

Woodbury University

Providing a Competitive Advantage to Students and Faculty with e-Portfolios



“We believe that e-Portfolios will give our students a competitive advantage in finding employment and at the same time allow us to assess the effectiveness of our instruction in educating the student for lifelong success.”

- Steve Dyer, Chief Information Officer, Woodbury University

Highlights

Business Context

Woodbury University implemented an e-Portfolio system to systematically improve student success in securing employment and to provide faculty a tool for improving instructional effectiveness and student learning.

Business Challenges

- Standardize data gathering and analysis processes to improve institutional effectiveness via both student and faculty performance
- Alter the curriculum to make sure the right data is being generated in the classroom that can be used as a basis for assessing effectiveness
- Convince students of the value of e-Portfolio preparation when demonstration of its worthiness is in the future

Solution

- Nuventive iWebfolio software
- Sun Fire™ V880 and V240 servers, running Solaris™ 10

ROI

- Demonstrated progress in Woodbury's data gathering and assessment capabilities for accreditation
- Improved ability of students to learn
- Ability of faculty to more consistently evaluate and appraise student performance and show their effectiveness in teaching

When Woodbury College first opened its doors in 1884 to prepare students for jobs in local businesses in central Los Angeles, the city had just 11,000 people. While the City of Angels may have grown dramatically, Woodbury, now a 1500-student university, continues to focus on increasing the region's economic capacity by preparing its students for employment in local Southern California companies.

It is Woodbury's belief that e-Portfolios will play an increasingly significant role in not only helping students to succeed in securing employment in a highly-competitive job market, but also in assisting faculty to assess and improve the quality of their courses. The university offers degree tracks in specific high-demand fields such as architecture, interior architecture, animation, fashion design, graphic design, business, information technology and marketing. All have a strong visual component.

Effectively presenting oneself in a structured manner has been a challenge for at least as long as the advent of the resume. e-Portfolios provide a consistent method for presenting skills and accomplishments. “It used to be that when students went out to get a job, they brought along a large stack of papers with them,” noted Steve Dyer, chief information officer at Woodbury. “An e-Portfolio presents all this information in a much clearer way,

and has the added advantage of being available for the employer to look at and study before or after the interview.”

The e-Portfolio Project's Beginning

A May 2001 visit by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) at the beginning of Woodbury's most recent accreditation process set the wheels in motion for the e-Portfolio project. During the visit, the WASC committee encouraged Woodbury to develop a culture of data collection, analysis, and forecasting to assist institutional efforts to improve through use of pertinent data.

Hired as chief information officer in February 2002, Dyer initially implemented a Student Information System (SIS) to begin standardized collection of student data. Institutional self-review processes made further improvements in data analysis and assessment.

Committed to increasing student success and improving instructional effectiveness, and understanding the possibilities in further expanding its ability to gather, deploy and evaluate data, Woodbury selected enterprise assessment and e-Portfolio software from Sun Microsystems partner Nuventive in early 2005.

Expanding Uses for e-Portfolios

Students will be utilizing e-Portfolios for both developmental and representational purposes.

Woodbury is carefully creating structured templates and examples of best practices to guide student efforts in evaluating their own progress over four years and in creating the best possible vehicle for demonstrating their true worth to prospective employers. However, it is difficult to assess the specific impact of the e-Portfolio in the context of other hiring factors such as the local economy.

Faculty members have committed to the use of e-Portfolios and have formed a committee to decide what should be included and the most effective utilization. Using the software, faculty will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction, based on common measures and desired learning outcomes, and take corrective action. The software also assists the institution in evaluating the overall effectiveness of individual faculty members, departments and instructional methodologies in improving student success based on a consistent set of criteria.

But faculty are also eager to use the software to present themselves as well, creating portfolios of their educational history, their vita, research, papers, associations and interests, all with the idea that it will help their career. "Promote me for these reasons," Dyer calls the practice. Again, the use of a consistent format makes it easier for the institution to consistently evaluate and appraise the faculty.

After experience with e-Portfolios and additional reflective thought, Woodbury has decided to introduce the technology to the

university staff as well. Staff reaction to this tool has been enthusiastic, feeling that it provides them a better way for presenting lifelong learning and career development.

Challenges in Implementing e-Portfolios

As with any new and unfamiliar way of doing things in education, the rollout of e-Portfolios at Woodbury has not been without challenges. On the faculty side of things, unfamiliar technology and philosophical issues combined with "not having enough time to do yet another thing" needed to be overcome. But the WASC accreditation provided the compelling reason for putting the project on a "not if, but when" footing.

While students don't have the usability issues with the software that some faculty might have, some perceive that integrating e-Portfolios into common class work will make their education more difficult and time-consuming. Without a history of statistical information, it is sometimes difficult to convince students that it will actually help them get a job, even if, from an employer's perspective, it allows hirers to get a clearer and wider appreciation for their skills and accomplishments over time, giving them the competitive advantage over other applicants with simple textual resumes in these highly visual and graphics-oriented local industries.

Critical Success Factors

Dyer sees two critical success factors as key in helping other institutions transition to e-Portfolios for student and faculty use. The first is top-down commitment from the executive and academic branches of the institution. You must demonstrate to them e-

Woodbury University At A Glance

Location: Burbank, California, with a satellite campus in San Diego, California
 Students: Approximately 1,500
 Full-time Faculty: 55
 Adjunct Faculty: 175

Portfolio's capabilities and value because you *must* have their support.

Second, Dyer suggests spending the time to figure out the proper design and use of e-Portfolios to achieve the institution's desired outcomes. "If you just give them the software," cautioned Dyer, "you'll end up with a worthless hodgepodge of data. You have to provide sharp focus so that it doesn't become a big electronic filing cabinet."

e-Portfolio Futures

While Woodbury's capacity to gather and analyze data has increased as a result of e-Portfolios, it knows that it requires substantially greater capacity in gathering, deploying, and evaluating data. Over the next few years, Woodbury is dedicated to implementing a robust infrastructure that can provide data and a culture that will nurture ongoing assessment.

In the near future, Dyer foresees a distinct possibility that students will be applying to Woodbury having already created an e-Portfolio in high school. At some point in time, having an e-Portfolio will give prospective students a competitive advantage in gaining admittance to the institution of higher learning of their choice.