

Red Light Districts, Washing Machines, and Everything In-Between: Creating iPort (the IUPUI Electronic Institutional Portfolio)

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Abstract

This essay addresses why and how IUPUI created its electronic institutional portfolio. It not only describes the process, but also highlights missteps and insights, so that lessons learned from creating this first generation of portfolios may expedite the work of other universities interested in developing their own portfolios. Finally, it focuses on how electronic institutional portfolios can become catalysts for change and institutional improvement, while also serving as multi-media self-studies for accountability and accreditation.

What does it mean to be an urban university? Why do so many urban universities rank poorly in *US News and World Report* even when they are effectively carrying out their missions, visions, and goals? And how might urban universities demonstrate to the public that they really are effective? These are some of the questions that the 1998–2001 Urban Universities Portfolio Project (UUPP), funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, set out to answer. Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) was one of six urban universities across the country that participated in the project, which produced six different prototypes for electronic institutional portfolios designed to answer the above questions. This article addresses why and how IUPUI created its electronic institutional portfolio. It not only describes the experiences of IUPUI, but also focuses on missteps and insights, so that lessons learned from creating this first generation of portfolios may assist and expedite the work of other universities interested in developing their own institutional portfolios.

Why We Created Our Institutional Portfolio

Situated in the downtown core of Indianapolis, IUPUI educates more than 27,000 students annually, most of them from the city of Indianapolis and its surrounding counties. Since its founding, it has grown, as Indianapolis has grown, in both size and sophistication. It now has more academic units and professional schools than any other campus in the country, and educates more Indiana citizens than any other campus in the

state. Under the auspices of both Indiana University (IU), with its flagship campus an hour south of Indianapolis, and Purdue University, with its flagship campus an hour north of Indianapolis, IUPUI was granted its separate identity and mission as Indiana's urban public campus just over thirty years ago.

While this sense of urban identity and responsibility has long influenced curricular and co-curricular planning and campus-community relationships at IUPUI, the campus has historically been overshadowed throughout the state and country by the prominent research accomplishments and strong national rankings of the flagship campuses to the north and south. Until recently, most people in the state viewed IUPUI as second best, the campus for students who are place-bound in Indianapolis because of career or domestic responsibilities or who are not accepted at Purdue, IU, or another first-choice university. In addition, while IUPUI was undertaking significant partnerships in the city and central Indiana region to enhance economic, cultural, intellectual, and technological development and was providing an array of patient and client services to the community, there was little awareness or acknowledgement of the extent or impact of this city-campus relationship within the local community, the Indiana Commission on Higher Education, the state legislature, the media, or local corporations. The initial reason for creating the IUPUI electronic institutional portfolio, consequently, was to increase awareness, both locally and nationally, of the importance of the role and mission of IUPUI in particular and of urban universities in general.

Over the three years of the project, as this primary goal came to be more clearly defined by the processes of portfolio development, both external and internal forces influenced the development and refinement of related and attendant functions for the portfolio. The two most significant external forces affecting both the purpose and the development of the portfolio were the establishment of a community college system in Indiana in 2000 and the upcoming campus accreditation visit in Fall 2002. These two forces necessitated internal responses and action: the establishment of the Future Group, comprised of leading faculty and administrators, to redefine the campus mission, vision, and goals, since the new community college had been assigned a mission that overlapped significantly with IUPUI's traditional mission and was expected to attract a substantial percentage of the students who would otherwise have attended IUPUI; and the formation of the Self-Study Steering Committee, which aimed to determine how best to document for our accrediting agency campus improvements and achievements in view of this recently refined mission, vision, and goals statement. As a consequence of these developments, the functions of the IUPUI electronic institutional portfolio came to include the following:

1. To serve as the self-study for our 2002 accreditation visit;
2. To demonstrate to multiple audiences, including students and their parents, local community stakeholders in higher education, our own internal IUPUI faculty, staff, and administrators, and a range of external stakeholders in higher education, the extent to which we are achieving our mission, including our achievements and our plans for improvement;

3. To catalyze and document internal cohesion and coherence in relation to our mission, vision, and goals;
4. To influence, locally and nationally, perceptions of the role of urban universities in higher education;
5. To influence the criteria by which universities are ranked.

How We Created iPort (The IUPUI Electronic Institutional Portfolio): First Steps

One: Selecting the people to do the work

The impetus and goals for creating the portfolio determined who was involved in its creation. The UUPP grant prescribed, and provided funding for, a core team comprising a campus director to develop and oversee the overall conceptual framework (a .5 FTE position); an institutional researcher to ensure accurate, up-to-date, and meaningful information about the campus (a .25 FTE position); the chief academic officer to provide direction and support (a .05 FTE position); and a Web and technology developer (a .5 FTE position) to integrate concepts, materials, and data into a coherent portfolio Web site.

Early in the process, this core team realized that, for the portfolio to represent the campus, it needed significant support and input from faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, for the portfolio to be integrated into the campus infrastructure, its development needed to be integrated into the work of relevant ongoing campus committees. We therefore initially set up one new committee with plans to draw upon appropriate existing campus committees as the portfolio began to take shape:

- *Implementation Committee* This was the one new committee established to provide guidance for and responses to the developing portfolio template. It included twenty key faculty, staff, and administrators who represented significant campus constituencies. These members were joined by two students and three local community members, representing the educational sector, the non-profit sector, and the corporate sector.
- *Program Review and Assessment Committee* This ongoing campus committee is charged with overseeing student learning and the assessment of student learning across the campus. While its role was minimal at the outset of the portfolio project, it became increasingly important as we focused on excellence in teaching and learning as a major emphasis for our upcoming accreditation visit.
- *Future Group* This group was established almost a year into the project. Because the portfolio was organized around the IUPUI mission, and this committee was charged with redefining our mission, vision, and values in response to the establishment of a community college system in the state, it exerted considerable influence on the portfolio template. The work of the Future Group led us to change our initial conceptual framework and to develop and present evidence for a modified set of performance indicators. While these changes and modifications created more challenges and work for the Core Committee, they also provided opportuni-

ties for dialogue, negotiation, and compromise, leading ultimately to greater coherence and consistency between the work of the portfolio project and the Future Group's strategic planning process.

- *Faculty Council* Because the institutional portfolio would make incursions into faculty time and make faculty work public to a national audience, it has been important to inform and involve faculty governance at all stages of the development of the portfolio.
- *Chancellor's Advisory Board* Comprised of leading community members, this Advisory Board was an important constituency to involve early on as we worked to determine what kinds of information community members would deem essential to an institutional portfolio.

Two: Determining the conceptual framework for the portfolio

Our first major decision was to develop our portfolio around the mission of the campus. While this seems a fairly simple and straightforward decision, it entailed many questions and issues, key among which were the following:

- How do we begin when the mission is in transition and is being redefined?
- How will the portfolio differ from information available on the main campus Web site?
- What kinds of content will we use to portray the work of the university as it enacts its mission? Who will select the content? How will it be selected? Will the content be comprehensive? If not, what will be the evaluative criteria for selection? Who will develop these criteria and evaluate the materials?
- How do we accommodate the different needs, interests, and levels of sophistication (with respect to higher education) of different audiences?
- How do we make the best use of today's technology, think ahead to what lies on the technological horizon, and still avoid a conceptual structure requiring technology that people with older or less powerful computers cannot manage?
- What kinds of contextual information do we need to provide for portfolio content?

Pondering these dilemmas and questions and pursuing their elusive and complex answers might have derailed us indefinitely, since we were forging new territory and lacked models for guidance or reference. Rather than try to answer the unanswerable, we made some provisional and pragmatic decisions in relation to each of the above questions:

- Since the mission would probably be *refined* rather than *redefined*, we began to consider the obvious areas of teaching, research, and civic engagement as major organizing categories for the portfolio;
- While the main campus Web site was primarily intended to be informative, our portfolio would be rhetorically persuasive. It would make the case that we were working hard to achieve our mission; that we were assessing ourselves on our effectiveness; and that we were making plans for and were already engaged in work to improve our effectiveness;
- In terms of content, we would begin with what we knew we had available;
- We realized that we could not possibly plan for the needs and interests of all possible audiences. We therefore decided to focus on being accountable to our

mission as clearly and as interestingly as possible;

- We determined that we would develop our portfolio with the best of current technology, and decide later whether we might need different versions for those with less powerful computers;
- We agreed that for the portfolio to have any value as a persuasive document in relation to achieving our mission, it had to focus on our campus goals, indicators of effectiveness to demonstrate how close we were to achieving those goals, the current status of our progress toward the goals, and our plans for further improvement.

Three: Organizing the contents of the portfolio

Having made those pragmatic decisions concerning the conceptual framework, we turned our attention to organizing the presentation of the three major aspects of our mission: providing excellence in teaching and learning for our constituents; research, scholarship, and creative activity; and civic engagement. While the details that follow will not match the specific circumstances at any other institution, the challenges of trying to wrestle the complexity of an institution of higher education into an elegantly simple portfolio framework will be common to just about any university undertaking a project of this nature. I will focus here on just a few representative decisions and issues to illustrate the kinds of challenges we faced and that might face other institutions in the process of developing an online institutional portfolio.

Wishing the portfolio to be as fully integrated as possible into core campus activities, we determined that the organization of our contents should relate directly to the organization of teaching and learning, research, and civic engagement as it currently existed and was enacted on campus. That entailed working with faculty, staff, and administrators across the campus to develop a broad overview of campus initiatives, processes, achievements, and plans for improvement in order to represent them accurately and meaningfully in the portfolio.

As might be expected on any large, complex campus, we discovered many fine initiatives related to all areas of our mission, but we also unearthed some challenges as we considered how to present these initiatives. Based on the information we gathered, the core team outlined an informal audit of the current status of teaching, learning, and civic engagement on campus; it also began to develop a list not only of what could be highlighted in the portfolio, but also of “campus chores” that needed to be initiated or completed if we were to present our campus work in the evaluative context of accountability essential to our concept of an effective and persuasive portfolio. Thus, portfolio development became a catalyst for development and improvement in all areas of our mission, and, consequently, a major resource in preparing for our 2002 accreditation visit.

We soon saw that attending to these campus chores would not just enable us to present the contents of the portfolio more persuasively; it would also provide greater internal visibility to and understanding of campus initiatives, would encourage stronger coordination of and coherence among campus initiatives, and would enhance the ability of the campus to demonstrate to our many constituencies the impact of these initiatives on the

campus and Indianapolis community. The most pressing tasks that needed attention were as follows:

- Finalizing a stable, officially approved statement of our mission, vision, and goals;
- Aligning our indicators of institutional effectiveness with our mission-related performance indicators;
- Identifying ways to document student learning and achievement of our six Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs), both in terms of what all IUPUI undergraduates, regardless of academic program, should know and be able to do and in terms of what graduating seniors in each specific academic program should know and be able to do;
- Documenting and evaluating the extent and impact of our engagement with the community;
- Documenting and evaluating the extent and impact of faculty and student research, scholarship, and creative activity in relation to the local and global community.

To accomplish these tasks, the Core Committee worked with key campus committees, such as the Future Group, which was already revising the campus mission, vision, and goals (including performance indicators) under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor for Planning and Institutional Improvement. We convened a new task force, led by the Director of the Center for Service and Learning, to develop a model for documenting and evaluating the effectiveness of our civic engagement. Similarly, we met with the Council of Associate Deans for Research, Scholarship, and Creativity Activity, under the leadership of the Vice Chancellor for Research, to work on a model for assessing and demonstrating the impact of research, scholarship, and creative activity on the local and global community. The chairs of these two groups worked with the Future Group to coordinate the work of their respective committees with the refined mission, vision, and goals for the campus. Finally, with the help of the Dean of Faculties, we provided funding for three Faculty Associates to assemble a campus-wide summary of teaching, learning, and assessment efforts related to the IUPUI PULs.

As we worked with this array of campus groups, our model for organizing the contents of the IUPUI Portfolio began to take a clearer shape. Our newly revised, briefer mission statement, “To provide for our constituents excellence in teaching and learning; research, scholarship, and creative activity; and civic engagement,” delineated the three main sections of our portfolio: Teaching and Learning; Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity; and Civic Engagement. The goals developed by the Future Group for each of these areas determined the internal organization of each section. For example, the goal under teaching and learning to “attract and support a diverse, better-prepared student body” became one sub-section of the Teaching and Learning section. Each sub-section was organized around objectives, our current status in meeting these objectives, and our plans for improvement.

Meanwhile, the Future Group, in conjunction with the Office for Planning and Institutional Improvement, developed a set of performance indicators for each of the goals and objectives. Concurrently, the Office of Information Management and Institutional Research created a model for demonstrating our internal evaluation of our effectiveness

in achieving our goals and objectives based on these performance indicators. Using a color-coding system similar to traffic lights, this model is both iconically simple and iconoclastic; it is by far the most controversial part of our portfolio—and the part that ties it all together, making a powerful statement about campus planning, self-evaluation, and accountability at IUPUI.

A Model for Inquiry and Accountability: Traffic Lights and Washing Machines

One advantage (and disadvantage) of an electronic institutional portfolio is that the potential content is virtually limitless in both breadth and depth of information. The core team thought it essential to present an easily understandable and readily accessible summary evaluation of our progress toward meeting our mission and accomplishing the major goals developed by the Future Group. We decided to use the familiar red, green, and amber lights of traffic signals as symbols to illustrate our progress toward achieving our goals. A green light indicates that we are at or beyond our goal; clicking on the green light leads portfolio visitors to explication of the goal in question, the performance indicators for the goal, the information on which the evaluation of progress was based, and related sites that supply further information. An amber light indicates that we are close to achieving our goal, with processes underway to achieve it very soon; clicking on the amber light similarly leads to further explication of the goal, the evaluative criteria, the processes under way to achieve the goal, and a timeline for achieving it. Finally, a red light indicates that we have some challenges to address before we can achieve our goal; clicking on the red light leads again to greater amplification, but this time with even more attention given to the improvement efforts underway and a projected timeline for achievement.

The development and presentation of this section of the portfolio, which graphically points to weaknesses, highlighted a major issue that permeated campus- and project-wide discussion throughout the three years of the UUPP. Typically, universities make public only what they are doing well. “Airing our dirty laundry in public,” as the issue came to be designated, could result in lower state appropriations, lower student enrollment, and lower prestige in the community. Some of the universities involved in the project existed in contexts and circumstances that would not allow them to take that risk.

But the core team at IUPUI took a somewhat different stance, epitomized by the statement, “It’s all right to air your dirty laundry if you put a washing machine next to it.” In fact, we believed that for our portfolio to have any credibility as a demonstration of accountability to diverse stakeholders in higher education, it needed to show our weaknesses as well as our strengths. At the same time, it also needed to show the standards and processes by which we evaluated our work, the ways in which we were addressing our perceived problems or challenges, what further resources or strategies were necessary for expediting our success in problem areas, and how we were working

to garner these resources and implement these strategies. It speaks highly of the upper levels of the IUPUI administration that they have been willing to support this unusual approach. Indeed, when we presented this idea to the Chancellor's Advisory Board, comprised of key members of the Indianapolis and surrounding communities, they wholeheartedly embraced the concept as a "sound and ethical business practice" (to quote one of the members).

Consequently, the IUPUI Institutional Portfolio has its own "red light district," a part of the site that shows quite clearly where IUPUI is not yet meeting the goals it has set for itself in relation to its mission, and what it is doing—and how long it will likely take—to meet the problematic goals. Of course, it also has its much more extensive "green light district" and "amber light district," in all cases showing the standards for evaluation, the processes of evaluation, and the ongoing commitment to improvement through initiatives, policy development, and other campus activities.

Current Status of the Electronic Portfolio

Now that the formal three-year UUPP is concluded, the IUPUI portfolio is being completed and maintained by the university's Office of Planning and Institutional Improvement. Based on the findings of a needs assessment conducted as part of the UUPP, the campus administration is providing funding for technological and content maintenance, as well as for further development. At the same time, the portfolio is becoming increasingly integrated into the administrative and faculty governance structure of the university. The current focus of portfolio development is to prepare for our November 2002 accreditation visit, which will be based on a self-study developed within the portfolio. Since the portfolio functions as a demonstration, summary, and evaluation of our institutional effectiveness, it will also eventually take the place of our published annual performance report. This use of the portfolio has two advantages: the electronic portfolio can be continually updated and can thereby provide a current portrait of the campus that captures changes and developments as they unfold; and, ultimately, once the initial costs of development are covered, updating and maintaining the portfolio will be more economical than publishing a comprehensive annual report. Probably what most signifies the adoption of the portfolio into the culture of IUPUI is that it now has a name: iPort.

Impact on Campus

The process of developing the portfolio has influenced and catalyzed other campus activities and initiatives. Key among these are the following:

1. Efforts to demonstrate student learning in the portfolio led to the appointment of three Faculty Associates to collect and synthesize information about teaching, learning, and assessment of the PULs. Their report, published on campus as *Phase I of a Study of Student Learning at IUPUI*, pointed to specific gaps in our processes of teaching and assessing the PULs, and of motivating schools and academic programs to address these gaps. The report is in the portfolio, summarized in an interactive

matrix that displays the curricular integration and assessment of each PUL in every academic program.

2. The need to document student learning for the institutional portfolio jump-started a new campus initiative to develop electronic student portfolios (“ePorts” at IUPUI). These student portfolios, which will be beta-tested during the summer and fall of 2002, demonstrate individual student achievement and improvement in both the PULs and in each student’s academic major or professional program. The infrastructure of the student portfolios is being designed to accommodate program-wide and campus-wide assessment of student learning as well. The portfolios will comprise part of an enterprise system that will interface with the registrar’s office for student transcripts and other credentials, with the campus career office for specialized resume templates, with the campus course management system, and with the institutional portfolio.
3. Campus work on demonstrating and evaluating the significance and impact of community engagement at IUPUI has led to development of a model that provides greater coherence and cohesiveness to the many campus-community partnerships and initiatives in which IUPUI is involved. This model has the potential to influence how civic engagement in higher education is documented and evaluated nationally.
4. Efforts to evaluate the significance and impact of research, scholarship, and creative activity have similarly resulted in development of a model that views research in significantly richer ways than the traditional quantitative summary of external funding, patents, papers, and publications.
5. The process of developing the portfolio is beginning to make faculty more aware of the work and accomplishments of other schools and academic programs on campus. As it develops further, it promises to be a continuing catalyst for such awareness on campus.
6. IUPUI is using the portfolio as the basis for an experimental accreditation self-study for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Our work over the past several years on developing the portfolio has saved the campus hundreds of hours of the kind of once-in-ten-years intensive committee work that generally precedes an accreditation visit; using this work for accreditation purposes also has the benefit of integrating accreditation-related efforts into ongoing campus work.

Insights and Lessons Learned

Developing one of the first generation of electronic institutional portfolios was a tremendous challenge. With no models, we truly were pioneers and, like many pioneers, we often felt lost, off track, bewildered by possibilities, and discouraged. Working with five other campus teams, and having the leadership of the project’s national director and of the American Association for Higher Education, the oversight of The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the advice of our various “critical friends” kept us focused and on track throughout the three years of the project. We made several missteps, but we persevered with the help of our colleagues in the project, benefiting greatly from quarterly project meetings and demonstrations of the six developing UAPP portfolios.

With the inspiration of one another's creative ideas and progress, we kept our learning curve constantly high, knowing we had the support of our colleagues on the other campuses. Here are some key insights and lessons learned by the IUPUI core team for iPort:

1. Faculty in academic programs and professional schools need to be involved in the design and development of the portfolio right from the start;
2. Administrative support is essential throughout the development of the portfolio;
3. Be clear from the very beginning about the purpose of the portfolio and the audience for whom it is intended;
4. Realize that the process, like the product, is more hypertextual than linear, and that many facets of the portfolio need to be worked on concurrently;
5. Select one microcosm or sub-section of the portfolio and develop it thoroughly first. In that way, you will gain a sense of the challenges and needs, you can try out several approaches, and you can select which seems the best for your campus;
6. Keep maintenance and sustainability in mind as you develop the portfolio. Nothing is worse for public relations than outdated links and old (or erroneous) information; and
7. Familiarize yourself with the different portfolio templates in the UPPP to see which version or combination of versions most closely resembles what you would like to achieve for your campus. Then call the contact person for that portfolio. We all learned a great deal from each other during the course of the project, and each of us is happy to share what we have learned as the second generation of electronic institutional portfolios comes into being.

Electronic institutional portfolios have a tremendous capacity to influence not just the documentation and evaluation of institutional effectiveness, but the improvement of higher education as well. They model a form of inquiry that provides opportunity for limitless depth and breadth of exploration, presentation, and assessment of the work of faculty, staff, and students. I invite you to visit iPort at <http://www.iport.iupui.edu/>.

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