

Implementing a Statewide Electronic Portfolio Infrastructure

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INTRODUCTION

On August 1, 2002, after over a year of discussion, design, and development, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) launched eFolio Minnesota™. After 15 months of operations, eFolio Minnesota has over 12,000 registered users and is receiving close to two million hits per month. The effort has experienced double-digit monthly growth since its launch and is well on its way to being adopted throughout the state by the K-20 education community along with the State's Workforce Center System. This article is intended to provide the reader with a chance to understand the historical factors that helped shaped this one-of-a-kind effort, along with providing an understanding of the design/development process and what the future potentially holds. This article is not intended to go into the history of the electronic portfolio movement; if one is interested in that, one needs go no further than to check out Dr. Helen Barrett's site at <http://www.electronicportfolios.com> (2004).

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

There were a number key efforts that helped to establish a tone and direction for eFolio Minnesota. These efforts were: the Internet System for Education and Employment (ISEEK—<http://www.iseek.org> n/d), the Department of Labor's defunct Career Management Account (CMA), and MinnesotaOnline. It is important to note that both the author and Gary Langer, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Programs, were heavily involved in all three of the efforts.

ISEEK is Minnesota's career and educational portal and has been operational since 1997. ISEEK has, among the state's education and workforce organizations, helped to set a tone for establishing the broad value of developing statewide infrastructure tools for Minnesota. ISEEK's success can also be traced to the

strong value placed on partnerships among and with the state's education and workforce organizations.

The Career Management Account helped to better define the value of constructing and deploying education and workforce tools that are targeted at an individual user, as opposed to those that are targeted at the user being part of an institution. The challenge of the CMA project, other than it being an "old" administration initiative attempting to survive in a "new" administration, was that the tool was "locked" down so tight through the use of digital certificates that those of us serving on the project team were unable to access our accounts. eFolio Minnesota, to be successful, would need to target users of average technology literacy.

Funding for eFolio Minnesota was obtained through congressional awards that were administered by the federal Department of Education through their funds for improvement of post-secondary education (FIPSE) offices. MnSCU's funds were targeted at laying the foundation to reshape ourselves to support the 21st century e-learner. These funds provided resources for awarding a variety of competitive e-curriculum awards to local campuses, expanding and enhancing electronic student services (e-student services), and helping to establish the organizational structure that evolved into MinnesotaOnline. Within the e-student service efforts, there were two areas of focus: Web-enabling core administrative student services to support students at a distance and establishing an electronic portfolio project—eFolio Minnesota. Work on Web-enabling core administrative student services proved to be highly successful thanks to internal support of our IT organization and by a decision to benchmark our efforts with those of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET). At that time, WCET had recently completed a study that helped to define the scope of electronic student services and identified national best practice resources in each of these areas. Work on eFolio Minnesota was initiated shortly after MnSCU launched its e-student service project.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT 101—DEFINE, DEFINE, DEFINE YOUR PROJECT

Most projects that are viewed as a “success” can credit a large part of that success to how the project was initially defined, and eFolio Minnesota was no exception to this. The initial assumptions and project structures that helped to shape the development of eFolio Minnesota are still at work, helping to shape the current operations and eFolio Minnesota’s future.

To understand eFolio Minnesota today, one needs to go back to the late spring of 2001 when project teams were beginning to be formed. There were three committees established to help define and shape the project: an educator team chaired by Lynda Milne, Director of MnSCU’s Center for Teaching and Learning; a student team chaired by Kevin Byrne, co-founder of Mindquest, the world’s first provider of an online high school diploma; and a worker team chaired by Norm Baer from the Career One Stop Service Center. The project steering committee included myself along with the individual team chairs. Individual team members were drawn from education and workforce organizations from around the state. Although members represented a diverse set of interests and backgrounds, they all had one thing in common—they were committed to establishing a statewide electronic portfolio project. In talking with each of the chairs after eFolio Minnesota was launched, it was interesting to note that none of us had any idea that the project would take the shape and form that it ultimately did.

The first task of the project team was to construct and release a request for proposal (RFP) in order to obtain contractor resources.¹ Critical in defining the RFP was the adoption of a set of key assumptions; these assumptions were critical not only within the context of the RFP, but also served as a key anchor in helping to ground the project during development. Project assumptions were as follows:

- **One size does not fit all:** There is a need to embrace differences among the various user communities.
- **KISS—keep it simple stupid:** When given a choice, the project would select the simpler of the options presented.
- **Yours for a lifetime:** The project would need to accommodate a user that creates their e-portfolio

in middle school, uses it throughout high school and college, and then supports their workforce and career efforts.

- **Learner/owner driven:** An individual learner will be in charge of his or her individual site.
- **“Word-processor friendly”:** Individuals that are Microsoft Word or PowerPoint literate would possess sufficient skills to create and administer their site. This project was intended to be “portfolios for the masses,” not “portfolios for Web-masters.”
- **Help and support tools would not be an afterthought:** Given the focus on the individual, it is/was critical to establish tools and services to provide support to users.
- **“Nothing but net”:** Creating and administering sites will be done entirely through the Web via a browser.
- **Security provisions that accommodate public, private, and restricted access:** Given appropriate concerns about information privacy, it is important to provide tools that permit a user to control how their information is displayed on the Web.
- **All media types had to be accommodated:** We live in a multimedia world that should be capable of being reflected within the portfolio.
- **“Super administrator” state-level tools”:** These are tools required to support help desk operations and related management functions.
- **Portfolios are and will continue to be valued within the education and workforce communities:** The project was not structured to convince users or organizations of the value of portfolios. There is more than sufficient research available to convince any skeptic of the value of portfolios within an education or workforce setting.

Using these assumptions, along with definitional work from the Career Management Account and expectations defined in MnSCU’s e-learning congressional awards, which referenced tools that would help complement services provided through ISEEK, an RFP was constructed and released in the summer of 2001. The project received multiple responses to its RFP, with responses being submitted from vendors around the country. The evaluation process produced two possible finalists: one candidate proposed a custom “build” solution, while the other candidate proposed a “buy” solution that included custom modifications

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