

## **Request for Title III Project Funds**

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Submitted by: Perri Gallagher, Associate Professor of English

### **1. Project Description**

“E-Portfolios in an online English class”

The purpose of this project is to pilot the portfolio tool that is available with WebCT CE 6.2 to determine its best use in an online Freshman English class (English 101A). The development of electronic portfolios has been a goal of the college, Title III, and the Distance Education program, and I have been a part of past committees and pilots of e-portfolio tools. In addition, the portfolio comes at an additional cost to the college, and so it is appropriate to evaluate its added value.

For as long as I have been teaching on line I have asked students to gather their work for a final “portfolio” at the conclusion of the class. In the previous versions of WebCT, however, the only means of collecting artifacts was to create a cluster of drop boxes. For student and instructor alike, this was a cumbersome process that tended to overshadow the goal of reflection and evaluation.

This project will make use of the portfolio for a similar, but slightly different purpose. Rather than an individual collection, it will provide a platform for collaborative work done in groups. Designing a portfolio assignment will foster student engagement and success by using e-portfolios for group work presentation. In the previous versions of WebCT, there was a group presentation tool and individual websites, but these have been eliminated leaving a gap for means by which students can make their work “public.” As the project will be conducted in the only two sections of the course taught online, it is important to offer this “virtual equivalent” in order for students to understand how group work can be done online.

### **2. Project Outcomes**

The SLOs for ENG 101A are as follows:

1. Identify and use fundamental patterns of rhetorical organization and basic elements of logical and critical thinking in both written and oral communication, recognizing that the content and form of effective communication are inextricably related.
2. Discover and research relevant information, evaluate it critically, and report it accurately in a well organized, documented essay which advocates a specific argumentative thesis.

3. Formulate his or her own ideas clearly and advocate them in a logical, organized way, both in expository and argumentative essays and in oral communication.
4. Read and listen analytically, identifying main and subordinate ideas, evaluating the evidence used to support them, in order to reason from and write and/or speak about these ideas.
5. Identify and create correct, clear, concrete, fluid prose.

The framework of the portfolios enables students to see their work collected over the time of the semester, and requires them to take an active role in the evaluation process. The research and writing that is conducted and selected for the portfolio adequately demonstrates the five student learning outcomes from the outside in perspective of the student. The portfolio requires an additional inside out perspective in the self-evaluation and reflection writing in which students must describe the research and writing process that lead to their artifacts.

In addition, part of the group project is to create a document that contains the ideas and research of the individual students who are writing on the same topic but, for the most part, on different aspects of it. In an online class, it is painstakingly clear that the effectiveness of their communication is vital to synthesizing and to constructing their project.

### **3. Assessment Strategies**

Students will be asked to post responses to six “Portfolio Group Project Reflection Questions” in a journal discussion board, private to instructor and student to increase the likelihood of candid responses. Evaluation will also be obtained through the introductions students are required to write commenting on their own experience of the class, including the creation of the portfolio.

According to the schedule put in place for the class, the groups work first in pairs from week 5-10. In weeks 11-15, joined into groups, they put together the portfolio and go public in week 16. From this work, I can assess the significance of the portfolio to their learning in the class.

### **4. Project Implementation timeline**

Spring Semester, 2008. When the portfolio tool is made available, I will familiarize myself with the options so that I can finalize the assignment specifics. I will also make a captioned video tutorial with Camtasia, to aid student understanding of how to navigate and use the tool to complete their assignment.

## **5. Faculty Responsible for development and Implementation**

I am the sole faculty responsible, though I will require the assistance of Onlineeducation to secure access to the tool through WebCT tech support, to populate the portfolios with students, and to grant access to me as a reviewer to eliminate that step for students individually.

## **6. Technology and Software Requirements**

There are no technology or software requirements, other than the WebCT licensing fees, and the purchase of Camtasia, both already paid for.

## **Completed Project Report for Title III Project Funds**

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Submitted by Perri Gallagher, Associate Professor of English

Project: “E-Portfolios in an online English class”

### **Summary:**

1. Created and posted the portfolio sequence of assignments for students, along with a captioned Camtasia video tutorial.
2. Assisted students during the process of creating their portfolios.
3. Revised the assignment based on the preliminary results.

### **Assessment:**

As with any innovation, communication is key, yet as one of two instructors using the tool for the first time, and the only one in English, the needs of my class may not have been clearly communicated. For instance, portfolios are known to serve in at least three capacities: As a collection of work for a specific class; as documentation of a student’s academic career; as a dossier for prospective employers. In the field of English, portfolios are used primarily as a vehicle for meta-cognition and for assessment of student learning within the class.

The following Position Statement: “ Principles and Practices in Electronic Portfolios” from the Conference on college Composition and Communication summarizes my perspective.

<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/128846.htm?source=gs>

### **Project Outcomes:**

The portfolio assignment had to be modified to fit the circumstances of the class. Specifically, the pairs that were to lead to the groups were largely inactive, and so the groups that were to take forward the work to the portfolio started off with much uncertainty. Given the inherent difficulties of group work in any situation, but especially an asynchronous one as students pointed out, I elected to change the portfolios to an individual, rather than collective effort.

It is likely that this necessary change came about, also, because of the technological learning curve. I had underestimated the difficulty students might have with WebCT version 6.2, even—

perhaps especially—if they'd taken an online class in WebCT 4. The need to operate in the portfolio environment, and alongside other students who might likewise have many questions, appeared to have been too much to manage.

The technical support for the portfolio was administered with some inconsistency. While heroic efforts were being made to learn the tool, and to communicate with BlackBoard/WebCT support when necessary, launching it was a difficult process. For example, each student name had to be input manually, and this was done early enough in the semester that when it came time for review of the portfolios, the adds and drops had not been updated. Group ownership of and access to portfolios also had to be created by support staff, and subsequently changed when the portfolios became individualized. It would have been simpler if instructors had the ability to manage this, but instead I had to be owner, designer, and reviewer in turn as the assignment evolved, further confusing what could be simplified.

As a reviewer, I faced a number of design issues. It was difficult to scroll through a single vertical list of students in two sections combined, who may or may not be in the class, whose names were not alphabetized, and whose work may or may not be signaled by an asterisk (designed to indicate when a portfolio is first created). The tool itself is also functionally external to the WebCT class; in other words, it can only be accessed via a tab in the user's login page, and not from the individual section in which they are enrolled.

### **Recommendations:**

Much of the literature I have read on portfolios is written from the traditional classroom perspective (and often K-12). While my ambitions were inspired by a recent book on online group work, I realized that while the structure and pacing were sound, to really maximize the benefits of the portfolio as an exit assignment the entire course must be built around it. This will make the purpose of the assignment more clear, and alleviate concerns from students that the work has no substantive meaning (technology for the sake of technology); and on the instructor side, keep the technology from driving the technology and not the other way around.