

# I Can See Clearly Now: Using ePortfolios to Support Reflection and Engaged Learning in a Summer Internship Program

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This study analyzed the development of an electronic portfolio (i.e., ePortfolio) program designed to promote and assess reflection and engaged learning for participants in a summer internship program. Over the course of eight weeks, 12 undergraduates reflected weekly on their internships through their ePortfolios both in writing and through artifacts, and attended three focus groups. The researchers identified common themes that emerged from the students' reflections and the focus group discussions, as well as analyzed the artifacts they uploaded. The researchers found that students used their ePortfolios to document increased proficiency in professional skills; to reflect on their personal development; and to discover how their internships shifted their perspectives, values, and future professional and academic plans. During the focus groups, the students shared that they valued the practice of reflection and found ePortfolios easy to use and effective for reflection, strengthening their purpose and confidence and enhancing their communication. The researchers also found the tool helpful for observation and assessment. Going forward, ePortfolios will remain the program's tool for reflection. However, the curriculum and assignments will be more collaborative and flexible for students, and the prompts will vary each week to enhance reflective practice and student engagement.

As we learn to navigate our “new normal”—the late-pandemic academic landscape—in higher education, administrators and faculty across the country are seeking novel ways for students to reconnect with one another and to engage with both attention and intention. Students are again studying abroad; conducting research in labs, archives, and the community; and participating in local and global internships. It is imperative that educators encourage and support involvement in these outside-the-classroom activities, while at the same time offer co-curricular programs that incorporate tools for reflection and connection among the participants. Incorporating electronic portfolios (i.e., ePortfolios) into co-curricular programs is one way to ensure students are taking time to consider their learning progress in an iterative way.

Recognizing that student engagement is pivotal to the success of an ePortfolio initiative (Barrett, 2007; Yancey & Hunt, 2009), it is essential that students find value in the practice of reflecting on their experiences. The utility of a professional or career ePortfolio is clear: it can be included on résumés, shared with potential employers, and used when applying to graduate and professional schools as well as when preparing to enter the workforce (Bonsignore, 2013). For learning ePortfolios, students can engage in integrative learning by connecting their experiences to create new knowledge (Reynolds & Patton, 2014). Asking students to reflect each week on the highlights and challenges they encountered during their internship or research project via their ePortfolios can make their learning and growth more visible to them. It is also a means for program coordinators to measure whether students are benefiting from their co-curricular experiences. In this study, we documented the creation

and implementation of an ePortfolio program that promotes reflection and engaged learning for students in a summer internship program. At the same time, we assessed their learning outcomes by reviewing their ePortfolio submissions and artifacts and by recording the focus group discussions.

This qualitative, phenomenological study (Patton, 2015) builds upon a previous analysis, which explored using ePortfolios for a summer undergraduate research program (Weber & Myrick, 2018). In both studies, we used the same weekly reflective prompts, offered three focus groups, and utilized Wix for building the students' websites. For the present study, however, we added a requirement of uploading at least one artifact per week pertaining to their internship. We hoped that by asking students to upload their own photos, videos, audio files, PDFs, etc., they would feel more inclined to express themselves in an authentic manner, thus, promoting self-expression (McLellan, 2021). As the researchers for the present study, administrators in higher education with expertise in co-curricular programs, we were interested in learning qualitatively how our students might share their academic and professional experiences through developing an ePortfolio during their summer internship program.

## Literature Review

### ePortfolio Usage

Practitioners use ePortfolios for a variety of purposes, including teaching and learning, programmatic assessment, and career development (American Association of Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2022). The versatility of ePortfolios makes

them a desirable learning tool for students, educators, and researchers. Students can also use ePortfolios in a variety of ways: to electronically compile their work over time; reflect on their academic and personal development; and share their insights with others such as teachers, advisors, and future employers. For optimal ePortfolio usage, students should be encouraged to create websites that cultivate community-wide interactions and collaborations (Zhang et al., 2007). The extent to which ePortfolios can be used varies depending on its purpose. However, these various approaches are not mutually exclusive, but rather may represent different starting points for portfolio usage (Sutarno et al., 2019). To achieve its full potential, educators should dedicate ample time and attention to implementing ePortfolios to ensure they are elevating student learning (Moore, 2016).

### **Documentation and Evaluation**

Creating ePortfolios is a useful tool to document experiences (Juhana et al., 2018). With the knowledge that students and instructors expect their eTools to be accessible and easy to use, ePortfolios adhere to both priorities for learners (Jafari et al., 2006). They can also be used to support formal and informal learning and to communicate student outcomes (O’Keeffe & Donnelly, 2013; Wild et al., 2008). Given the ease with which ePortfolios can be used for collection and then communication by sharing the content widely, it is a tool that can also be used to evaluate faculty and institutional educational practices (Basken, 2008). An ePortfolio can support integrative learning through the process of students making connections with the content in their ePortfolios (Reynolds & Patton, 2014). Moreover, ePortfolios can be useful in evaluating educational outcomes. The ePortfolio practice can support the assessment of learning outcomes through demonstrating student and faculty members’ work and by capturing learning in all stages (Eynon & Gambino, 2017). They can serve as an innovative tool to do a wide range of assessments and can be used to support pedagogy and enhance students’ overall engagement with their education (Richards-Schuster et al., 2014).

### **Reflection**

The robust pedagogical practice of ePortfolio development is fully realized through the process of reflective writing (Shulman, 1998). These reflective skills pave the way for transforming personal experience into new knowledge and in challenging preconceived notions and structures (Carl & Strydom, 2017; Eynon, 2009). With recent advances in online learning environments, researchers agree that ePortfolios benefit students in terms of extending

knowledge acquisition and encouraging connectedness, specifically for those students without prior ePortfolio experience in reflecting on their learning (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010; Taylor et al., 2012). In fact, student ePortfolios can be used to demonstrate the acquisition of specific skills in terms of reflective learning and continuous professional development. Moreover, they can also serve as the connective tissue for students when deciding what and how to share their artifacts and insights in their ePortfolios (Yancey & Hunt, 2009). Photos, videos, research projects, interviews, and reflective writing are all examples of evidence and can be linked to specific academic experiences or serve as proof of lifelong learning.

However, simply asking students to reflect on their newly acquired skills and experiences will not necessarily result in a thorough analysis. To support optimal student learning, ePortfolios must be developed in a precise manner to further deepen student reflection (Bartlett & Sherry, 2006; Harring & Luo, 2016). Specific questions and guidelines should be developed that relate to course goals, allowing students to make their learning apparent and connected to the learning outcomes.

Regardless of how ePortfolios initiatives are designed and for what intended purposes, they can guide students in thinking more critically about their learning in collaborative learning contexts (Klenowski et al., 2006). Encouraging students to use ePortfolios in a collaborative way supports more effective reflections; it can be enjoyable and improve their writing skills (Tonogbanua, 2018). These types of ePortfolios can validate the learning process in the form of knowledge, collaboration performance, and student skills (Sutarno et al., 2019). The user’s reflection, a demonstration of what was learned during the learning process, and the level of social interaction between the user and other participants, such as peers, facilitators, or teachers, remain critical to appropriate ePortfolio practices (Barrett, 2011).

### **Professional Development and Civic Engagement**

Furthermore, through the creation of an ePortfolio, students may hone their professional identity and self-efficacy (Bennett & Robertson, 2015). Recognizing that self-assessment is vital to professional development and growth (Jarvinen & Kohonen, 1995), ePortfolios can be used to support this maturation process and can even serve as a preparatory tool prior to entering the workforce (Choate et al., 2019). For students’ co-curricular experiences, it is ideal to merge the curriculum with their programmatic experiences, promoting reflection from their lived experiences (Gallen, 2021). Using ePortfolios can enhance students’ civic literacy by strengthening their engagement in the real world as well as their learning on sustainability (Conefrey & Smyth, 2020; Geoffrey, 2015). For

instance, when ePortfolios were used to collect reflective feedback from students who participated in a service immersion program, ePortfolios were useful in ways of extending knowledge and deepening civic engagement experiences (O’Laughlin & Serra, 2016). For students engaged in service-learning work, ePortfolios are particularly useful for showing how field experiences inform their personal growth and vice-versa (Richards-Schuster et al., 2014). Through ePortfolio practice, students can demonstrate their integrity by articulating their values and their civic and personal responsibilities (Cambridge, 2010). This kind of integration can deepen students’ connections to communities, as well as their understanding of civic engagement and social justice broadly and how these issues configure into their work individually (O’Laughlin & Serra, 2016).

### **Personal Development and Lifelong Learning**

An ePortfolio practice encourages reflection, collaborative activities, and achievement, thereby providing critical opportunities for personal development. This includes learning that stems from what students choose to upload to their ePortfolios in addition to the social practice of sharing and communicating their work with peers and educators (Barrett, 2011). Since students will work multiple jobs throughout their careers, documenting skills that they have learned over time shows evidence of both lifelong and life-wide learning (Chen, 2009). Creating ePortfolios allows students to demonstrate learning over time and fosters cycles of reflection, revision, and iterative growth (O’Keefe & Donnelly, 2013). Beyond documenting purely academic experiences, ePortfolios can provide unique platforms for integrating co-curricular, professional, and personal experiences into comprehensive “living documents” of life-wide learning—elevating the value of all dimensions of student life, and promoting cross-context connections (Cambridge, 2008; Fitch et al., 2008; Madden, 2015).

### **Career Development**

Recognizing that ePortfolios can be a valuable tool in career development and in job searches, students are able to continue utilizing their websites once the formal course or programmatic assessment has concluded (Yu, 2012). Students’ ePortfolios can be authentic indicators of what they have learned and are able to accomplish, addressing their potential. In addition to the typical integrative learning practices, ePortfolios can promote students’ professional digital identities (Conefrey & Smyth, 2020). In the spirit of creating their online identities, students also have an opportunity to not only develop their professional career profile through

ePortfolios but also to integrate newly acquired skills to present themselves to potential employers. In addition, professional websites can showcase some of the top qualities that employers are seeking, such as computer and organization skills (Barrett, 2012). Creating ePortfolios can hone students’ technological and communication skills (D’Angelo & Maid, 2013). When students create their professional portfolios, they can showcase their academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular experiences in a curated fashion, making it easier for an employer to evaluate their knowledge and skills (Benander & Rafaei, 2016; Ramirez, 2011). In fact, many students indicate that they wish to use their ePortfolios during their careers because the websites align with their professional goals (Schiele et al., 2017).

### **High-Impact Practices**

Recognizing the multiple uses of ePortfolios, administrators in higher education are often compelled to use them in tandem with other high-impact practices. Studies find that the reflective practice can be even more valuable when students engage in multiple high-impact practices (HIPs) during their academic careers; specifically, students become more flexible and self-directed learners (Mueller & Bair, 2018; Peet et al., 2011; Reese & Levy, 2009). For instance, this process might include developing an ePortfolio to post reflections during an undergraduate research experience, a study abroad, or an internship. Using ePortfolios, in conjunction with other high-impact activities, gives students the opportunity to draw connections between distinct educational experiences because collection over time is a crucial component of the ePortfolio process (AAC&U, 2022; Strivens, 2015). Since creating an ePortfolio is a form of dispositional learning, combining cognitive and personal development for developing life skills, it is a highly valued HIP for 21st-century learners (Kuh et al., 2018).

Thus, ePortfolios are viewed as a sound pedagogical and evaluative tool capable of promoting student learning and success (Nguyen, 2013). Consistent with the literature in the field, there are many compelling reasons to further examine ePortfolios in higher education. Our study explores students’ experiences in a summer internship program with an attempt to provide insights into ePortfolios that promote and assess reflection and engaged learning.

The research questions raised for this study included: How do we develop an effective ePortfolio initiative that will promote reflection and engaged learning for participants in a summer service program? As the program coordinators, will we be able to observe and measure the students’ learning through the reflections in their ePortfolios?

Table 1  
*Participant Chart Including Intended Academic Major*

Participant	Academic major
1	Premed
2	Biomedical Engineering
3	Public Policy
4	Math, Computer Science
5	Premed, Public Policy, Global Health
6	Premed, Neuroscience, Biology
7	Neuroscience
8	Biomedical Engineering
9	Economics
10	Chemistry
11	African, African-American Studies
12	Public Policy, Economics

### Method

This was a qualitative, phenomenological study (Patton, 2015) on how we launched an ePortfolio initiative in the summer of 2022 for students participating in a full-time, 8-week internship program. As an academic unit housed in a midsized, highly selective, private university in the Southeastern United States, our office supports undergraduate and graduate students in academic engagement activities. One of the scholarship programs we oversee includes an internship initiative for rising sophomores, which places students with non-profits that match their professional interests. These students were the participants in the study.

### Participants

This year's cohort included 12 rising sophomore students who worked at a wide range of non-profits in the same city as the location of the university campus (see Table 1). The internship placements were in the fields of education, health, housing, law, and the environment. The students lived in apartments on campus and met together once or twice per week: once formally with the program coordinators and once optionally for an excursion or group activity.

### Procedure

Regarding participation in the research study, all 12 students received the consent form from a representative at the institutional research office. The students were informed that it was their choice whether to allow their ePortfolio submissions and responses during the focus groups to be included in the study. We were not informed of which students opted in or out of the study until after the conclusion of the program, which was a way to manage the risk of undue influence.

This risk mitigation strategy was needed as we were the researchers *and* the program coordinators. Since participation was voluntary, students needed to have the assurance that their decision to take part in the study would have no bearing on their standing in the program.

All students chose to participate in the study. However, if any had not participated, their ePortfolio submissions and responses during the focus groups would have been removed from the data analysis process. This removal would have been easy to do because each participant's responses were clearly sorted and labeled in the software that we used for collecting and storing data.

### Weekly Reflections

The students were required to develop ePortfolios during their internship experience. They were expected to build these ePortfolios whether they participated in the research study or not; however, as mentioned above, all students opted into participating in the study. Each week, the students were asked to respond to prompts, which included these five questions (also available in Appendix A):

1. What was the most fulfilling task you completed this week and why?
2. What was the most challenging issue you encountered this week and why?
3. How have these occurrences impacted your summer service experience?
4. Has your perspective on your service experience changed? If so, how?
5. How is this experience shaping or informing your overall views on service?

The students built their ePortfolios using Wix, a website-building platform. They shared their links with us, but the links expired after a certain amount of time to protect their privacy. Their websites were not made public.

The students used the Blog tool in Wix for responding to the prompts. Each week, they posted their responses to the questions as a new entry in their blog. This helped us easily find and review their responses. They also uploaded an artifact each week, which could include a photo, video, screenshot, or another type of file. Wix's Blog tool allows users to easily upload artifacts to their posts, which was helpful to us and to the students.

We commented on the students' posts each week via email, so they were aware we had read their responses. The feedback given to the students varied in length and scope based on what they originally posted. Most of the time, we engaged with the content each student shared, but sometimes our comments were more of an acknowledgment that their responses had been received if their original posts were brief. The feedback was only visible to the individual students; the comments could not be viewed by other students in the program. We were hopeful that this feedback would address the issue of students potentially feeling a lack of connection with us during the program (Morales & Soler-Dominguez, 2015).

### **Focus Groups**

The students also participated in three focus groups during the first, fifth, and last week of their internship program. The sessions were recorded for data analysis purposes, and the recordings were audio only. During the first week of the program, the students learned how to create ePortfolios using Wix, and we asked about their expectations for using ePortfolios. During the fifth week of the program, we checked in on how their ePortfolio process was going. During the final week of the program, we assessed their experience in building ePortfolios. The focus groups were conversational and guided by a set of discussion questions; they were an invitation for the students to provide their feedback to us and their peers (see Appendix B for the full list of questions). At the end of the study, we also gave the students an opportunity to attend an optional session on transitioning their ePortfolios from a learning to a career, or public-facing, ePortfolio. This session took place during the fall semester and served as a quasi-reunion for the students to gather again as a group.

### **Data Analysis**

We used the research software program Dedoose to collect, code, and analyze the data. The weekly prompts were uploaded into Dedoose once all the identifying data was removed. The three focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Once we had complete and accurate transcripts, we removed the descriptors from the data collected and deleted the original audio recording to protect the identities of the students.

We met consistently as a research group during the 8-week program to discuss our data collection and to debrief after each focus group. During these discussions, we confirmed that our students were all completing the weekly prompts, and we were obtaining substantive reflective responses from them that we could later analyze for the study. After the focus groups, we discussed if our questions were eliciting the feedback we needed to answer our research questions and if the students felt free to share their insights in the group settings. Overall, we were pleased with how much the students contributed during the focus groups and we appreciated their interest in sharing their experiences with us.

When we finished collecting the data at the end of the summer program, we learned that all students consented for their reflections and feedback from the focus groups to be included in the study. We then began the analysis process using Corbin and Strauss's (2015) method of open and axial coding; we highlighted key phrases and ideas and then identified the dominant themes that emerged. If any students had not consented to participate, however, we would have removed their submissions in Dedoose and their comments from the focus group transcripts prior to analyzing the data.

### **Results and Discussion**

Through this analysis, we sought to answer the following questions: How do we develop an effective ePortfolio initiative that will promote reflection and engaged learning for participants in a summer service program? As the program coordinators, will we be able to observe and measure the students' learning through the students' reflections in their ePortfolios? This project collected data from two primary sources: the students' responses to the weekly prompts, which they posted in their ePortfolios, and the three focus groups, which took place at the beginning, middle, and end of the summer program.

In an effort to share our findings, we first discussed the dominant themes that emerged from the students' reflective essays. They posted on professional development; personal development; and their perspectives, values, and plans going forward. Then, we identified the feedback and themes that emerged from the focus groups. The students believed:

- Recording their summer experience was valuable, but were concerned with authenticity;
- ePortfolios were an effective tool for reflection;
- The reflective practice strengthened their purpose and confidence and enhanced their communication;

- Personalizing artifacts was challenging; and
- Wix was an easy platform to use.

We conclude this section with the modifications and enhancements we plan to make to our ePortfolio program based on the data and feedback we received. This includes offering more opportunities for student collaboration and varying the reflective mediums and prompts.

## Emerging Themes From Students' ePortfolios

### *Professional Development*

Professional development was the most prevalent theme in the students' reflective essays in their ePortfolios. In this context, students posted on issues that pertained to the workplace and related to skills they could include on a résumé. They shared how they were learning to effectively communicate with others, manage employer expectations, and work collaboratively with others. The students posted about developing their leadership skills, and some explored what leadership meant to them. For instance, Participant 9 wrote, "The responsibility of an individual to show up and hold themselves accountable is upon themselves. It can be difficult as a leader to tread the line between management and micromanagement" (Reflection Week 6).

Students wrote about how they organized and planned projects, events, and initiatives. They explained in writing how they were becoming more proficient at honing new skills, such as coding, marketing, and using social media. They also posted on how they were adapting to working independently, sharing their ability to problem solve and think creatively about an issue:

These experiences have greatly impacted my summer service experience by not only improving my communication skills but further teaching me how to think outside of the box. For the client I mentioned earlier, collaboration and creative thinking were key to find ways to actually help her. (Participant 6, Reflection Week 4)

### *Personal Development*

The students also often reflected in writing through their ePortfolio submissions about how they had developed personally, referring to experiences and skills they would not likely share publicly but related to their individual growth and maturation. These included performing tasks outside their comfort zone, recognizing the need for patience, acknowledging a lack of skills, and noticing how their confidence was building over time. Their ePortfolios were platforms to share professional and personal triumphs as well as challenges and

frustrations. Many students posted about the personal obstacles they had to overcome to get their specific jobs done. At the same time, they shared their concerns regarding systemic challenges that they believed were thwarting their organizations' abilities to serve their populations. Participant 12 wrote, "Knowing they now received legal resources eased the situation; however, the challenge is actually taking legal action" (Reflection Week 6). Participant 4 stated, "My summer service experience has been able to give me a first hand [*sic*] experience with how the system needs reform and that was not something I expected to get from working in my [summer program] location" (Reflection Week 3).

### *Perspectives, Values, and Plans Going Forward*

One of the reflective prompts asked the students to consider how their perspective on service may have changed during their internship. The students shared how they learned more about their populations' real-world issues, which offered them more insight into the complexity of the challenges their clients faced as well as empathy for their personal struggles. This encouraged students to ponder what might lie ahead for them and how they wish to serve going forward. For instance, one student mentioned now realizing the need to pursue a career that involves hands-on work to stay motivated. Another wrote about planning to take a personal finance course to address their newfound knowledge gap, as well as quenching their renewed interest in advocacy. Another student shared that because of the internship, they learned the importance of enjoying what you do. Participant 8 added, "It's important that one finds a way to serve doing something they either enjoy or are passionate about so they can find their work more fulfilling and continue serving, thus impacting the community more" (Reflection Week 3).

The students were also asked to write about how their experiences were informing their overall views on service. They posted on the importance of engaging the community, doing work that is sustainable, and realizing that much of service happens behind the scenes without anyone knowing. In addition, some students expanded this question to explore how their internship was shaping their larger goals and perspectives, often keeping in mind the systemic challenges they may have encountered during their internships. Participant 5 wrote, "The little things (or at least the things we take for granted) are also important aspects of service" (Reflection Week 6). Participant 3 stated, "I think the overarching lessons I have learned through experience this summer are the benefits of a healthy work-life balance as well as the inner rewards of engaging in work that you feel passionate about" (Reflection Week 5).

## Emerging Themes From the Focus Groups

### *Valuable Record but Concern With Authenticity—Focus Group 1*

During the first focus group, the students shared their enthusiasm for having an online record of the progress of their summer experiences, which they could refer to later in their collegiate careers. “I think, after the summer is over, I’m going to appreciate having [the ePortfolio] to look back on. I think that’ll be really valuable to me” (Participant 11, Focus Group 1). They felt that having this record would remind them of what they accomplished and how they may have changed over time. The students also believed that by chronicling their activities, they would be able to organize their experiences by themes, which could better showcase their interests in fields such as health and education. They also expressed an interest in eventually using their ePortfolios to show evidence of their professional attributes and as a resource to share with employers.

One concern that was shared was how it might be difficult to be authentic and honest when posting their reflections. Participant 2 expressed, “If you focus too much on professionalism, though, it might not be as genuine” (Focus Group 1). Participant 3 added that when creating products such as an ePortfolio, it is hard to be “authentically honest” (Focus Group 1).

### *Effective Tool for Reflection—Focus Groups 2 and 3*

Their initial impressions proved accurate. During the second and third focus groups, the students shared that ePortfolios were an appropriate and convenient storage and reflective tool for the internship program. Their websites and reflective prompts assisted them in organizing their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, and shed light on what they enjoyed most about their internships. Responding to the prompts compelled them to jog their memories to identify the highlights for the week. One student mentioned that by looking back, past challenges no longer seemed like challenges because they were already addressed (Participant 8, Focus Group 3). Another student appreciated the ability to write freely without being graded or judged (Participant 3, Focus Group 2). One participant shared that the weekly reflections were critical in shaping the service experience (Participant 1, Focus Group 2).

Even when they were not in the mood to reflect, they felt the exercise was worthwhile after it was completed (Participants 3 and 11, Focus Group 2). As the students predicted during the first focus group, they appreciated having a record of their weekly experiences that they could refer to later, and this record provided them with a feeling of accomplishment. “I would not sit

down for 30 minutes and reflect on my day otherwise. . . . Three years down the road [when] applying to grad school, I have an almost first-hand account of what I was doing” (Participant 5, Focus Group 2). The students felt that it will be helpful to review over time how their perspectives may have changed. “I think in the long-term it will definitely be very useful” (Participant 12, Focus Group 2).

Consequently, they grew to have an appreciation for the practice of reflection. Participant 1 noted that people tend to reflect on negative experiences, but taking the opportunity to also consider positive experiences is impactful (Focus Group 3). Participant 9 shared that by reflecting, “I felt almost better about myself and just better about the work that I was doing” (Focus Group 3). Participant 12 stated, “I think that one of the values of reflection is learning your values and learning why you continue to do this” (Focus Group 3).

### *Strengthened Purpose and Confidence—Focus Groups 2 and 3*

The participants expressed that the reflections—especially the question on what was fulfilling—gave them a stronger sense of purpose and confidence that they were making a difference. One student mentioned that when responding to what was fulfilling, they realized they were having an impact, just on a smaller scale than perhaps they had originally intended. “Instead of changing the world or something, you’re kind of just changing the life of one person, helping an individual and their circumstance” (Participant 11, Focus Group 2).

By posting each week about their service experience, their progress and growth were made transparent; their skills, strengths, accomplishments, and improvements became more evident (Participants 1, 3, 6, 9, and 10, Focus Group 3). The students mentioned building specific skills, such as honing their interpersonal communication abilities, enhancing their patience and empathy, and improving their capacity to engage in challenging conversations. Through the reflections, they were also able to consider what will and will not bring them more fulfillment when they enter the workforce, thinking forward to their future career pursuits.

### *Enhanced Communication—Focus Groups 2 and 3*

Another benefit of the ePortfolio program was that the students received consistent feedback from a program coordinator on their postings. For instance, Participant 10 shared that the feedback served as “validation” when they were struggling with whether they were making an impact (Focus Group 3). These weekly comments served to personalize and support their reflective process.

The fact that they knew their posts would be read and commented on each week likely enhanced their degree of engagement in using their ePortfolios. This consistent communication also allowed the coordinators and students to build stronger relationships with one another throughout the summer experience. We recommend building in time to respond to the students' posts each week since this is a worthwhile, albeit time-consuming, task.

### ***Lack of Personalizing Artifacts—Focus Groups 2 and 3***

As previously mentioned, in addition to the written reflections, the students were asked to upload an artifact each week. This could essentially be any document—professional or personal—that was demonstrative of their week.

During the focus groups, the students mentioned that they struggled to decide which artifact to upload each week. Since they could not share clients' personal information and images, some settled on posting generic stock images of buildings or stacks of books, which they found disappointing. Although students were given the latitude to upload a broad range of artifacts, adhering to McLellan's (2021) suggestions for creating ePortfolios, most posted photos of themselves at work, the documents they completed for their internships, and projects they were planning at their jobs. One student mentioned, "I usually try to find like the highlight of the week" (Participant 9, Focus Group 2). Many of the photos took place at their non-profit organizations but were mostly informal in nature—selfies with colleagues, students in action and at events, and yummy treats at the office. A few students posted personal items, such as their weekend activities and their lives outside of their internships.

### ***Wix Was an Ideal Platform***

All but two participants had prior experience building websites, so the students had no issues using Wix. They quickly adapted to using the tool, adding pages, and uploading artifacts to their websites with ease. The students were also pleased with the aesthetic of their websites. In addition, we as the researchers found Wix to be an ideal platform for coordinating an ePortfolio program. Using the Wix Blog tool enabled us to easily locate the postings, as well as view the students' progress over time.

About half of the participants embraced the ePortfolio beyond the programmatic requirements, posting additional information on their personal backgrounds, classes taken, views on service, and other co-curricular experiences. The other half addressed the weekly postings but did not go beyond what was required. However, it is important to note that during

the 8-week summer program, we focused on developing learning ePortfolios, which meant the websites were not intended to be shared with anyone outside of the program. During the fall semester, we offered a workshop on transitioning their websites into career (or public) ePortfolios. We expect that they will expand their Wix websites to include more web pages and artifacts going forward.

### ***Enhancements to the ePortfolio Program Going Forward***

#### ***Opportunities to Collaborate***

Perhaps the most significant outcomes from this study derived from the thoughtful suggestions offered by our students during the focus groups on how to make modifications to the reflective process going forward. To begin with, they would have liked more occasions to collaborate with peers on their ePortfolio reflections. During the program, the students had the opportunity to share the links of their unpublished websites with one another, but there was no assignment or requirement to do so. Supporting the recommendations made by Zhang et al. (2007), the students would have also liked to be separated into small groups to discuss their weekly reflections or had an assignment that entailed group reflective postings.

#### ***Reflect Using Various Mediums and Prompts***

In addition, they suggested either being encouraged or required to post in varied ways throughout the program. They would have liked to have had more mediums for reflection and felt the variety would enhance the authenticity of the postings. In addition to written comments, this might include vlogs, photos with captions, slide presentations, videos, and other ways of expressing thoughts and ideas.

The students also asked that the prompts change each week. They suggested that some questions remain constant, such as what was fulfilling this week and what was challenging, but that other prompts should vary to encourage creativity and deeper introspection "I know the questions are meant to be as a guide, and for the most part they are, but sometimes like I can feel a little like restricted by like having to answer all of them" (Participant 8, Focus Group 2). Students recommended questions that solicited something funny or remarkable that occurred, so they would be encouraged to approach the prompts with more novelty, or perhaps ask a question that makes them think differently about an issue. Another student suggested bulleting the prompts rather than numbering the questions (Participant 4, Focus Group 3). Bulleted prompts might change the order or the approach of how students respond.

For the present study, we kept the prompts the same for the entire program to better assess the ways in which the students utilized their websites weekly. However, now that we are more confident that ePortfolios are a sound tool for reflection for our program, we can experiment with varied ways for students to post and collaborate going forward. For next year's program, we plan to incorporate all the students' suggestions and are grateful for their feedback, which will likely enhance the reflective process.

### Conclusion

For this research study, we explored the development of an ePortfolio program designed to promote reflection and engaged learning for our participants in a summer program. We also assessed if ePortfolios could be used to observe and measure the students' learning through the reflections in their websites. For the summer internship program studied, ePortfolios proved to be an ideal medium to achieve these objectives. The students appreciated reflecting on their experiences each week, and the ePortfolios were easy to access and utilize for assessing student learning. Going forward, the curriculum and assignments for the program will be more collaborative and flexible for students and the prompts will vary slightly from week to week to enhance the reflective practice.

Although our university campuses are still working towards returning to collegiate life pre-pandemic, the changes and disruptions we have endured present opportunities for us to rethink how we educate and inspire our students. As they set out to make a difference in their academic fields and in the world—through research, internships, and study abroad experiences—we should consistently assess if our programs are achieving their stated goals. Our students (and admittedly all of us) have changed a lot in the past few years. If the outcomes of our co-curricular programs are not meeting our expectations, should the execution of the goals or the goals themselves be changed? If we anticipate that students will learn to reflect, think critically, and learn more about themselves and others through participating in our co-curricular activities, are our curricula, resources, and assessment tools appropriate to evaluate these outcomes? Using ePortfolios can help educators answer these critical questions and many more, presenting innovative options for engagement and assessment going forward.

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Appendix A  
Weekly ePortfolio Prompt Questions

1. What was the most fulfilling task you completed this week and why?
2. What was the most challenging issue you encountered this week and why?
3. How have these occurrences impacted your summer service experience?
4. Has your perspective on your service experience changed? If so, how?
5. How is this experience shaping or informing your overall views on service?

Appendix B  
Focus Group Questions

**Focus Group – Session One**

1. Do you have prior experience building a website?
2. What are your expectations for building and using an ePortfolio this summer?
3. What do you anticipate will be challenging?
4. What do you anticipate will be valuable or beneficial?
5. How do you plan to use your ePortfolio during the service program?
6. How do you plan to use your ePortfolio after the service program?

**Focus Group – Session Two**

1. How are you using your ePortfolio?
2. What are you uploading on your website in addition to what you have shared with us each week?
3. What are the benefits of building an ePortfolio?
4. What are the drawbacks of using an ePortfolio?
5. Thus far is this a useful tool? If so, how is it useful? If not, why?

**Focus Group – Session Three**

1. Overall, how would you assess your experience in building an ePortfolio?
2. What are the benefits of building an ePortfolio?
3. What are the drawbacks of using an ePortfolio?
4. What did you learn about yourself through developing an ePortfolio?
5. What did you learn about your service experience through developing an ePortfolio?
6. What is the value of reflection?
7. How was using a digital platform more or less beneficial than in-print journal writing or vlogging?
8. Would you recommend other students build a website while conducting service? Why or why not?
9. Do you recommend we continue using ePortfolios for this program?
10. What modifications should be made to the ePortfolio program?