The UUPP in a National Context

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Abstract

The author discusses the Urban Universities Portfolio Project's implications for higher education nationally in this article. Placing the UUPP within a national agenda to focus attention on student learning, he examines how portfolio development worked from both the "inside out" and the "outside in" to renew this focus. The impact of portfolio development on participating institutions and the power of interinstitutional consortia to stimulate internal change suggest that collaborative electronic portfolio development represents a promising avenue for pursuit of educational reform.

The Urban Universities Portfolio Project (UUPP) was part of a larger family of projects funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts in the late 1990s. Its wider implications can therefore best be understood by recalling both its specific place in that family and the context from which the project emerged at that particular time.

In 1995–1996, Pew was completing an ambitious series of grants centered on remediating major deficiencies in student achievement in K–12 education. Ten years after a national commission had proclaimed the nation "at risk" because of the poor quality of its elementary and secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education 1983), Pew's systematic and well-funded "New Standards" initiatives appeared well on the way to addressing many of these deficiencies (National Center on Education and the Economy 1995). Turning to higher education seemed a natural next step, but determining exactly how to do so proved difficult. On the one hand, America's colleges and universities were far more diverse and multi-functional than its elementary and secondary schools. Clearly a single set of "new standards," however rigorous and creative, would never prove acceptable to them all. As a matter of public policy, moreover, higher education never seemed as broken as K–12 education. Despite a steadily growing accountability movement for public colleges and universities, as well as sporadically expressed discontent from employers about the declining higher-order thinking skills of college graduates, most people saw little to complain about except the growing cost of attendance.

Faced with these unfamiliar conditions, the Pew Trusts' incumbent Education Director, Robert Schwartz, took the unusual step of commissioning a group to design a "first venture" into higher education quality. Its product was a template for a national demonstration project that ultimately became the UUPP (Ewell 1996). When Russell Edgerton took the helm of Pew's Education Program in 1997, the UUPP grant was already funded. But Edgerton saw it as the first piece of a mosaic of related, loosely coupled initiatives designed to address a common set of objectives (Edgerton 1997). One cluster of projects (labeled "inside-out") sought to build collective faculty responsibility for establishing, teaching toward, and assessing common learning objectives in key areas

like writing and critical thinking (Edgerton 1999). These projects were typically based at individual institutions or consortia and were intended to "prototype" new approaches to instructional design, pedagogy, or assessment. A second cluster of projects (labeled "outside-in") recognized that individual colleges and universities would rarely engage in the hard work of establishing collectively agreed-upon standards of academic achievement without clear incentives to do so. This cluster of projects thus focused principally on accrediting bodies, and was designed to help them create approaches to institutional review that would focus attention on central academic issues.

UUPP sat squarely between the two clusters. Centered on a group of individual institutions, the project was clearly focused on creating a collectively agreed-upon "storyline" for quality that could be used to stimulate further improvements inside institutions. But the fact that the resulting story would be public—visible to all comers through the rapidly developing medium of the World Wide Web—meant that it had to be credible to and validated by external constituencies like accrediting bodies and public policymakers. Participants found that walking this fine line between internal academic sensibility and external accountability was very hard. But it was also extraordinarily useful in furthering Pew's original goal—integrating outside-in and inside-out initiatives for change.

Fond Hopes and National Challenges

As a bridge project, the UUPP was intended to address issues that were emerging at many levels across the country. First, it aimed to demonstrate new approaches to quality review that could help accrediting bodies overcome the many difficulties they were beginning to encounter with their traditional practices. A second goal was to show how a group of institutions could take collective responsibility for student achievement in a few core areas, like writing or critical thinking, and develop effective ways to publicly back their claims for quality. A third goal was to do all this in the context of a particular group of institutions that was growing in importance nationally and yet was easily misunderstood. And it is important to stress that these objectives were largely unrelated to one another; the project could—and did—do better in some of them than in others.

New Approaches to External Quality Review

The mid-1990s was a period of unprecedented restlessness in accreditation. Four of six regional accreditors began significant efforts to reshape their standards and review processes, three new accrediting bodies were born, and prominent professional/specialized accrediting commissions began streamlining their approaches to center them more specifically on student academic achievement (Ewell 2001). These changes had many roots. Technology-based instructional delivery posed significant challenges to established accreditation standards and practices that focused largely on resources rather than results. Long-standing quality-review approaches simply did not apply to such settings, and the many institutions that were eagerly embracing technology complained vociferously to accreditors as a result. Meanwhile, accrediting bodies were under

increasing pressure from the federal government to demonstrate their own effectiveness. They needed badly to re-establish credibility in light of Congressional doubts about their effectiveness and growing pressures from federal authorities to look more forcefully at student learning outcomes.

Within this broader context, it was hoped that the UUPP might help institutional accrediting bodies find solutions to a set of specific and growing problems:

Lack of Focus in the Self-Study/Review Process. Accreditation's traditional approach to reviewing institutions was deliberately designed to be "comprehensive." Standards and mechanisms for peer review sought to address virtually every aspect of institutional condition and performance—from physical plants to faculty governance. With limited time and resources available, neither the self-study nor the visiting team could examine "quality" in any real detail across this vast array of topics. More importantly, attempts to do everything meant that the quality of teaching and learning—what the public thought accreditation was certifying—frequently got short shrift. Institutions badly needed a way to efficiently demonstrate basic compliance with minimum resource-based standards, so that the majority of their evaluative energy could be redirected toward student learning.

Following the logic of recently developed "academic audit" approaches to quality assurance in Europe and Australasia (Dill, Massy, Williams, and Cook 1996), one initial intention of the UUPP was thus to pilot an efficient way to collect and display the kinds of materials needed to demonstrate basic compliance. A second ambition was to free institutions from the constraints of established resource-based standards that left little room for highlighting distinctiveness and particular strengths. Participating institutions would create models that allowed them to tell their stories within the framework of their own views of effectiveness and their unique contributions.

Lack of Institutional Benefit. Preparing a formal self-study and hosting a comprehensive visit have always been expensive propositions. And because stakes are high (though eventual outcomes rarely in doubt), institutions cannot afford not to invest heavily. But established accreditation processes yield few benefits to institutions themselves. The process of preparing a traditional self-study, though frequently claimed as a valuable opportunity for self-examination, is rarely connected directly with an institution's own planning and evaluation efforts. Complaints to regional accreditors about this disconnect had been on the rise for many years, especially from more prominent institutions that were not at risk from accreditation and that had well-established internal review processes.

Accrediting bodies responded by allowing increasing opportunities for some colleges and universities, once they had established basic compliance, to undertake "special topics" or "focused" self-studies that could be connected more closely to the institution's own evaluative agenda. Following the logic of the "audit" concept, these new processes were intended to shift the focus of review from materials prepared by the

institution explicitly for an external body to materials prepared by the institution for its own purposes, with periodic examination by an external body. In the UUPP context, the medium of the World Wide Web appeared ideal for this purpose. External reviewers could look not only at displays prepared especially for reviewers, but could also watch unobtrusively as an institution's own internal investigations and debates unfolded.

Static, Linear, and Episodic Presentations of Evidence. Traditional approaches to accreditation had also become excessively formulaic. For want of a meaningful alternative, most institutions elected to "follow the standards" when assembling a self-study, engaging in little real self-analysis. Documentary evidence gathered for a visiting team's inspection during a site visit similarly tended to be organized around standards. And the entire process was highly episodic. For most institutions, the accreditation cycle was repeated every ten years, though a trend toward five-year focused reviews was apparent in several regions, and not much happened in between such episodes. These constraints affected both the utility of self-study for institutions themselves and the ease with which visiting team members could identify and follow up on important issues. Because of the sheer volume of material to be covered, self-studies became increasingly weighty, while the typical standards-based presentation made it increasingly hard for reviewers to see thematic connections among the various chapters of an institutional self-study.

New technologies promised to alleviate this condition. In fact, a few CD-Rom-based "hypertext self-studies," which allowed reviewers to navigate presented material in multiple ways, had already been prepared by the time UUPP was launched. The project was expected to extend these pioneering efforts by using the capabilities of the World Wide Web. The resulting portfolios could be explored flexibly, according to each reviewer's own priorities and interests. In addition, such portfolios could include direct hot links to already-established sites within the institution, in effect bringing the traditional site-visit document room online. Potentially, the entire review process could occur unobtrusively and continuously, instead of visibly and episodically.

The designers of the UUPP thus intended the project to be an important part of an ongoing effort to develop new tools for quality assurance that would help further the Pew Trusts' outside-in agenda. By funding a set of related projects aimed at remaking standards and review approaches within accrediting agencies, the Trusts hoped that a wide array of new prototypes for presenting and reviewing evidence of effectiveness might be developed.

Taking Collective Responsibility for Student Learning

By 1995, the assessment movement in American higher education was over a decade old. Responding to either accreditation requirements or state mandates, most campuses could by this point credibly claim that they were doing assessment (El-Khawas 1990).

It was thus apparent by this time that assessment alone had only limited ability to change institutional behaviors; assessment's reach was indisputably broad, but it was not very deep (Lopez 1997). In large measure, this limited impact could be attributed to the fact that assessment was implemented as an add-on at most colleges and universities, unconnected to faculty cultures or day-to-day practices in teaching and learning (Ewell 2002). Many institutions had established assessment offices, had developed plans, and had actually engaged in periodic evaluations of program effectiveness. But, like the accreditation process, these plans and evaluations were rarely ongoing or internalized, and their results only occasionally informed academic planning and decision-making. Recognizing this condition, the original project design commissioned by Pew prominently featured a different approach—adopting collective responsibility for student learning.

"New Standards" for Higher Education? In contrast to higher education's by-then-established approach to assessment, which emphasized diversity among institutions with respect to learning outcomes, the reform efforts in elementary and secondary efforts begun in the early 1980s emphasized common standards of academic achievement for all students. This emphasis implied a substantially different approach to academic quality assurance. Instead of periodically examining broad measures of student achievement in the aggregate-like sample-based tests and surveys, the K–12 approach required every student to demonstrate that he or she met established standards in core subjects as a condition for advancement. The Pew-funded New Standards project did groundbreaking work in this arena by producing highly detailed benchmark standards of achievement in various subject areas, together with innovative assessments designed to demonstrate individual mastery. Meanwhile, Pew was also embarking on a series of K–16 initiatives designed to extend such standards-based reforms into the collegiate admissions process and the first two years of college. A consortium-based project like the UUPP might help further this agenda by demonstrating the feasibility of setting up common goals for student learning in a few key abilities across a small set of higher education institutions.

Common Goals for Learning. Standards-based reform in K–12, moreover, is not just about assessment. Established and widely recognized goals for learning also serve as a common language that supplies a framework for organizing the entire teaching and learning enterprise. Ideally, these desired outcomes are embedded in the curriculum at every step in the form of individual course objectives and in the assignments that students complete on a day-to-day basis. They also provide the basis for ongoing faculty discourse about pedagogy and about helping students to understand what is expected of them. Even more broadly, goals for learning are intended to permeate decision-making by helping to define relative priorities for investment. Commonly adopted goal statements therefore form the heart of an aligned and consequential system that is "organized for learning."

Harnessing this dynamic requires, first and foremost, substantial ownership of learning goals by all participants. But at most colleges and universities, learning outcomes statements for such areas as general education are established by a small committee, are published and disseminated, and then largely ignored. While they may be used episodically to guide the process of gathering evidence they are rarely used systematically to actively align teaching and learning efforts across a campus. At the time UUPP was launched, a number of initiatives in higher education were beginning to address common goals for learning in this more systemic sense. Among them were two prominent Pew-funded projects: the Student Learning Outcomes Initiative at Alverno College and the Greater Expectations project at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U).

In addition to stimulating internal mobilization, common goals in K–12 standards-based reform also establish benchmarks across institutions to help ensure that graduates have attained similar levels of achievement. Pew was pursuing this objective as well; for example, through the Quality Assurance Collaborative (an effort among six diverse institutions to establish common standards in collegiate writing) and the Quality in Undergraduate Education (QUE) project (aimed at setting common achievement standards in selected disciplines to support university-community college partnerships).

Both commitment and experience thus suggested that establishing common goals for learning should be at the center of the UUPP. At the very least, it was hoped that progress could be made in agreeing on common benchmarks for collegiate writing. Most of the six UUPP campuses had well-established writing initiatives, since the development of written communications skills was especially important for the substantial numbers of nontraditional students that these institutions served. At the same time, the methodology of student assessment—based on techniques like rubrics or holistic scoring—was more advanced in writing than in other collegiate skill areas. Incorporating both results and methods into compelling public displays through an institution's Web-based portfolio might constitute a powerful demonstration of a set of institutions taking active and collective responsibility for one key outcome of a college education.

The Urban Public Connection

By the mid-1990s, major structural changes in higher education were difficult to ignore. Participation rates were burgeoning, diversity was increasing, and established ways of categorizing colleges and universities seemed increasingly questionable. The traditional earmarks of a university in the minds of both policymakers and the public—residential, selective, focused on educating full-time students in the arts and sciences—were less and less typical of American institutions. Large, urban, public universities were at the vanguard of structural change by virtue of their missions and locations; they were thus increasingly ill-served by approaches to public accountability that presumed the traditional earmarks. At the same time, urban institutions were becoming more and more important to American higher education: they served as the access point to higher education for growing numbers of students—about 1.3 million out of a national total of

12 million four-year students in 1995—when the UUPP was conceived; they were attracting record levels of sponsored research support; and many were recommitting themselves to engagement with their urban communities and to the mission of raising educational attainment in these communities (Cambridge, Miller, and Plater 1997).

The decision to locate a demonstration project in a consortium of urban public universities recognized their growing importance in the changing landscape of higher education in at least three ways:

Organizational Complexity. Urban public universities are unusually large, complex, multi-faceted institutions. Their character results at least in part from their history; most of these institutions are fairly young as free-standing organizations, founded originally as federations of multiple professional schools sharing a common urban location. As a consequence, they tend to be decentralized and entrepreneurial, with few common academic standards in place across schools or divisions. They generally emphasize professional education, with the arts and sciences playing a subordinate role. On the one hand, the predominance of professional programs enforces a strong focus on outcomes, since performance on licensure examinations and professional accreditation provide ever-present benchmarks for achievement. But the lack of direct advocacy for such general education outcomes as writing or critical thinking in these institutions—despite the widely acknowledged importance of such outcomes in professional settings—presents formidable challenges to implementing assessment. Pew's decision to pursue its agenda to enhance accountability and encourage collective responsibility for learning through an Urban Universities Portfolio Project was thus in part a high-payoff gamble: if these goals could be accomplished in such settings, they could probably be achieved anywhere.

Enrollment Diversity. Urban universities enroll substantial numbers of what have been termed "new majority" students. Such students are frequently drawn from distinctive ethnic or cultural groups, are first-generation college-goers, are older than average, and attend college part-time while working and attending to family responsibilities. Along with their fellow students who begin at urban institutions right out of high school and attend full-time, many are under-prepared for college work and need help in developing basic collegiate skills in such areas as writing and mathematics. With student bodies that represent the future of higher education, urban institutions would seem to be ideal settings for a project aimed at forging future higher education practices. At the same time, the pressing need to address fundamental collegiate skills for new majority college students was aligned with Pew's ambition to extend standards-based reform up the educational ladder into postsecondary settings.

Public Misunderstanding. Finally, despite their growing importance, urban public institutions had difficulty explaining their missions and challenges to policymakers and the general public. More than two-thirds of the states, for example, had established statistical performance measures for public institutions by 1997, and seven were engaging in performance funding. But because of assigned mission and typical student

profiles, urban institutions generally scored poorly on indicators like graduation and completion rates, where they were automatically handicapped by their lack of selectivity, or on time-to-degree, where part-time attendance and stop-out behavior represented factors outside institutions' control. Meanwhile, the communication venues provided by accreditation and state accountability policies provided few opportunities for such institutions to highlight what they believed were their most important educational outcomes. Among the most prominent of these were substantial "value-added" for students who began their academic careers with serious academic deficiencies and the provision of widespread social, cultural, and economic benefits to their cities and communities. During an era punctuated by frequent calls for higher education to serve societal—rather than strictly academic—purposes, the need to document these contributions and make them more public was especially pressing.

For all these reasons, it made sense for Pew to create a project that focused on this particular set of institutions. But it is equally important, when assessing the UUPP's place in a national context, to recognize that the project's objectives were always intended to be applicable across the entire spectrum of American higher education.

Implications and Lessons Learned

By any measure, these original hopes were ambitious. But in taking stock of lessons learned, it is important to remember that when the UUPP was launched in 1997, it was only the first of a large and growing family of related Pew-funded efforts moving in the same direction.

As is often the case with complex change efforts, some of the UUPP's most prominent outcomes were not anticipated at the outset. The most obvious and expected accomplishment, of course, was in the realm of tool development. The Web-based institutional portfolio proved a useful and flexible medium for displaying accountability information of many kinds. Somewhat less anticipated was the portfolio's utility in focusing and facilitating internal institutional planning and evaluation processes. More subtly, though, again, not unexpectedly, the project demonstrated the power of cross-institutional peer review to stimulate and sustain internal institutional change efforts. Equally unsurprising was that so little progress was made in defining (or assessing) collectively established student learning outcomes. Three years, experience has shown, is simply too short a period to make much headway on this agenda. But even here, useful progress was made in demonstrating how authentic examples of student work—judged by consistent standards—could be linked and publicly shared.

Portfolios as Tools for Accountability

When the UUPP was conceived in 1995, the use of institutional portfolios in accreditation was relatively new. Now the concept is everywhere. At least one regional association—the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)—has completely replaced the traditional self-study document with portfolio-like displays as the principal

mode of institutional presentation (WASC 2001). Others, like the New England Association, are actively experimenting with the concept as a way to present evidence of student learning. And all are accepting portfolios as either supplements to, or substitutes for, the self-study on a case-by-case basis. To claim that the UUPP was directly responsible for such widespread adoption would be inappropriate, as agencies like WASC had been experimenting with paper-based institutional portfolios for many years. But certainly the project was at the center of these developments and served as a critical "proof of concept" within a broader set of national trends in accountability.

Auditable Exhibits. Institutional portfolios have proven extraordinarily good media for demonstrating basic compliance for a wide range of accreditation standards. While this was not the central purpose of the portfolios developed for the UUPP, project experience certainly confirmed this utility. Electronic portfolios can easily accommodate the wide range of policy documents that accrediting teams need to examine for "due diligence" purposes like academic governance policies, course approval procedures, and catalogue material. More importantly, if they are in Web-enabled form, such materials can be examined unobtrusively off-site, which allows visiting team members time to focus on more substantive issues when they actually visit. Compliance portfolios thus frequently contain live links to other Web sites at the institution to allow in-depth virtual examination of basic procedures.

In some cases, compliance portfolios are assembled for multiple institutions in the same system—a procedure recently adopted, at a considerable savings of time and money, for the eleven campuses of the University of California to support all of their WASC reviews. Newly adopted review procedures for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) now allow compliance reviews of this kind to be accomplished without a visit at all, using a "desk audit" approach. These examples signal a growing trend away from specially-produced narratives in accreditation practice toward direct inspection of institutional materials through an audit process. Not only is this approach more efficient than preparing traditional narrative descriptions, it is also more effective. Authentic exhibits of real documents and procedures to be examined live through the Web are hard to fake, and are therefore a good deal more credible than traditional descriptions. Institutional portfolios like those prepared through the UUPP—especially in electronic form—have thus clearly proven their usefulness in this most basic of accountability functions.

Self-Study in Motion. At a deeper level, electronic portfolios allow institutions to address a more fundamental drawback of the increasingly popular academic audit. Through direct in-depth inspection, audits can easily verify whether or not the institution has the capacity to engage in, for example, meaningful evaluations of student learning by examining institutional research resources, assessment procedures, and the like. But audits cannot establish whether or not this capacity is being used effectively. A Web-based portfolio, in contrast, can enable an external body to observe over time how an institution is able to define a problem important to it, design and carry out investigations of that problem, discuss the implications of what is found, and make changes as a

result. WASC procedures for carrying out a required "Educational Effectiveness Review," for instance, encourage institutions to undertake two or three such in-depth problem-based studies on topics related to student (or institutional) learning. The electronic portfolio medium allows a review of how such studies are being formulated and carried out, with progress periodically assessed by a team in much the same fashion as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was able to monitor campus progress in the UUPP.

A useful prototype of this capacity to display "self-study in motion" in the UUPP was the unfolding portrayal of program review at California State University, Sacramento. Such applications mirror the growing importance of consistent, but low-level and unobtrusive, contact between accreditors and institutions that are a hallmark of the new WASC procedures and are typical of the North Central Association (NCA) Academic Quality Improvement Project and the restructured approach to review adopted by SACS as well.

Key Performance Measures. Another accelerating trend illustrated by the UUPP experience is toward public display of statistical information about institutional condition and performance. As noted earlier, statistical performance indicators are increasingly popular features of state approaches to public accountability. Standard indicators of this kind are also finding their way into accreditation as an efficient way to examine such matters as financial condition and long-term institutional viability. The American Association of Liberal Education (AALE), for example, recently put in place a set of standardized indicators of institutional condition modeled on Standard and Poor's bond ratings procedures; similar approaches are being pursued by WASC and SACS.

Electronic media are particularly suited to communicating this kind of information because they can display it in graphic form, can allow users to "drill down" to obtain multiple layers of detail, and can provide easy-to-access portals that describe (or link to) initiatives that the institution has launched to address the condition being monitored. Illustrated especially well by the display of performance indicators in the IUPUI project portfolio, interactive Web-based displays of performance measures are increasingly being adopted by state systems as well as institutions. For example, Kentucky recently launched a Web display that includes performance measures related to five key questions about higher education's contribution to the well-being of the state, using architecture modeled directly and unashamedly on IUPUI's UUPP portfolio.

All of these features are part of a growing trend toward public openness in all sectors of higher education that is, in itself, valuable for accountability. Unlike K–12 education whose accountability crisis emerged in the early 1980s as a result of shortfalls in actual performance, higher education's accountability problems have always been more about credibility and public confidence (Ewell 1997). Much of the anger of legislatures is therefore centered on higher education's perceived lack of responsiveness and its unwillingness to keep open books than it is about actual shortfalls in performance. Mechanisms like Web-based portfolios that can be examined at any time and that can allow anyone to look at a wide range of institutional resources and behaviors—potentially in considerable depth—can go a long way toward alleviating this condition.

The capacity to achieve openness that the portfolio medium affords thus provides a significant avenue for addressing higher education's principal accountability problem.

Portfolios and Internal Mobilization

A less apparent connection between UUPP experience and emerging national trends was inside participating institutions. The period 1985–1995 saw the emergence of multiple parallel reform efforts, all aimed at transforming undergraduate education. These included learning communities, service learning, writing across the curriculum, assessment, and many others. Because most UUPP participants were innovators to begin with and because urban universities provided fruitful settings for such initiatives, they were already engaged in a lot of them. But as in other institutions, reform efforts were often isolated from one another and failed to act with synergy. Each was typically funded through soft money and required its own department-like structure in order to survive. Creating the UUPP portfolio frequently helped participating institutions develop a framework within which to round up such initiatives across the grain of established organizational silos. At a broader level, the task helped forge institutional identities and set corresponding priorities in what were otherwise unusually decentralized organizational settings. Finally, the fact that everything took place in a public and consortial atmosphere made it hard to duck the task. All these factors made the process of constructing portfolios as rich in lessons as the products themselves. Most of these local lessons, moreover, resonated strongly with broader national trends in higher education.

Portfolio as an Alternative Organizational Form. When they began the task of designing their portfolios, UUPP participants tended to begin with an implied organizational scheme based on existing institutional structures and processes. This approach yielded a familiar array of offices and initiatives—linked together electronically and creatively to be sure—that resembled a virtual version of the university's organizational chart. This natural way to begin, ironically, looked a lot like how institutions first produced Web-based courses: just put an existing course "on the Web" in its current form, without thinking much about how the entire approach to pedagogy (or the basic conception of a course in the first place) might be transformed. As UUPP participants' portfolios went through multiple iterations, it was apparent that just such a transformation of thinking was occurring. Portfolios were organized less and less in terms of hierarchies of offices and structures, and more and more thematically around cross-cutting functions and results. The capacity for hypertext navigation amplified this transformation because it was possible to link displays on several dimensions at once—both organizationally and thematically, for example. Efforts in faculty development or in community service, for example, could be linked horizontally to present a comprehensive picture of what was happening, even though they were dispersed across multiple schools or departments.

Constructing portfolios in this manner mirrored wider experimentation with matrix-like organizational structures at many colleges and universities across the country, intended

to overcome the sometimes stifling effects on innovation of dispersed semi-autonomous departments and hierarchical organizational structures. At the same time, the act of building portfolios helped create lateral channels of communication among related initiatives. Institutions had to carefully inventory what each component in a complex organization was up to. When they did, they frequently discovered related initiatives that were not working together or even aware of one another.

Telling Our Story. Participation in the UUPP presented campuses with a significant opportunity to ask really hard questions about themselves. Indeed, one of the most unexpected project findings was that institutions found it almost impossible to say anything straightforward about their institutional identities that would make sense to an outside audience. It thus proved surprisingly difficult to pin down what being an urban university really meant, the project's presumed point of commonality. More significant for some participants was the issue of whether they really wanted to be an urban university, even if they knew what one was. At the same time, building a portfolio designed for external audiences sometimes had the unanticipated effect of stimulating important internal conversations about missions and priorities. Ultimately, defining essential attributes in terms of compelling and concrete visual images, individual student and faculty stories, or quantitative data displays proved far more productive in raising and resolving questions of basic identity than vaguely-worded strategic plans and mission statements.

This process of wrestling with basic identity—and its resolution in new definitions of institutional types—was also part of a wider national trend. Urban universities were only one of several groups of postsecondary institutions that were putting pressure on the Carnegie Commission to fundamentally re-think the way it classifies colleges and universities (McCormick 2000). Debates within the UUPP thus closely mirrored simultaneous and ongoing conversations about classification. Some UUPP participants, for instance, insisted on preserving their identities as major research powers, despite the fact that on many dimensions they did not look like traditional research universities at all; others were proud of their missions of adding value to underserved students and adopted a consciously urban character, even though they did equally significant amounts of research. As at Carnegie, the emerging consensus was that single dimensions for classification of any kind were insufficient. Wrestling with these questions visibly and concretely through the task of creating a compelling public message proved far more worthwhile than merely engaging them conceptually and rhetorically.

Institutional Learning Communities. Equally unanticipated was how beneficial the UUPP's organization as a consortium turned out to be. Designed as a typical demonstration project, it had originally seemed sufficient that six similar institutions would be engaged in a basically similar set of activities. Consciously consortial activities were initially not given a great deal of thought. Site visits undertaken by members of the IRB and institutional representatives were viewed by the project's designers more as accreditation rehearsals than as means for furthering collective learning. But these

visits—as well as the all-participant project meetings—quickly became far more than this. At the most instrumental level, the UUPP's identity as a consortium meant that participants felt responsible to each other for making progress. Like members of a student learning community, institutional representatives frequently reported that the unrelenting demand to show progress on their portfolio at the next project meeting was a powerful stimulus to action. Like members of a learning community, they also freely adopted one another's ideas and incorporated them into their own designs. The fact that all this activity was occurring in an accessible, electronic environment enormously facilitated such "productive mutual exploitation" in the project's later phases, because evolving products were there for everyone to see and use.

In this sense, the project turned out to be as much about collective institutional learning as it was about building portfolios or even demonstrating effectiveness. The UUPP experience was also consistent with broader national trends in quality assurance, in which the traditional approach of working with only one institution at a time was increasingly being questioned. WASC's re-visioned approach to accreditation and the NCA Academic Quality Improvement Project, for example, were simultaneously adopting consortial features like organized cohort groups of similar institutions and multi-institutional collaborative work on self-study projects. More importantly, the growing salience of collective learning in the UUPP marked, though unintentionally, a return to accountability based on mutual expectation and respect within the academy itself. Again, this was facilitated by a medium that made open communication unavoidable. Working together occasioned mutual disclosure and honesty. Honesty, in turn, became a new basis for accountability.

Originally intended mainly to demonstrate new approaches to external quality assurance, the UUPP thus had some surprisingly useful implications for internal institutional mobilization and improvement. These changes emerged, in part, simply because the project provided an important set of semi-public occasions. Like accreditation at its best, visits and meetings could be exploited by both project and institutional leaders to keep internal initiatives moving and to focus dispersed improvement efforts. But the role of institutional leadership itself cannot be overestimated in this process. Some participants clearly moved further than others because their leadership recognized and took advantage of the opportunities for synergy and institutional improvement that these occasions presented.

Learning as an Unfinished Agenda. Examining student learning and developing credible, collective evidence that it was occurring was one of the UUPP's original goals. Clearly, this goal was not achieved. By the end of the project, individual campuses had made some progress in developing campus-specific learning goals for general education. But the ambition to develop learning goals in common in such areas as writing was quickly abandoned as unrealistic. The struggle to define fundamental goals for learning and to produce evidence for their accomplishment was not unique to members of the UUPP. By their very nature, in fact, UUPP institutions may have been

worse off than other campuses. Most of the progress in student assessment in such areas as writing and critical thinking was occurring at much smaller places where undergraduate teaching was the principal faculty concern.

From a national perspective, the mid-1990s constituted a remarkably fallow period for assessment. By this time, assessment activities had been largely routinized in the forms requested by external agencies like states and accreditors—with a separate assessment office running periodic sample-based data-collection projects, whose results were for the most part unconnected to institutional decision-making processes. Faculty remained largely uninterested in and uninvolved with such efforts. The perception that assessment was stuck in these routine practices was one of the major concerns of those responsible for the original project's design. Further progress would require new strategies to gain faculty buy-in for embedding commonly accepted standards in the ways they routinely judged student work; it would equally require finding ways to show authentic examples of student work to external audiences appropriately and efficiently. Efforts to meet these requirements started slowly in UUPP. But by the end of three years, some useful lessons had begun to emerge:

Public Standards for Writing. Most UUPP institutions had already made a strong commitment to addressing student deficiencies in writing, a demand made unavoidable by serious shortfalls in entering student capacities. In some cases, writing was formally and rigorously assessed at several points in each student's career, using multiple judges and formal scoring rubrics. In others, the process of establishing common writing standards was not so advanced, but faculty were at least familiar with one another's grading criteria and developed common assessments of student writing for placement purposes. So it was no surprise that the project's most visible progress in establishing and illustrating public, communicable standards of achievement was in the area of writing.

The unique capabilities of hypertext displays were invaluable here; for the first time, institutions could display examples of authentic student work publicly, together with the level of achievement that such examples represented, the scoring guides used to determine this level, and annotations within the work itself indicating the specific features of the work that led to the scores awarded. Such displays represented a significant achievement that was quite consistent with emerging best practice elsewhere (Walvoord and Anderson 1998, Mentkowski and Associates 2000). These public displays concretely illustrate established standards and aggregate individual student performances for accountability purposes without disturbing the authenticity and integrity of regular faculty work.

Linking Student Portfolios. Similarly, by the end of the UUPP, several campuses were experimenting with establishing student-level electronic portfolios. These were usually compiled by students themselves, using a common template, and included representative examples of the student's work structured around established, university-wide, goals for learning. Such portfolios, of course, were originally designed as tools

for learning, not as mechanisms for accountability. But the treatment of writing in several campuses' institutional portfolios suggested that individual demonstrations of mastery might in principle be used as authentic illustration of institution-wide achievement of collective goals for learning. One participating campus, for example, plans to rotate individual student portfolios for public display, together with appropriate documentation of aggregate achievement. These plans are consistent with a number of emerging initiatives in which student-level electronic portfolios are simultaneously being established as both teaching tools and mechanisms to document student achievement over time (Cambridge, Kahn, Tompkins, and Yancey 2001).

Formidable obstacles, of course, lie in the way of such an approach, including the legal and privacy conditions established by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), as well as the reservations expressed by many institutions' own governance bodies for approving human-subjects research. But the approach has the important potential of allowing authentic examples of student work to do "double duty"—that is, to certify individual mastery of established standards, while simultaneously demonstrating broad accountability to an institution's external stakeholders.

Such efforts are only just beginning. But the cases noted would not have been practicable, or even conceivable, without the electronic medium. Indeed, one of the more remarkable features of the UUPP was that the pace of technological change was so great over the course of the project that innovations that would not have been deemed possible when the effort was conceived were routinely being accomplished several years later.

The UUPP ultimately was central to what became a network of Pew-funded projects aimed at addressing a complex set of inside-out and outside-in agendas that sought to stimulate a renewed focus on student learning and its demonstration both within the higher education institution and among its external stakeholders. All told, some 35 projects, representing an initial investment of over $28 million are now a part of the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning—an umbrella organization aimed at keeping these efforts viable and in touch. Many of the principals in later Pew Forum projects first became involved in these agendas as members of the UUPP's National Advisory Board and IRB or as campus participants. Hopes for the project when it was first conceptualized some seven years ago were thus understandably high. They were not only hopes for a single initiative, but for achievement of a national reform agenda as well.

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