

# AePR

SP/SU 2019, Vol. 3, Issue 1

THE AAEEBL ePORTFOLIO REVIEW

## Building Bridges II

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# Do Students Use Their ePortfolios After Graduation? A Pilot Study of Undergraduate and Graduate Students

Authors: Heather Stuart, Megan Haskins, and Lucas Adelino

Review Editor: Connie Rothwell

## Introduction

The use of ePortfolios to support student learning and professional development during their academic experience has been well documented (Miller & Morgaine, 2009; Penny Light, Chen, & Ittelson, 2012; Watson, Kuh, Rhodes, Penny Light, & Chen, 2016). In addition to providing students with the opportunity to synthesize their experiences, students can use ePortfolios to communicate their skills and abilities during job and graduate school search processes. Studies analyzing employer perceptions of ePortfolios generally show positive (Hart Research Associates, 2013) or moderately positive (Leahy & Filiatraut, 2017) responses, sometimes tempered by employers' lack of familiarity with the concept or the technology (Yu, 2012).

**ePortfolios are especially relevant in light of a rapidly changing professional environment. Jobs are no longer lifelong commitments; students entering the job market today are expected to work at several organizations as they progress in their careers**

ePortfolios are especially relevant in light of a rapidly changing professional environment. Jobs are no longer lifelong commitments; students entering the job market today are expected to work at several organizations as they progress in their careers. Chen (2009) argues that this high volume of transitions places greater responsibility on individuals to develop and maintain a curated record of their experiences. In this manner, ePortfolios are documents of lifelong and life-wide learning, and their benefits extend beyond the scope of undergraduate or graduate education.

Cambridge (2010) presents an overview of three large-scale projects that worked with ePortfolios beyond the scope of academic institutions. Though these projects show how ePortfolios can help individuals manage transitions throughout their lives, none of the three focuses on the use of ePortfolios by higher education students after their graduation. This pilot study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how Auburn University students perceive ePortfolios and how some of those students use ePortfolios after graduation.

## Institutional Context

In order to understand how and why we conducted this pilot study, some background information about our institutional context is important. The ePortfolio Project at Auburn University is a campus-wide initiative that supports students as they create outward-facing, professional, integrative ePortfolios. Across

departments and programs, our office helps students create ePortfolios that meet four learning outcomes: critical thinking through reflection, technical competency, visual literacy, and effective communication. While the office offers several ways to directly support students through workshops and online materials, the majority of our work is collaborating with faculty to help them think about how to integrate ePortfolios into courses and curricula. Faculty and staff who decide to teach ePortfolios can opt to participate in the cohort, a type of learning community, where they can access resources and support from our office. As we continue to implement the initiative, we prioritize flexibility and student ownership in our practice and programs. For example, the curriculum map and type of ePortfolio may vary from one department to the next, and students can choose which platform they use to create the ePortfolio. For more information about the initiative and case studies from specific departments, see Bartlett, Stuart, Owensby, and Davis (2016).

### even though we prioritize flexibility, assessing student ePortfolios across the four learning outcomes is a necessary part of the initiative

Even though we prioritize flexibility, assessing student ePortfolios across the four learning outcomes is a necessary part of the initiative. Our office developed an Assessment Institute, an IRB-approved method of assessing student ePortfolios that also acted as a faculty development opportunity (Marshall, Duffy, Powell, & Bartlett, 2017). Faculty participated in a training and norming process to ensure consistent use of the rubric and increase reliability across scores. Two Institutes were carried out in 2016 and 2018, resulting in the scoring of 248 ePortfolios.

Previous research from the Assessment Institute has focused on the development process, details of the rubric and the scoring of student ePortfolios, and the faculty experience (Marshall et al.,

2017). This previous research provided more details about the assessment of ePortfolios within our context, but did not consider the data collected from students about their experiences with ePortfolios. This study examines that data with the goal of better understanding student experiences and the value they see in ePortfolios after graduation.

## Methods

The research design for this study followed a mixed-methods approach, which allowed us to analyze both a Likert scale and open-ended sections of a student survey, as well as triangulate the results of the analysis.

### Student Survey

We collected the data through a survey link sent via Qualtrics to students who we thought might have encountered ePortfolios, either in their courses or directly through our office. These students met at least one of the following criteria: graduated from a cohort program between August 2012-May 2018, attended ePortfolio workshops, nominated for an ePortfolio award, held a position as an ePortfolio Ambassador, or worked as a writing center consultant.

A total of 6,357 students were contacted and 682 students completed the survey, a response rate of 10.7%. Of those students, 248 included a working link to their ePortfolio.

The survey asked students to include a link to their ePortfolio, provide general contact information, indicate if they were willing to be contacted in the future, and provide researchers permission to access academic and demographic data, all of which were optional. Students also answered a series of Likert scale and open-ended questions focused on how they used or planned to use their ePortfolio following graduation.

### Data Collection

The Likert scale section of the survey was comprised of five items, all optional. Each item included five response options, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Between

496-497 students responded to each item. The five Likert items students were asked include:

1. The process of creating an ePortfolio helped me think about what I wanted to do after graduation.
2. I used or plan to use my ePortfolio while looking for a job or applying to graduate school.
3. Creating an ePortfolio helped me see connections among my experiences.
4. Creating an ePortfolio helped me explain my interests and skills.
5. I have evidence my ePortfolio helped me secure a position or admission to a graduate program.

Items 1 and 2 focused on the ePortfolio as a process. Items 3 and 4 focused on the ePortfolio as a product. Lastly, item 5 focused on ePortfolio use after graduation. If students selected “agree” or “strongly agree” on this final item, they were prompted to respond to an optional open-ended follow-up question. Sixty-nine students responded to the open-ended question:

*What is the evidence your ePortfolio helped you secure a position or admission to a graduate program?*

### Data Analysis

Simple descriptive statistics, aided by Microsoft Excel, were used for analyzing the distribution of responses to the Likert scale items. For the open-ended question, our analysis was informed by Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All three researchers coded the data, which was done in three steps. First, each researcher independently used open coding to become familiarized with the data set and draw a set of preliminary themes. Axial coding was then used to look for connections, similarities, recurrence, and relationships of causality between the individually derived themes. This culminated in the first version of our codebook. Lastly, over three in-person meetings, the researchers refined the codebook, using constant comparison (Glaser, 1965) to ensure that it accurately represented the data set. At the end

of the process, there were eight codes and 100% agreement among the three researchers.

### Results

The responses to the Likert scale items are indicated in the graphs below:

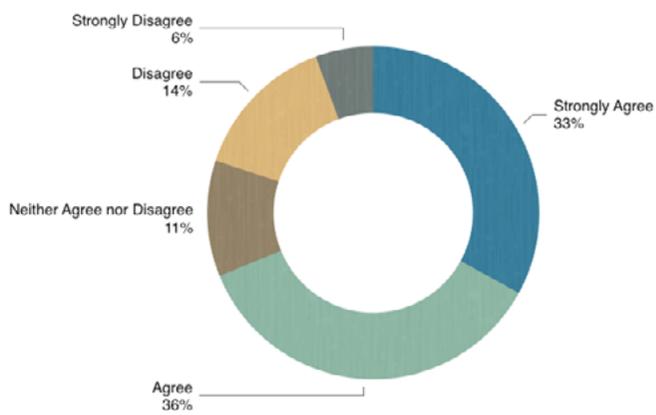


Figure 1. Results for the question “The process of creating an ePortfolio helped me think about what I wanted to do after graduation.”

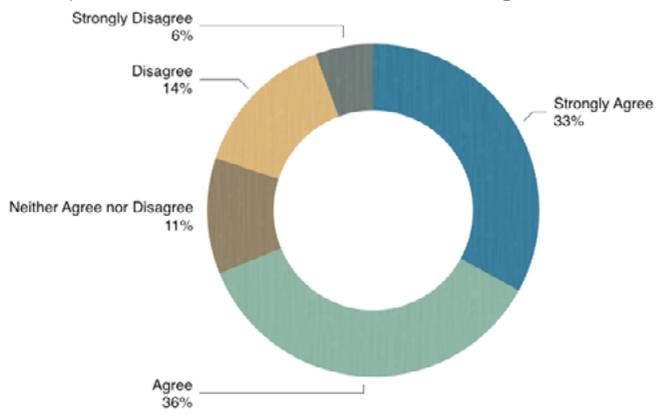


Figure 2. Results for the question “I used or plan to use my ePortfolio while looking for a job or applying to graduate school.”

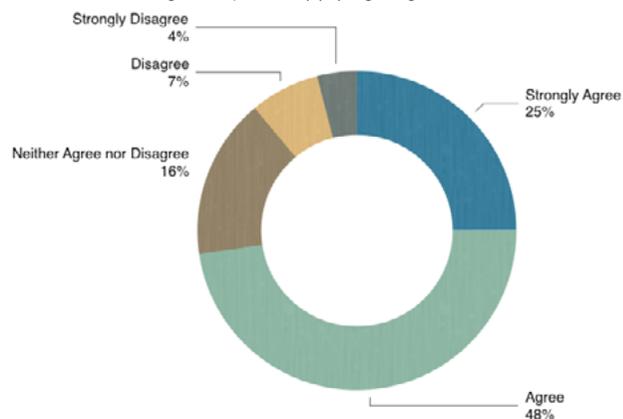


Figure 3. Results for the question “Creating an ePortfolio helped me see connections among my experiences.”

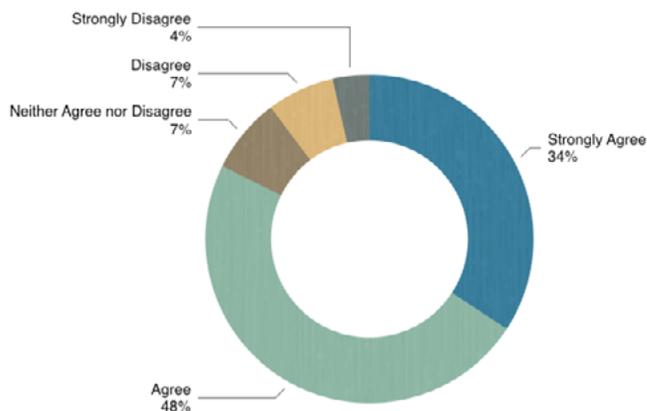


Figure 4. Results for the question “Creating an ePortfolio helped me explain my interests and skills.”

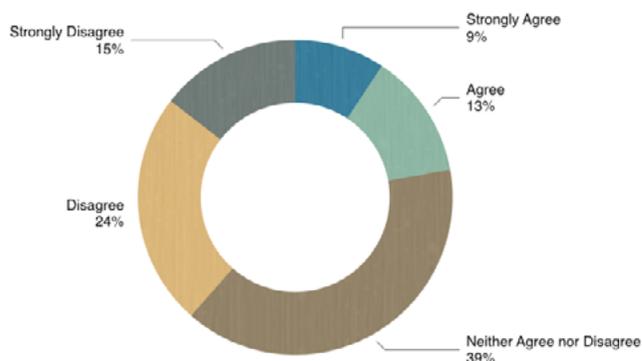


Figure 5. Results for the question “I have evidence my ePortfolio helped me secure a position or admission to a graduate program.”

Analysis of the open-ended question yielded eight codes, which describe how students reported using their ePortfolios after graduation and what they consider evidence of successful ePortfolio use. The codes and their distribution are represented in the table below:

Code	Usage
Hired	39%
General Value	23%
Hiring Process Implicit	23%
Hiring Process Explicit	13%
Search Process	13%
Tracked Views	3%
URL	3%
N/A	13%

Table 1. Distribution of Qualitative Codes

It is worth noting that multiple codes could be assigned to a single response. As a result, the sum of “Usage” in the table above goes over 100%. Below is a brief description of the codes, followed by examples of responses they describe.

- **Hired** describes responses where students state that getting a job or being accepted to a graduate program is the evidence of successful ePortfolio use.
  - *Example: “I sent mails to professors with a link to my ePortfolio and I finally got a fully funded offer from Penn State.”*
- **General Value** includes comments about the general benefits of ePortfolios, such as helping students organize their work, showcase their experiences, or articulate their professional identities.
  - *Example: “It’s helped me showcase my work.”*
- **Hiring Process Implicit** describes comments that report positive responses from hiring committee members, without mentioning the ePortfolio as a deciding factor for their selection.
  - *Example: “Positive reviews from all who I interviewed with. Easy to view and share around the office.”*
- **Hiring Process Explicit** describes responses in which students’ ePortfolios were singled out by their hiring committees as the reason for their selection.
  - *Example: “[My employers] stated that my ePortfolio was the strongest that they had seen, and that is the main reason that they felt comfortable with giving me the higher offer.”*
- **Search Process** includes comments about ePortfolios being used in a job search, without mentioning their reception by prospective employers or admissions officers.
  - *Example: “I submitted my ePortfolio as the main way to share my work for job applications.”*
- **Tracked Views** describes responses in which students report tracking the page views of their ePortfolios.
  - *Example: “In Google Analytics, I saw numerous visits to my online portfolio from the institution that ended up hiring me.”*
- **URL** includes comments in which students posted the links to their ePortfolios.
- **N/A** describes any other comments that could not be grouped under the other codes. Often, these comments were too short or worded imprecisely. Categorizing comments such as “interview” or “it helps me to get a summer internship” would require making judgment calls about what students might have wanted to say or assumptions on grammatical mistakes, which we sought to avoid.

### Discussion

Student responses indicate that they find value in both the process of creating an ePortfolio and the use of ePortfolios in their career or

graduate school pursuits. The process of creating an ePortfolio requires students to reflect on their curricular and co-curricular experiences, synthesize those experiences into visual and written reflections, and package that content on a website. This process is complex and requires significant critical thinking from students. The student responses indicate that this process helped them see connectedness between their experiences (73%). Students also indicated agreement that creating an ePortfolio helped them explain their interests and skills (82%). The understanding that students see value in the process of creating an ePortfolio emphasizes that educators should pay attention to how ePortfolios are being created, and not just on the finished product. One student clearly articulates this by focusing on the value of the process in providing a clear representation of their learning process for a professional context, stating:

*“[My ePortfolio] allowed me to explain my role and thought process behind each piece, which I would not have been able to do if I merely sent [employers] a couple sample files. It also allowed me to communicate my identity as a professional in a way a resume and cover letter cannot.”*

In addition to seeing the value of the process of creating an ePortfolio, students also identified value post-graduation. Sixty-four percent of students agreed that ePortfolios helped them think about what they wanted to do after graduation. Students are able to more clearly articulate their goals and market themselves for a specific audience because of the thinking that goes into an ePortfolio. One student cites the ePortfolio’s value in capturing their abilities, stating: “The hiring manager...felt confident offering me a position...because the portfolio so comprehensively explained my skill set, qualifications, and goals.” Since students see the value of the ePortfolio, many (69%) agreed that they will use or have used the ePortfolio to seek a job or apply for graduate school. One student articulated the evidence of their ePortfolio use, stating: “I was offered significantly more than

I had originally been told [because] my eportfolio was the strongest that they had seen.”

The distribution of the qualitative codes gives us additional clues about what students consider evidence of successful ePortfolio use. “Hired” was the most frequent code (39%), suggesting that, for most students, getting a job or being accepted to a graduate program is the strongest indication that their ePortfolios were valuable. Receiving positive responses from admissions officers or prospective employers is also considered evidence, as demonstrated by “Hiring Process Implicit” being among the most used codes (23%). Furthermore, the rate of use of the “General Value” code (23%) lends further proof that students deem the process of creating an ePortfolio valuable.

### Conclusion and Next Steps

The results of this study indicate that students see that they are better equipped to identify and articulate their own skills, experiences and knowledge when they complete ePortfolios. Students also see positive results when they use their ePortfolios in the job or graduate school markets. When introducing ePortfolios to students, we often hear questions about the value or return on time and energy investment. Prior to this study, our responses focused largely on anecdotal evidence that lacked the impact needed to convince students to commit to the process of creating an ePortfolio. However, this research project helped produce numerical and testimonial data that support our assertion that ePortfolios are worth the effort on the part of students.

While this study provides compelling information, we are interested in gathering more data to better clarify how students are using their ePortfolio after graduation. While many students cited employment or positive conversations with committees focused on their ePortfolios, we seek to better understand what students view as evidence of ePortfolio use after graduation. For instance, how did students share their ePortfolio with committee members? We are also interested in if and how students continue

to use their ePortfolio after obtaining their first job after graduation. Do they continue to update and share their ePortfolio as a networking or promotion tool? If so, in what ways does the ePortfolio change as their careers progress? These questions will allow us to better understand how students use their ePortfolios in the future. This understanding can inform the ways in which we discuss and teach ePortfolios to students, and findings may also better inform how students market their ePortfolios to career and graduate school contacts.

### About the Authors



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