Polished (3 points):** Displays mastery of spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

**Competent (2 points):** Minor proofreading errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

**Developing (1 point):** Some serious errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

**Unacceptable (0 points):** Lacks competence in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

**Overall Score** (Add the points scored in the above categories. Assign the appropriate rating, as indicated below.):

**Rating Point Range**

**Polished 16–18 (and no “1” or “0” in any category)**

Any portfolio scoring a “1” or “0” in any category may not be rated as “Polished/Professional,” regardless of the overall score.

**Competent 11–15 (and no “1” or “0” in “Whole document” or “Surface”)**

Any portfolio scoring a “1” or “0” in “Whole Document” or “Surface” may not be rated as “Competent/Maturing,” regardless of the overall score.

**Developing 5–10 (or a “0” in “Whole document” or “Surface”)**

Any portfolio scoring a “0” in “Whole Document” or a “0” in “Surface” must be rated overall as “Marginal/Developing,” regardless of the overall score.

**Unacceptable 0–4 (or a “0” in “Whole document” and “Surface”)**

Any portfolio scoring a “0” in “Whole Document” and a “0” in “Surface” must be rated overall as “Lacks Competency,” regardless of the overall score.
Appendix C: Journalism, Public Relations, and Technical Communication Rubric

Whole Document Issues
Polished (3 points): Displays mastery of organization, coherence, focus, and unity.
Competent (2 points): General control of organization, coherence, focus, and unity.
Developing (1 point): Some major breaks in organization, coherence, focus, and unity.
Unacceptable (0 points): Lacks competence in organization, coherence, focus, and unity.

Genre Conventions
Polished (3 points): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are used effectively and appropriately in the documents. Displays appropriate documentation forms (MLA, APA, etc.). Cover essays clearly explain conventions of the genre.
Competent (2 points): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are used somewhat effectively and appropriately in the documents. General control of documentation forms (MLA, APA, etc.). Cover essays inadequately explain conventions of the genre.
Developing (1 point): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are used occasionally in the documents. Incorrect or incomplete use of documentation forms (MLA, APA, etc.). Cover essays’ descriptions of conventions of the genre are incomplete.
Unacceptable (0 points): Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are not used in the documents. Does not display appropriate documentation forms (MLA, APA, etc.). Cover essay fails to explain conventions of the genre.

Rhetorical Strategies/Audience
Polished (3 points): Mastery of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image. Language (vocabulary, reading level) and detail is appropriate to reading level and professional context. Cover essays demonstrate a clear understanding of audiences’ needs and expectations.
Competent (2 points): Evidence of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image. Language
(vocabulary, reading level) and detail demonstrates some awareness of reading level and professional context. Cover essays demonstrate some understanding of audiences’ needs and expectations.

**Developing (1 point):** Some evidence of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image. Language (vocabulary, reading level) and detail demonstrates some awareness of reading level. Cover essays demonstrate an unclear understanding of audiences’ needs and expectations.

**Unacceptable (0 points):** Little evidence of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image. Language (vocabulary, reading level) and detail is inappropriate to reading level and professional context. Cover essays demonstrate a lack of understanding of audiences’ needs and expectations.

**Style**

**Polished (3 points):** Skillful use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

**Competent (2 points):** Somewhat strong use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

**Developing (1 point):** Some use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

**Unacceptable (0 points):** Inadequate use of sentence variety, figurative language, cohesion, and voice as appropriate to document.

**Visual Design**

**Polished (3 points):** Excellent use of layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space, as appropriate.

**Competent (2 points):** Some use of appropriate layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.

**Developing (1 point):** Inadequate use of layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.

**Unacceptable (0 points):** Little evidence of an understanding of layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.

**“Surface” Correctness**

**Polished (3 points):** Displays mastery of spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

**Competent (2 points):** Minor proofreading errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

**Developing (1 point):** Some serious errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.
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Unacceptable (0 points): Lacks competence in spelling, grammar, mechanics, and standard usage.

Overall Score (Add the points scored in the above categories. Assign the appropriate rating, as indicated below):

Rating Point Range
Polished 16–18 (and no “1” or “0” in any category)
   Any portfolio scoring a “1” or “0” in any category may not be rated as “Polished/Professional,” regardless of the overall score.
Competent 11–15 (and no “1” or “0” in “Whole document” or “Surface”)
   Any portfolio scoring a “1” or “0” in “Whole Document” or “Surface” may not be rated as “Competent/Maturing,” regardless of the overall score.
Developing 5–10 (or a “0” in “Whole document” or “Surface”)
   Any portfolio scoring a “0” in “Whole Document” or a “0” in “Surface” must be rated overall as “Marginal/Developing,” regardless of the overall score.
Unacceptable 0–4 (or a “0” in “Whole document” and “Surface”)
   Any portfolio scoring a “0” in “Whole Document” and a “0” in “Surface” must be rated overall as “Lacks Competency,” regardless of the overall score.

Appendix D: Student Learning Outcomes Report for Spring 2012 (Excerpt)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Learning Outcome</th>
<th>Results for AY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students will . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Use graphic design principles and tools to create effective print layouts. (BA-Journalism; BA-Public Relations)</td>
<td>1 student rated “Competent” [Some use of appropriate layout, design, illustrations, fonts, color, and white space.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Master traditional journalism conventions and design principles (BA-Journalism, BS Convergent Media)</td>
<td>5 students rated “Polished” [Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, AP style, etc.) are used effectively and appropriately in the documents. Displays appropriate documentation forms (MLA, APA, etc.). Cover essays clearly explain conventions of the genre.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Swiss Army Knife Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Use of clear, correct sentence style adhering to AP requirements as appropriate (BA-Journalism)</th>
<th>Not Applicable – No BA – Journalism graduates in group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Effective use of rhetorical strategies to establish ethos and persuade audiences (BA—Public Relations)</td>
<td>1 student rated “Polished.” [Mastery of understanding of context, sense of purpose, appeal to audience, and promotion of ethos or image. Language (vocabulary, reading level) and detail is appropriate to reading level and professional context. Cover essays demonstrate a clear understanding of audiences’ needs and expectations.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Master public relations and business writing genres (BA-Public Relations)</td>
<td>1 student rated “Polished” [Generic conventions (inverted pyramid, press release format, consistent headings, etc.) are used effectively and appropriately in the documents. Displays appropriate documentation forms (MLA, APA, etc.). Cover essays clearly explain conventions of the genre.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acknowledgments
The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Kaye Adkins at Missouri Western State University, who provided valuable programmatic background and supporting materials in the drafting of this article.

Author Information
Dr. Michael Charlton is an assistant professor of professional writing at Missouri Western State University, where he teaches technical communication and public relations.