In December 2006, Karen Thurmond (University of Memphis) facilitated a NACADA Webinar on the advising syllabus, that important advising tool that communicates to students that advising is teaching and identifies learning outcomes advisees can achieve through the advising process. Several sessions at the 2007 NACADA Annual Conference provided information on the advising syllabus, and a pre-conference workshop was devoted to the advising portfolio. Interestingly, however, only one Conference session specifically addressed the electronic portfolio as a logical adjunct to these advising issues. E-portfolios are an increasingly important part of the college experience and can be a fundamental means for the documentation of advising outcomes. Therefore, academic advisors should consider implementing the e-portfolio into the advising process.

What is an e-portfolio? Helen Barrett (2000) describes it as a “reflective tool that demonstrates growth over time” (¶4). More precisely, she notes that the e-portfolio “brings together two different processes: multimedia project development and portfolio development” (¶5), both equally important to students. Danielson and Abrutyn (as cited by Barrett, 2000) noted that the process involves “collection, selection, reflection, and direction (looking ahead and setting goals for the future)” (Barrett, ¶6). As an “ongoing learning tool” (¶38), the e-portfolio “is not a haphazard collection of artifacts” (¶4).

The directors of the Electronic Portfolio Program (2007) at Virginia Wesleyan College note that an e-portfolio is a “web document” which facilitates the following:

- Reflecting [on self, abilities, interests, coursework, co-curricular activities, etc.]
- Connecting the lessons of the college classroom to the world beyond campus
- Bringing together coursework, off-campus research, off-campus experiences
- Developing a record that ultimately translates into a resume that will give students an edge (¶1).

Advisors will note similarities between these two definitions and several advising outcomes – reflection, learning, transferability of knowledge from classroom to world, and career goals. Furthermore, an e-portfolio results in a product allowing students to demonstrate “useful technology and design skills” (Agnes Scott College, 2007, ¶3). E-portfolios are flexible and permit students to stand out as individuals. Reflections on learning and skill development from semester to semester can be included as well as photographs of learning experiences, important course papers and projects related to career interests, music, poetry, art, personal goals and philosophies. The word “resume” in the Virginia Wesleyan description could be misleading because while an e-portfolio can contribute to an effective resume, its implementation in the freshman year is important to the documentation of advising outcomes and the student’s college experience.

When an e-portfolio is not limited to the senior year for the sole purpose of obtaining employment, it is useful to advisors for fostering student growth. The authors of the Agnes Scott College (2007) electronic portfolio entry noted that the e-portfolio “promote[s] student engagement” and “encourages student[s] to organize and creatively present evidence of [their] intellectual and personal development and academic achievement during [their] entire college career” (¶1). Advisors can help incoming college students begin e-portfolios with reflections on summer job experiences, volunteer activities, new ideas they want to explore in college, and campus groups they would like to join. Students can establish goals, save pictures, reflect on new work experiences through service-learning and internships, identify skills development, and record their changes in values and interests. The e-portfolio, then, creates an ongoing electronic document which advisor and advisee can use as a foundation for advising sessions.

Some possibilities for connecting advising syllabi with e-portfolios are suggested by current advising syllabi. Among student expectations listed on the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Cross-College
Advising Service (2006) syllabus are the following: “come to appointments prepared with questions and/or topics to discuss,” “be open to developing and clarifying your personal values and goals,” and “keep a record of your academic progress and goals” (p. 1). Students automatically create a record while reflecting and writing on possible questions, topics, values, and goals which can be called up on a computer for discussion and rethinking. The e-portfolio also helps students to achieve two of the objectives and expected student outcomes listed on the calendar page of the same syllabus: “clarify your personal values, especially as they relate to academic and career choices” and “assess your skills and strengths” (Cross-College Advising Service, 2006, p. 2). By providing a record of these thinking projects, the e-portfolio helps students prepare for advising sessions and examine their thoughts on these issues as they move through college. At the same time, students can create an environment for music, poetry, or photographs. They can also connect co-curricular activities to their courses and reveal skills and career-related interests that the advisor and student can discuss.

Another academic advising syllabus (Fall, 2005) from Dickinson College includes advisee responsibilities such as “organize official documents” for easy access and “develop an on-going portfolio of your advising work” (p. 2). The authors of the Dickinson syllabus note that scanning and maintaining a record of such documents and advising sessions will help the student and advisor “to accurately measure and document that you have achieved the learning outcomes for academic advising” and to create “a variety of documents that you and your advisor will develop together to demonstrate your achievement of these outcomes” (p. 2).

The word “portfolio” reminds us that the advising portfolio is another tool that has been receiving much attention lately. Do students need both an advising and an e-portfolio? An advising portfolio can easily be one and the same as an e-portfolio, increasing a student’s sense of engagement in its development.

Electronic portfolio programs continue to grow. The Virginia Wesleyan College “PORTfolio” program replaces a minor, requires nineteen credit hours, and includes an e-portfolio which students begin their freshman year. As part of its Learning Outcomes Project, Schoolcraft College has a four-year Electronic Portfolio Program (2007) encompassing a seven-week course “specifically designed to help you organize and begin construction of your electronic portfolio” (¶5). Schoolcraft students have access to multiple resources, including links to sample e-portfolios. One final example is the e-Portfolio and Global Citizenship project (n.d.) from Kennesaw State University. This four-year e-portfolio program is based on the RACCE (2002) college student portfolio process: “reflect, assess, collect, connect, and express.” Kennesaw’s e-portfolio program equips students “to become productive citizens” (¶1) as it “strengthens the vision of the college student learning process” (¶2). The Virginia Wesleyan’s “Top 10 reasons that make the PORTfolio Program different!” (n.d.) points to benefits which students can appreciate: “You will learn web design skills and modify and add to your portfolio throughout your journey through the program. Eventually this will become a 3-D collection of your experiences, coursework, and photos that you will use to market yourself to prospective graduate schools or potential employers. This is way beyond Facebook and MySpace . . . ” (No. 10).

Academic advising should become a vital portion within the increasing number of e-portfolio programs. Recognizing that advising is teaching, NACADA members have promoted the advising syllabus as a means to identify learning outcomes students can attain through the advising process. The e-portfolio contributes to the achievement of numerous learning goals. Therefore, advisors should consider how the activities and expectations that make up advising syllabi can be connected to and facilitated by electronic portfolios. The possibilities are ripe for study and experimentation.

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References


