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Can ePortfolios Connect?

These five smart steps can help you navigate perilous ePortfolio territory.
By Joseph C. Panettieri

I'm always wary when someone sticks the letter "e" in front of a word. For every eBay--a monumental success, to be sure--there are hundreds of eFailures piled atop the dot-com scrap heap.

Where do ePortfolios fit in? They're not quite monumental successes, but they're certainly here to stay. In their most basic form, ePortfolios allow students to securely store, publish (i.e., display) and update their creative work on a university's Web site. For instance, an architecture student can display his designs and schematics, a computer animator can post her short films, and a music major can publish his unique arrangements. As they interview for internships, career opportunities, or graduate schools, these students can direct potential employers and admissions personnel to their respective online ePortfolios.

That sounds simple enough--until you look under the hood. More than mere Web sites, ePortfolios also are complex data management systems. When properly designed using such standards as eXtensible Markup Language (XML), ePortfolios can interact with course management systems, HR systems, and enterprise resource planning (ERP) applications. In other words, ePortfolio sites can securely gather student grades, professor names, evaluation comments, and other content, providing a complete 360-degree view of a student's academic record to approved site visitors.

The ePortfolio concept is hardly new. The **University of Minnesota**, for one, kicked off its first ePortfolio project in 1995. More than 23,000 students, faculty, and advisers at the university use the ePortfolio system to track students' personal and professional achievements.

In January 2003, the university partnered with the **University of Delaware** and the r-smart group (www.rsmart.com) to launch the Open Source Portfolio Initiative (OSPI), an ePortfolio initiative that adheres to Java 2 Enterprise Edition (J2EE) standards. The OSPI has since expanded to include the Carnegie Foundation, the **University of Rhode Island**, and **Georgetown University** (DC). Generally speaking, OSPI seeks to ensure that universities can design and distribute ePortfolios on free software and widely accepted programming.

Meanwhile, **Indiana University** recently received a \$518,000 grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation to develop and study ePortfolio software. And this fall, **Oral Roberts University** (OK) will require all entering freshmen to compile, maintain, and complete an ePortfolio as a graduation requirement. Other institutions, including my own--**New York Institute of Technology**--are taking a hard look at how ePortfolios may integrate with student portals.

Look Before Leaping

There's no denying the ePortfolio movement, but ePortfolio projects aren't for the faint of heart. Complicated software standards, tricky design requirements, and competing faculty agendas can short-circuit even the best ePortfolio concept. Feeling a little nervous? Follow these five steps and you'll maximize your university's chances for success in the burgeoning ePortfolio sector.

Step 1--Form a council. Much as I despise bureaucracy, sometimes it just makes good business sense to organize a team that's empowered to attack a challenge. Any successful ePortfolio project requires more than technology managers. You also need key faculty members, administrators, and technology partners to discuss, shape, and embrace the concept. Without buy-in from key academic leaders--including your university's president--students will never discover the ePortfolio's power and potential payoff. Council members should be divided up into teams that engage external experts (Step 2) and students (Step 3).

Step 2--Ask the experts. In addition to the OSPI, you'll find helping hands at the Electronic Portfolio Consortium (eportconsortium.org), comprising specialized software firms such as ePortaro Inc. (www.eportaro.com), and such integrators as Information Methodologies Inc. (IMI; www.infometh.com). The ePortConsortium includes academic members (**Penn State University** and **UCLA**, among others) and also corporate



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members (Blackboard Inc., Microsoft Corp., etc.).

IMI and ePortaro are of particular interest. Both Herndon, VA-based, the two firms promote the ePortfolio Interoperability XML (EPIX) specification. Launched in January 2003 with great fanfare, the specification may allow disparate ePortfolio systems to easily interact with one another. I've heard little about the specification over the past six to 10 months and IMI has been unusually quiet. But the folks at ePortaro have landed several major ePortfolio customers, including **Deakin University** (Australia) and **Drexel University** (PA). (Neither university returned requests for comment about their ePortfolio strategies.)

Step 3--Identify your customers. Many universities refuse to call students their "customers." They consider it derogatory, but I rather like the term. Instead of living in ivory towers, academia must reach out to its customers--our students--to determine what, if anything, they want from an ePortfolio system.

Sadly, universities often embrace new technologies without considering the customer and business implications. Whether we're talking about online classrooms or online registration, think of all the time and money your university has wasted by designing new systems or retrofitting old ones without the customer in mind. In the case of ePortfolios, you absolutely must seek proactive student involvement to determine what features and functions your students need most. Be sure to gather opinions and ideas from a variety of faculty members and students (freshmen, sophomores, etc.) across your university's core majors. Remember: Medical students absolutely will have different requests and requirements for their ePortfolios than will English majors. In terms of functionality, find a core of common denominators to appease the broadest set of students, and also identify the "must have" features that engage your most prized students. Everyone, for instance, may request the ability to post Adobe PDF files, while only your engineering students may need to post CAD/CAM graphics.

Step 4--Identify the project scope. Initially, your new ePortfolio system may serve students in a single department. A few months from now, however, it might become a platform for your entire university. So, instead of launching the system in a departmental bubble, make sure it is designed to scale and meet the needs of the entire university. Otherwise, your university may wind up with a mishmash of incompatible software.

Skeptical? Consider the rise of PC networks. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, many universities deferred networking decisions to multiple department heads. The result was a hodgepodge of networking software. Some campuses had no less than five different network operating systems--Banyan Vines, Digital PathWorks, IBM LAN Server, Novell NetWare, and Microsoft LAN Manager. The runaway projects were spawned by separate departments, without approval or coordination from a centralized chief information officer (CIO). On the upside, small workgroups could now share printers and files. On the downside, weaving all of these software packages into a single networking environment was costly, time consuming and, in some cases, impossible.

Keep that history lesson in mind as your university plots its ePortfolio strategy. Are some departments pushing ahead on their own? Perhaps it's time to lay down the law with renegade project managers. On the flip side, you could leverage existing departmental work for the university's broader ePortfolio push. Either way, make some calls and pound on some doors to determine if grassroots departmental projects exist, and then adjust your broader university strategy appropriately.

Step 5--Know your limits. In many cases, setting up an ePortfolio can be more than you bargained for--a lot more. Much like the Internet itself, your university's ePortfolio could grow exponentially in size as students add more and more content to their sites. Many institutions, such as **Indiana Wesleyan University**, therefore enforce a 20-megabyte storage limit on each student's ePortfolio. Smart move--or is it? Engineering students with CAD/CAM designs, broadcast journalism majors with sample news videos, 3-D computer animators with short films, and other specialized students will surely require storage space that pushes well beyond 20 megabytes each. It may therefore be wise to have staggered storage limits based on students' majors.

Next, consider your network pipelines. Are your broadband connections wide enough to support full-motion video? Can your servers fetch bulky multimedia files for demanding Web surfers?

Even if your network infrastructure makes the grade, there are legal issues to consider. For instance, who's ensuring that your university's ePortfolio doesn't include copyrighted materials or obscene content? For extended technical guidance and a bit more legal information, be sure to read the Electronic Portfolio White Paper (http://with.iupui.edu/WhitePaper/whitepaperV1_0.pdf).

Even with technical and legal safeguards in place, there's still a chance your ePortfolio

system will grow exponentially. The reason: Alumni. Indeed, some universities permit graduates to maintain and update their ePortfolios indefinitely. That's a great gesture and a wonderful way to strengthen alumni relations--if you can afford the storage.

How's your university tackling the ePortfolio challenge? Let me know at joe_pan5@yahoo.com, and I'll report on the feedback in a later column.

Joseph C. Panettieri is editorial director at New York Institute of Technology (www.nyit.edu). He has covered Silicon Valley since 1992 for *InformationWeek*, Ziff Davis Internet, and others.

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