Abstract: The United States Military Academy is unique in the expectations and responsibilities placed on recent graduates. The forty-seven month experience of a Cadet is broken into a 4 program system and has natural breaks from one semester to the next. The segmented and stove-piped nature of this experience is compounded by a lack of time to reflect, because of the deliberately busy pace of Cadet Life. Electronic portfolios have been successfully used by a variety of institutions to empower students to reflect on their education and development across their entire academic experience. An e-portfolio could bridge the gap from program to program and semester to semester. An e-portfolio would provide Cadets a consistent place to collect and view feedback from their entire experience, allow mentors access to information from previous semesters and other programs, and give Cadets a forum for reflecting on their growth and development towards becoming an Army Officer. An e-portfolio is a mechanism to enrich every experience a Cadet has and to create a better sense of control and meaning in their development. The WPLDS pilot program, AMS interface, and OEMA branching tools demonstrate that USMA is ready for e-portfolios.

Table of Contents
1. Introduction: Understanding the West Point Experience in Context
   a. Leaders of Character Committed to a Lifetime of Selfless Service
   b. The Forty-Seven Month Cadet Experience
   c. Electronic Portfolios are the Missing Thread of Continuity
2. Electronic Portfolios
   a. What Does an E-Portfolio Consist of?
   b. The Purpose of an Electronic Portfolio
3. How E-portfolios are Successfully Implemented?
   a. Faculty Investment
   b. Student Ownership
   c. Integration
4. Implementation at USMA
   a. 2016 Pilot Program
   b. Where do we go From Here?
5. Conclusion
   a. USMA is Busy, Segmented, and Stove-Piped
   b. Schools Have had Great Success Using E-Portfolios
   c. West Point Needs it More and is Better Prepared Than Other Schools
1. Introduction: Understanding the West Point Experience in Context


The United States Military Academy (USMA) exists to train young men and women to be Officers in the United States Army. In four years, the typical Cadet will go from an 18 year old recent high school graduate to a Second Lieutenant Platoon Leader. In general, Cadets come into West Point as teenagers leaving home for the first time and must be ready to make life and death decisions in combat within months of graduating. The Academy has a daunting developmental task to prepare graduates to be responsible for, and capable of, the challenges they may face upon commissioning. USMA is not the only organization with such high demands of its graduates, ROTC programs and the other Service Academies also commission Lieutenants. Few schools assume that ‘each’ graduate will face such responsibilities and the independence and trust placed in Army Lieutenants is not typically mirrored in the Air Force and Navy. Therefore, USMA leads a small group of institutions with the responsibility to prepare the entire student body for the rigors, weight, and responsibilities of leading young men and women into harm’s way on behalf of the American people.

b. The Forty-Seven Month Cadet Experience

To fulfill the Academy’s responsibility to the Army, the Cadets, and the Nation, a rigorous and broad system of development, education, and training has been refined for over two-hundred years. The Superintendent describes the unique West Point experience as the synthesis of Athens, a top tier undergraduate education, and Sparta, the world’s preeminent military leadership training. The developmental experiences of a Cadet are batched into the Military, Academic, Physical, and Character programs. Using the framework of these four programs, the staff and faculty plan and execute the individual developmental experiences that transition a High Schooler into an Officer. Like traditional undergraduate schools, West Point uses eight semesters when scheduling courses. In addition to holding academic courses to a semester schedule, physical courses and testing, and military grades and duty position rotations are all

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2 Ibid., v.
synchronized by semester as well. Lastly, there are a series of, primarily military, graduation requirements that Cadet’s must do over their summers.

The result is that a Cadet’s busy schedule is neatly segmented from one semester to the next. For the typical Cadet, the beginning of May, August, or January marks the beginning of all new Academic classes, a new position on a new sports team, a new roommate, and a new role in the chain of command inside of a new squad and platoon, with new subordinates and leaders. Then, inside of the cleanly segmented semester, Academic, Physical, Military, and Character developmental experiences are ongoing within their own lanes. The segmentated and stove-piped nature of a Cadet’s experience are further compounded by the deliberately challenging and stressful schedules that Cadets are required to maintain. Tactical Officers (TACs) and their Non-Commissioned Officers (TAC NCOs) can synchronize and de-conflict the 4 programs and spend the majority of their time counseling and shaping their Cadet’s experiences to set conditions for reflection and development. However, TAC teams in a Company are outnumbered sixty-to-one and reflection must ultimately be an individual process.

d. Electronic Portfolios are the Missing Thread of Continuity

The missing thread of continuity in the forty-seven month Cadet experience is a self-curated reflective narrative of the Cadet’s development and electronic portfolios offer the best tool to meet this need. Electronic portfolios (E-Portfolios) create a platform for Cadets to consolidate four years of experiences in four programs, provide a forum for Cadets to present their accomplishments to peers, mentors, and themselves, and foster the self-guided reflection necessary for development. The introduction of an e-portfolio to the Cadet experience will provide the connective tissue across the myriad of developmental experiences that already exist at West Point. An e-portfolio will intuitively drive Cadets to make meaning out of their experiences while reflecting on how experiences map their larger growth and development. No institution in the world provides the depth and breadth of opportunities that USMA can for its students. Few institutions shoulder the burden of developing Army Officers for combat leadership. Introducing an e-portfolio will harness those opportunities to better fulfill the leader development that our Cadets, our Army, and our Nation deserve.

2. Electronic Portfolios

   a. What Does an E-Portfolio Consist of?

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5 Keith, 20.
E-portfolios capture the paradigm shift from ‘teaching’ to ‘learning’ by cultivating the habits of metacognition, reflection, and self-critiquing in students. The concept of a student portfolio has been used for decades in the United States and Europe to record student work, track progress, and to assess programs. The internet, personal computing, and social media technologies of this generation have broken down the barriers that previously limited the utility of storing and sharing a large binder worth of student work. So it is accurate, but misleading to say that an e-portfolio is just a digital version of the traditional student portfolio. Broadly, any digital repository of a student’s work could be considered their e-portfolio. However, the value that can be unlocked when students are challenged to maintain and share their work over time as a representation of their growth and skill is powerful. So powerful, that some colleges have built their entire learning environment around the individual student’s e-portfolio. At Guttman Community College in New York City, the vision statement codified their definition of an e-portfolio:

“E-portfolio is an environment in which we showcase our work, articulate and reflect on our learning, assess our outcomes, document improvements and change, and communicate to each other and the larger communities we are a part of.”

One vendor, Livetext, recently came to USMA and provided a demonstration of their proprietary e-portfolio software to members of the West Point Leader Development System (WPLDS) Integration Committee. Their software allows faculty from any class to build assignments for the students to complete by posting on the student’s own timeline. Crafted signature assignments are thereby collected in a single landing timeline for the student. Students can then build displays of their work and instantly share them to peers, instructors, Linked-In, Twitter, or Facebook. Assignments that challenge students to reflect on, review, package, and present their work from across the curriculum used intuitive software to create professional displays for students and a wide variety of feedback mechanisms from peers, the public, and faculty members. This software demonstration shows how powerful current technology can be in transforming

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10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Capozza
Electronic Portfolios as a Thread of Continuity in a Cadet’s Forty-Seven Month Developmental Journey

the old 3-ring-binder of essays into a living representation of the student’s growth, development, and learning.

b. The Purpose of an Electronic Portfolio

In reviewing the literature associated with e-portfolios, the variety of given purpose statements are best exemplified in the following:

“[E-portfolios] permit tracking of longer episodes of teaching and learning more effectively than single observations do, as well as encourage the important connections between process and product. They can also help institutionalize norms of collaboration, reflection, and discussion to help shift responsibility for demonstrating learning to the student.”13

E-portfolios create conversations about a student’s learning and development that are curated by the student. Using a portfolio, students can choose the work that best represents their self-evaluations and self-reflection out of their entire body of work.14 A student’s portfolio becomes like their Facebook page. It is the image that the student presents of their learning. Linked-In is perhaps a better example because of the professional, and not just social, focus. In fact, Linked-In has a function to allow members to post their publications, presenting their best foot forward. In these social media pages, there is an intuitive ownership of the content by the individual. I post what I do on Facebook because I want to present myself to the world in a certain way. Students write essays because they are assigned, because there are points attached, and to stay out of trouble. When a student does the work to write an essay well, their very definition of “well” may best be described as, “what I think the instructor considers a good paper.” The shift in ownership that a well incorporated e-portfolio generates is that a student will share an essay because they believe it represents their skills, ability, and original thought well. It is a decision by the student to write and share something that they believe is a good representation of their ability. The power inherent in this paradigm shift is immense.

E-portfolios exist to drive the paradigm shift for students from producing work for a class to producing work for themselves. When a student builds an e-portfolio, they are creating a story about their learning and development.15 E-portfolios create narratives that leads students to draw connections between classes, assignments, and from year

14 Fuglik, 2.
Capozza
Electronic Portfolios as a Thread of Continuity in a Cadet’s Forty-Seven Month Developmental Journey

to year. Reflecting on their total body of work creates self-awareness that can then be demonstrated to mentors, peers, and faculty through the e-portfolio.\(^{16}\)

In most classrooms and for most students, once an assignment is complete, it is nearly forgotten and typically discarded. At the end of a semester, it is a common sight on most campuses for binders and notebooks (often ceremoniously) to be thrown out completely. E-portfolios allow a space to capture key academic accomplishments without the burden of physically maintaining them in hard copy. The powerful digital tools available to today’s students allow easy storage, access, mining, packaging, and sharing of work across a student’s entire academic career.\(^{17}\) When faculty capitalize on e-portfolio technology to make students review and make connections across their previous assignments, it drives deep learning and high-impact self-awareness and growth in students.\(^{18}\)

The impact of one assignment on a student is typically bound by the learning and growth that occurs while it is being created. When these assignments are captured and a student returns to reflect on them as a single piece of their larger body of work, it creates additional levels of academic learning and understanding, while teaching self-awareness for the student.\(^{19}\) E-portfolios allow students to create a narrative, a story of their educational journey.\(^{20}\) The experience of reflection that a student goes through when sifting through their work and curating their e-portfolio is to see and understand long-term goals for improvement that go beyond a particular course or topic.\(^{21}\) Most courses, by nature are bound within a semester. The goals and end states are directed towards the final exam and the hope that the student will take what they’ve learned beyond that final. E-portfolios are the tool for a student to collect and organize what they learn in that course in order to ensure that the student carries it with them.

3. How E-portfolios are Successfully Implemented?

a. Faculty Investment

The magic described above does not occur automatically. Simply giving students access to e-portfolio software doesn’t equal reflection, connections, and a deep understanding of a student’s learning in context. A common theme in literature

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 345.
\(^{17}\) Yaffe, 1.
\(^{20}\) Graves and Epstein, P. 344.
\(^{21}\) Harring and Luo, P. 10.
Capozza
Electronic Portfolios as a Thread of Continuity in a Cadet’s Forty-Seven Month Developmental Journey

discussing e-portfolio best practices is the need for faculty buy-in. In order for an e-portfolio to be rich enough to be of value, instructors across many classes must routinely give time for students to upload and manage their work. There is an intuitive challenge here as well. At the beginning, time must be taken to explain the purpose and value to students before the body of work is present. It is difficult to illustrate the power of an e-portfolio when there are only two documents present. This challenge of having to demonstrate value before adoption exists for faculty as well.

The value that faculty place on e-portfolios in their courses has a direct impact on whether students see value in maintaining the tools. In some successful classrooms, instructors add reflective e-portfolio based prompts to key assignments so that reflection occurs immediately as the student finishes the prompt. The importance of faculty engagement is evident in schools like Portland State University. In Portland, a four year effort targeted the faculty and included hiring new IT personnel and teaching e-portfolio classes to teachers and administrators in order to finally get an e-portfolio friendly culture to take root.

A common problem generated from a lack of faculty engagement is a lack of familiarity with a student’s whole body of work. It is unreasonable to think that in their free time, faculty members will go through and read capstone papers and review major projects for all of their students. However, faculty must be willing to see the connections that their students call attention to in order to have meaningful conversations about development over time. In order to ensure faculty investment, many successful courses create e-portfolio based assignments where the student’s curating of the platform is the graded event and not a process that happens after the event. Giving students graded e-portfolio presentations also allows the teacher to drive reflection over a long period and challenges the student to present the fruits of their guided reflection.

b. Student Ownership

The power generated by placing ownership for displaying and presenting their work onto the individual student is immense. A best practice to drive ownership is to

23 D’Erizans and Bibbo, p. 84.
25 Ibid.
26 Reynolds and Pirie, 22.
27 Hubert, 28.
28 Harring and Luo, 11.
29 Graves and Epstein, 342.
allow students opportunity to pick which of a number of assignments they will capture in their e-portfolio. This technique empowers students by building flexibility into the system. Utilizing e-portfolios saves graded work from the recycling bin and incorporates it into the student’s window for presenting their abilities and growth. This process adds a new intrinsic value for the student to do work that will present themselves well to their peers and mentors. Multiple studies show a cumulative effect where over time, students become more engaged and more positive about the value of e-portfolios as they spend more time building and curating one.

Student appreciation and acceptance of e-portfolios is not universal. Although research shows that voluntary use of an e-portfolio was reported sixty percent amongst visual arts students, the same research showed a three percent voluntary use amongst writing majors. An American study showed that in a program that provided a voluntary e-portfolio, fifteen percent of students had made no contributions to their portfolios at all. Although not universally welcomed, e-portfolios do add layers of engagement and new challenges. They engage a variety of learning styles not always catered to in a straightforward assignment.

c. Integration

Guttman Community College provides an outstanding example of the impact integrating e-portfolios throughout a curriculum can have. Guttman was a new university that adopted e-portfolios as the primary mechanism for delivering content to students and for reviewing and providing feedback on their work. Beginning in the student’s first summer at the school, they authored a “Who am I” essay and began building their e-portfolio. Guttman claims to be the first college in the country to use e-portfolio as the centerpiece of the institution. Students have regular workshops to deliberately work with faculty members on maintaining and presenting their body of work and every course and assignment is managed on the system. Faculty at Guttman concluded that the e-portfolio catalyzed learning, allowed students to make meaning out of their
education, and improved the overall assessment and quality of the institution as a whole.\textsuperscript{40}

4. Implementation at USMA

a. 2016 Pilot Program

In the second semester of Academic Year 2016, as part of the West Point Leader Development System (WPLDS) Integration Committee, I designed and implemented a pilot e-portfolio for a group of approximately 350 Cadets. Serving as a member of the committee, an MX400 instructor, and the Battalion TAC Officer for 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment (1st BN), I found myself at a nexus where a test was possible. With the permission of the Dean and Commandant, I had the Cadets of 1st BN use our existing technology, reflective assignments, and mentor relationships to proof the concept of an e-portfolio for the Academy. The results were limited but promising.

The USMA SharePoint has a “mysite” function where every member, every @usma.edu email account, has an address where they can post documents and control access. I had a very smart Cadet, planning on branching Cyber, write an illustrated instruction booklet on how to access an individual “mysite,” how to upload documents, how to manage viewing and editing rights, and how to invite others to view the site. Incorporating the Battalion’s other two TAC teams and the Battalion and Company Chain of Command, we began to assign tasks to slowly build and then utilize the mysite as an e-portfolio.

We gave a class on the purpose of an e-portfolio and demonstrated how to manage the SharePoint sites to each Company. Then tasked every subordinate to invite their leaders to view their e-portfolios, and for every leader to verify and report that they had access. Then we began populating key reflective assignments that we had identified throughout the curriculum. Our goal was to include a key assignment and a key mentorship touchpoint for each year group. PL100, PL300, and MX400 each had requirements already built into the course that were reflective in nature.

In particular, the PL300 mentorship assignments gave a great opportunity, by having 1st BN Cadets invite their mentors to review all the reflective data that they had published in their e-portfolio before sitting down for their sessions. As a PL300 mentor, I enjoyed being able to review a Cadet Platoon Leader’s PDR Summary before they walked me through a leadership challenge they were facing. The Cadet was dumbfounded when I showed how the challenges he had presented lined up with the 360 feedback he had received from three years of PDRs.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 6.
In MX400, the Pershing Essay already asked Cadets to review their PDR Summary Report and use it to reflect on their development. I had a Cadet submit not only their required PDR Summary Report, but their CTLT OER and a personality survey they had taken in PL300 as well for evidence of their journey. Within the chain of command, we mandated mentorship of Yearlings by Firsties and of Firsties by voluntary mentors from the staff and faculty. In theory, these mentoring relationships would now have a wealth of reflective data to add depth to their conversations. My expectations for engagement were not grand, but I was surprised when a faculty member reached out to commend the system for eliminating the stovepipes that keep information from flowing between the Academics, Military, Physical, and Character programs.

I anticipated that engagement would be limited with our limited time and resources, and it was. However, my hope was to “lead a horse to water” in the sense that I could make 350 Cadets build the beginning of an e-portfolio and I was surprised at the number of Cadets that I saw “drink.” I noted SharePoint as one of the weakest links in the pilot. The proof of concept for the WPLDS Integration Committee was to see where we could use a commercial product if we had access. Imagine my shock then when I saw that one of my Platoon Leaders had figured out how to embed a professional photo of himself in a suit and tie onto his “mysite” next to list of a dozen files he had uploaded.

The examples of success listed above are individual. We led a Battalion of Cadets to create a SharePoint repository of reflective assignments that included TAB results, PDR Summaries, and essays. We created no new writing assignments and only a handful of new mentoring relationships. We had a budget of zero dollars and Cadets...
said that it took about fifteen minutes to a half an hour to upload all of their documents in the system. With those very limited resources, I was able to capture a variety of individual instances where that minimal investment added a layer of ownership and reflection in their Academic requirements and depth to the coaching and mentoring that our Cadets receive.

b. Where do we go From Here?

Certainly e-portfolios could unlock new levels of development, learning, and growth if implemented at USMA. So could a plethora of other tools, experiences, requirements, or resources. There is no lack of great ideas to improve the forty-seven month Cadet experience. There is only a lack of resources, and primarily the resource of time. But, USMA is crouched and ready to pounce on this tool. In fact, the Academy Management System (AMS) already consolidates feedback across all four pillars and all eight semesters into an online system that Cadets, staff, and faculty can easily access. What is lacking is Cadet Ownership. Every AMS interface looks the same, sterile and without content. For every Cadet, only the data presented changes.

Meanwhile, on another part of campus and towards another purpose, the Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA) has gotten one step closer. In a dramatic shift in the way that branching is done across all commissioning sources, OEMA has introduced a system for talent assessment and branch education.41 By taking the Talent Assessment Battery” (TAB), Cadets receive feedback on their talents, relative to their peers, in a list of talents that branches have linked to success in different career fields.42 OEMA’s branching platform pulls all of the AMS data in as well, connecting that raw data Cadet performance to the talent strengths.43 Cadets know that the branching decision makers review this body or work and the platform allows Cadets to add in their own comments on the various tabs throughout their profile. Most important, the stakes are high. Cadets see the OEMA branching platform as their opportunity to control their destiny and make an argument for the branch they want to commission into. The result is an online system that consolidates and easily displays data from forty-seven months and four programs of work. Cadets care deeply about presenting themselves well through this display and many add elaborate comments to demonstrate how they are ready to commission into their desired branch. So “mission complete” right?

I don’t think so. I think we can do better. I think our WPLDS pilot, AMS, and OEMA show the dormant potential that USMA is on the brink of unleashing. USMA has

43 Ibid., 25.
Capozza
Electronic Portfolios as a Thread of Continuity in a Cadet’s Forty-Seven Month Developmental Journey

the added bonus of being a hierarchical and compliance based organization where large scale integration of an e-portfolio could be driven and synchronized by echelons that bridge the gaps between programs and semesters. E-portfolios are not “plug and play,” they take an effort from administration, teachers, and IT support to implement successfully.44 USMA has been sidestepping in the right direction according to the programs currently in place. All that is missing now is the decision to commit and deliberately embrace e-portfolios.

5. Conclusion

   a. USMA is Busy, Segmented, and Stove-Piped

      The programs for Military, Academic, and in the case of our NCAA teams in particular, Physical development do not flow together until they reach the Superintendent. By design, a teacher does not get a say in whether a failing NCAA athlete misses class for a competition or not. Tactical Officers may recommend, but it takes the Superintendent to pull that Cadet from a competition roster due to poor Academic performance. As a former Army Crew oarsman, I understand that a boat requires eight oarsmen to compete. But still, this example does demonstrate the stove pipes that exist at West Point. Time is carefully managed and fiercely defended. Instructors may not schedule AI during mandatory formations, TACs may not excuse Cadets from class, and this is how USMA is able to jam pack a Cadet’s schedule to the minute without setting them up for failure. With the same mentality, every graded courses is portioned into evenly sized blocks within a semester. The result of such careful time management on the part of the institution is that Cadets “ping” from gym class to formation, to math, to English, to formation, to a chemistry lab, and then to practice. We expect that they don’t reflect on their own given the lack of free time and mental energy, so we assign reflection assignments in a multitude of classes and projects. By the nature of the Academy, we have created gaps between the programs and between semesters. The pace of Cadet Life compounds these gaps by denying Cadets chances to reflect and make meaning from one developmental experience to the next.

   b. Schools Have had Great Success Using E-Portfolios

      Schools around the country, and the world, have harnessed the power of e-portfolios to string together the narrative of a student’s learning.45 When a student can put an assignment in context with their other work, revisit it, reflect on what they learned doing it, and present it to their peers, mentors, and faculty, they are multiplying the

44 Kahn, 3.
45 Yaffe, 46.
educational value of that one assignment. West Point has such a great variety of developmental experiences already built into a Cadet’s four years that there is a nearly universal chorus that nothing new can be added without taking something else away. However, our Cadets move from great experience to great experience and often do not have the dedicated time and resources to reflect on that experience and make meaning of it. E-portfolios could create a time, space, and a forum for the needed mentorship for Cadets to do that reflection. In fact, we already see the beginnings of this deeper learning in the WPLDS pilot program, our consolidated AMS feedback, and the OEMA branching profiles.

c. West Point Needs it More and is Better Prepared Than Other Schools

West Point generates the best developmental experiences a student or faculty can expect to see in an undergraduate program. These great resources have been provided to USMA because the burden on our graduates is so heavy after commissioning that the necessity for their maturity and development is universally appreciated. We pile experiences onto our Cadets in a system that is segmented and stove piped in order to maximize the time and value of each individual component. What USMA lacks, is a string of continuity to help the individual Cadet pull the width and breadth of their experiences together into a coherent narrative. The introduction of an e-portfolio at USMA would create the platform for a Cadet to consolidate and retrieve their experiences, a forum for discussion and presentation of their development, and support the reflection that turns those rich experiences into leader development. E-portfolios are the connective tissue missing from the forty-seven month Cadet experience that will shift the paradigm and instill a sense of owning one’s own preparation for commissioning and service.
Capozza
Electronic Portfolios as a Thread of Continuity in a Cadet’s Forty-Seven Month Developmental Journey

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Capozza
Electronic Portfolios as a Thread of Continuity in a Cadet’s Forty-Seven Month Developmental Journey

