TO:	My Colleagues
FR:	David Hubert , Associate VP for General and Developmental Education
RE:	**Thinking Out Loud About E-portfolios at SLCC**
DATE:	November 2, 2008

As I talk with various people about e-portfolios and look at e-portfolio platforms and actual examples from other institutions, I can't help but think that we have a golden opportunity to empower students with e-portfolios and also serve programmatic and institutional needs for assessment. The opportunity is provided by the nexus of several recent developments, including the arrival on our campuses of the first generation of students who have grown up in a technologically connected world, the impetus from accrediting agencies for effective assessment of learning outcomes, and the recognition of many in higher education that colleges and universities need to help students become more active and intentional in their studies.

Starting Points:

First, let's start with a few basic principles that I hope we can all agree on with respect to e-portfolios. They should:

- Be provided by institutions of higher education, but **"owned" by students**.

- **Be portable** so students can use them even after they leave a particular institution.

- **Allow for student creativity** within a semi-structured setting that will also **enable institutions to gather assessment data**.

- **Integrate into the curriculum** in such a way that is real (i.e., not artificial or an add-on) and meaningful to students and to the mission of higher education.

- Be centered on **enabling students** to A) archive evidence of having achieved—or progressed toward achieving—student learning outcomes, B) reflect on their learning, and C) express themselves to a variety of potential audiences.

- **Minimize effort** by having the student e-portfolio be the basis for both program and institutional-level assessment.

- **Be easy to use and support, cheap, scalable, flexible and able to incorporate evolving technology**.

Pitfalls:

Next, what ought we *not* to do? Aside from not doing the opposite of the bullets above, I think it would also be a killer if we do any of the following:

- Use e-portfolios primarily for accountability and accreditation purposes instead of grounding them in effective pedagogy and curricular design.

- Use e-portfolios as a replacement for transcripts in the transfer process.

- Create a uniform and rigid e-portfolio system where one size fits all students, programs, and institutions.

- Fail to sustain a move to e-portfolios over time. Either we're serious about it or we're not. Let's not waste anyone's time and effort by starting a process we're not prepared to see become a reality.

What We've Done So Far

Under the leadership of Suzanne Topp, Professor of Mathematics, and Helen Cox, Associate Vice President of General and International Education, SLCC began an e-portfolio pilot project in the Spring of 2008. This pilot is funded by a grant from the Utah System of Higher Education. Under the pilot, faculty in English and Math have used several e-portfolio platforms in their courses. The pilot continues this academic year, with additional faculty and disciplines involved. In addition, fifteen faculty are participating in a pilot specifically addressed at using e-portfolios in the faculty evaluation and tenure process. We also have a small pilot of students using e-portfolios to archive and reflect on assignments across all of their courses and co-curricular activities.

Key Issues We Have to Resolve

Platforms—Electronic Portfolios are becoming quite popular in higher education, and a number of platforms exist with which to create e-portfolios. These choices appear to fall into the following categories:

1. *Extensions of Commercial Learning Management Systems*. Companies that provide learning management systems such as Blackboard and Angel have e-portfolio modules that institutions can add on for an additional fee. These e-portfolios are typically easy for students to use because they can simultaneously submit assignments to their courses and to their portfolio. The capabilities of these e-portfolios improve with each iteration of the LMS. I worry, however, about two things with respect to these types of e-portfolios. First, will students develop a sense

of ownership of their portfolio if it is integral to a learning management system? Second, they seem to be more of a one-size-fits-all approach.

2. *Hosted Commercial E-portfolios.* A number of enterprises like X-folio, Digication, and Epsilen offer e-portfolio solutions for a price. My impression so far is that the price and the quality vary considerably. I haven't liked what I've seen of X-folio. I like Digication, and am using it in my student and faculty pilots. I have no experience yet with Epsilen. These e-portfolios should be relatively easy to implement, since we don't have to worry about hardware, software updates, and so forth. Budget could be a problem if we scaled up to having all students with an e-portfolio.

3. *Hosted Non-Commercial E-portfolios.* There are several free basic e-portfolio solutions such as Google Sites and Wordpress. Although not designed specifically for e-portfolios, they do allow students to create attractive and informative e-portfolios. The price is right. My initial impression is that Google Sites is easier to use than Wordpress. One downside of this solution is that these types of e-portfolios have no assessment functionalities that I know of.

4. *Open Source Solutions*. Open source software like Sakai and Moodle allow students to create e-portfolios. The institution would need to dedicate IT resources to do the programming and maintenance required for an open source solution.

Integration into Our Curriculum—This issue keeps bouncing around in my head, because it's a critical one that is fraught with so many dangers. Any time you want to start tweaking the curriculum, you'd better have your body armor layered over your asbestos underwear. E-portfolios need to be integrated into the curriculum in order for students to take them seriously. E-portfolios need to be integrated into the curriculum because it's the pedagogically sound thing to do, rather than adding them on like some sort of after thought.

What would it mean to integrate e-portfolios into our curriculum? Some possibilities include:

1. Create a one-credit Gen Ed foundation course where (among other things) students would be introduced to e-portfolios and a two-credit Gen Ed capstone course where student's e-portfolios would be graded. How would we do this without adding credits? From where would we take those credits? Imagine an academic struggle that would make the Battle of Hastings look like a kiddie carnival—I'm talking blood in the streets, arrows through eyes, the whole works.

2. Create a mandatory First Year Experience where (among other things) students would be introduced to e-portfolios and require Interdisciplinary (ID) courses to grade e-portfolios. Again, where would we get the credits to create the First Year Experience? Who would teach all those sections? Would ID faculty baulk at having to grade entire portfolios?

3. Replace the Computer Literacy (CL) requirement with an e-portfolio requirement. Students don't get GE credit for CL anyway, even though it is a graduation requirement. One objection, obviously, is that many faculty will argue that CL is still a valid requirement and ought not to be scrapped. Another objection is that we want students to be working on their e-portfolios throughout their time with us instead of cobbling one together right at the end of their studies, and simply instituting an e-portfolio requirement won't encourage students to work on them on their own.

What is the Utah System Doing?—It's plenty difficult to figure out what we at SLCC want to do, but we also need to fit within whatever e-portfolio system USHE develops. But since USHE's plans are not at this point well developed, it raises the question of whether it makes sense for a particular institution to move forward with e-portfolios, knowing that there would be the possibility that what it creates will not fit with the Utah system in the future. If SLCC was that cutting edge institution, we could end up having to dismantle what we've built and reconstruct it according to USHE requirements. Of course, there is the possibility that we create an e-portfolio system so spectacular at SLCC that the Utah system says, "*That's* what we'll adopt system wide."

My Recommendations

I think we would have a truly world-class e-portfolio system if we did the following:

- **Establish College-wide, program-level, and course-level learning outcomes**. [Done!]

- **Mandate a non-credit General Education requirement** that each student must "Complete an E-portfolio" in order to receive an AA, AS, or AAS degree.

- Figure out how to **help students get started with their e-portfolios**. Obviously, some will take to it like fish to water, but others will have difficulty. I'm not wedded to a particular solution, but some possibilities include:

  o Have the Computer Literacy courses help students get started.
  o Have the LE 1020 Essentials of College Study courses help students get started.
  o Create a set of online tutorials for how to get started.
  o Have Student Services put together some e-portfolio workshops.
  o Add e-portfolio guidance to the Learning Center, Learning Resources, and/or Writing Center services.

- Agree among ourselves on a **standard set of categories that a student e-portfolio must have**. These might include sections like:

    o   About Me

    o   My Learning Goals

    o   Learning Outcomes

    o   Learning Outside of Class

    o   Resume

    In the About Me and My Learning Goals sections, students would be largely free to express themselves as they wish. In the Learning Outcomes section, students would need to archive artifacts and reflect on their attainment of program-specific and Gen Ed learning outcomes. In the Learning Outside of Class section, students could document and reflect on their co-curricular activities, their work experience as it relates to their education, study abroad trips, service-learning experiences, field studies, and so forth. In the Resume section, students would start and continually update their resume.

- Agree among ourselves that **students can use one of several possible e-portfolio platforms** so long as they agree to structure them according to the "template" described in the previous bullet. Students might be allowed to choose between, say, two possible free hosted sites and two possible commercial e-portfolios. The institution could subsidize part of the cost of the commercial e-portfolios. The student could change their platform at any time, but would need to migrate all their files and reflections from one platform to the other. [I make this recommendation largely on the assumption that it would be difficult for all departments to agree on one optimal platform. However, a clear problem with this recommendation is this: how would we have a central registry of e-portfolios to keep track of them all and to sample for assessment? Could we add a Banner field for the URL for each student's e-portfolio?]

- Have students sign a release indicating that if their portfolio is randomly selected for program or institution-level assessment, the College must be given access to it for a specified period of time and the students will be asked to refrain from making changes to the e-portfolio during the assessment period (let's say, during the month of June). In addition, inform all students selected for assessment that their names will be entered into a drawing for prizes.

- **Here's the trippy recommendation**: Require all Gen Ed courses to go through the curriculum process with a revised Course Curriculum Outline indicating that the course has at least one *signature assignment* *that will be graded after the student*

puts the assignment in his/her e-portfolio and reflects on it.[1] The student would provide the link to the e-portfolio to the instructor, who would then go into the e-portfolio to grade the assignment. Moreover **all Gen Ed courses must also have a small holistic assessment** of the student's overall e-portfolio that is included in the course grade. This assessment would be a small portion (I'm thinking about 5%) of the student's grade in that course. The Gen Ed committee would create a rubric that faculty would apply in giving students a grade for the holistic e-portfolio assessment. The rubric would be shared with students so they would know what *all faculty across the curriculum* will be looking for in e-portfolios. [Why is this recommendation trippy? Because it doesn't require us to find credits anywhere, it essentially requires students to build their e-portfolio as they take courses, and it involves all Gen Ed faculty in thinking about how their assignments will help students demonstrate key learning outcomes.]

- Create several **annual awards for e-portfolios**. The awards would be prestigious and have a cash prize. Categories might be Best Overall E-Portfolio, Best Use of Multi-Media in an E-Portfolio, Best Reflection in an E-Portfolio, and so forth. Faculty could nominate particular e-portfolios by a certain date, and a committee would make the selection of winners.

- Create **assessment rubrics** for student learning outcomes. Select a random sample of e-portfolios and apply the rubrics to the artifacts students have put in them as evidence of having met each particular learning outcome. Gather groups of faculty to assess the evidence for different learning outcomes—one group for critical thinking, one group for written communication, one group for quantitative literacy, and so forth. Do the assessment in June and pay faculty a stipend to be a reviewer. Institutional Research gathers the results and writes an assessment report in time for Welcome Back day in August.

- **What if a student transfers from SLCC to another college or university in the state of Utah?** Well, if all higher education institutions did the same thing as SLCC, the student would take his/her e-portfolio with them and simply add pages to the My Learning Goals, Learning Outcomes and Learning Outside of Class sections of their e-portfolios. The student's new college or university would have its own signature assignments and would assess their learning outcomes in a similar manner that we at SLCC assessed ours.

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[1] A signature assignment is one that addresses two or more of the student learning outcomes and constitutes a real-world application of knowledge. Faculty already give signature assignments, but they may not be used to this particular terminology. Examples of signature assignments include final projects that incorporate course concepts; service-learning or field study experiences; writing assignments that tap not only discipline knowledge but also another learning outcome such as effective communication or critical thinking; or a realistic problem that students need to solve using the established knowledge or skills in a particular field.