

What it takes for ePortfolio to Make a Difference: The Catalyst Framework, Student Learning & Institutional Change

Bret Eynon, Laura M. Gambino & Judit Török

ePortfolios have demonstrated broad potential to play a crucial role in helping colleges and universities meet the pressing challenges of contemporary higher education. To realize this potential, however, campus leaders need a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for addressing the multi-faceted tasks of building a successful ePortfolio initiative. The Catalyst Framework provides an invaluable resource that can make a difference for educators on campuses nationwide.

Meeting a Critical Need

The past decade has seen a dramatic expansion in ePortfolio's profile in American higher education. Data from the 2011 [Campus Computing Project](#) report documents the growth of ePortfolio use on campuses nationwide. Between 2003 and 2010, across all sectors of higher education, the use of ePortfolio more than tripled. More recently, data from the 2013 [ECAR](#) survey suggests that 53% of American college students now report using an ePortfolio during their time at college.

This growing interest in ePortfolio is not surprising, given the trends shaping US higher education. The explosion of new digital learning environments, heightened emphasis on student success and completion, and broad debates over accountability and assessment are disrupting higher education structures and challenging educational leaders. Working with increasingly diverse student bodies, educators must deepen and improve student learning – and at the same time, develop new ways to examine and articulate their contributions to the learning process.

An integrative ePortfolio initiative can play an invaluable role in helping colleges and universities adapt and respond to such changes. In the Catalyst essay, [The Difference ePortfolio Makes](#), we report on an emerging body of evidence suggesting that ePortfolio can indeed offer positive benefits such as advancing student success, deepening student learning, and supporting transformative outcomes assessment, professional development, and institutional change initiatives in higher education. As Randy Bass writes in the Winter 2014 issue of *Peer Review*:

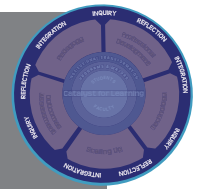
In a landscape of unbundled educational services and increasingly granular learning experiences, ePortfolios are agents of integration. They are demonstrating the capacity to create an integrative and coherent context for students to make sense of their learning and for institutions to get an unmatched, holistic view into the impact of their curricular and institutional designs.¹

This potential, however, is not always realized. On many campuses, ePortfolio projects face key challenges—from choosing the right platform to providing technical support, building faculty engagement, developing

What is an ePortfolio?

[Click here for an introduction to the ePortfolio field, outlining different types of ePortfolios and defining key terms.](#)

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effective pedagogy, and balancing conflicting expectations. There is a deeper issue as well – ePortfolio initiatives require coordinated efforts on multiple fronts, cross-institutional collaborations that can challenge long-standing practices and assumptions. As a result, many campus ePortfolio initiatives are short-lived; others survive, but never grow and thrive at the level intended by their supporters.

Part of the problem is that many campuses launch ePortfolio implementations with unclear goals, based on limited understanding of what ePortfolio initiatives can accomplish. Campuses lack access to comprehensive discussions of implementation issues and well-organized collections of campus-tested strategies and practices. They have no guide to help them plan the complex effort needed to achieve success.

While the ePortfolio field has matured, no comprehensive and evidence-based framework has yet emerged to guide institutional and initiative leaders as they design and grow their ePortfolio initiatives. There is a broad need for an overarching conceptual structure that embraces and explains the complexity of ePortfolio initiatives, the strategic potential of their integrative nature, and the rich and evolving nature of ePortfolio itself as an emerging set of practices.

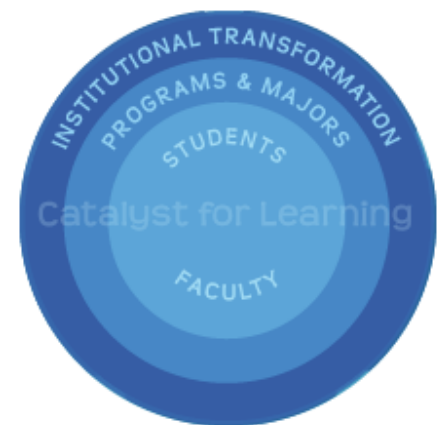
This resource site responds to that need. And its conceptual structure, the Catalyst Framework can help campuses think through not only their goals, but also the collaborative strategies ePortfolio initiatives require. The Catalyst Framework is designed to further the capacity of campuses to use ePortfolio to address pressing needs and make a meaningful difference to student, faculty and institutional learning.

Connect to Learning and the Catalyst Framework

In the Connect to Learning project, ePortfolio leaders on 24 campuses nationwide worked together to document and share their practices, exploring this question: “What strategies and approaches do successful ePortfolio campuses employ to launch, build, and sustain their ePortfolio initiatives?” The answer to this question, the Catalyst Framework suggests, has multiple layers involving pedagogy and institutional practice. Due in part to the longitudinal and integrative nature of ePortfolio, meaningful initiatives must encompass not only the practice of individual faculty but also programs, departments and other institutional groupings. This brings ePortfolio initiatives into sometimes challenging territory. As Michigan’s Melissa Peet has suggested, much of the conversation about ePortfolio is “really about organizational change.”ⁱⁱ Consequently, successful ePortfolio initiatives tend to be multi-faceted, active across many dimensions of campus structure and culture.

The Learning Core: The hypothesis emerging from our research states that effective integrative ePortfolio initiatives address at least three levels of campus life and learning:

1. The active engagement of students, faculty, and other front line staff (advisors, student affairs staff, etc.) who shape core student learning experiences;



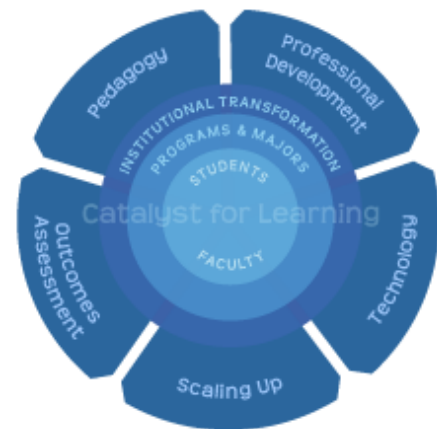
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2. Departments/Programs/Centers – the crucial organizational units around which campus life (academic and co-curricular) is most often organized; and,
3. Institutional Culture – the broad campus-wide mission, policy, stakeholders, and culture that structures and conditions educational practice.

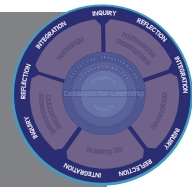
Interlocking Sectors: C2L research further suggests that the most effective integrative ePortfolio initiatives address these core learning levels with work that takes place in five interlocking sectors:

- **Integrative Social Pedagogy** – the theory and practice that guide the use of ePortfolio to support and deepen student learning, including practices related to ePortfolio for career and advisement. C2L focuses particularly on practices that involve integrative learning and social pedagogy, and center on reflection as a key to deep learning. ([For more on Integrative Social ePortfolio Pedagogy and Practice, click here.](#))
- **Professional Development** – the active processes (workshops, seminars, on-line tutorials and institutes) designed to help faculty and staff learn about ePortfolio technology and pedagogy and more effectively advance student learning and growth. ([For more on ePortfolio-related Professional Development, click here.](#))
- **Outcomes Assessment**– the ways campuses use ePortfolio and authentic classroom work to support holistic assessment of programs and General Education outcomes. ([For more on ePortfolio for Outcomes Assessment, click here.](#))
- **Technology** – the choices campuses make about ePortfolio platforms and related support mechanisms can have a profound impact on the shape and the success of the campus ePortfolio initiative. ([For more on ePortfolio as a Technology, click here.](#))
- **Scaling Up:** Planning, Building, and Evaluating an ePortfolio Initiative – the active role of campus ePortfolio leaders – and the way they work with students, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders to make the connections that can catalyze institutional change. ([For more on Scaling Up ePortfolio, click here.](#))



These sectors are highly interconnected. ePortfolio-related professional development can focus on pedagogy, technology or outcomes assessment – or combinations of the three. The choices made by campuses about ePortfolio technology can facilitate (or hinder) the growth of integrative ePortfolio pedagogy and shape the student learning experience. The ability of campus ePortfolio proponents to effectively engage departments and college leaders shapes the curricular and cultural context for learning at all levels. The relationships among these elements are complex and profoundly significant for the work of campus ePortfolio teams.

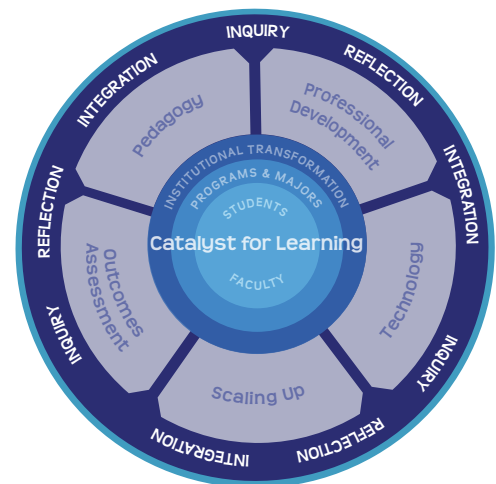
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The C2L hypothesis is, therefore, that the most successful campus ePortfolio initiatives work at multiple levels of the institution, from classroom learning to programmatic and institutional change. Across these levels, their work addresses interlocking issues of pedagogy, professional development, technology, assessment, and institutional change.

Design Principles: Embracing and helping to unify sectors of the Framework are three overarching design principles: Inquiry, Reflection, and Integration. C2L research suggests that the practices of effective ePortfolio initiatives demonstrate a more or less explicit use of these design principles not only in their pedagogy, but in other sectors as well:

- **Inquiry Learning** is a well-developed pedagogy involving generating questions, examining evidence, and solving authentic problems. For students, ePortfolios can be understood as an inquiry into their own learning. In sophisticated ePortfolio-related professional development programs, faculty, too, are engaged in collective inquiry into practice. Programs and institutions use ePortfolio-based Outcomes Assessment as part of their inquiry into learning and teaching.
- **Reflection**, as understood by Dewey and others, stands at the core of deep learning, key to processing experience and the generation of meaning. Reflection is widely understood as essential to powerful ePortfolio practice, and becoming a reflective practitioner is key to the success of many professional development and outcomes assessment efforts.
- **Integrative Learning** involves connecting learning across time, space, and discipline, and developing the capacity to transfer knowledge and skill from one setting to another. Faculty and institutions as well as students must work to advance integration, thereby overcoming fragmentation and more intentionally applying insights and innovations to the broader process of building more cohesive and effective educational institutions. ePortfolios and Outcomes Assessment can be powerful processes in this regard. ([For more on Inquiry, Reflection, and Integration as Design Principles, click here.](#))



While shaping powerful practice with students, these principles can help guide effective practice in other sectors of the Catalyst model, as well: Professional Development, Outcomes Assessment, Technology, and Scaling Up. Consequently, in the Catalyst graphic, these principles form an embracing ring with connective corridors linking all sectors and layers of dynamic ePortfolio initiatives.

C2L research suggests that thriving campus ePortfolio initiatives use the Inquiry-Reflection-Integration (I-R-I) design principles in practices across aspects of campus life. These campus projects work to focus learning at all layers of the institution: advancing student learning and success; making student learning more visible to faculty and staff, accreditors, stakeholders, and students themselves; and helping colleges develop as more connected and adaptive learning organizations.

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Conclusion

The Catalyst Framework helps us to understand that building and sustaining a successful ePortfolio initiative is in many ways an institutional change effort. As Bass powerfully argued in a 2012 Educause article, “For any large-scale version of ePortfolios to be successful, they will require at the program and institutional level... a goals-driven, systems-thinking approach that requires multiple players to execute successfully.” Building an integrative ePortfolio initiative involves intentional and far-reaching institutional change. “We must fully grasp,” Bass writes, “that students will learn to integrate deeply and meaningfully only insofar as we design a curriculum that cultivates that; and designing such a curriculum requires that we similarly plan, strategize and execute integratively across the boundaries within our institutions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Emerging from the examination of campus practices, the Catalyst Framework helps us “plan, strategize, and execute integratively” as we develop effective ePortfolio initiatives. Analyzing the developmental stories and practices of C2L campuses, it illuminates specific strategies and the overarching, coordinated attention to diverse sectors of campus life needed to build effective ePortfolio implementations. While inherently challenging, requiring careful design and cross-campus collaboration, such initiatives can play a powerful role in advancing the learning of students, faculty, and higher education institutions themselves.

The Catalyst Framework provides a comprehensive conceptual structure for understanding the developmental work of campus ePortfolio initiatives. As such, it serves as the organizing structure for the practices and stories shared by C2L campuses. The essays found in each Framework sector analyze and offer guided access to the strategies developed by leading ePortfolio campuses. It is our hope that this rich resource will help ePortfolio initiates and veterans alike more effectively and intentionally address what it takes for ePortfolio to make a difference.

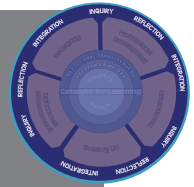
ePortfolio is not an end in and of itself. Rather, ePortfolio initiatives represent a rare opportunity, a way colleges and universities can meet pressing educational needs for student success and deep learning, institutional innovation and coherence, accountability and the development of a campuswide learning culture. An ePortfolio initiative requires leaders with grounded vision, informed design, and commitment to thoughtful adaptive collaboration. The Catalyst Framework can be a powerful resource to such leaders and their campuses as they seek to realize ePortfolio’s promise for higher education.

Citation

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