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ePortfolios: The Method of Choice for Validation

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ePortfolios: The Method of Choice for Validation

Community colleges have long been institutions of higher education in the arenas of technical education and training, as well as preparing students for transfer to universities. While students are engaged in their Student Learning Outcomes, projects, research, and community service, how have these students validated their work? One method of validation is the design and development of the personal and professional ePortfolio. By using business sources and other peer-review journals—as well as personal and professional experiences—this article chronicles the process of how ePortfolios offer validation of a student's learning experiences to meet workforce expectations as part of an individual's holistic social media footprint, e.g., ePortfolios (workforce) and social media (interpersonal).

REAL-TIME ACCESS BY EMPLOYERS AND INTERESTED 'OTHERS'

According to Schawbel (2011), your online presence will replace your written resume in the next ten years. Additionally, Fertik (2012) noted that employers have become savvy connoisseurs of online resources to evaluate job applicants, even if the applicants are unaware of the review. This online presence phenomenon is perpetuated by sundry, user-friendly, and even complex web-based tools available to employers and others, to capture, catalog, analyze, and synthesize volumes of data at the drop of a hat. These technologies form an individual's holistic digital representation.

Digital representations are created when we use digital services, in whatever form we may use them, e.g., email, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, personal-professional ePortfolios, web pages, search engines, etc. Specifically, Fertik (2012, p. 1) stated that "those of us who exert the necessary effort to maximize our digital representations will be rewarded: opportunities will find us. Those of us who don't will miss out." To validate employer use of social media to review a candidate's attributes, Smith (2013) identified a survey conducted by CareerBuilders.com (2012) in which 37% of the 2,303 hiring managers and human resource professionals surveyed, reported using social media to evaluate job candidates. Another 11% indicated that they currently do not use social media, but have plans to begin. That's almost 50% of organizations using this practice to assess job applicants—including an individual's ePortfolio or web site (Wills & Rice, 2013).

For example, in 2011, Alabama State University hosted an Oracle Database Academy Workshop, presented by an Oracle Senior Administrator. She informed the group that she no longer accepted printed resumes. Her approach was an ePortfolio with validation of database design, community service, and team projects. The outcomes she sought in the ePortfolio were specific output screen-captures that *only* Oracle could generate. These screenshots were to be a part of the validation repertoire within the ePortfolio. Not only did the Oracle Administrator evaluate the holistic social media footprint (interpersonal skills) as alluded to by Schawbel (2011), Fertik (2012), Smith (2012), and Wills and Rice (2013), she specifically utilized validation items in the ePortfolio as the technical determinants for hiring (workforce skills).

To correlate actual trends in the use of ePortfolios as part of the overall employee search process, several web sites are offering hosted space for student ePortfolios. Within these sites, many also offer potential employers search tools that make it relatively easy to scan volumes of ePortfolios for keywords to match employment needs. The implication of this ePortfolio-to-employer-search process is that the more sites that participate in these technologies, the greater the need for a viable ePortfolio as part of one's holistic digital representation.

THE EPORTFOLIO AS A VALUE-ADDED TOOL FOR STUDENTS

The development of ePortfolios benefits students in many ways. They enable students to develop web skills, function as self-driven managers of their sites, and promote themselves professionally and personally. In the words of Miller and Morgaine (2009, p. 12):

> E-portfolios are gaining support as a way for students, faculty, programs, and institutions to learn, assess, and improve through a mutual focus on the work that students complete over time—work that can both facilitate and document a range of ambitious learning outcomes.

As an online methodology, the ePortfolio is the tool of choice—or artifact central repository—for validation of the work that students complete over time covering many topics. The following items chronicle and categorize how this process may be achieved:

1. **Artifacts.**   One of the fundamental underlying considerations for an ePortfolio is the collection, preparation and posting of artifacts. Artifacts are any type of documentation that a student may have accumulated over time; however, to maximize and validate what students have learned in their respective studies and/or experiences, the artifact collection should be encouraged as early as possible in the tenure of each student. For example, how many students actually keep their work in a digital format that can be used as a validation of workforce skills? Moreover, do students who participate in community service collect digital images of the site where they worked, or full documentation of the projects they completed, and so forth? How many students understand the value of keeping a journal of work completed, to include actual screen-shots of design, application, and output? The validation artifacts—not grades—are the primary proof that students have accomplished work, enhanced their skills and abilities, and are a better prepared candidate than other applicants for a position within an organization. One cautionary consideration: artifacts should be categorized into two groups – a) professional, and b) personal. A student must be fully cognizant of what each type is and how to use them to promote himself or herself as not only a viable candidate for a job, but also as a community service-minded individual.

2. **Web Hosting.** This portion of the ePortfolio process requires students to understand the variances in free web space vs. paid web space; domain registration; and, search engine population. To be a serious contender within the search methods of employers, student web sites must be populated in the domain of search engines, outside the normal method of

providing the URL to a reviewer. In terms of free and paid space to host a student's web page/ePortfolio, free web space normally—but not always—tends to advertise for the hosting site. Conversely, paid web services offer more flexibility, development tools, and provide features to enable a student's ePortfolio to be ad-free, easier to locate, and more robust in the amount of space for artifacts and other content. Students may opt for free space prior to graduation and paid space subsequent to graduation.

3. **Design & Development.** At this point in the process, students determine how they will design and embed their ePortfolios as part of their web presence. For example, students must decide whether to use a coding method, such as HTML5, or an application approach, such as DreamWeaver. This phase of the ePortfolio process may be the most difficult since it requires a specific skill set, i.e., designing and maintaining the web site and ePortfolio. These web-based skills could lead to ancillary employment opportunities, however, since the development of the web site and ePortfolio requires skills related to FTP, templates, file management, and so forth.

4. **Quality of Service & Accessibility (QoSA).** While this may seem a bit generic and assumed, the QoSA factor is mandatory for outside readers as a measure of attention to detail, logic arrangement, presentation ability, and accessibility. When employers review the web site, specifically targeting the ePortfolio content, it is imperative that the navigation tools, links, and presentation are professional, free of errors and easily accessible. An ePortfolio that has valuable workforce-quality artifacts, but several spelling and punctuation errors along with a difficult search function, will not bode well in the review process.

5. **Longevity.** Longevity is the factor that requires a student to grasp the maintenance aspect of an ePortfolio. Examples are adding new artifacts, modifying linked web pages and

templates, enhancing coding, and investing time in the ePortfolio and web site to promote oneself for the best possible review outcomes. Students will be required to learn the principles of continuous improvement for their ePortfolios, and to maintain their digital representation as a holistic endeavor. For the serious-minded student, the ePortfolio will become a valuable asset for instant access of life-long achievements that can be retrieved by any interested party—or the student—as the needs arise in real-time.

<div align="center">RECOMMENDATIONS</div>

The overarching recommendation for community colleges is to seriously consider the ePortfolio as a tool of choice for validation of the students' skills, abilities, and community service. If possible, community colleges may opt to provide space for students, as well as offer a course in the design and development of ePortfolios to include the collection and storage of artifacts; the methods needed to create a digital footprint that is of acceptable quality for employer review; and faculty review of the student web site to offer support and guidance.

Community college students can use ePortfolios to promote a better quality product for themselves. For example, if students are aware that a trend is evolving into one-out-of-every-two employers using social media tools—including the ePortfolio—to evaluate them when they apply for employment, then students are more likely to consider the work they do as meaningful to the workforce, instead of a general assignment to receive a grade.

Finally, avoid the hype and make sure your college's use of ePortfolios is meaningful for students and potential employers. A review of the literature provides ample suggestive evidence that ePortfolios have been used for some time in K-12, colleges, and universities. However, the crux of the ePortfolio trend is that these tools are used to disseminate actual validation artifacts of an individual's ability to accomplish work that has meaning to an employer, who then

provides a return on the student's investment via salaries and benefits. College students in particular are "at the right stage to be creating a really strong online presence. The traditional resume can't showcase personality, accomplishment, and passions, which really give an edge in the career search. And, for companies, it's useful for recruiting purposes to look beyond the bullet points" (Chen, 2012, citing Lee, p. 1).

If the community college includes notations of using ePortfolios in its literature and curricula, the tool is best suited as an actual and applied method of choice for validation of a student's accomplishments.

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