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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Information Technology

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### Creating Online Portfolios Can Help Students See 'Big Picture,' Colleges Say

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

More and more institutions are encouraging -- or even requiring -- students to create "electronic portfolios" that highlight their academic work and help them reflect on their campus experiences. Many administrators say that e-portfolios will be the next big thing in campus computing, although others wonder how many students will want to use them, and how many professors will embrace the idea.

Essentially, an e-portfolio is an extensive résumé that links to an online repository of a student's papers, problem sets, pictures from study-abroad stints, and anything else that demonstrates the student's accomplishments and activities. The hope is that students will show off their portfolios to potential employers or to parents eager to see where their tuition money is going.

"E-portfolios are on the horizon," says Ronald Bleed, vice chancellor for information technologies at the Maricopa County Community College District, which is considering joining a consortium to develop e-portfolio software. "But what they really are is still being defined," he adds.

The idea of creating portfolios of student work is not new -- some colleges or individual departments have been requiring paper-in-binder versions for years. Many of those portfolio projects are now going digital to make it easier to organize and distribute student materials. And the concept has recently caught the eye of computing administrators and academic-technology officials at institutions that have never tried portfolios.

Now a handful of nationwide efforts are under way to refine the e-portfolio concept and develop easy-to-use software tools that will integrate portfolios into existing campus information systems. Many of the e-portfolio efforts include a privacy feature that allows students to regulate access to their portfolios.

This month, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and the University of California at Los Angeles formed a consortium to develop e-portfolio software. The software, which is expected to work with existing campuswide information technology, will give students and advisers tools to build portfolios.

The [consortium](#) is still recruiting members, who are expected to pay \$10,000 per year to join. Member colleges will help design the e-portfolio system, and they will also get full access to the resulting software and its source code, says Ali Jafari, a professor of computer technology at Indiana-Purdue who helped start the consortium. A beta version of the software is expected to be released this summer, he adds.

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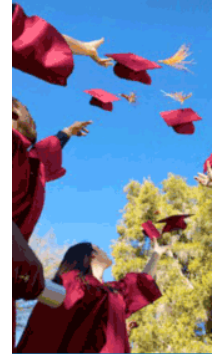
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Another group of colleges formed a consortium in October to compare notes about their own e-portfolio projects. That group, the [Electronic Portfolio Action Committee](#), consists of California State University at Monterey Bay, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern University, Stanford University, and the University of Washington. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is also a member of the group.

Some colleges have already set up campuswide e-portfolio systems. One example is Alverno College, which since 1999 has required all new students to create a [diagnostic digital portfolio](#). The effort grew out of the college's earlier paper-based portfolio requirement, which began in 1973, says Kathleen A. O'Brien, vice president for academic affairs at the college. A key feature of the portfolio system, she says, is that students must include information to demonstrate the core abilities that the college requires them to learn before graduating -- for example, problem-solving skills.

The American Association for Higher Education has created a [searchable listing of portfolio projects](#). The association also recently published a book on the subject, *Electronic Portfolios: Emerging Practices in Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning*.

Some students say the most important reason to create an electronic portfolio is that it might help in the hunt for a job.

Patrick Gilligan, a senior at Elon University, made a portfolio to show to potential employers. "It gave me another chance for employers to see my skills and talents," says Mr. Gilligan. "It was definitely valuable."

But among administrators and faculty members, the key benefit of e-portfolios is that they can breathe new life into the academic-advising process and help students reflect on how their disparate activities become a well-rounded education. Today's busy college students -- many of whom juggle classes, work, volunteer activities, and more -- can easily lose sight of the big picture.

"It's not meant to be just a souped-up résumé, or a folder of stuff," says Helen L. Chen, a research scientist at Stanford University's [Stanford Learning Lab](#), which has been developing and testing an electronic-portfolio system since 1998. "We're interested in providing students with tools to help them make the connections with all of their various experiences."

"Reflection" is the word that many e-portfolio enthusiasts use to describe what they hope to spark in students. But that doesn't necessarily mean that students will spend hours in their rooms musing on their activities, says Ms. Chen.

"Quite frankly it doesn't happen that way," she says. "Meaningful reflection often includes dialogue and conversation with a coach, a mentor, an adviser, or a peer." That means that professors or peer advisers must get involved to help students decide what to include in their portfolios and how their activities fit together, she says. Some e-portfolio projects provide

sample questions that advisers can ask students to help them create their portfolios.

Getting a large number of professors involved is the most challenging part of starting a campuswide e-portfolio system, says Mark C. Farrelly, special-projects coordinator for the University of Washington's Educational Technology Development Group.

The university is planning to introduce an electronic-portfolio tool for all of its students this fall, though administrators will particularly promote its use to 3,500 incoming students who participate in an existing student-support program.

Do students really want to create portfolios? At Washington, support for the project came from the Student Technology Fee Committee, composed of about a dozen students, who chose to give more than \$90,000 from student fees to get the effort started.

H. Gorkem Kuterdem, a doctoral student at the university who is a member of the committee, says the project will benefit students -- as long as it remains optional.

"If a student is putting a portfolio together just to satisfy some graduation requirement, he or she might feel resentful about the process, and the end result will probably not be very useful," he says in an e-mail message. "On the other hand, I think that a willingly participating student would find her time well spent on putting together a coherent, inclusive portfolio which will help her discover strengths and weaknesses in her education."

Brenda E. Lambrecht, a senior at Alverno College who was one of the first students there to make an e-portfolio, agrees that the tool is useful only if a student buys into the idea. But she says that the process helped her -- and even drew some jealous comments from friends.

"They've looked at this portfolio and said to me, 'I wish we had something like that,'" she says.

John C. Ittelson, a professor of communication science and technology at California State University-Monterey Bay, is a leader of the Electronic Portfolio Action Committee. He says that as employers see the benefit of the portfolios in searching for employees, more and more students will demand that colleges offer the option.

"A few years ago the question was, 'Was every student going to have an e-mail account?'" says Mr. Ittelson. "I think fairly soon you're going to see that everyone is going to want to have some kind of Web space that represents their learning and their assessment."

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Background article from *The Chronicle*:

- [Kalamazoo Starts New Graduation Requirement: Create a Web Page](#) (05/23/1997)



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