

CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY

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ePortfolio Leaders: In Utah, A Community College Sets the Pace of Change

A Q & A with Salt Lake Community College ePortfolio leadership

- By Mary Grush
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Across the country, there are a few higher education institutions that have gained recognition as pioneers and leaders in the adoption of ePortfolios. Salt Lake Community College is one such institution. CT talked with Ryan Carstens, Associate Provost for Education and Community Partnerships, and David Hubert, ePortfolio Director and Professor of Political Science, about SLCC's ePortfolio initiative and its leadership in the state.

Mary Grush: What was the original vision for your institution's ePortfolio initiative?

David Hubert: There were actually several related visions, with three main motives as parts of the overall vision for ePortfolios:

One part of this vision was to use ePortfolio as a reform for our general education program. We have a cafeteria-style gen ed program, that most students were seeing as a set of unrelated courses to "get out of the way" before they got into their major. We really wanted them to experience gen ed as a more cohesive, coherent program. We thought that ePortfolio would be a way to do that, because we consider it to be a kind of a capstone "along the way" — but rather than having an actual capstone, we're constantly having students think about their courses and how they relate to each other while they are going through gen ed.

The second part of the vision had to do with student engagement and intentionality. We wanted students to be more engaged with their learning in gen ed, and we thought that the ePortfolio could help do that... Plus, we wanted students to be more intentional about the learning outcomes for general education. So, when students reflect in their ePortfolios, they are often asked to reflect on how they are progressing, or what pieces of evidence they have that indicate that they are progressing towards certain learning outcomes. Also in terms of student engagement, we are trying to get students not to simply do assignments and forget about them, but to archive them and revisit them as they take other classes later. The third part of the vision was the wish to directly assess our general education program. Prior to the implementation of ePortfolio we did only indirect assessment of gen ed, through surveys of students — now we are able to assess samples of student work directly. It's really been eye-opening to see our gen ed program from the point of view of what students actually do, as reflected in their ePortfolios.

Grush: When did your institution begin implementing and using ePortfolio technology?

Hubert: We started piloting ePortfolios in 2005, at the course level. We piloted different platforms with a few instructors — I was one. Later, when I was Dean of General Education, we decided we had enough experience at the classroom level to put a proposal together to

make ePortfolio a general education course requirement. That was approved in 2009 and went into effect in Summer, 2010.

Grush: How has this requirement affected general education at SLCC, and how would you describe student adoption?

Hubert: We can certainly say that ePortfolio has greatly helped us assess the gen ed program. We're getting really good data, and we do a survey now every May with a sample of graduating students' ePortfolios. We do an assessment report that goes to the college community, looking at strengths and weaknesses in student attainment of certain learning outcomes.

Initially, in terms of student reaction, they were somewhat skeptical, and they didn't really understand what an ePortfolio was. But, now that we are three years into it, we're really kind of over the hump, and ePortfolio is starting to become a cultural marker for the institution. Now, it's an expectation that everyone "does" ePortfolio, and students are learning from each other how to build really effective ePortfolios.

Grush: Is ePortfolio use increasing at your institution?

Hubert: Our ePortfolios started in general education, but it's now expanding to a number of our career and technical education programs, as well as into the majors.

Ryan Carstens: And it's two-fold: Students are seeing the utility of this for jobs, especially in some of the CTE programs where the ePortfolio can be a sample of work. But we also see it having implications for employers, who are seeking quality employees in the soft skills areas. By using the ePortfolio to target the gen ed learning outcomes — critical thinking, reflection, and so forth — we think we will have students go out better prepared to be quality employees and not just skilled in terms of technical training.

Grush: How is ePortfolio adoption around the state? Is SLCC a model? Were you the first in your state to adopt this technology?

Ryan Carstens: We were the first higher education institution in our state to adopt ePortfolios. Actually Salt Lake is one of the first in the country. Of course, there are several institutions [and institution types nationally] viewed as pioneers. But we are certainly out there early at the community college level.

We now see several other institutions adopting this around the state, and we are opening discussions about ePortfolios for transfer students. So we are starting to have some state discussions about ePortfolio.

In Utah we have a state coordinating board (The Utah System of Higher Education) and within that, a state general education task force made of representatives from each of the higher ed Utah schools engaged in the general education efforts at their institutions. They are looking at ePortfolio as an instrument — for some of the same reasons David articulated: not only to help with assessment but also to go after general education learning outcomes. We have adopted LEAP from AAC&U as a framework for what we try to do in the state for general education outcomes; we've also looked at degree qualification profiles (DQP).

Grush: So ePortfolio serves as an assessment instrument at that level?

Carstens: Yes, it does, in a broad sense. For example, if a state chooses to use DQP as a framework — maybe looking at how an Associate degree lines up with the profile — you are essentially looking at the college-wide learning outcomes of degrees. And as soon as you start walking down that road of trying to identify all that as a state, and agree about it among institutions, you are at the next phase and saying, "How do we *know* whether we

succeeded?" Now you are talking about assessment ("How do we *know*?") — that's really where ePortfolio fits in here. And there's going to be broader interest among schools in supporting that framework discussion with ePortfolio.

Grush: Do you have any concrete examples of using ePortfolios in that way?

Hubert: We have three DQP projects going right now: one with business majors and the University of Utah; one with geoscience majors and Utah State University; and the other with teacher education in all of the transfer schools. They are all doing DQP negotiations, and they are all going to be using the ePortfolios to document student learning.

Grush: What about ePortfolio's role closer to the student and to student learning, and to pedagogy?

Hubert: I'm on the board of AAEEBL, and I go to all of their conferences and to the ePortfolio part of AAC&U's general meeting every year ... One of the issues that seems to be pretty common, is that some institutions are thinking that they can sign on to an ePortfolio platform, plug it in, and it's just another piece of technology. But really, if it's done well, ePortfolios should change the way faculty and students interact with each other, in a positive way.

It takes quite a bit of professional development effort to get faculty to think about ePortfolio as a pedagogy rather than a technology.

Carstens: The real frontier for us is in the teaching and learning discussions, and not in "how to" use the tech. That's where we have a lot of opportunities to broaden our understanding.

About the Author

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