



*From High Impact ePortfolio Practice:  
A Catalyst for Student, Faculty, and Institutional Learning*

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*The following is an excerpt from the unedited manuscript.*

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## **Introduction**

Electronic student portfolios, or ePortfolios, represent an intriguing aspect of the emerging digital learning ecosystem. According to an Educause report, 57% of US colleges now offer ePortfolios to their students, reflecting dramatic growth over the past decade. Furthermore, more than half of college students nationwide reported they had used ePortfolio at some point in their time at college.<sup>1</sup> And yet systematic knowledge about how to make ePortfolio practice most effective has been slow to emerge, as has concrete evidence of its impact. This book speaks to the need for deeper understanding of effective ePortfolio practice and its potential benefits for students, faculty, and their colleges. Based primarily on the research done by 24 campus teams in the Connect to Learning project (C2L), a national community of practice, this book outlines the strategies needed to ensure that ePortfolio fulfills its promise.

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ePortfolios make student learning visible – to students themselves, to their peers and faculty, and to external audiences.

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Student ePortfolios are web-based, student-generated collections of learning artifacts (papers, multi-media projects, speeches, images, etc.) and related reflections, focused on learning and growth. ePortfolio practice builds over time and across boundaries, linking courses and disciplines, co-curricular and life experiences. ePortfolio platforms facilitate the linking process and help make learning visible to students themselves, to their peers and faculty, and to external audiences. But meaningful student ePortfolio practice – the process of curating the connected collection, making meaning through reflection, and developing deeper, more intentional identities as learners --requires much more than a platform. It requires thoughtful action on the part of students, guided by well-informed faculty and staff and supported by a broad coalition of college stakeholders. We hope this book will serve as a resource for faculty, staff and campus leaders as they work make ePortfolio practice meaningful and effective.

In this book, we argue that ePortfolio practice can play a unique role in 21<sup>st</sup> century higher learning. We present evidence from C2L campuses demonstrating that ePortfolio offers powerful avenues for enhanced student, faculty, and institutional learning. In a landscape of proliferating educational services and increasingly fragmented learning experiences, we suggest, ePortfolio has demonstrated capacity to support coherence and integration. We offer a set of comprehensive, field-tested strategies for strengthening ePortfolio's value as a high impact practice. Based on the practices of the C2L network, the Catalyst Framework can guide the work of faculty, staff and campus leaders who want to mobilize ePortfolio practice to enhance learning and teaching.

The Connect to Learning network brought together ePortfolio innovators from a diverse set of campuses, including Boston University, Virginia Tech, and San Francisco State University, as well as LaGuardia, Guttman, Three Rivers, and Salt Lake Community Colleges. Working

together over the course of four years, campus-based teams gathered evidence, shared ePortfolio practices, and discussed what made ePortfolio practice effective.

Figure I.1.

*Note.* Working together in a community of practice from 2010–2014, the 24 campuses in the Connect to Learning project created the Catalyst for Learning: ePortfolio Resources and Research website ([c2l.mcnrc.org](http://c2l.mcnrc.org)) to share their work with the broader ePortfolio field.

Looking across C2L’s broad collection of evidence, our findings suggest that, done well, ePortfolio practice can help institutions balance aspirations for deep learning and student success and translate pressures for accountability into meaningful institutional learning. We propose that effective ePortfolio practice can help students engage more deeply and take ownership of their learning, leading to measurably greater student success, including improvements in retention and graduation. We find that ePortfolio practice can help link a set of fragmented experiences (for example, a set of high impact practices based in different parts of campus) bringing greater coherence and meaning. Our findings can be summarized in three related value propositions:

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**Proposition 1: ePortfolio practice, done well, advances student success.** At a growing number of campuses with sustained ePortfolio initiatives, student ePortfolio usage correlates with higher levels of student success as measured by pass rates, GPA and retention.

**Proposition 2: Making student learning visible, ePortfolio practice, done well, supports reflection, integration, and deep learning.** Helping students reflect on and connect their learning across academic and co-curricular experiences, sophisticated ePortfolio practices transform the learning experience. Advancing higher order thinking and integrative learning, the connective ePortfolio helps students construct purposeful identities as learners.

**Proposition 3: ePortfolio practice, done well catalyzes learning-centered institutional change.** Focusing attention on student learning and prompting connection and cooperation across departments and divisions, ePortfolio initiatives can catalyze campus cultural and structural change, helping colleges and universities develop as learning organizations.

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Summarized in Chapter 1 and detailed in Chapter 8, these findings represent an step forward for the ePortfolio field. Evidence linked to Proposition 1 shows how ePortfolio practice can advance student success, helping students progress towards graduation. Evidence related to Proposition 2 suggests that ePortfolio practice helps educators balance a focus on completion with an emphasis on quality, the deep learning that makes education meaningful. Proposition 3 outlines the ways that ePortfolio initiatives have a broader impact, helping colleges become more cohesive and agile learning organizations. These three propositions organize important evidence for strategic planning and institutional decision-making related to ePortfolio practice. They also provide a coherent set of propositions to be tested through further research.

Together, these value propositions undergird our argument that ePortfolio should be recognized as a High Impact Practice. Spearheaded by George Kuh, Ken O'Donnell, Tia McNair, Ashley Finley and others, the body of research on High Impact Practices has highlighted the broadly demonstrated power of ten widely used higher education innovations, such as First Year Seminars and Undergraduate Research. C2L data suggests that ePortfolio practice shows a pattern of benefit comparable to other HIPs.

The benefit of all High Impact Practices depends on being “done well.” First Year Seminars can help new college students persist and thrive, for example, but only if they are instituted with a high degree of attention to quality and depth. Our study of ePortfolio practice reveals a similar pattern. Done poorly, without insight or careful attention to the qualities that make ePortfolio practice powerful, ePortfolios will have few benefits for students or their institutions. Done well, ePortfolio practice can powerfully advance student, faculty, and institutional learning.

In this book we propose a detailed guide or set of precepts for “doing ePortfolio well,” the Catalyst Framework for effective ePortfolio practice (see Figure 2). We highlight integrative

social pedagogy as a key factor for success and provide examples of such pedagogy, in practices designed by faculty nationwide. Drawing on the experiences of C2L teams, we also discuss the kinds of support that faculty and students need, addressing professional development, outcomes assessment and ePortfolio technology, as well as the institutional strategies that advance the power of ePortfolio practice.

Using This Book: This book is designed as a resource for faculty, staff and administrators who want to employ ePortfolio practice to deepen and transform student learning. This book is not a teacher's handbook, but it can provide invaluable guidance to educators seeking to advance educational improvement at multiple levels, from classroom practice to institutional outcomes assessment and campus structure.

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Figure 2. The Catalyst Framework

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Chapter 1 introduces the ePortfolio field and its development. It outlines the work of the Connect to Learning project, summarizing what we learned from each other and spotlighting the website we jointly created, Catalyst for Learning: ePortfolio Resources and Research <http://c2l.mcnrc.org/>. Readers interested in a quick overview can find in this chapter some highlights of our collective findings.

Chapters 2-7 illuminate the conceptual and practical qualities of ePortfolio practice done well. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the Catalyst Framework and highlights the Catalyst design principles: Inquiry, Reflection and Integration. Subsequent chapters focus on specific Framework sectors, from pedagogy (Ch. 3) and professional development (Ch. 4) to outcomes assessment (Ch. 5). Chapter 6 examines the role of ePortfolio technology in effective ePortfolio practice. And Chapter 7 considers the institutional strategies C2L campuses used to build and

scale their ePortfolio work. These chapters offer examples of the work needed in each sector, drawn from C2L campus practices. Each chapter includes a section entitled Getting Started, which highlights first steps and issues to be kept in mind in launching an ePortfolio project.

Chapter 8 addresses the questions, “Why ePortfolio?” How can ePortfolio practice help students and faculty? What does it offer deans, provosts, and other institutional stakeholders? It details our three propositions, discussing the quantitative and qualitative evidence supplied by C2L teams.

Chapter 9 discusses the ways ePortfolio is used in conjunction with other High Impact Practices such as First Year Experiences, Capstone Courses, and Service and Community-Based Learning. C2L research suggests that effective ePortfolio practice can deepen the impact of other HIPs; and that the longitudinal/connective quality of ePortfolio facilitates integration of multiple HIPs, helping students understand and articulate them as a cohesive signature learning experience.

Chapter 10, the book’s final chapter, goes beyond current practice to consider the future of ePortfolio practice and the ePortfolio field. We argue that connecting the emergent fields of digital badging, e-advising and learning analytics to integrative ePortfolios can guide strategies to address the whole student.

The development of effective ePortfolio practice is an evolving process. We do not see our work as conclusive; rather, we hope that it contributes to an on-going collective process. More research will be needed and new approaches must be tried if ePortfolio practice is to serve the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century students and faculty. We invite all readers to join us on the Catalyst for Learning resource site, to discuss new questions and insights, to share best practices, and to build a living resource for this growing and exciting field.



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<sup>i</sup> Eden Dahlstrom et al., *ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology* (research report, EDUCAUSE, 2013), <http://www.educause.edu/ecar>.