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The Next Big Thing? The Promise of E-Portfolios at NYU and Beyond

By [Keith Adams](#)

Student portfolios have been a significant part of higher education for decades. Across disciplines, students create collections of work that demonstrate their accomplishments, talents, and knowledge. Everything from resumes and course projects to a description of a student's goals and general academic records can be included in a student portfolio. These resources are commonly evaluated by faculty, administrators, and prospective employers, in order to assess the credentials of the respective student. From Tisch School of the Arts to the Department of Teaching and Learning in the School of Education, many of New York University's professional schools and colleges integrate student portfolios into the curriculum.

A concerted effort has begun to bring this educational and professional tool into the digital age by creating and developing an electronic online portfolio tool. Institutions around the nation have begun implementing tools for the creation, evaluation, and repositing of student portfolios in a digital environment. Many academics and professionals are heralding the e-portfolio as the next step in web-based educational technology. Despite this perceived potential, there are a great many unanswered questions that present themselves when examining the concept of online portfolios.

The National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII) has set forth some key areas for investigation regarding electronic portfolios. The mission of the NLII is to create new collegiate learning environments utilizing the power of information technology to improve the quality of teaching and learning, to contain or reduce rising costs, and to provide greater access to higher education.

The NLII Research Focus

Teaching and Learning Issues

- Effectiveness of portfolios in generating, recording, and assessing learning
- Pedagogical benefits
- Content standards
- Contributions to both formative and summative assessment
- Documentation and impact assessment of e-portfolios on student learning

Higher Education System Issues

- Potential purposes for electronic portfolios
- Challenges faced in moving from the paper record to e-portfolios
- Short and long-term policy concerns of e-portfolios (security, privacy, FERPA, etc.)
- Implications of a potential shift from institutionally-based to lifelong learner-based records

Institutional Issues

- University policy implications (e.g., intellectual property content issues)
- Support and long-term maintenance implications (financial models, storage and archiving, lifelong portfolios)
- Learning from others' mistakes
- Collaboration with each other and with government and industry to address e-portfolio challenges

Technological Issues

- Effective design technologies
- Possible integration into existing enterprise systems (SIS)
- Standards and technical specifications

Marketplace Issues

- Guidelines for e-portfolio system development by universities
- Guidelines for influencing vendors to meet higher education's needs

Most of these issues are significant to New York University. By exploring a variety of models presently at use in higher education and by considering some of the key areas presented above, we can glean enough information to assess which mechanisms might be the most effective and therefore warrant further study.

The North East Regional Computing Program (NERCOMP) recently showcased three case studies of institutions that are utilizing electronic portfolios in the collection of student academic information. Each institution presented examples of "home-grown" tools used by staff and students at various levels.

Connecticut College, Dartmouth College, and Wesleyan University have each created their own tools for electronic student portfolios. In the case of Connecticut College, their impetus was from a student advising and career services perspective. Their Office of Career Enhancing Life Skills wanted a tool that integrated the college's multiple advising services and student academic records with an online interface. Students and staff alike could then access this interface to research career development advice and track the undergraduate student body.

Working in conjunction with Connecticut College, the Career Services Center at Dartmouth documents student academic progress and allows faculty to evaluate student development through a Perl-driven interface. Users can access a web-based interface that includes a resume program (Microsoft or RTF format), a journaling feature that allows the student to record notes on their skill development experiences, and a tool for uploading multimedia files for inclusion in the student portfolio. Both institutions allow the student to publish a URL of their portfolio to prospective employers and faculty mentors.

Technology Support Services at Wesleyan University initially created an e-portfolio tool to enhance the student advising process. However, the tool soon evolved to include faculty and staff e-portfolios. Faculty can access their course schedules, class lists, and online courseware, like Blackboard, from their e-portfolios. The University Registrar, who has access to both student and faculty e-portfolios, runs enrollment and online course registration through the portfolio. Wesleyan's e-portfolio system is now growing outside the academic spectrum; human resources and alumni portfolios are in operation or under implementation.

Each of these cases reflects the experiences of smaller educational institutions. How NYU would integrate a similar system on a larger scale remains to be seen.

The U.S. Department of Education's PT3 grant program (Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology) also recently presented a number of examples of e-portfolio integration taking place nationwide with the help of a government funding initiative.

Eastern Kentucky University has created an e-portfolio tool for their pre-service teachers, to help measure their progress, showcase their technology skills, and prepare for employment opportunities. Two of the key elements of this initiative are to train students in basic technical skills and to compare their tool with several others to determine which will ultimately become the ECU portfolio system.

The University of Wisconsin--River Falls implemented their system to help pre-service teachers gain recognition for their technology experience and prepare them to compete in the job market. Each student teacher's portfolio is unique. Students are given creative control over the content preparation of their portfolios and trained in web

interface design. Students are also trained in the use of video technology utilizing Apple Computer's iMovie software, which has emerged as one of the most effective components for students. The tool is user-friendly and very interactive, and the editing features increase an e-portfolio's visual effectiveness.

The University of Alaska--Anchorage (UAA) has two missions for the electronic portfolio: first, to provide a much-needed alternative means of student assessment, and, second, to increase student skills in new technologies through the creation of their own portfolio. Towards this end, UAA offers their students access to digital imaging, video and database technologies, and spreadsheets.

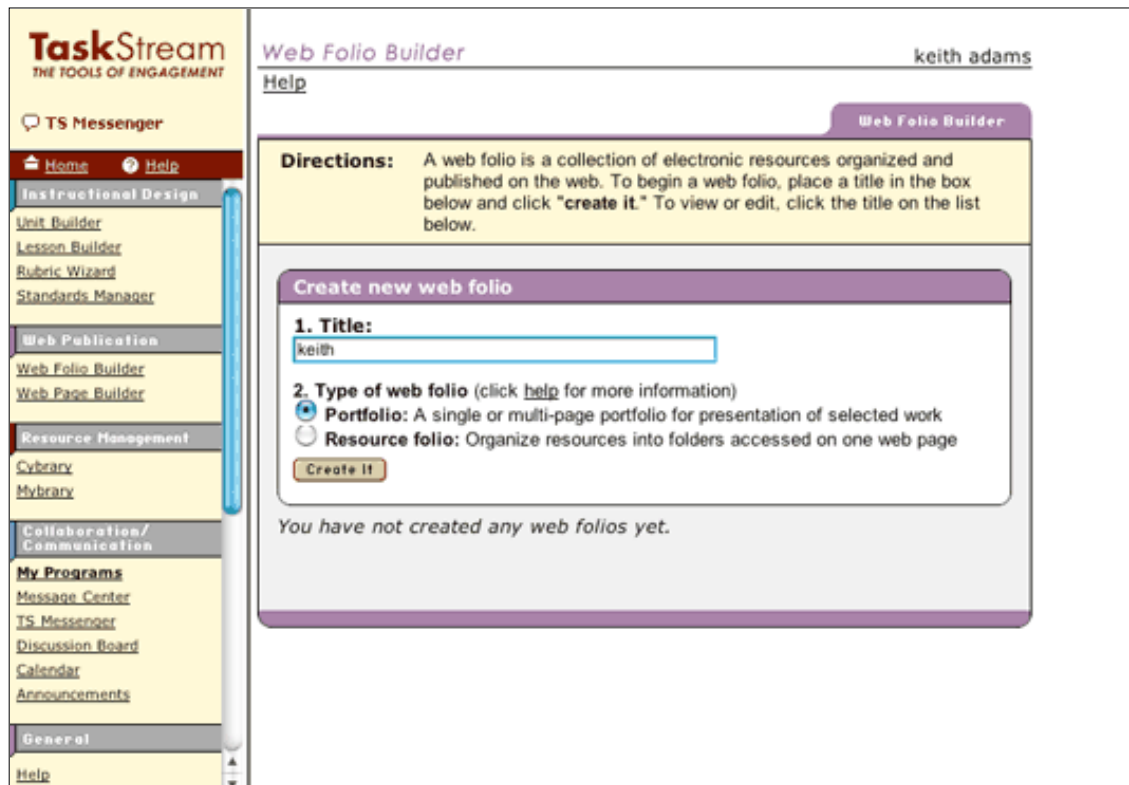


Figure #1 - The TaskStream Web Folio Builder

Finally, there are a number of commercial products on the market designed to facilitate the creation and management of e-portfolios. One such organization, TaskStream, recently presented a demonstration of their e-portfolio tool to a group of NYU faculty from the Steinhardt School of Education (see fig. #1, above). Most of the commercial e-portfolio products have similar functions and allow for the same capabilities. The significant differences are in compatibility with an institution's system and product support. TaskStream runs their product on their own servers and they give full technical support to the institution and its users.

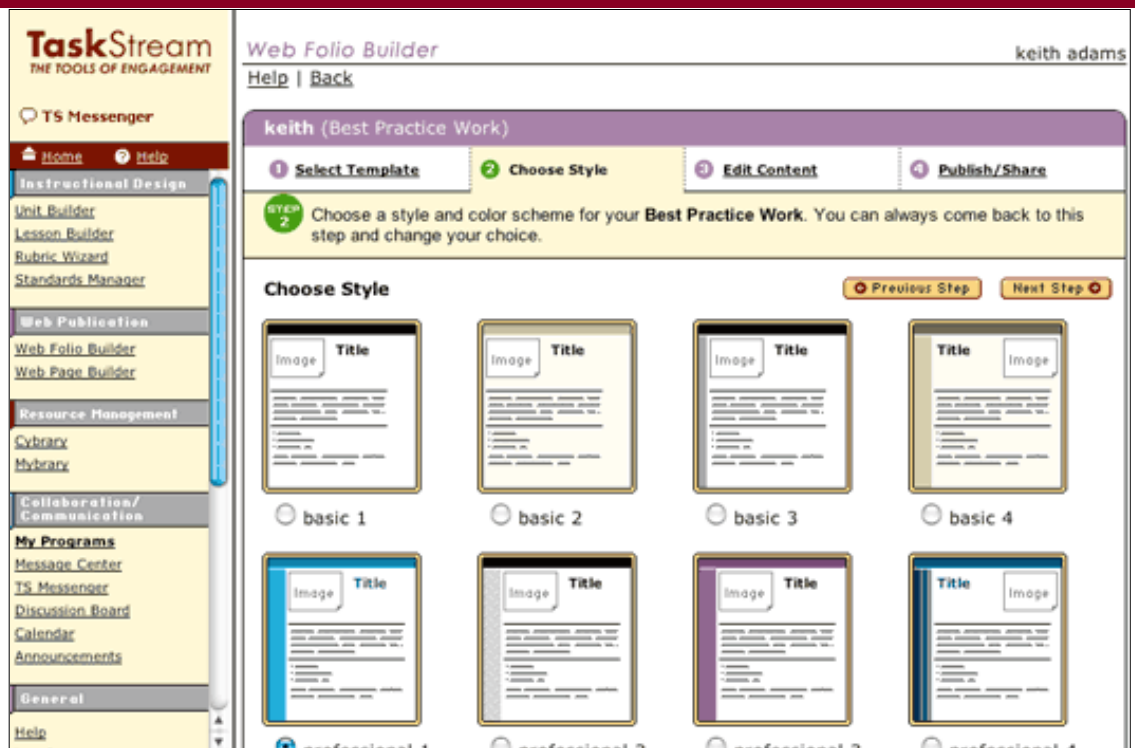


Figure #2 - TaskStream Web Folio Style Options

The TaskStream tools allow faculty and administrators the ability to manage and distribute course materials, review student work and track student progress, create portfolio templates and assess students' portfolios online, develop curricula, easily reference state and national standards, and prepare assessment rubrics (see fig. #2). TaskStream's reporting tools aggregate and disaggregate data for accreditation support. Students or teacher candidates can submit work for review and evaluation, receive feedback from instructors, and author standards-based lessons and units. TaskStream's Web Folio Builder makes it easy for students to create, organize, and share electronic portfolios that demonstrate standards compliance for certification (see fig. #3). The TaskStream tool is mainly designed for Teaching and Learning programs. However, the tools can be modified to enable Art programs or other disciplines to create, manage, and distribute portfolios.

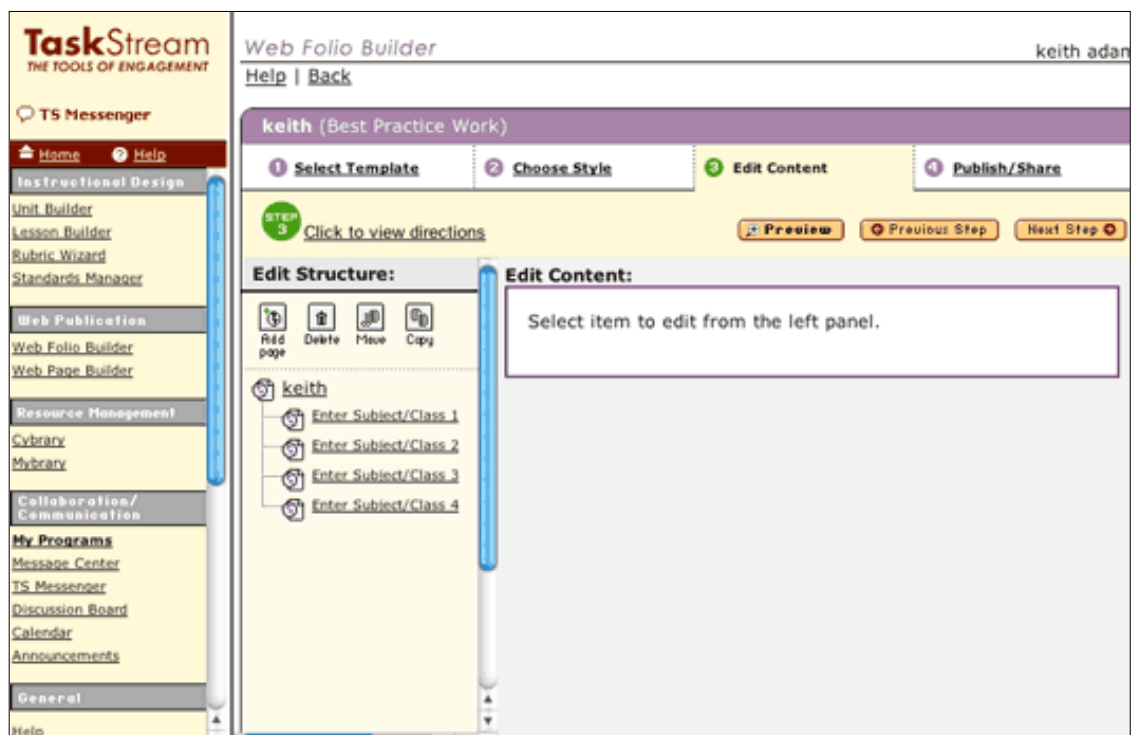


Figure #3 - TaskStream Web Folio Content Editor

As e-portfolio systems evolve, the potential applications for such tools continue to grow increasingly more varied. The key issues that remain the point of departure for any further exploration and consideration of electronic portfolio systems are, and will be, the deciding factors in how an institution like NYU implements any product, whether home-grown or purchased. A number of the models represented here have not yet begun to address some of the key areas broached by NLII. Most of these institutions are grappling with these issues in a pure exploratory effort. As with any serious study, research needs to be comprehensive and thorough and should continue until effective outcomes are reached. For now, the promise of eportfolios is in the details.

Resources

- National Learning Infrastructure Initiative
<http://www.educause.edu/nlii/keythemes/eportfolios.asp>
- NERCOMP (North East Regional Computing Program)
<http://www.nercomp.org/>
- Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers To Use Technology (PT3)
<http://www.pt3.org/stories/eportfolio.html>
- TaskStream
<http://www.taskstream.com/pub/>

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