

## Making College “Worth It” – Season 1, Episode 7

### ePortfolios as Capstone Experience

Nolan Schultheis (00:08):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:15):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and our international Network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Nolan Schultheis (00:30):

I'm Nolan Schultheis, a first year student at Elon University, studying psychology with an interest in law. I'm the Center for Engaged Learning's Podcast producer and a legal profession scholar.

Jessie Moore (00:40):

And I'm Jessie Moore, Director of Elon Center for Engaged Learning and a Professor of Professional Writing and Rhetoric.

Nolan Schultheis (00:46):

In this episode, we'll focus on ePortfolios as capstone experiences. We'll talk to Professor Carol Van Zile-Tamsen from the University of Buffalo. She led an analysis of UB's General Education Capstone, which uses an ePortfolio as its signature assessment.

Jessie Moore (01:02):

In a 2021 poll of over 1,800 recent college graduates, only 18% had developed an ePortfolio during college. ePortfolios offer students an opportunity to reflect on how their learning experiences fit together and can give students space to showcase what knowledge and experiences they bring to future studies or employment. Therefore, we're excited to hear from our guests about an institutional initiative that ensures all University of Buffalo students have an opportunity to develop an ePortfolio.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (01:36):

My name is Carol Van Zile-Tamsen and I work at the university at Buffalo as the Associate Vice Provost and Director for Office of Curriculum Assessment and Teaching Transformation. And if I say that again, I'll just say CAT because it's a long mouthful. And why I wanted to participate in the research seminar in capstones was because at the time I was actually the capstone coordinator for our general education program. We had been running it for about two and a half years at that point, and I was very interested in seeing how other people's capstones were designed and what portfolio tools they were using just to make sure that we were on the right page and doing it as good as we could do it for our students.

Jessie Moore (02:23):

Can you tell us a little bit about that ePortfolio requirement?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (02:27):

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Sure. So, our undergraduate general education program ends with the culminating capstone course. Typically, our students will finish their general education requirements in two years, and then at the fall or spring of their junior year, they would take our capstone course. And in that course, they're basically building any ePortfolio that demonstrates their achievements within the general education program. And so, it's meant to help them review all of those courses that they probably didn't want to take and try to pull out those pieces of information that have actually been useful to them and that are helping them in their majors, but also that could potentially be applied once they leave college and go to their next chapter.

Jessie Moore (03:19):

I really appreciate both the ways that invites them to reflect on how the different courses fit together and also on that integrative component that it's acknowledging these aren't just random classes that they do contribute in many ways to students' development as they continue on their studies.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (03:40):

We actually did some qualitative research after our second full year of the capstone, and basically it was just open-ended questions to students. What do you think you gained from this, if anything? How would you like to see it changed? Just trying to be very broad and not leading. And in those responses to that, we had students writing things like, I never understood why this college was making me do X, Y, and Z, but now it makes perfect sense and I know how I'm going to use this as I move forward. So, it really did, the program really does show us the metacognitive development and the development of lifelong learning in these students, which not only are we recognizing it, but they are as well.

Jessie Moore (04:28):

Thank you for sharing that additional detail. And I should note too that you have a chapter in the book *Cultivating Capstone*. So, we will link to that with a discount code for any listeners who want to access that chapter, but we'll also link to the program's website so that they can see firsthand how you describe the Capstone requirement to your students.

Nolan Schultheis (04:55):

So, what would you like college students and the people who support them to know about new ePortfolios as the capstone experience?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (05:02):

Well, I think that as far as college students go and the students that we have here, I would just like them to not only engage themselves in the integration and the reflection because it is so valuable for their continued development. And communicating that to them is sometimes difficult because they, not all students, but some students can see this as just one more thing that I have to do before graduation. And the good thing is that even those students tend to come out of it realizing that they've gained something. But also for parents, hopefully by having the students do this, it's more obvious to them what the value of the education is. So, it's not just taking all these core courses because we want to keep them here longer and make more tuition. It's really because we want them to grow and develop into mature thinkers who can integrate knowledge and reflect on knowledge and change if they need to as far as when they're trying to learn something.

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(06:09):

But also there's just this whole idea of our digital lives, I guess I would say. And one of the goals that doesn't get emphasized here as much as it maybe should was we wanted to give the students a place that would allow them to professionally present themselves to the world through this ePortfolio that is not anything like Facebook or I don't even know what all the social networks are that students use now, but we wanted them to see that this is not a place to take pictures of your breakfast and post them. This is a place where you really do demonstrate your skills and your knowledge, and how did they do that in a way that is mature and professional so that people who see that can see how they've grown, how they've developed, and there's not any of that other nonsense there that maybe employers or parents don't want to see.

Nolan Schultheis (07:11):

I was going to say, I think that's probably one of the largest takeaways I had from reading the chapter is that this ePortfolio is really, it focuses on reflection in a different way that other capstones do. And it wants you to really consider what you've done and what you've put in the portfolio as opposed to a normal capstone kind of just being a student led learning experience, if that makes sense.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (07:33):

It does. I will say I think there is some confusion among our students because some of our programs have culminated capstone courses and then we have the general education capstone. And so, it's sometimes hard for them to understand what's the difference, and sometimes they don't even realize that until they get into our gen ed capstone and then realize, oh, this is very different from what I'm doing in my major, and the focus is very different.

Nolan Schultheis (08:00):

Do you find that when you have students using ePortfolio that they have strategies for reflection or does reflection still have to kind of be taught to the students?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (08:08):

I think it's a very mixed bag. We have many students who are naturally reflective and they come into this and they're very successful, and they do it very well. Others are not so good at that. And so, it is a learning process. Our teaching staff for the Capstone, this is all delivered online, so the feedback and the interaction between the instructor and the student is within the actual portfolio itself. So it's like a living thing as the semester goes along and the instructor will comment within the portfolio about those reflections and are they being too superficial? Or we also have the students who go way over the top because they think, what do you want to hear? And let me write it.

(08:59):

And so, the instructor would give them feedback, just be honest, and your grade isn't going to depend on how flowery your speech is or how much you tell me what I want to hear. Now, one thing that we do have at UB that is helpful for getting students to reflect is that they have to take a first year seminar. And that is true for our freshmen, our first time students, but also our transfer students. And so in those seminars, that's really where they get introduced to this idea of the ePortfolio. And then many of the instructors of those seminars have them do reflective writing in that course. So, that is a place for them

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to sort of get their feet wet and understand what reflective writing is so that when they go into the capstone, they've at least had a little bit experience with it.

(09:50):

But one thing that I guess as I was going through my schooling, my dad was always someone who would say, "If you made a mistake, stop and think about it. What did you do?" And so, I've always had this propensity to reflect constantly, did I do that well, could I done it better? And so on. But I think some of our students come in without that. This is a skill that is important for them to learn. And through the capstone, they start to get there. And some of our students don't always get to the point we would like them to be, but they're at least making progress.

Jessie Moore (10:29):

I also really appreciate that example of how your institution has made a commitment to scaffolding student progress towards this goal, that they have introductions to it before they actually have to develop it, and then they have practiced with reflection before they do their ePortfolio, so that it's not the first time they're encountering either the concept or the strategies to make it effective. So, that's a really, I think, helpful reminder for other universities and colleges to think about how if there's something that we want as a capstone experience, we need to support it earlier in students' experience as well.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (11:12):

Right. And one thing that we went into this new general education program with was this idea that students, we think they understand. They can read a syllabus, they have the assignments there, and they should know, right? This is how you do this assignment, you should know that. You should know what reflection is, you should know what integration is, but they don't. And so, as we designed the program, the whole focus was on being as explicit as we could, what do these things mean? And never assume that students know what something means because some of them probably don't. So, just being very clear in all the language and then giving those students the time or an opportunity to practice before they're actually assessed on something, because if they've never done something before, it's not fair to just give them a grade on something that this is the first time they're actually doing that thing. I guess being very intentional with this program is how it was designed.

Nolan Schultheis (12:15):

So, I understand there's scaffolding leading up to the actual capstone, but do you feel that the loose structure of the capstone itself provides avenues for creativity or does it cause stress maybe for the student or faculty themselves?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (12:28):

I don't think it causes stress for the faculty because they are trained to know that students are coming from different majors and they have different ways of showing their achievement and different unique aspects to them in terms of how their portfolios will turn out. When we designed the capstone course and thought through the elements of the portfolio, we really wanted to make it like a multimedia effort so that if they could demonstrate their achievement in a course through a PowerPoint presentation that they gave, or maybe they could make a video where they talked about how meaningful the course was, we gave them that flexibility. But what we found is that students were very much ingrained to just give

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text responses. They were afraid to take that risk. And so, it's taken some time for the instructors to really get those, again, intentional directions to students that it doesn't have to be just written text. You can do anything you want as long as you're conveying your achievement of these things and your reflections. The only real strict part of it is that you have to use our central ePortfolio tool.

Nolan Schultheis (13:48):

I was just going to say I understand that the portfolio is really, it's meant to be a combination of a lot of things. It's meant to be reflective, it's meant to be the student's input, and as you said, it's not exclusively text. And that kind of leads me to believe almost that it kind of functions in the same way that almost a resume would and that you are listing things you've done, listing your accomplishments, reflecting on your accomplishments. So, my question is, do you know if students come back to their portfolio either as a work or life reference?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (14:21):

They do. We tell them right up front in the syllabus that this is a tool. This ePortfolio is a tool that you can use as you move into your professional life. But you may want to change the elements because when you're putting yourself out there to get a job or to get into graduate school, different things are going to be important for that type of a portfolio rather than this one. But you can use the skills that you've used in the capstone course to pick those or curate those items and put them together in a meaningful way. Those are skills that you can use for your professional portfolio. We actually started with a system called Digication, which was extremely difficult for students to use. And so, the first year that I was the capstone coordinator, that's all I did was help students and then go to classes and present on how to use the portfolio.

(15:23):

So, we actually went to the portfolio tool in Blackboard, which that was kind of a step back for us because you can't share, at least the way our Blackboard was set up, you can't share those portfolios with outside people. And so, that was somewhat of a drawback. So, we had to let them know that, okay, you have these skills, but you have to use a different tool. Whereas with Digication, they could still use the tool, but then we now have gone into a different LMS that doesn't have a portfolio tool that we like. And so, they're using Microsoft Sway, which it's very visual apparently. It's easy to use and it is something that can be shared and they can make as many portfolios as they want. We have a template set up that they can actually use our template and just modify it for their professional purposes. But I think that is something that they do recognize based on our research that, oh, this is a skill I've learned that now I know how I can use this in other aspects of my life.

Nolan Schultheis (16:31):

Coming from a college student who also has worked in the past, I learned how to make a resume in high school I want to say, it might've been junior or senior year. I really don't kind of remember how to make a resume. And I feel like this e-capstone would definitely teach you skills on how to even construct a resume and just in general to make it more visually appealing, kind of just the structure. I feel like it inadvertently teaches you how to make a resume. I think that's a really cool little side effect of the ePortfolio.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (16:59):

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I agree. And then another side effect is that we've hired student assistants, TAs, even new professionals, and it's amazing to me that they don't know how to really, they put in what they did, what their experience is, but they don't know how to talk about that in terms of the skills they've gained. And in this ePortfolio, they are reflecting on what they've done and they have to put it into that language of achievement. What did I achieve? What skills am I taking away? So, I think there's just a natural evolution between the reflections in the portfolio and how to really highlight things in their resume and also write a good cover letter. And we've also collaborated with our career center, and they kind of are building on that idea. They aren't necessarily helping students make portfolios, but they're kind of building on that idea as they help students create their resumes, which I think is a really nice synergy.

Jessie Moore (18:00):

I love that as someone who has coordinated ePortfolio programs before and also worked with seniors who are developing more public facing ePortfolios in combination with other job search materials like the resume, like the cover letter. And I agree that there's a nice synergy there that we can capitalize if we are mindful to it. You also mentioned something that I think we lived here too, of that transition through different platforms for ePortfolios and trying to find that balance between something that works internally for assessment purposes, but then also can be more public facing for students to be able to adapt and repurpose for later use with their ePortfolio. I'm wondering if there are other things that from your experience, you would suggest colleges or their faculty and staff do to help students develop ePortfolios or to think about if they're considering a large scale implementation of an ePortfolio requirement?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (19:06):

Well, I think that colleges and that the programs themselves really do need to think about the long-term impacts of a portfolio and why students would want to keep this in the future. And so, it is important to not confine yourself to a tool that is internal only. And I realized that that does have implications for assessment because if it's an internal tool, it's easy to attach a rubric to it and not only get the scores for the student's grade, but also to pull that data for more large scale assessment. What we've done here is we have used the LMS or the Learning Management System to build our rubrics, and then the instructors, it's not always convenient, but we suggest to them that they do their grading on a double screen, so that they can pull up the portfolio from outside of the LMS and go through that and complete the rubric at the same time.

(20:05):

But I think it is important for people to really think through what is the purpose of the portfolio, and if they're only thinking of it in terms of assessment, then maybe one of these inside learning management system would be helpful. But if they really do want it to be meaningful and something that students carry with them, then I don't think they should be constrained by that. I think they should be creative in the processes they put in place to get the assessment data they need from whatever tool is used.

Jessie Moore (20:35):

Right. Thank you. So, our last question is just if there's anything else that you'd like our listeners to know about the ePortfolio requirement at UB or about ePortfolios as capstone experiences?

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (20:47):

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Well, I think the bottom line is that they're very valuable for students' development, and it's hard to do something like this at scale. So, when we were proposing our general education program and we said that all students, all undergraduate students are going to take this capstone, there were faculty across the campus that were just, oh, no, this isn't going to work. How can you do it at that level? And even people in the SUNY system, other campuses we talked to, they just couldn't fathom how we could put this in place. I would just say that there was a lot of creative thinking that we had to do behind the scenes. We did pilot the format of the capstone for a couple semesters before we actually launched it just to do all that tweaking we needed to do to make it work at scale.

(21:39):

So, I would just say that it can be daunting, but it can be done. We have 20,000 undergraduates and they're all doing a capstone and it's working. Beyond that, I just think that it is worth it, and the more we can communicate to students about what the benefits are for them in the long run, I think the better because we don't want them to feel like this is just another requirement and why am I doing this and I'm just going to do the minimal amount of work and be done because we really are wanting to help them reflect, integrate, and develop those lifelong learning skills.

Nolan Schultheis (22:17):

I really actually enjoy the idea of the ePortfolio. I think if I were to take a capstone, I think I would want this one because I think it has practical application outside of school itself, and I know the entire purpose of a capstone is to be viewed not as something strictly for school. But I feel like this capstone in particular goes even further than others may and kind of gives you life skills on top of reflecting skills.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (22:42):

One final point is just how the idea of the ePortfolio has sort of spread out like a snowball around campus. We have master's level classes in engineering that are using a ePortfolio primarily to do their student assessment, but also for the students to be career ready. And some of our medical majors are starting to bring that in because they want their students to have these professional ePortfolios. And then on the instructor side, we've never had a specific requirement about what faculty should include in their tenure and promotion dossiers to demonstrate the effectiveness of their teaching. So, some of the units are actually taking it upon themselves to have their faculty do any ePortfolio. Now, that they've seen how it works on the student end, they're beginning to see these connections for what they need to use it for. And I think that's very exciting as well, is that once you introduce it to the campus, then people can see how it might fit with what they're trying to achieve. And it can be really an excellent tool in many different types of activities.

Jessie Moore (23:59):

Exciting to note that ripple effect. Well, we will wrap up there, but thank you very much for visiting with us today. We appreciate you sharing your time.

Carol Van Zile-Tamsen (24:07):

Absolutely. Thank you for having me.

Jessie Moore (24:12):

What were some of the things that stood out to you that you think students should think about?

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Nolan Schultheis (24:16):

Really just the application of the ePortfolio. I know it's rough and it's difficult to kind of just be forced to think about either mistakes you've made or achievements you've had and to grab those from maybe a class or just life experience in general. But the actual application of the ePortfolio is designed that way so that it ultimately helps the student the most. And I think that's probably the biggest takeaway I had is to actually kind of just register it in any student's head when they're doing this is that it's actually a very useful tool and there's a good chance that they'll end up referencing it either in their work life and even just their life in general. And it ultimately also teaches great resume building skills, which is essential in today's working world.

Jessie Moore (25:06):

Absolutely, and as Professor Van Zile-Tamsen noted, it's something that you can adapt, but you've learned the skills. And so, having the skills, having practiced with it, and getting feedback on how you're using them then sets you up well to do a portfolio that might be for a different purpose, but that shares some of the same traits. I also was struck as we were talking with Professor Van Zile-Tamsen reminded me of our conversation with Professors Ketchum and Weaver a couple episodes ago, and thinking about elements of play in capstone and that invitation to include multimedia in the ePortfolio is another potentially invitation for play and experimentation and creativity as you were asking about. It's a space where we can continue to help students feel comfortable with that flexibility, with that potential foreplay. But I was just struck by the parallels of our two conversations.

Nolan Schultheis (26:12):

Definitely if a student is having fun learning, then there's a 90% chance they're going to actually register that information in their head way more than they would if they knew it was simply for a grade.

Jessie Moore (26:22):

Anything else you wanted to reflect on, on this episode?

Nolan Schultheis (26:26):

As a student, it's really just like, Hey, recognize that this thing is good for you and put your effort into it because if you put your effort into it, you'll reap the rewards later.

Jessie Moore (26:35):

And on the faculty and staff side. We'll link to some other resources on the website, including some of the Center for Engaged Learning's resources on ePortfolio. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Nolan Schultheis (26:50):

And I'm Nolan Schultheis. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (26:57):



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### **ePortfolios as Capstone Experience**

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