Learning Portfolios in the University Honors Program (UHP)

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This case study outlines the portfolio implementation in the University Honors Program (UHP) at the University of Cincinnati.　We discuss how the UHP has used several different platforms to host student portfolios, having currently settled on giving students the option to choose their own Web 2.0 platform. These learning portfolios emphasize reflection on experiences required by the UHP.

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Background of the UC University Honors Program and Learning Portfolios

The University Honors Program's (UHP) vision is to develop students into global citizen scholars who lead innovative efforts toward solving the world's complex problems.The UHP is built around an innovative pedagogical approach to honors education that includes development of learning eportfolios. The UHP is focused on experiential, reflective, and integrative learning as well as the following thematic areas: community engagement, creativity, global studies, leadership, and research. The UHP is comprised of around 1450 students who are in the top 7% of UC's undergraduate baccalaureate seeking population, from across colleges and disciplines.

The University Honors Program is committed to offering students an individualized, student-centered approach to a meaningful undergraduate experience. To that end, we are dedicated to:

- Promoting activities that lead students to discover their passions and enhance their gifts and talents
- Coaching students to purposefully engage in experiential learning opportunities and reflection to maximize and integrate their learning
- Fostering a community that prioritizes transformational personal development, civic participation, and global responsibility

The college experience of these academically talented and motivated students is enriched through their honors experiences and the development and compilation of a learning eportfolio throughout their time in the UHP. The learning eportfolio is critical to achievement of our student learning outcomes and, ultimately, our vision.

Students are required to complete 5 honors experiences, a one-credit-hour *Gateway to University Honors* course, have a cumulative university GPA of 3.2, or above and maintain their honors learning eportfolio by showcasing all honors experiences and completing a year-in-review within the eportfolio each year.

History – How has the UHP progressed in using eportfolios?

The UHP has been using ePortfolios since 2007. The history of the UHP dates back to the 1960s when it was a program within the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences. It became a university-wide program in the 1990s and continued its traditional focus on honors education. In 2006, the university began to re-envision honors education at UC and, therefore, the model and pedagogy for its university-wide honors program. ePortfolios were included as a foundational element of the new pedagogy.

In 2007, a brand new University Honors Program was launched to serve as the best practice of the university's new general education model, integrated core learning (ICL). ePortfolios were a key element of the best practice of ICL implementation, along with integration of experiential learning. With that, ePortfolios and experiential learning became key elements of the UHP's new pedagogy and structure. Beginning in fall 2007, eportfolios became a requirement for UHP students.

The UHP piloted ePortfolios during the 2007-08 academic year using Blackboard's eportfolio platform. Blackboard was selected for a number of reasons. The primary reasons for utilizing Blackboard were so that all UHP students had a common, free platform that any UC faculty or staff member could easily access. It was also thought that using a common platform with pre-made templates would facilitate the effective creation of portfolios by students.

UHP students created their eportfolios in a one-credit hour required course, *Gateway to University Honors* (and still do so in that class today). Students initially build their portfolios in that class and then continue to develop them throughout their time in the UHP.

The UHP learned very quickly that the implementing eportfolios through Blackboard, for its purposes, was problematic. The Blackboard portfolio system was neither student friendly nor intuitive. Students experienced significant technical problems in organization of content, public and private sharing capabilities, and common formatting needs, such as the inclusion of hyperlinks. UHP staff had to walk the students through step-by-step processes to learn how to build their portfolios. Students experienced frustration and did not see the point of creating a portfolio that was so cumbersome, not user friendly, and visually unappealing.

The simplicity of the templates also generated a great deal of push-back from students. The templates did not have the features or design possibilities that other media did. At that time, Blackboard was competing with media platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Google, Plaxo, MySpace, etc., all of which were more advanced in the user experience and look than Blackboard. In addition, the Blackboard product wasn't portable, so students couldn't take it with them after graduation or easily export their work.

The UHP determined that Blackboard would not work and began researching other platforms mid-year. In fact, the Blackboard ePortfolio implementation was such a failure that the UHP removed the requirement for that cohort of students to maintain portfolios.

In 2008, the UHP engaged in product research to select a new common platform that would provide a higher level of functionality. After researching a number of platforms, including LiveText, Chalk and Wire, Taskstream, Foliotek, and iWebfolio, the UHP selected iWebfolio. At the time, the UHP still thought it was necessary to select a common platform that could be used to create templates and through which UC faculty and staff could provide feedback within the system. In addition, iWebfolio offered an additional level of functionality that, if purchased, would allow for assessment within the system. The UHP thought that this might be a valuable tool in the future, as the UHP implementation of eportfolios matured.

Nuventive's iWebfolio system was selected and utilized from fall 2008 – spring 2012. Students were required to purchase 4 or 5 year accounts that would last through the time of graduation. All UHP staff had accounts as well, in order to access, review, and provide feedback on students' eportfolios.

iWebfolio came with its own technical and educational challenges. While it possessed a higher level of functionality than Blackboard, it shared similar issues. iWebfolio still did not provide students a user friendly, intuitive platform that could be tailored to the user's personality and preferences (which students wanted). Students were limited in how they could tailor the look of the portfolio. They wanted more freedom and choice of design to make the eportfolio their own. Students did not feel a personal connection to the eportfolio, which is critical to students taking ownership. In addition, the eportfolio was only portable if students continued to pay the fee after graduation.

After a few years of using iWebfolio, the UHP began to look at its philosophy of eportfolios differently and expand the view from needing something with a structured template system to something more open. This shift in perspective also followed general advancements in online technology, as more and more free, open platforms were becoming available that students could utilize more easily that standardized fee-based platforms.

In fall 2012, the UHP moved to an open platform, allowing students to select the online platform of their choice to build their individual eportfolios. A few parameters were provided, including that the platform features a unique user URL. Common systems at that time (and now) included Weebly, WordPress, Blogger, Wix, Tumbler and Google Sites. In moving to an open platform, it was also stressed that students can choose a site that allows for password protection to keep it private (between the student and the honors advisor), should they so choose.

At this same time, the UHP also shifted in language from using the term "ePortfolio" to emphasizing that it is a "learning portfolio". In essence, it's all electronic now and the UHP felt that there was no need to emphasize the "e" in ePortfolio. Instead, emphasizing the "learning" aspect was more important.

Moving to an open platform has been incredibly successful and received very well by students. The quality of portfolios increased significantly almost immediately. Students instantly had more ownership and control of personalization. They can choose what their portfolio looks like, making it reflective of who they are, their values, personality, and individual learning.

Students who began with portfolios in iWebfolio were given the option to move to an open platform if they wanted to. The UHP continued to support iWebfolio through the time that the final cohort who began in iWebfolio graduated. Since that time, all UHP students have learning portfolios that are based in an open platform.

UHP students continue to initially create their learning portfolios in the *Gateway to University Honors* class. Upper-level UHP students now serve as peer educators for learning portfolios in the class, presenting to their peers and facilitating discussions on the design, use and benefits of learning portfolios.

UHP and Learning Portfolio Learning Outcomes

The UHP's tagline is "experience, reflect, integrate, transform". The primary goals of UHP learning portfolios reflect this, since the purpose is for students to reflect upon and showcase their honors experiences and to also then integrate their learning from honors experiences with their holistic undergraduate careers.

The University Honors Program's vision for learning portfolios has been to establish a best practice model that engages students in:

- actively reflecting on collegiate experiences
- identifying connections between curricular and co-curricular involvements
- evaluating aspects of experiences as they relate to academic, personal, and professional identities
- providing intentional touch-points between the student and the UHP throughout the student's college experience
- and, integrating learning across experiences, articulating that learning to various audiences, and making meaning from it (in other words, telling the story of their learning)

Ultimately, the purpose of UHP learning portfolios is for students to develop their stories over time and begin to tell them, using that learning to inform their choices and direction forward with purpose and intentionality. UHP learning portfolios provide a space for students to reflect on, document, and showcase

their experiences, record milestones, maintain a history of their experiences (honors and otherwise), provide artifacts, and evidence of learning through each experience, and to make connections across those experiences over time.

The UHP has a number of student learning outcomes. The following are those that are most salient to learning portfolios. As a result of engagement in learning portfolios, UHP students will:

- Develop a capacity and appreciation for reflective learning.
- Identify and explore interests, potentially leading to development of a passion(s).
- Integrate their learning and make connections across academic, personal and professional ideas, experiences and involvements.
- Develop the ability to tell their story – to articulate their learning and communicate the impact of that learning in written, verbal, or other forms.
- Make progress towards becoming self-authored individuals who rely on internal formulas to make decisions about their lives (rather than on external formulas or expectations).

The active reflection that students engage in as they maintain their learning portfolios leads them towards achievement of these learning outcomes. The learning portfolio scaffolds their experiences and learning over time, moving them towards these outcomes.

Demonstrating Outcomes for Assessment – how do the portfolios demonstrate the outcomes

UHP learning portfolios are viewed as formative and their development as an ongoing, dynamic process over the course of 4 or 5 years (the time that the students are at UC). The UHP expects to see growth and progress over time and an increased capacity for reflection and integration.

The portfolio assessment process is built into our graduation requirements. UHP students' learning portfolios are assessed at intentional touchpoints throughout the student's career, the most important being (1) upon initially creating it in the *Gateway to University Honors* class (2) at the completion of each honors experience and (2) during annual progress reviews including completion of the year-in-review.

At the completion of each honors experience, students are required to showcase that experience in their portfolio. In showcasing the experience, students provide a reflective summary of the experience – what it involved, what the student learned and how the student was impacted. The student also includes an artifact - a sample of work from the experience that exemplifies their learning. They include a brief explanation of why they chose that sample to share what they have learned and taken away from the experience, as well as the impact of the experience and how they might utilize those lessons learned in the future. UHP advisors review each honors experience in the learning portfolio for evidence of that

learning. An honors experience is only signified as completed after the honors advisor assesses the learning portfolio showcase.

In fall 2012, the year-in-review became a requirement for each student's learning portfolio. Prior to that, it was clear that students were reflecting on and showcasing their individual honors experiences. However, as a whole, they were not making connections across their experiences and integrating their learning. With the broader reflection and integration lacking, students were not able to articulate their learning in a connected way across their personal, professional and academic experiences and, therefore, were not able to tell their story in a cohesive, integrated manner. Hence, the year-in-review was implemented as a learning tool to facilitate this integration.

All UHP students now complete a year-in-review at the end of each academic year. This year-in-review is assessed by their honors advisor. In the year-in-review, students reflect upon their experiences and learning from throughout the previous year and how they are different as a result. Students then look forward and share hopes, ideas and concrete goals for that learning in the upcoming year. Students will have already reflected on individual courses and experiences in their learning portfolios, so this is the "big picture" overview of their learning to inform how they will continue to move forward. This is where the sustained, meaningful integrative learning happens.

How the Portfolios are Constructed and Folded into the Program

"A portfolio that is truly a story of learning is OWNED by the learner, structured by the learner, and told in the learner's own VOICE (literally and rhetorically)." ~Helen Barrett (2005, p13)

University Honors' learning portfolio philosophy is influenced by John Zubizarreta's 2004 book, *The Learning Portfolio: Reflective Practice for Improving Student Learning*. According to Zubizaretta, the learning portfolio provides a structure for students to reflect on their learning over time to "develop the aptitudes, skills, and habits that come from critical reflection" (p. 15).

Learning portfolios are the backbone of the UHP. They scaffold students' learning in the UHP and throughout their UC career. UHP students are required to create a learning portfolio during the first semester of their freshman year, as part of the required *Gateway to University Honors* course (HNRS1010, one-credit hour).

Students initially create their portfolios in our *Gateway to University Honors* class. This class is taught by UHP staff, including all of our honors advisors. After the class ends, the student's assigned honors advisor becomes the primary guide for students as they continue to develop their learning portfolios.

Students then maintain that portfolio throughout their time in the UHP, reflecting on, showcasing and integrating across their honors experiences. This includes personal, academic and professional learning as well as curricular and co-curricular experiences. While students are required to include their honors experiences in portfolios, we encourage them to include any meaningful experience they engage in, honors-related or not. Featured student portfolios can be found here - http://www.uc.edu/honors/students/portfolios/featured.html.

Each summer, students complete the required year-in-review in their portfolio. The year-in-review can be in any format. While the most common is a traditional reflective essay, many students choose video, art work, photo essays or other methods for reflection on and expression of their learning. The year-in-review is the primary place where integration of learning occurs.

An updated, complete portfolio is a graduation requirement. UHP advisors review and evaluate students' work and portfolios on an ongoing basis, but there is also a formal review process annually in summer.

Students create portfolios that reflect their individual values and personality, telling their story, while maintaining a professional image and tone. We require students to maintain three sections –

- Author page
- Showcase of each honors experience (5 are required for graduation)
- Year-in-review each year

How Our Staff are Trained to Use and Provide Support for the Platform

The UHP allows an open platform. This allows for students to select the platform that aligns with their personality, vision for their portfolio's look and design, and technical abilities. This also allows them to utilize the portfolio for other purposes or to integrate it with portfolios required in other aspects of their academic program. For example, if their college requires them to maintain a professional portfolio or an individual class has a portfolio requirement, they can choose to use the same platform and integrate the portfolios if desired.

Students can choose any platform as long as it provides for the following:

- Features unique user URLs

- Allows the upload/downloading of files

- Enables users to embed and/or incorporate Web 2.0 tools

- Provides the opportunity for reviewer feedback and/or commentary

Presently, most platform options come with these features. That was not the case when the UHP first moved to an open platform in 2012. The most commonly selected platform at this time is Weebly, followed by WordPress, Google Sites (which easily allows for password protection), Wix, and Blogger.

The UHP makes it clear to students that they can keep their portfolios private and use sites that allow for password protection. Surprisingly, very few keep it private, with almost all making their portfolios public.

While we guide students in choosing a platform and in creating their portfolios, training to use these platforms is not formally provided to the UHP staff or students. Rather, instructors and advisors who may need assistance support one another and share expertise. Students generally choose a platform that they are comfortable with and support each other if they need assistance. There is not currently university support for any of these platforms. When needed, UHP staff, advisors or students can contact the technical support for the individual platform. To date, this has been used very little but has been successful in learning anything needed or resolving issues. Students and staff are generally comfortable utilizing the technical online support provided by individual platforms.

Student attitudes towards the learning portfolios

Student attitudes towards learning portfolios have been overwhelmingly positive (once the UHP moved to an open platform). Prior to moving to the open platform, the student experience was negative due to limitations with the platforms. Now, with an open platform, students are able to take ownership, and it has become a positive experience for the great majority.

The portfolio is intertwined with the UHP's strong focus on reflection. That can sometimes mean that students don't view it as positively when they are in their first or second year, when they are still learning the purpose and value of reflecting on experiences. As they develop the capacity for and appreciation of reflective learning, they see directly the positive impact on their personal, academic and professional learning and development. Over time, students generally develop that appreciation and gain a positive attitude towards reflection and learning portfolios.

In addition, students comment that it is helpful to have a record of their collegiate experiences in one place. They share that this allows for more effective development of their resumes, provides for easier crafting of personal statements for graduate school applications, and allows for more effective interview preparation.

> *"I really wanted to make my portfolio usable for showing to future employers/applying for internships, etc., and I found this is a great way to remember and document everything I have done in college." ~2014 UHP graduate*

In their upper-years, students recognize that their portfolios provide a unique history of where they were in their learning at various points in time. They are able to see their own growth and development in ways that they would not be able to otherwise. In turn, they are able to articulate this learning to potential employers and graduate schools. They recognize that their portfolios provide evidence of learning that they otherwise might not have seen or recognized.

How learning portfolios have changed the UHP and what the future might bring

Learning portfolios have impacted the UHP in two major ways - by (1) providing a concrete space for the integration of learning to take place across experiences and across time, and (2) creating a public brand for the UHP through the public sharing of individual student's learning portfolios (always with students' permission).

The focus on integration of learning has been touched on throughout this article. Over time, as individual students utilize their portfolios to document and reflect upon their honors (and other) experiences, they develop increased capacity for reflective and integrative learning. In turn, students with well-developed learning portfolios demonstrate (and tell us) that they are better able to articulate the impact of their experiences, knowledge, skills and attitudes they have developed as a result, and how that all relates to their academic, personal and professional development. They are better able to tell their story. This has a positive impact on graduate school applications (personal statements, statements of purpose), job and other interviews, scholarship and award processes, and more. It has a clear and significant impact on students' future direction and opportunities.

Implementing the year-in-review as a learning portfolio requirement was as fundamentally powerful for the UHP as initially implementing the portfolio itself. The year-in-review has been a game changer, providing students with a structured time and space to critically reflect on their learning across experiences, integrate that learning, and to consider the impact as they move forward, informing choices and opportunities. It has increased the learning that we see from students and changed how they see their own learning.

On a programmatic level, learning portfolios have provided a public brand for the UHP. They have given the UHP a public space for others to see students' engagement and learning. Viewers can see the impact of the UHP upon looking through a student's portfolio. When sharing with faculty and staff across campus, as well as with other partners who are learning about the program, the viewer can immediately picture what students are doing, ways in which they are engaged in learning, and the resulting impact. They can, quite literally, see our vision coming to life within each student.

Other points of impact have been:

- Learning portfolios have also increased peer-to-peer sharing and learning in the UHP. Students look to one another's portfolios for ideas, to better understand the program, etc.

- UHP advisors get to know our students better through their learning portfolios and can reference them in providing references and in writing recommendation letters.

- Faculty report that they look to UHP students' learning portfolios when writing recommendation letters as well. They also report that they are able to write better letters for students with learning portfolios.

- Some students' portfolios are featured on our website and many report having between 10-25 unique users visit their sites per week, with some vastly exceeding this average. Thus, students' portfolios are also helping the UHP create a brand on a larger, more national scale.

Future questions and direction include:

- Cost will always be an issue. A key question is whether these platforms will continue to have free options. Currently, Weebly has placed some limitations on free usage of their platform. Weebly, to date, has been the most utilized platform by our students.

- Assessment is a key next step for the UHP and learning portfolios. Formal assessment of student learning outcomes is needed to better prove the impact of the learning portfolios.

Advice

The UHP took a leap of faith back in 2007 in deciding to implement a new program with learning portfolios at the foundation. We took another leap of faith the following year, when the UHP's ePortfolio pilot failed, and we had to start over. In that, our biggest piece of advice is to take that leap of faith for your class or program and to be open to the potential positive impact of ePortfolios on student learning and engagement.

Other advice:

- Answer the question of "why ePortfolios?" for your class or program first. Ensure that there is a clear purpose and practical application, so that students see that purpose and don't see it as busy work or just something extra they have to do for their grade. Clearly answer the "why" before setting out and ensure that it is continuously integrated moving forward. Establishing a balance of pedagogical and practical purpose in maintaining their ePortfolios is necessary to meet students' evolving motivations

- Do your research to learn about various models, pedagogies, platforms, and the successes and challenges of others.

- Implement ePortfolios in a way that is authentic and meaningful to your class or academic program and that fits its culture (or, that contributes to the culture that you want to create, as in the case of the UHP).

- Gather feedback from students, faculty and staff who are engaged in your ePortfolio process. Listen carefully to what they are telling you (or not telling you) about their experience of the portfolio; provide structured opportunities for them to provide feedback.

- Incorporate that feedback into your ePortfolio practice.

- Allow for student ownership of the ePortfolio. For example, select a platform that contributes to student understanding of the "why" of your ePortfolio implementation and allows for it to be a meaningful and positive experience for the student.

- Allow for student privacy. If your ePortfolios are on a public platform, always allow for students to opt to keep their individual portfolio private.

- Be aware of the broader landscape and what students might be doing with ePortfolios outside of the context of your class or program. Are they creating other separate portfolios for other classes and programs? Is there a way to integrate those portfolios?

- Develop an assessment plan for your ePortfolios and implement that from the beginning.

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