Integrative Learning, E-portfolios, and the Transfer Student

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The participation of Portland State University (PSU) in a three-year Integrated Learning Project (ILP)—cosponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Association of American Colleges and Universities—has involved developing and assessing advanced strategies to help students pursue learning in more intentional, connected ways. The underlying assumption of the ILP is that fostering students' abilities to integrate their learning will give them the habits of mind needed to make informed personal, professional, and civic decisions throughout their lives.

Much time and attention has been devoted to designing and implementing the first year and last year of PSU's four-year integrated general education program, University Studies. The program begins with the yearlong Freshman Inquiry course, which focuses on critical thinking skills, and culminates with the senior-year capstone. However, the middle segment of the program (the focus of PSU's project), which accommodates all students who began their college career at PSU and a large number of transfer students, has not received the same attention since the adoption of the University Studies general education program in 1994. Several groups of faculty, mentors, and students have worked on proposals to improve the integrative learning in the middle portion of University Studies during the past two years. Last year, the ideas that came from those groups went to the University Studies Committee—the fac-

ulty policy and curriculum committee for the program—for discussion and revision. The plans for redesign have been continually revised as the discussions have progressed. The current redesign of the middle part of the program was presented and discussed at the fall 2004 University Studies faculty retreat.

In the midst of these project redesign discussions, the provost resigned, but the interim provost has initiated another set of conversations about University Studies. The ideas he presented in a white paper on undergraduate education—which include enhancing internationalization of the curriculum as well as implementing the recommended changes in the middle portion of the program—are now being considered by a faculty committee that will soon make recommendations to the president and the faculty senate.

The PSU Integrated Learning Project focuses on enhancing the transition into PSU and the University Studies general education program for the approximately two-thirds of students who transfer to PSU after completing their freshman year at another institution. Through specific interdisciplinary course content, the Transfer Transition courses orient students to PSU and help them improve their communication skills, learn the process of inquiry from the perspectives of several different disciplines, and build a foundation for the effective and efficient application of information technology resources. Courses provide

students with multiple opportunities to practice and become proficient in the four University Studies goals—communication, critical thinking, ethics and social responsibility, and the diversity of human experience.

The E-portfolio as a Reflective and Integrative Repository

It is not easy to capture and portray the varied ways in which student course work exemplifies a growing mastery of the four University Studies goals and the ability of students to integrate their learning in terms of both content and the cognitive goals of the program. The disciplinary and interdisciplinary emphases of instructors range as widely as the particular projects taken on by students. Over the past several years, the University Studies program has explored the use of electronic portfolios as a mechanism for compiling students' work samples and their reflections on the nature and quality of their work. Students who begin their university careers at PSU are now invited to construct an electronic portfolio during their Freshman Inquiry course, an invitation that has been taken up by students in useful and creative ways. Given this initial success, the University Studies program is now expanding the use of the e-portfolio through a pilot study with students in Sophomore Inquiry, with the final aim of having the e-portfolio encompass the entirety of a stu-

dent's undergraduate course work as well as cocurricular experiences.

There are many good reasons to utilize the e-portfolio as a repository of student work and as a framework for encouraging ongoing reflection and integration. Most importantly, perhaps, is the ability to store the variety of works that students produce: written text, graphics, video, and audio, as well as integrative displays of such work in the form of student-designed Web sites. Given the richness of its content, the e-portfolio serves as a primary medium for evaluating program success. A key component of every portfolio is a set of student reflections on their own learning in the context of the general education goals.
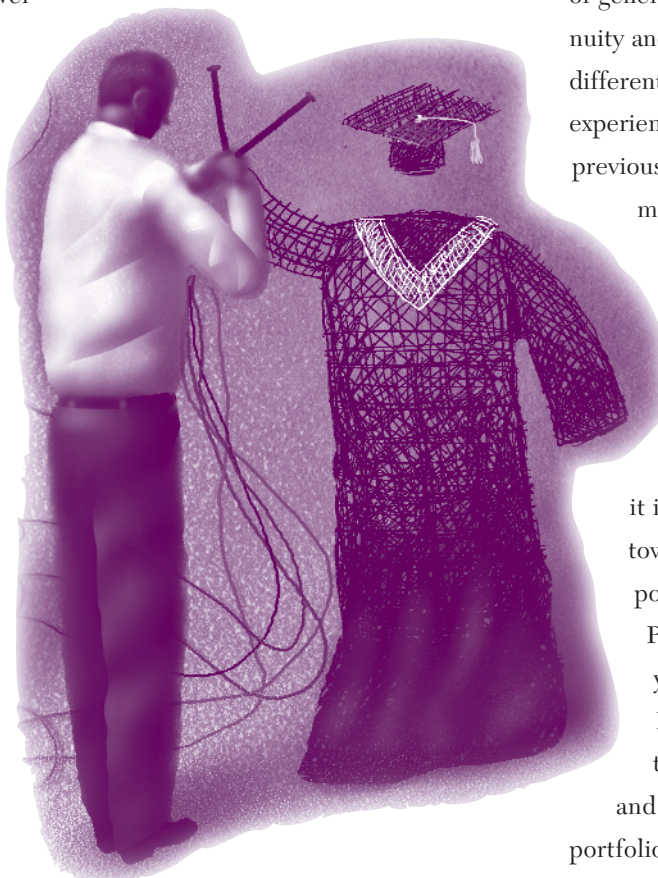
The e-portfolio also represents an economy of means; much can easily be saved to a small amount of server space. Additionally, there is easy access to an e-portfolio for a range of viewers—fellow students, instructors, graduate and professional school admissions committees, and employers.

These reasons are particularly persuasive in the context of the University Studies program. First, the general education goals of University Studies are manifested in courses of differing design and with differing content, types of assignments, and interdisciplinary emphases. Second, the program extends from the freshman through the senior year. And third, a great many students transfer to the university into a program of general education that aims for continuity and coherence—a program that is different from what they most likely experienced as general education at their previous institution(s). Thus there are many reasons to provide an integrative learning framework of the sort that an e-portfolio affords.

Although it is a challenge to institute the e-portfolio as a reflective repository, it is easy to conceive the steps toward student production of an e-portfolio for those who begin at PSU and stay through their senior year. The full year of Freshman Inquiry provides ample occasion to develop the rationale, tools, and initial work pieces for the e-portfolio. The continuity from Freshman

Inquiry to Sophomore Inquiry underpins the expectation that students will gain in confidence and work toward reflective integration of an increasing body of repository materials. It is not unreasonable to assume that after two years in University Studies, students will have begun to see the value of their ongoing attention to the e-portfolio and its continued elaboration through their junior and senior years.

Transfer Transition

It is those students who transfer into the integrated structure of University Studies who present the greater challenge. We must provide a means for students who transfer to our institution after the freshman year to gain experience with and appreciate the value of the e-portfolio. We hope to meet the challenge in two ways. First, we will offer a greater number of Transfer Transition courses especially designed to introduce transfer students to the form and content of University Studies. This change is likely to help most of those students who transfer in as sophomores. Particular attention will be paid to the e-portfolio, where transfer students will be given the occasion to produce a reflection that ties their earlier academic work to the general education framework at PSU.

Second, we will put into place a slightly different approach for junior transfers. While it may be possible for us to field junior-level Transfer Transition courses, those students will be also taking "cluster courses" at the upper-division

level (see www.ous.pdx.edu for more information about program curriculum design). Because there are hundreds of cluster courses, we need a flexible mechanism by which work deposited in the e-portfolio can be developed. We are exploring the possibility of mini-courses for which graduate students would serve as a general resource to help junior-level

transfer students move examples of their work—and reflections on that work—into the e-portfolio. Indeed, this approach promises to strengthen the e-portfolio as a tool for integrating not only general education coursework, but the display of disciplinary work as well.

Finally, we have been collaborating with partner community colleges to help students develop e-portfolios while at community college. We have learned that transfer students who initiate e-portfolios before they arrive at PSU bring with them similar levels of preparation and reflective practice in relation

to the University Studies goals as our native students. The e-portfolio is also a promising medium for demonstrating what students learn outside the classroom, which contributes helpful information for advising and provides connections to transfer students' cocurricular activities.

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undergraduate student's experience at PSU, developing capabilities to demonstrate student learning through general education, the major, and cocurricular activities. The findings from PSU's work to this date are also being shared with members of the University Studies Committee to inform their recommendations for revisions to the program. As always, we are engaged in a work in progress. ■