

## Scaling Strategies and ePortfolio as a Catalyst for Change

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### Bridging Paradigms

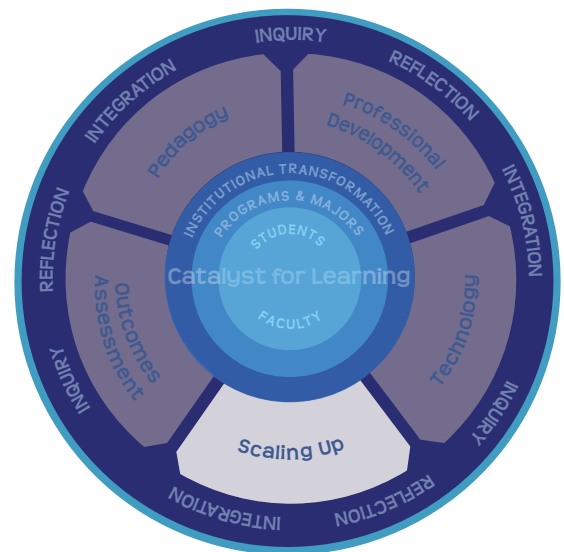
Developing and scaling ePortfolio initiatives poses complicated and challenging design problems. ePortfolio practices must straddle established and emerging paradigms of higher education. The established paradigm privileges the formal curriculum, courses, programs and majors; it emphasizes knowledge transfer and cognition, delivered through curricular design that is generally atomistic, linear, and built on inputs. The emerging paradigm comprehends the importance of both curriculum and co-curriculum, focuses on student learning as an outcome, and understands learning to be fundamentally integrative and iterative. Bridging these paradigms, the process of scaling an ePortfolio initiative can advance the emergence of a new vision for higher education.

By scaling, we mean the strategies and approaches by which ePortfolio projects begin within small segments of an institution and then grow, as additional faculty, courses, and programs begin to work with ePortfolio. As it scales within institutions, ePortfolio increasingly serves as a network of connections -- among students and faculty, and programs and majors, and integrating with institutional initiatives, such as General Education, outcomes assessment, and high-impact practices. Through these connections, ePortfolio initiatives inform and deepen emerging pedagogical practices and introduce increasingly rich views of student learning into the everyday flows of teaching, assessment, and curriculum design.

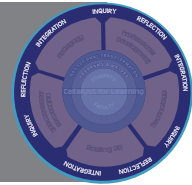
In this deepening effect, ePortfolio pulls institutions towards a learning-centered paradigm. The third [Catalyst for Learning Proposition](#) addresses the difference ePortfolio can make in catalyzing such institutional change:

**Proposition #3: ePortfolio catalyzes learning-centered institutional change: *Focusing attention on student learning and prompting purposeful connection across departments and divisions, ePortfolio initiatives can catalyze campus cultural and structural change, helping the institution move towards becoming an adaptive learning organization.***

As catalysts for organizational change, ePortfolio initiatives can help institutions meet the challenges of developing a learning culture and navigating a turbulent higher education landscape. The explosion of interest in massive online learning, adaptive learning systems, learning analytics and granular certification all reflect the same paradigm shift that values access to learning, alignment of outcomes and personalization of learning and education. However, these forces threaten to advance the paradigm in disintegrative ways, unbundling education into a series of disparate and disconnected experiences; in turn, this unbundling creates challenges for efforts to advance local institutional value, the impact of community on learning, and the holistic dimensions



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of education. ePortfolio can help institutions shape a more intentional and integrative strategy for negotiating the potential disruptions of the higher education landscape.

The strategies for scaling ePortfolio become particularly salient in this potentially disruptive landscape; consequently, their capacity to bridge to an emergent learning paradigm significantly enhances their value in catalyzing organizational and institutional change.

## Thinking in Ecosystems

Innovative ePortfolio practices can help solve problems and meet challenges that institutions did not know they had thirty years ago. This is where the true power of ePortfolio may lie—in its capacity to push toward new practices, and a new paradigm, while at the same time operating under the design constraints of current structures. ePortfolio leaders see scaling strategies as opportunities to connect ePortfolio initiatives to the core priorities for building a culture of learning in their institutions. These priorities might include:

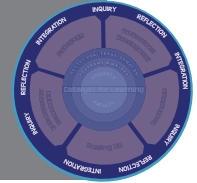
- An increasingly robust vision of General Education that goes beyond knowledge areas to skills and dispositions;
- A vision of the first-year experience that looks very broadly at student success;
- A new priority on transparency and alignment of learning goals among courses, programs and the institution, also including (but not limited to) the complementary pressures on assessment and accountability; and
- A growing appreciation for integrative learning and experiences, including curricular opportunities such as learning communities and capstone experiences.

For the most part, these are new priorities for higher education, emerging in recent decades as part of a broad shift to a paradigm that is learning-focused, outcomes-driven, and student-centered.

Co-evolving with these expanding practices, ePortfolios provide a context for bringing together stakeholders from across boundaries, creating a network of connections that respond to the ecosystemic nature of institutions. By their integrative nature, ePortfolio initiatives foster collaborations across silos, connecting faculty, academic staff, student affairs professionals, advising, writing centers, technologists, librarians, employers, alumni, internship coordinators, community partners, and many more. As the [Catalyst Framework](#) details, successful initiatives also partner with departments and programs, General Education, outcomes assessment, and high-impact practices, especially First-Year and Capstone Experiences, as well as service learning, undergraduate research and study abroad.

It is not merely these individual connections that are critical to the scaling and development of ePortfolio initiatives but the network quality, or interrelationship, of these connections that speaks to the intrinsic qualities of ePortfolio and the strategic opportunities it offers. For example, there is a critical relationship between the capacity of ePortfolio to enable students to more easily make connections among the courses in a degree program and between General Education courses and program courses, on one hand; and on the other, the

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capacity of faculty and programs, through their connection to ePortfolio initiatives, to think about the coherence of their curriculum and its relationship to the broader curriculum.

Similarly, on some campuses, ePortfolio provides the apparatus that links First-Year Experiences, General Education programs and outcomes assessment -- efforts that are all too often compartmentalized. ePortfolio initiatives can build connections among such efforts and, by providing data and authentic evidence of student learning, help them leverage support from allies in administration, the faculty governance structure, or the strategic planning process.

Co-evolving with the practices of the emerging learning paradigm, ePortfolio initiatives strengthen a network of essential, reinforcing connections. Integrating ePortfolio practice into institutional culture helps to create and catalyze an institutional ethos of learning.

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### ePortfolio as a Catalyst for Strategic Change

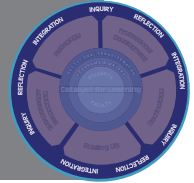
Perhaps the most fundamental connections that ePortfolios forge are between institutionally-defined experiences (i.e. courses, assignments and goals defined by faculty, programs, majors, schools) and the lived experience of the student, as ePortfolios are a fundamentally student-owned, integrative learning space. That connection is the first premise of ePortfolio's capacity for being a catalyst for change because it provides a context for working both incrementally and transformatively at the same time.

What does it mean to be a catalyst for change? What's the vision of change that is prefigured by ePortfolio? There are at least three layers to this change that have been implied in the discussion so far:

1. **Integrative learning culture:** The shift to a student-organized view of learning, bridging curriculum and co-curriculum, where learners pull from knowledge resources and offerings to construct an increasingly customized educational experience that is both professionally productive and personally meaningful.
2. **Integrative learning analytics:** The development of an institutional conversation on student learning that can provide a framework for integrating data on student achievement and move the institution towards a learning-centered culture and structure.
3. **Strategic change:** A context for institutions to engage faculty and other stakeholders in institutional change and to define and renew their local institutional value and character.

These all bear on scaling strategies for ePortfolio initiatives. For example, in the sphere of [professional development](#), ePortfolio invites faculty and staff to understand the student learning space differently—while at the same time anchoring ePortfolio assignments and reflection practices in their course goals. Yet, ePortfolio

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by nature provides faculty a way to think beyond their courses, both to connect course goals to programs goals, and potentially to connect course content to student experiences.

ePortfolio also provides a structured and concrete context for program and department leaders to think about alignment of program goals, course goals, course assignments, and student work. Faculty and staff engaged in ePortfolio initiatives regularly address issues of alignment among course and program goals, assignments and student work, assessment criteria, learning analytics, and institutional outcomes. This is one of the ways

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that ePortfolio practice nurtures learning cultures that “grow organically from the ground up—from pilot to broader implementation”.

Through engagement with institutional planning and strategic initiatives, ePortfolio can help institutions think about investments made in structures that promote integrative experiences—in large part by making visible the impact of dimensions of the educational experience that are often invisible, or at best, marginal. This visibility makes possible what has been called *institutional learning*, and it is crucial to the process by which ePortfolio bridges to the learning paradigm.

### Enabling a ‘positive restlessness’ about Student Learning

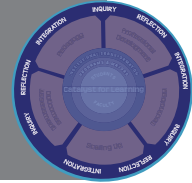
In a 2005 publication, George Kuh, et. al.<sup>i</sup>, identified the characteristics of schools that outperform expectations with higher than predicted graduation rates and higher than predicted NSSE scores. They list features that foster student engagement and persistence:

- A “living” mission and “lived” educational philosophy
- An unshakeable focus on student learning
- Environments adapted for educational enrichment
- Clearly marked pathways for student success
- An improvement-oriented ethos
- Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success

These institutions, they found, share an “ethic that permeates the campuses—a tapestry of values and beliefs that reflect the institutions’ willingness to take on matters of substance consistent with their priorities. Indeed they exude a sense of ‘positive restlessness’ in how they think about themselves and what they aspire to be.”<sup>ii</sup>

This kind of positive restlessness and ethos are difficult to mount and to sustain. In most institutions, it is an

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ongoing challenge to find ways to realize cycles of systematic improvement, based on rich evidence of student learning, within the fabric of everyday practice. This is difficult enough to achieve within programs, let alone across boundaries of all the areas of the institution that influence student learning. Although this kind of focus is highly valued, it is often perceived as pressure to “do assessment” being imposed from the top down, added on to faculty work, and therefore proving difficult to sustain.

ePortfolio can serve as a catalyst for change precisely by providing a set of practices and connections that enable an institution to carry out an unshakeable focus on student learning and a shared responsibility for educational quality and student success in ways that connect to faculty, students, and programs. This speaks to the efforts throughout C2L to closely tie ePortfolio to outcomes assessment in ways that fit with faculty culture and can be sustained beyond periodic scrambles for accreditation or pressures for accountability. They can serve to bridge, in Helen Barrett’s distinction, “assessment of learning” with “assessment for learning” (see [Outcomes Assessment](#)), arriving at a new framing, what Darren Cambridge has called “Assessment for Institutional Learning.”<sup>iii</sup>

This is an especially valuable framework in the context of rising interest in “learning analytics” that can be harvested from virtual learning systems, such as Learning Management Systems and adaptive learning environments. As useful as these analytics can be in giving a picture of certain dimensions for student activity and attainment within circumscribed contexts of instruction, they are insufficient by themselves for giving a portrait of the whole learner and the arc of an education characterized by learning that takes place in a wide variety of settings. Offering a different type of data and a more holistic perspective, ePortfolios can serve as

an integrative space for drawing together learning analytics from multiple sources, both from the perspective of the student (empowering learners to read and contextualize their own analytics) and of the institution (enabling programs to see alignment of parts to wholes).

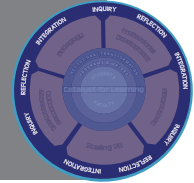
In order for this kind of integrative learning culture to thrive on campuses, it has to function at multiple levels simultaneously and coherently, from course improvement to program improvement to institutional learning. This ecosystemic view of assessment can be significantly enabled by ePortfolio, which can serve as a connector or circulatory system for giving multiple stakeholders a continuous, structured flow of evidence (including student work, student reflection, and faculty and staff reflection) on how students are achieving institutional goals.

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### Scaling ePortfolio for the Re-centered Curriculum

As we have seen throughout the Connect to Learning campuses, ePortfolio can help institutions meet the challenges of building a culture of learning in multiple ways. ePortfolio prefigures an important part of what a

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learning-centered institution would look like by affording a view of student learning organized primarily around the student experience, linked to learning goals, with connections mapped across courses and experiences, and over time. As discussed in this essay and throughout the [Catalyst Site](#), this serves as a critical bridge to an emerging learning paradigm that, at its best, operates through a network of connections and can act as a catalyst for change—change that is both incremental and transformative at the same time.

Yet, even as higher education shifts to this emerging learning paradigm, there are tensions and diverging impulses that constitute the ecology of higher education. These include a growing focus on student success, completion, and employability; widespread emphasis on outcomes assessment accountability that drive standardized testing and easily obtained metrics of attainment; and an accelerating interest in modularizing education so that it is more portable, flexible, and affordable.

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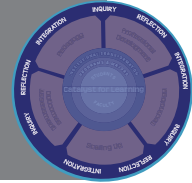
These impulses are set against many of the values present in ePortfolio implementations, including a robust democratic vision around the values of a liberal education for all students, and the importance of higher order skills and dispositions for long-term success and personal fulfillment. This vision also values outcomes assessment and analytics, but recognizes the complexity of learning that engages cognitive, affective, and metacognitive dimensions through iterative experience.

As explored in the "[The Difference ePortfolio Makes](#)", ePortfolio practices can help institutions negotiate among these tensions in the ecology of higher education:

- ePortfolio initiatives have demonstrated impact on retention and graduation rates, serving the ends of completion and student success; yet, ePortfolio also serves to deepen the impact of learning by providing an integrative space where students can reflect on the meaning of their learning and articulate a sense of identity and purpose;
- ePortfolio initiatives can serve institutional priorities on assessment and accountability, not by reduction of learning to simple metrics or testing, but by making the richness of student work visible and engaging multiple stakeholders in ongoing conversation about the evidence of student learning calibrated to institutional and programmatic learning goals;
- ePortfolio can serve as an effective tool for connecting curricular “parts” to “wholes.” Being organized around the student experience, ePortfolios bring together multiple stakeholders, across boundaries and silos, to interrogate how individual and often discrete components of the educational experience align and reinforce each other.

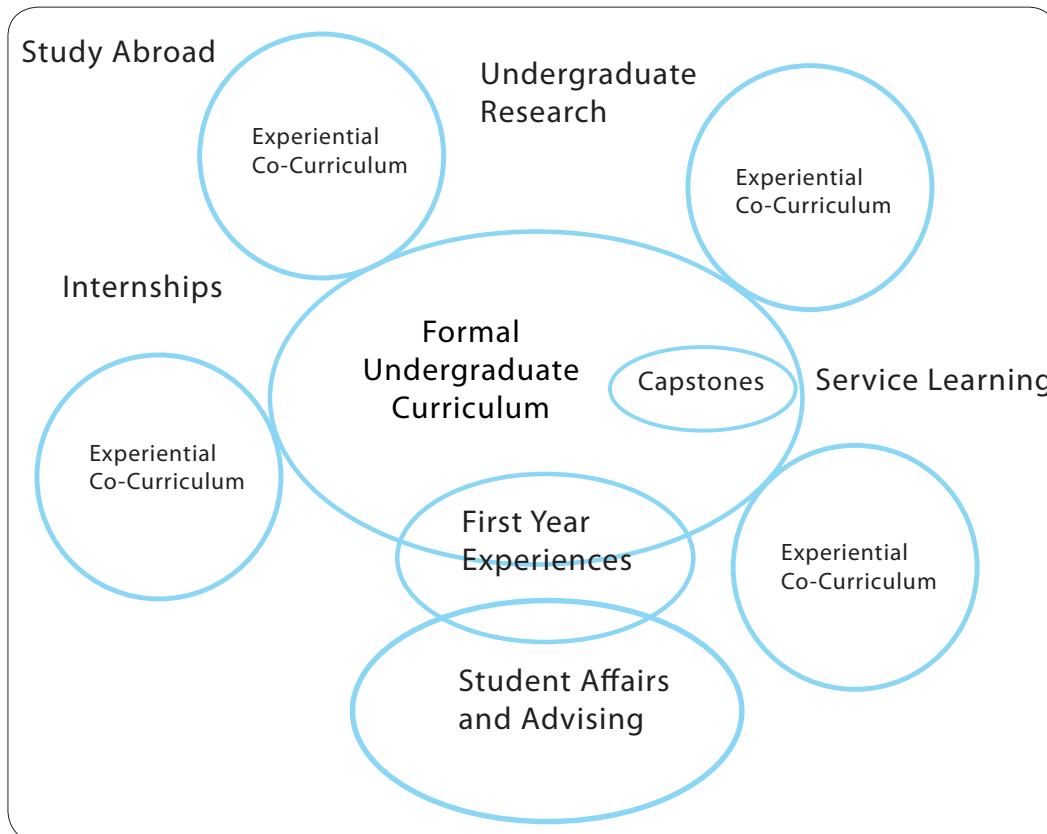
The role of ePortfolios in this complex ecology is prefigurative of what we might call the *re-centered curriculum*. In the established paradigm, the undergraduate curriculum is organized around formal curricular structures, with the experiential co-curriculum, as well as campus functions such as student affairs and advising, often considered

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marginal. Experiences that have been identified as high-impact practices are typically located in the experiential co-curriculum (service learning, internships, undergraduate research) or are anomalous experiences in the formal curriculum (first-year seminars, capstones).

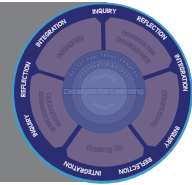
## The Traditional Curriculum Paradigm: Center, Margin, and High-impact Practices



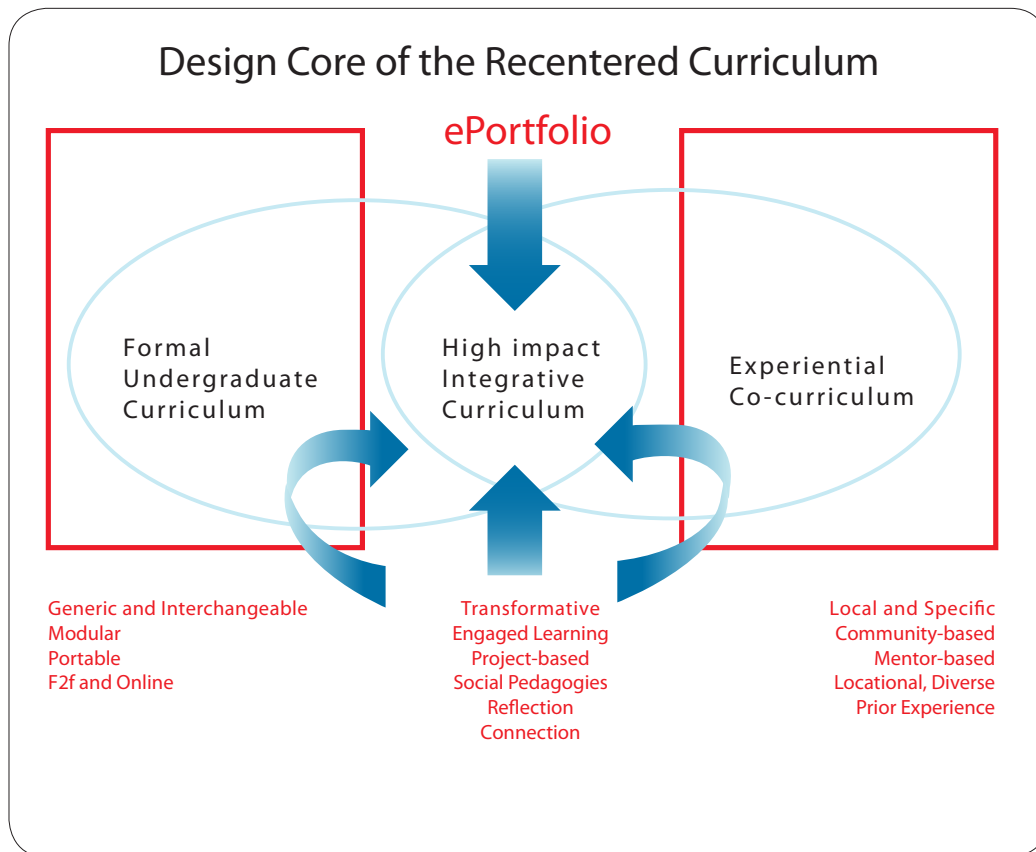
In a re-centered curriculum, a different configuration appears. A dynamic synergy links the emerging learning paradigm with the explosion of digital learning environments (including open courseware, large databases of instructional videos, and the online course materials with adaptive feedback and smart tutors systems). A growing segment of every higher education institution's curriculum will be modular, portable, and interchangeable. This dimension will be driven by the pressures for higher education to be affordable, accessible, and flexible, and will not necessarily be tied to holistic institutional experiences. There will also be a growing range of performance data and analytics arising out of these experiences that will become part of the assessment landscape.

Yet every institution will also strive to define what makes its institutional brand and experience unique. For many that will mean offering integrative and transformative experiences that address its higher order institutional

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learning goals. This dimension of the curriculum will be characterized by pedagogies of engagement; it will be largely project-based or inquiry-based, writing or communication-intensive, perhaps reflection-driven and by nature, integrative. And it will draw on local assets and support structures, such as Student Affairs and advising.

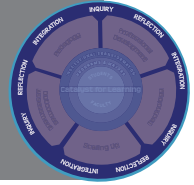


In this conceptualization, ePortfolio provides a set of powerful enabling practices for the high-impact integrative curriculum. These transformative practices draw on and intensify the rest of the curriculum—the modular, foundational, and interchangeable building blocks of an education. And at the same time, these practices can recognize and spotlight the local and specific aspects of an institution—its physical location, advising and mentoring structures, the diversity of its community. ePortfolio provides an a reflective space for students to knit together and make meaning from all of these diverse learning experiences.

In this emerging context for higher education, ePortfolio has a central role to play, both in bridging this new world and in helping to make the argument that a high-impact curricular core is possible in this new landscape. Successful ePortfolio initiatives will plan their scaling strategies to address the segmenting of higher education and position ePortfolio at the center of this recentered curriculum. This includes the full range of scaling strategies signaled in this essay and in the Scaling Up sector of the Catalyst Framework.



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This view of the recentered curriculum reinforces the connective and catalytic dimensions of ePortfolio and highlights its potential role in responding a potentially disruptive and rapidly changing higher education landscape. To make this possible, ePortfolio leaders must see the role of their initiatives in all three levels of impact discussed in this essay: in creating an integrative learning culture, in providing a site for an emergent integrative learning analytics, and in providing an ongoing framework and context for strategic change.

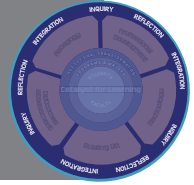
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# Scaling Strategies and ePortfolio as a Catalyst for Change



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