

# ***I was a 98-pound weakling before I joined the UUPP – Reflecting on Lessons Learned at California State University, Sacramento***

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## **Abstract**

*This article draws on familiar aphorisms in this essay to describe lessons learned by her campus, California State University, Sacramento, about developing electronic institutional portfolios. Like other institutions in the Urban Universities Portfolio Project, CSUS found developing an online institutional portfolio to be complex, but worthwhile in unexpected ways. By the end of the project, the campus had made real progress in strengthening program review and assessment processes and in building a campus “culture of evidence,” trust, and engagement.*

Even before California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) joined the Urban Universities Portfolio Project, the campus was involved in experimental accreditation activities in collaboration with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). After the experience of a thematic self-study in 1996, the university administration unofficially adopted a pungent phrase—“creating a culture of evidence”—attributed (hopefully, not apocryphally) to WASC’s Director, Ralph Wolff, as an unofficial motto for the university’s assessment and improvement initiatives. That phrase became the mantra of our university portfolio and was reinforced visually by the image of what one site visitor called a “mountain” of file folders on the entry page of our portfolio prototype. The habit of reducing complex relationships and activities into short, catchy jingles and mottos is rampant in American society, even in the rarefied air of academia.

One person’s motto is another’s aphorism. My copy of *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* defines an aphorism as “1: a concise statement of a principle” and “2: a terse formulation of a truth or sentiment.” As I prepared our campus report for the June 2001 final gathering of the UUPP membership, I was struck by how easily and meaningfully our portfolio experiences could be expressed as a group of aphorisms—many of them appearing to be overworked phrases from everyday life—that could be given new vibrancy and relevance when applied to our experiences in the UUPP:

## **Rome Wasn't Built in a Day**

It became increasingly clear to the campus portfolio development team that the three years of generous funding and the focused work made possible by our participation in the UUPP were insufficient to the task at hand, especially as the task at hand morphed into something bigger than just building a channel of communication about our educational empire. Initiating, energizing, and implementing change in any organization is a multidimensional process, and, in the case of a university, those elements can be further complicated by a general resistance on the part of certain members of the community, on principle, to any change at all.

Coming to the realization that our electronic institutional portfolio could not only display our greatness, but also had the potential to reveal structural and procedural weaknesses, led us to begin to reconceptualize the functions and desired capacities of our portfolio. Acknowledging the significance of our activities in relation to a number of university initiatives and goals, and the potential centrality of a well-conceived portfolio to our next regional accrediting review, has led CSUS to a long-term commitment of resources and time to redirect the portfolio. The campus UUPP team has evolved, with the addition of a couple of new members (representing the Faculty Senate and the administration), into a pre-WASC planning committee. The changes we foresee in our institutional portfolio are, on one level, reactive and anticipatory and, on another, strategic and incremental.

Incremental, anticipatory changes to our institutional portfolio will be undertaken in response to our interpretation of the specifics of newly-adopted WASC standards for institutional capacity and educational effectiveness. We will thus consider ways in which we might adjust elements of the portfolio for use in the self-study portion of the accreditation process. Our portfolio must also undergo more strategic transformations, which we anticipate will enhance not just the electronic display of our effectiveness, but our entire frame of reference for evaluating ourselves—the values, structures, and organization that inform our attempts to become a more effective educational institution.

The aphorism “Rome wasn’t built in a day” is also a meaningful reminder that useful, enduring, and valuable institutional re-orientation and re-creation is a process, and that anything worth doing is worth doing well.

## **If You Build it, They will Come**

A foundational element of the CSUS institutional portfolio was that it should serve an internal audience as well as external accrediting agencies. This definition of the portfolio’s basic function led the campus team to focus on the ways in which an electronic portfolio could act as an access point to the institution for faculty, support staff, and interested others. Conceived as an adjunct to the university’s home page, the CSUS institutional portfolio was seen as an opportunity to make campus strategic planning

more visible and accessible to the very people who were the primary beneficiaries/victims of the process, and, in doing so, to enlarge participation and buy-in to the activities of the institution as a whole by departments, programs, and the Faculty Senate.

Originally, the portfolio was seen as a way to bridge a gap that had developed between the many positive and productive activities that were occurring on the campus and the sense of many departments and programs that their internal, discipline-based focuses were the most meaningful definitions of their roles on campus. As the portfolio has developed, and different campus constituencies have joined the process, any lack of connection between an enlarged institutional vision and perceptions of the day-to-day life of the university has been thrown into high relief. Creating a portfolio that provides a synthetic and synchronistic vision of how the parts of the university make up and contribute to the whole has led to the development of program portfolios that rest within the university portfolio and continue to be part of the ongoing work on the CSUS portfolio.

Enabling programs and departments to prepare self-study materials in an electronic format and embedding those portfolios in the institutional site has been a significant development, helping to ensure that the university portfolio provides an environment that both supports and illustrates the living presence and influence of our strategic planning activities and university-wide initiatives. One very interesting aspect of the portfolio process on our campus arose from the first campus project director's interest in using electronic technologies to prepare a program-centered portfolio. His model, developed under the aegis of the UUPP process, provided the impetus to other departments and programs to prepare program self-studies in a Web-based format. Similarly, investigating the ways in which our institutional portfolio might include the myriad activities underway on our campus allowed us to become part of a campus-wide learning community, as our activities intersected with a number of other, initially unrelated campus initiatives.

Building even a fairly primitive version of an institutional portfolio has enabled us to visualize new ways of engaging our internal community in the processes of improvement and effectiveness that are central to our educational and service missions. The institutional portfolio can provide a field of activity that encourages constituents of the campus community to participate in ways they find enhancing and challenging. What is being built in our institutional portfolio is a kind of "field of dreams"—a place where we can make our visions and goals public, and work in collaborative and collegial ways to achieve them.

## **The Medium is the Message**

Marshall McLuhan's declaration that technology affects the production, distribution, and meaning of mass-mediated messages is particularly germane to our work on the institutional portfolio. Technology can have an important role in institutional communi-

cation, change, and improvement. Its use will, by its very nature, influence the ways in which we undertake activities and assess our effectiveness.

One of the major goals of the CSUS portfolio is to make the planning and resource allocation activities of the Council of University Planning (CUP) more visible. The portfolio provides a visual and accessible version of these core processes. For example, campus portfolio team discussions about CUP led to the development of a visual model of the planning process as an ellipsis that serves as both a gateway image and map of the portfolio Web site. The ellipsis also illustrates the feedback loop we try to incorporate into our attempts to improve ourselves as an educational institution. Demystifying the CUP process by displaying it on the portfolio site is a significant step toward opening channels of communication across the university and among various publics about the effectiveness of university policies and processes.

Additionally, while the early focus of the portfolio was on university-level activities and assessment, the permeability of Web-based technology quickly revealed ways in which institutional material could be meaningfully linked and amplified by department and program information on teaching and student learning. In this way, technology provided a means to facilitate institutional communication and improvement. Similarly, technology both illustrated and drove change—like the development of electronic program portfolios as repositories for self-studies that are much more accessible to the entire university community than earlier print documents.

McLuhan's truism about the effects of the medium on the message applies as much to print as it does to electronic technologies. Academic writing, by tradition and inclination, is often quite wordy. The dominant aesthetics of professorial communication are in direct violation of the architect Mies van der Rohe's exhortation that "less is more." In academic culture, "more is more," and the result is a professional (and, by extension, institutional) investment in text-based communication. Translation of institutional materials into an effective electronic format requires a reduction in text that is counter-cultural, and, for some, counter-intuitive. A fundamental lesson in the development of the CSUS portfolio has been "edit, edit, edit."

Web-friendly communication requires the distillation of information into its most pungent forms. To respond to the requirements of electronic media, both internally focused and externally directed communications must evolve and adjust. Even if the ultimate meaning of our message is unchanged, its format and presentation most certainly need to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of electronic media. In *Designing Web Usability*, Jakob Nielsen reminds his readers that "the natural way people go about doing Web projects based on their non-Web experiences turns out to be wrong." In the case of the CSUS institutional portfolio, site navigation and effective organization and display of information continue to be matters of great importance as we refine and rework our site so that it "mirrors the user's tasks and their views of the information space."

## Nature Abhors a Vacuum

Roget's Thesaurus includes two synonyms for "vacuum" that are relevant to our efforts to build our institutional portfolio. The most commonly used, "void," has significance for the framing and structure of our document. A second, equally resonant term, "nonexistence" has meaning for what we learned about our institutional life in the course of constructing our portfolio.

On the micro level, as the team began to discuss the portfolio's contents and visual style, we also began to think about the "what," "why," "how," and "where" of providing our audience with the most meaningful information. The original campus commitment to UUPP seems to have been grounded in a desire to provide broader access to the myriad pieces of survey information and institutional data collected and prepared by the Office of Institutional Research for the campus community. The Web seemed like an ideal environment and, early in the project, we used our Web site as a glorified data warehouse. It was as though, once we had decided to build a Web site, we could not just let it sit in cyberspace, empty. We had to fill the "void" of cyberspace that we had "opened." Now that we had a new presence in space in the form of our institutional portfolio, we had to spread out and claim our new territory. But who wants to surf through 30,000 pages of raw data?

More broadly, as we worked to amplify the connections between the data we collected and the processes of planning, assessment, and evaluation that were supposed to be core institutional activities—at least according to our strategic planning documents—the team began to notice that certain elements of our enterprise appeared formally correct, but largely purposeless, empty of real meaning and value for many members of our community. As the team began focusing on the portfolio as a channel of communication within and about the processes of institutional planning and on the collection of materials to underpin our developing "culture of evidence," we found ourselves working in a vacuum of agreed-upon and publicly enacted values.

We thus undertook a large, broadly drawn survey of faculty and external stakeholders in an attempt to clarify learning expectations for the baccalaureate degree. We then refined our findings, through consultation and discussion, into a set of baccalaureate learning goals that were presented to the Faculty Senate. The pilot use of those goals as organizing principles for assessment was undertaken in General Education. That pilot expires this spring and the Senate must vote to institutionalize a set of student learning objectives by the end of this academic year. This vacuum—the lack of a common superstructure of specific, publicly stated academic and curricular goals for student learning—has far-reaching implications for the ways we do business and can be called to account for ourselves as an educational institution. The process of building our institutional portfolio provided us with an organized and functional way to explore and fill in some of the empty places in our university's definition of itself and its mission.

## **Progress is Not Our Only Product**

Originally, the main purpose of our portfolio was to demonstrate to ourselves and to our accrediting agencies that we were making significant progress on the issues and initiatives that affect our ability to fulfill our educational and service goals. We also saw our portfolio as an electronic repository of institutional research information that would be more accessible (both physically and intellectually) to various groups that might use it for institutional and program review or for evaluation and improvement purposes.

As we built our portfolio, however, the campus team began to talk about what we were learning about our campus culture, institutional values, and goals. The portfolio work became a conduit for discussion, reflection, and introspection, mostly among the members of the campus team—but soon our ideas and concerns began to filter out into the larger campus community through our presentations to groups like the Faculty Senate and the Council for University Planning. We also presented the portfolio in various iterations and with various emphases to outsiders—like panels of WASC institutions and other CSU campuses. The portfolio became the nexus of a learning community that included and connected our UUPP colleagues, CSUS faculty and administrators, regional partners, and national experts. We began a pattern of collaborative learning across units of our university that we hope will continue as we refine and re-vision our institutional portfolio.

While much of our campus efforts focused on the intended product of the project—the development and implementation of a Web-based institutional portfolio—the twisted aphorism “progress is not our only product” expresses the importance of the process of developing the portfolio. In that process of creating and shaping the product, the campus team found opportunities for reflection and introspection that allowed us to step away from the portfolio as a “thing” and to re-conceptualize our work as something grounded as much in philosophical constructs as in technological ones. Certainly, all the campuses participating in the UUPP felt the need to actually build something—but at CSUS, we also found ourselves thinking about campus history, culture, and change agency.

### **“It’s Alive!!”**

Certainly, over the course of the three years of the UUPP, the institutional portfolio took on an occasionally “Frankensteinian” aspect—a life of its own, not always under the campus team’s control and not always revealing information that was cause for celebration. As change agents and members of the campus community, we needed to learn to acknowledge the difficulty of addressing problems and flaws that were revealed in the portfolio with the care, humor, and earnest resolve they deserved. The “airing” of “dirty laundry” was a concern at one of the first quarterly meetings of the UUPP I attended; receiving fairly constant, consistently high-quality scrutiny—by our own colleagues and administrators, UUPP Institutional Review Board members, and interested “others”—required the portfolio to grow up and mature to meet expanding expectations as the project’s elements and goals evolved.

That sense of organic evolution was actually in keeping with our original intent to create an active, living, unfinished electronic document that could be responsive to a variety of institutional agendas. Since the university, at its best, is a living entity, the institutional portfolio must be equally “alive”—responsive to changing realities, ideas, and ideals. One of the results of this flexibility is that our UUPP portfolio is “morphing” into an element of our preparation for our next WASC review. Some members of the UUPP campus team have joined a pre-WASC planning committee that is examining the accrediting standards and ways in which we might use the institutional portfolio to present evidence for both our institutional capacity and our educational effectiveness reviews.

## **It Takes a Village . . .**

Our original intent was to create a portfolio for very specialized audiences; the portfolio’s structure and focus grew out of the ways in which we thought we might effectively make use of the technology to accomplish our goals. Over the three years of the UUPP project, it became increasingly clear, however—from both our on-campus work and the questions and feedback we received from our project partners, that a truly effective institutional portfolio would need to accommodate an enlarged audience of users. Since one of our goals was to increase the visibility of university processes and activities, the portfolio site needed to encourage its visitors to use its basic information and structural framework for their own purposes. Producing a usable portfolio demanded that the campus team conceptualize an ongoing process of portfolio development and refinement that facilitated overlapping and enlarging circles of engagement. From administration to campus team, from campus team to departments and programs, deans, faculty members, and support services, a truly institutional portfolio needs both to shape and to reflect institutional effectiveness.

This recognition of the need for an expanded universe of stakeholders in both the portfolio process and in our institutional life was one of the most important outcomes of our participation in the UUPP. Our stakeholders include our own colleagues as well as outsiders, and our continuing work on the portfolio allows us to identify areas of our institution that need attention. Building the portfolio has let us relearn our history and identify those powerful and essential “truths” that are all the more significant because we never speak them aloud or directly acknowledge them. Because of our membership in the expanded village of the UUPP, our campus was able to draw on the experience and interest of a large community of critical friends and an Institutional Review Board of remarkable and wide-ranging expertise.

## **The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living**

Our experience in the UUPP gave California State University, Sacramento an unparalleled opportunity to begin building a culture of evidence to support an institutional culture of trust and engagement. Our electronic portfolio will continue to be instrumental in providing us with opportunities for learning. It is clear that everything we know

about ourselves as an educational institution and the world in which we find ourselves is shaped by our histories. Our electronic portfolio is developing at a critical period in our institutional life, and it can provide us with an efficient and effective way to create an accessible institutional archive.

Building, implementing, refining, and maintaining our electronic portfolio also provides occasions for self-examination and self-assessment. An institutional portfolio, if used to its maximum benefit, can support both the ability to respond to discrete data inquiries and an organizational culture that is inquiry-based. The evidence that underpins our electronic institutional portfolio must be permeable; it must be able to sustain public scrutiny at various levels in order for us to maintain our credibility. In addition, the self-examination and institutional change that result from developing and using this sort of portfolio must build in structures for feedback, comment, reaction, and action. One of the most important tasks left for CSUS is to make the feedback ellipsis, already the visual centerpiece of the portfolio, into a living, broadly meaningful organizational activity.

### **“I was a 98 pound weakling before I joined the UUPP”**

The most significant effects of our participation in the UUPP can be likened to the muscle-building activities of body builders. Over the course of the three-year project, the quarterly meetings with our UUPP campus partners and review board members began to feel like opportunities to flex our institutional, organizational muscles. At the start of the project, CSUS, like its five campus collaborators, was a change-agency weakling. At each project meeting, the campus teams were given the opportunity to pump up, to demonstrate new levels of institutional, programmatic, and individual activity. We found ourselves exercising new, or underused, institutional muscle and will. As a result of UUPP, our program review process has been strengthened and deepened. We are defining and working our major muscle groups as we continue to focus our institutional conversations on meaningful assessment and the development of useful and philosophically sound learning goals and teaching activities. In the atmosphere of friendly and collaborative competition modeled by and fostered by the UUPP, we have reaped a multitude of unexpected benefits, both as a university and as individuals on the campus team. And, as we begin the next phase of our portfolio’s implementation and development, we feel confident that the lessons we learned in the UUPP will stand us in good stead as we continue to reflect on what we have accomplished and what we mean to do.

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