

Overview¹

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The Urban Universities Portfolio Project (UUPP) began its work in the summer of 1998 with an enormously ambitious agenda. Six campuses, working with the American Association for Higher Education, with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, aimed to define common performance indicators for urban public universities, and, in so doing, to articulate the role and value of urban institutions within American higher education; to pioneer new, more compelling approaches to demonstrating student attainment of core collegiate learning outcomes; and to develop new tools for improvement and accountability that would contribute to accreditation reform, state review practices, and the ways in which colleges and universities are rated and ranked by popular media like *US News and World Report*.

We planned to accomplish these goals by developing “institutional portfolios.” Like faculty-created teaching portfolios or student-created learning portfolios, our institutional portfolios would combine carefully selected authentic work samples with reflection on accomplishments and growth around specific objectives and themes. The original proposal to Pew envisioned eventually migrating these portfolios from paper to the Web. Harnessing the potential of new electronic media to support the broad agendas of the project was a secondary goal, not included in the original list of major project deliverables.

As the project unfolded, the realities of the short three-year time frame and the challenges of reaching common consensus on issues of fundamental institutional purpose inevitably reshaped and, to a degree, pared the initial agenda. All six campuses quickly agreed, however, that even the most selective and tightly focused institutional portfolio would necessarily encompass an amount of material not easily accommodated on paper; all developed their portfolios from the start in electronic format. By the end of the project’s first year, we began to see that our experiments with working in electronic media were not only enhancing the capacity of the portfolios to store large quantities of information, but were powerfully influencing the character and impact of our individual and collective efforts to represent our institutions, their missions, and the ways in which those missions were enacted.

If the project’s most significant collective accomplishment was the development of the first generation of online, electronic institutional portfolios, the articles that follow bear witness to how technology also transformed our ways of working within our individual

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institutions, understanding our institutions internally, and communicating about them externally. The use of a new, non-linear, interactive, and multi-dimensional medium to represent our campuses' missions and work generated rich internal discussions about institutional identities and values and stimulated new, integrative thinking about the linkages among mission, planning, purposes, practices, and results. The work itself of developing the portfolios proved to be a powerful stimulus for organizational self-examination, sharpening institutional identity, breaking down administrative and disciplinary silos, and catalyzing institutional learning and improvement.

The project also provided persuasive evidence of the value of interinstitutional collaboration. The fact that we were building our portfolios as part of a consortium of campuses accelerated the pace of portfolio development; we all wanted to show our colleagues that we had made progress from one meeting to the next. And while the six campuses found little to agree on when it came to defining the "urban public university" as a distinctive sector of higher education—for reasons that Peter Ewell insightfully analyzes in this issue's concluding essay—we found ample ground for cross-fertilization when it came to borrowing ideas from one another. Project universities freely exchanged strategies for jump-starting campus change efforts, creating conceptual frameworks for our online portfolios, and making the most of the capabilities of the Web environment for communicating within and about our institutions.

By the end of three years, the initially amorphous and slippery concept of an "electronic institutional portfolio" had taken distinct form; portfolio development had helped each institution move forward on its improvement agenda; and each had taken stock of how its stated mission played out through its practices, programs, and priorities. Equally important, the project's external stakeholders and "critical friends," who periodically evaluated the evolving portfolios, attested to the ability of electronic institutional portfolios to bring them face to face with real student, faculty, and institutional work and accomplishments in more direct, powerful ways than any written description of achievements could do.

The articles in this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* provide a window into the experiences of individual campuses as they created their portfolios, and summarize the lessons they learned about effective portfolio development and institutional change (which turn out to be two closely related topics). Sharon Hamilton's essay kicks off the issue with a discussion of how IUPUI approached portfolio development, focusing especially on the campus's efforts to find the "right" conceptual framework for structuring its Web portfolio. In the end, that framework turned out to be one that aligned closely with the campus's mission and strategic priorities, while helping to move the campus forward on defining those priorities. Hamilton makes a special effort to highlight initial missteps and barriers to anticipate, with an eye to assisting campuses beginning new portfolio projects in getting off to a smooth start.

Kathi Ketcheson's piece describes an all-too-rare collaboration between institutional researchers and faculty members in bringing an electronic institutional portfolio to life

at Portland State University. Her article emphasizes the value and impact of collaboration among members of two groups who brought different perspectives and a diverse set of skills to the process of portfolio development. It is filled with practical ideas and advice for other campuses undertaking portfolio projects.

While the issue's first two articles focus on the process of portfolio development, a different perspective is supplied by Ronald Henry's piece and the co-authored essay by Mary Kathryn Tetreault and Kathi Ketcheson. Both articles examine the usefulness of electronic portfolios for institutional planning. Henry's paper describes how Georgia State University used its Web portfolio as a means to create a more vital, well-informed, and inclusive strategic planning process for the campus. The GSU portfolio also incorporated a dynamic database that provided up-to-date information to key decision-makers during a period of exceptionally rapid campus change. Tetreault and Ketcheson reflect on the potential of Web portfolios to create a new institutional epistemology that can inform campus planning; the very structure of the Web, they argue, with its hyperlinks and menus, forces those developing or viewing an electronic institutional portfolio to make connections across administrative and disciplinary categories, to view the institution from multiple perspectives, and to ask why the institution does what it does.

Victor Borden of IUPUI and Jackie Donath of California State University, Sacramento provide additional practical advice that should be carefully considered by any campus beginning an institutional portfolio initiative. Based on a study commissioned by the UUPP and carried out by Edutech, Inc., Borden analyzes the resources and capacities—technological, fiscal, and human—needed for effective portfolio development. As he points out, with these capacities in place, institutional portfolio development can become a vehicle for further growth of institutional capability for planning, assessment, and improvement. Donath summarizes campus lessons learned about portfolio development in her witty take on how a series of familiar aphorisms provides insight into campus change processes. Though her approach is humorous, her advice deserves serious attention.

Finally, Peter Ewell, one of the original creators of the UUPP, places it in a national context, exploring its role in a broad higher education reform effort intended to enhance collective faculty responsibility for undergraduate student learning and to focus the attention of external stakeholders, particularly accrediting bodies, on central academic issues. Noting that urban public universities are “at the vanguard of structural change [in higher education] by virtue of their missions and locations,” yet are “increasingly ill-served by approaches to public accountability that [presume] the traditional earmarks,” he discusses the project's implications for urban institutions specifically and for higher education generally. His analysis of the project's successes (both anticipated and unanticipated), its unfinished agendas, and its lessons will be invaluable to campuses and stakeholder groups considering or conducting similar efforts.

When the UUPP began its work in 1998, most participants had never seen an “elec-

tronic institutional portfolio.” Now, as Peter Ewell remarks, “the concept is everywhere.” One regional accrediting association, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, has begun requiring portfolio-like “institutional presentations” in lieu of traditional self-studies, while at least two others, the New England Association and the North Central Association, are sponsoring demonstration projects that are experimenting with variations of the concept. I expect that many readers of this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* may be part of one of these or another portfolio initiative and will come to the issue in search of specific ideas and advice. I doubt they will be disappointed. If we have managed to capture even a fraction of the experiences and lessons of the UUPP, this issue will have achieved its intended purpose.

Author Information

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