

Using e-Portfolios to Demonstrate High-Impact Educational Practices and Promote Student Employment Success

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This paper presents e-Portfolios as an innovative platform to document student learning and promote reflection throughout their university experience. e-Portfolios allow students to demonstrate their engagement with high-impact practices derived from American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU): study away, leadership, internship/work, civic engagement, and undergraduate research. Using results from an employers' panel and student surveys, this paper empirically evaluates students' engagement with the university, marketing curriculum, and e-Portfolio projects. Among other findings, e-Portfolios improve student satisfaction with their overall undergraduate education, add value to the contemporary marketing curriculum, improve student's employment search after graduation, and create new assessment opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Student experience is a very important topic in higher education, particularly with many studies demonstrating the positive significance of high-impact educational practices and their impact on student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Albertine & McNair, 2011; Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Kuh, 2008). In general, high-impact practices, “facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016). Some examples of high-impact practices would be learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative projects, internships, study abroad courses, and capstone courses (Association of American Colleges & Universities, n.d.). Prior research has shown that campuses involved in such practices have increased student engagement. Studies have also shown that by utilizing high-impact practices schools are invested in educationally purposeful activities (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Kuh, 2001).

Also, as recent studies demonstrate, professors have promoted the integration of digital technology into the marketing curriculum, such as twitter, blogs, and other social media (Cronin, 2009; Granitz & Koernig 2011; Schiele, 2013). By extension, e-Portfolios are additional examples of instruction being infused with technology to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning in the

classroom (Malhotra, 2002; Nuldén, 1999). The e-Portfolios, moreover, serve as more than just electronic representations of student work; they function as a focused digital collection that demonstrates students' efforts, abilities, and progress during their education journeys (Drury, 2006, p. 2). Because students are in charge of their e-Portfolios, curation and assessment of student work is student-centric, allowing them to more easily see their development, both as students and emerging professionals.

Similarly, e-Portfolios allow for more transparent assessment practices that make it easier to demonstrate to various stakeholders that student learning is taking place. E-Portfolio software often better organizes student evidence, assessment practices, and assessment reports, thereby allowing faculty and administrators to more easily "close the loop" between teaching, assessment, and outcomes. And finally, e-Portfolios allow for a more sustainable assessment practice since prior assessment records and evidence (student work) can be more easily stored without using paper. In fact, e-Portfolios provide multi-dimensional evidence of students' abilities in, and understanding of, the key concepts central to a course (Light, Chen, & Ittelson 2011). In general, previous research has shown the effectiveness of technology's applications in the classroom that leads to higher student satisfaction, and overall improved learning (Debus & Lawley 2011; Hollenbeck, Mason, & Song 2011).

The student experience, in regards to technology in the classroom, has become a critical component of learning in higher education. Although there have been discussions on the subjects of technology in marketing curriculum and high-impact practices, many faculty are not actually utilizing these teaching methods in their courses. Therefore, several universities have responded by increasing systematic technological assessment practices (Thompson, 2013), one of which is the implementation of e-Portfolios in the university system.

In our study, students utilized e-Portfolios to review their educational experiences at the university and to focus on their experiences in the following high-impact areas: study away, leadership, internship/work, civic engagement, and undergraduate research. Subsequently, this paper is organized as follows: The first section provides a review of the relevant literature particularly built around high-impact practices, student engagement, and e-Portfolios. In the next section, the implementation procedures of the e-Portfolio assignments are presented in detail. Then, a discussion occurs of e-Portfolios' tangible outcomes and major benefits, both of which are supported with quantitative and qualitative evidence from student surveys and an employer panel. We conclude with limitations and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High-Impact Practices and Student Engagement

Active learning and student engagement challenge the educational models often used in the past (McLaughlin, 2014). Student engagement is the energy that students spend engaging in meaningful educational experiences that impact desired learning outcomes and overall student experience (Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). Specifically, Kuh et al. (2007) proposes that student success be defined broadly to include student engagement, satisfaction, and persistence; and academic achievement, goal attainment, and post-college performance. Also, the following pedagogical practices have been widely tested and have been shown to benefit cultural diverse university students: First-Year Seminars/Experiences, Common Intellectual Experiences, Learning Communities, Writing-Intensive Courses, Collaborative Assignments/Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, Service Learning, Community-Based Learning, Internships, Capstone Courses/ Projects (Kuh, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

The positive effects of student engagement have also been noted in other studies (e.g. Cruce, Wolniak, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2006), which suggest that institutions should seek ways to channel student energy toward educationally effective activities. Nevertheless, at many universities, application of such active learning practices is unsystematic, which can be detrimental to student learning (Kuh, 2008; Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

e-Portfolios

From an educational perspective, e-Portfolios may be a personal and professional online space for students to showcase their experiences and demonstrate their skills (Samiei & Lucas, 2012). Learning-oriented e-Portfolios often contain three foundational components: reflection, documentation, and collaboration (Zubizarreta, 2009). Also, in e-Portfolios, students can present digital resources relevant to their studies and involvement, and link to other students and teachers for collaboration and feedback (Hartnell-Young et al., 2007). These e-Portfolios are used as an “evidence-based tool” to engage students in the process of systematic reflection and integrated analysis of learning (Yu, 2012).

An e-Portfolio targeted towards potential employers and recruiters should present a rich compilation of a student’s skills and qualifications (Hallam & Creagh, 2010; Reese & Levy, 2009). For professional e-Portfolios, items suggested for inclusion are resumes, professional references, and samples of projects and presentations (Papp, 2014). E-Portfolios can be valuable tools for students, because e-Portfolios provide a platform to showcase a student’s skills and demonstrate a student’s accomplishments to potential employers (Yancey, 2001; Drury, 2006). By encouraging students to create e-Portfolios, universities can help students meet their career goals after graduation (Ward & Moser, 2008). Some employers may use information from e-Portfolios during the preliminary screening phase, while others may use them when making final candidate selection (Yu, 2012).

Our study not only includes students’ creating their professional e-Portfolios but also includes potential employers evaluating the students’ e-Portfolios. These employers, an Employers Panel, were off-campus reviewers of the professional e-Portfolios, in other words. Our study’s findings will also be defined by students creating an e-Portfolio, a self-portrait e-Portfolio, based on their participating in high impact practices.

E-PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT OUTLINE

Assignment Guidelines

The guidelines for the e-Portfolio assignments, we created, were intended to foster students’ engagement while demonstrating skills to potential employers. With e-Portfolios in general, students also explored the rhetorical and design theories that best inform the creation of their e-Portfolios for multiple purposes and audiences. To present and narrate leadership, study away, work, research, and/or civic engagement experiences, e-Portfolio software allows students to create visual and textual documents, and to integrate multimedia into these documents. In addition, these e-Portfolios may facilitate entry into professional disciplines or graduate school after graduation.

With these various purposes in mind, here are this study’s e-Portfolio learning outcomes:

Learning Outcomes

1. Create e-Portfolios for multiple audiences including potential employers.
2. Apply various theories—e.g., narrative, graphic design, psychological, educational, etc. theories—to designing e-portfolios.
3. Study e-Portfolios as a genre that has a place in other document designs, e.g., power points, websites, resumes, etc.
4. Create a professional persona that includes relevant experiences outside of the curriculum.
5. Integrate high-impact practice experiences—study away, leadership, internship/work, civic engagement, and/or undergraduate experiences—into e-Portfolios.
6. Advise the university regarding developing e-Portfolios as part of a student’s high-impact practice experiences.

Student Participants

Students in a small, private university participated in this study. The previously mentioned professional e-Portfolio assignment (appropriate for potential employers), the self-portrait e-Portfolio assignment, and students’ reflections on high-impact practices were held-in-common assignments in classes, both being generally populated by seniors: a marketing class (MRKT) and an interdisciplinary

studies class (INDS). In total, 46 students in two courses were surveyed: two sections of a Marketing Research (MRKT) course and one section of an Interdisciplinary e-Portfolio Design (INDS) course.

In the MRKT course the students were all Marketing majors. Most of these students were seniors in their final term before graduation; they were preparing to enter the job market. Most INDS students (90%) were seniors and juniors who were motivated to take this upper division elective because they anticipated it's helping them secure jobs after graduation. These students have a reasonably high amount of academic experience so that they may fairly interpret high-impact practices and create e-Portfolios to reflect those practices.

ASSIGNMENT

Self-Portrait e-Portfolio Assignment

This e-Portfolio organizes co- or extra-curricular activities; non-paying work experiences; and/or high-impact experiences (study away, leadership, internship/work, civic engagement, and/or undergraduate experiences). The purpose of this e-Portfolio is to help students learn to create a narrative and self-reflection important to their professional lives, but not part of their official curricular experiences at the university. After graduation, the students' targeted audiences for these e-Portfolios would be graduate schools and/or potential clients for freelance or consulting services. This e-Portfolio fulfills learning outcomes: 1 to 6.

Professional e-Portfolio Assignment

In this assignment students created a standard e-Portfolio suitable for a potential employer including cover letter, resume, recommendation letters, and samples of work. In addition, for the MRKT course, students incorporate a 5-minute PowerPoint "pitch" into this e-Portfolio. The professional e-Portfolio fulfills learning outcomes: 1 to 5.

METHODOLOGY

Our study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a holistic picture of how students perceive the use of e-Portfolios and demonstrate their high-impact practices. Two rounds of surveys were administered both in the middle of the semester and at the end of the term. Results of the Employers Panel—off-campus professionals who reviewed INDS students' e-Portfolios with possibly employing the students in mind—provided additional data on the e-Portfolio.

Employers Panel

Off-campus professionals who work in the student's field of study (e.g. marketing, accounting, film, or architecture), reviewed their e-Portfolios. Each employer completed his or her review by working independent of the other reviewers, but all employers used the same rubric to review each Professional e-Portfolio. Furthermore, the off-campus professionals only considered a student's Professional e-Portfolio when writing a review: no in-person communication and no "real time" contact existed between off-campus professionals and students.

FINDINGS

Mid-Term Survey Results

When asked to indicate the importance of high-impact practices, 34% of survey respondents, the students, indicated that one area, "Study Aboard," was either "not so important" or "not important at all." While this response may have represented students not having had a study abroad experience, it may also have represented students' perceptions of the importance of study abroad and indicate that students may need more preparation to appreciate this as a high-impact practice.

However, 77% of students indicated that “Leadership” is “very important,” and 74.5% indicated “Internship” was “very important.” Significant support, moreover, existed for the two other high-impact areas: “Civic Engagement” and “Undergraduate Research.” Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated that “Civic Engagement” was either “very important” or “somewhat important,” and 79% of respondents indicated that “Undergraduate Research” was either “very important” or “somewhat important.”

These findings may have implications for how readily students may understand each high-impact practice area. In general, 76% of MRKT students thought the connections between a professional persona and experiences outside the curriculum were “very relevant”; however, only 37% of INDS students considered such connections were “very relevant.” These findings may suggest that many business students are more willing to understand how extra-curricular experiences, or educational experiences co-occurring with the curriculum, may be part of their developing their professional persona. In contrast, our study’s students from across the curriculum may think that extra-curricular experiences are less relevant to their forthcoming professional lives.

Final Survey Results

In both the MRKT and INDS courses, when asked how important the high-impact areas were to them, 80% of students said that their “internship experience” was “very important.” Moreover, 65% thought that their “study away experience” was either “very important” or “somewhat important.” While this seems to contradict mid-term survey information, responses here represented a 42% to 45% response rate. Nevertheless, the importance of high-impact experiences seems to vary according to disciplines as well as individuals.

While 91% of MRKT students found “leadership experience” to be “very important,” only 56% of INDS students had the same response. Whereas 100% of MRKT survey takers found “civic engagement experience” to be either “very important” or “somewhat important,” only 56% INDS students had similar responses. Although 91% of MRKT survey takers found “undergraduate research experience” as either “very important” or “somewhat important,” only 33% INDS students had similar responses. In other words, here is more evidence that how high-impact practices are appreciated may consistently vary by discipline.

All students were asked how successfully they had developed their professional persona and professional online presence during the MRKT and INDS courses. 91% of MRKT survey takers thought they had either “very successfully” or “successfully” developed a professional persona and professional online presence: 100% INDS survey takers responded similarly. So, overall, students in both courses perceived e-Portfolios as enhancing their online professional presence and persona.

Employers Panel Results

While students in design fields (e.g., animation, film, graphic design, architecture) are expected to have an e-Portfolio or web-based portfolio to present as part of the interviewing and hiring processes, for marketing students an e-Portfolio is used more sparingly, perhaps only in the interviewing process and not in the process of selecting who will be interviewed. That said, all employers agreed that an e-Portfolio was only one consideration, among others, when finally determining whom to interview and hire. According to our employer panel, 59% of the e-Portfolios reviewed would lead to a student being interviewed and/or hired, if the e-Portfolio was all that was considered during the entire hiring process. Below are a few representative comments from employers:

“An e-portfolio or a portfolio in general is not something that most employers in the business world expect to see from a candidate, so having a strong and engaging e-portfolio could be a very powerful differentiating factor.” -Director of Global Marketing

“Portfolio demonstrates a very strong experience background that she can definitely capitalize on, which is exactly what she is doing throughout her portfolio and resume. I would give her a very serious consideration, but would like to meet and talk to her in person first.” –HR Manager

“In our business, for talent based roles, a web based portfolio of work samples and supplemental information is common practice. This has replaced printed works, CDs, and flash drives being sent in. Your e-portfolio will likely be viewed and critiqued prior to a meeting or interview.” –Design Executive

The employer panel consisted of each student’s e-Portfolio having two independent reviews—that is, two professionals in that student’s discipline gave the reviews. Also, each employer read multiple e-Portfolios. Consequently, each employer’s e-Portfolio reviews, based on the held-in-common rubric, led to these findings: 16 of 29 reviews suggested that students improve their Visual Rhetoric in their e-Portfolios, and 17 of 29 reviews suggested that students needed to improve their Written Rhetoric. However, when suggestions for improvements in Written Rhetoric are added to those for improving proofreading, editing, and revising, 22 of 29 reviews indicated improvements in written communication were needed. This finding may indicate a need for more concentrated instruction and student involvement in written communication as found in first-year composition and writing-intensive courses in the majors at the university where the research was conducted. e-Portfolios may be better utilized if the university supports written communication as a core competency throughout the curriculum.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our analysis reveals that students found e-Portfolios to be a beneficial learning and professional development tool. In fact, respondents/students indicated that they would be motivated to use e-Portfolios in the future because they align with their career goals. Based on assessment evidence, too, most students from across the disciplines perceived e-Portfolios as enhancing their online professional presence and persona, and perceived e-Portfolios as being desirable in select university courses.

Regarding MRKT and INDS courses, when asked, “Do you think that e-Portfolios should be more widely used throughout the curriculum and during a student’s career at the university?” 55% of survey takers (students) responded with “Yes, but only in select courses,” and 35% responded with “Yes, but only in one or two courses.” So, although e-Portfolios are generally perceived as valuable by students, educators should work on educating students as to why using this tool is valuable during their university years as well as continue to provide tangible evidence for students to see the e-Portfolio as valuable in their work after graduation.

On the positive side, and in general, most surveyed students felt that e-Portfolios have enhanced their understanding of their professional identity and their professional audiences, with 65% of respondents indicating that they were “very likely” to use their e-Portfolio software after the course’s conclusion. The majority of MRKT and INDS students, 67% also agreed with this statement: “This course meant I have become more comfortable with sharing my professional work with others outside of my field.”

In conclusion, this paper presents an overview of how to use e-Portfolios to digitize the student experience. However, future research should be conducted to better understand how to nurture a “freshman to senior” culture of e-Portfolios and high-impact practices. Subsequently, students may better construct written and visual texts in a culminating e-Portfolio at the university.

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