

## Developing Self-Directed Learners Through an ePortfolio Peer Consultant Program

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This case study looks at the implementation of an extracurricular program, the ePortfolio Peer Consultants (ePPC) peer-mentoring technology group, as a part of an ePortfolio project at the University of Virginia and its impact on the development of ePortfolio skill sets. Specifically, we seek to understand if and how the participation in this program has fostered autonomy and self-directed learning among the peer consultants. The study examines multiple sources of data, collected iteratively over three semesters, including the results of a focus group, a survey, interviews, and media sources, such as videos and ePortfolios. Results suggest that the ePPC program fosters self-directed learning linked to ePortfolio use. The study sheds light on innovative ways to utilize ePortfolio peer mentoring in an extra-curricular capacity in order to cultivate self-directed, autonomous learners.

A primary goal in education is to create meaningful, authentic, and significant learning experiences designed to shape lifelong learners (Brown & Thoroughman, 2017; Candy, 1991). Scholarship has established that in the classroom, ePortfolios serve as a tool to help promote this type of learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2018; Batson, Watson, Chen, & Rhodes, 2017; Buyarski, Oaks, Reynolds, & Rhodes, 2017; Firdyiwek & Scida, 2014; Yancey & Weiser, 1997; Zeichner & Wray, 2001). This study examines extra-curricular dimensions of an ePortfolio program at the University of Virginia, the Foreign Language Learning ePortfolio Project (FLLeP), and its impact on creating self-directed, autonomous learners. FLLeP executed a large-scale integration of ePortfolios in the university's foreign language classes. In order to provide technical support for foreign language students enrolled in these courses, the project leaders hired students who had prior experience with ePortfolios in the program's pilot year to serve as technology peer mentors, known as ePortfolio Peer Consultants (ePPCs). Although the ePPCs served in an extra-curricular capacity and were not enrolled in courses utilizing ePortfolios, evidence suggests that they also achieved some of the learner-centered goals driven by the ePortfolio, such as self-directed learning. This study examines the case of these ePPCs and discusses how the principles of ePortfolios promoted self-directed and autonomous learning beyond the classroom and into extra-curricular components of the ePortfolio program.

### Rationale

One of the primary objectives of the implementation of ePortfolios is to create a *meaningful* learning experience that can extend into a student's future life and career (Brown & Thoroughman, 2017; Hubert, 2016). As Candy (1991) pointed out, "Lifelong

learning takes, as one of its principal aims, equipping people with skills and competencies required to continue their own 'self education' beyond the end of formal schooling" (p. 15). As a result, in order to encourage the development of lifelong learners, there has been an increased emphasis on a learner-centered approach as opposed to a teacher-centered focus in the classroom (Candy, 1991; Fink, 2003; Firdyiwek & Scida, 2014; Grow, 1991; Holec, 1979; Little, 2007, 2009). One of the ways a learner-centered pedagogy has been facilitated is through the inclusion of technology in the curriculum. As Firdyiwek and Scida (2014, p. 116) noted:

The shift from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm in education (Barr & Tagg, 1995) changes not only the roles teachers and learners play, but also the role of technology, as well as the role of those who shape and support technology integration in education. Today, teaching technologies are not just repositories of information or passive delivery mechanisms of static packaged course material (Batson, 2011), but play a significant role in helping us with the difficulties inherent in the paradigm shift we are experiencing, in which monitoring and responding to learners' progress becomes just as important as, if not more important than delivering instructional content and assessing students' final products (Cambridge, 2010).

Technology plays a pivotal role in providing students with ways to become self-directed learners. Correspondingly, the FLLeP project integrated ePortfolios into the foreign language classroom with a key goal to "empower students to become more independent, active, self-directed learners, aware of their own progress and learning styles, and equipped with tools for lifelong learning" (Scida, James, & Firdyiwek, 2016, p. 31).

The initial objectives of the ePortfolio implementation were designed to impact students enrolled in foreign language courses. However, the influence of ePortfolios extended into another component of the program: the ePortfolio peer consultants. The ePPCs served as peer mentors to students enrolled in foreign language courses using ePortfolios. By providing technical assistance, they were a critical factor in encouraging students to become more self-directed and autonomous learners, empowering them with both knowledge and practical skills necessary to design their individual ePortfolios for their classes. Their preliminary role was designed as a supplementary element to the overall program geared towards a student-centered learning approach. By giving the students who worked as ePortfolio peer consultants the freedom to work with and learn about technology, these peer consultants, in turn, became motivated to learn new skills independently. This phenomenon adds an unexpected layer to the FLLeP model designed to promote self-directed learning for students in courses. Building upon the groundwork established in a 2016 study about FLLeP (Scida et al., 2016), this article examines another dimension of the project. It analyzes how an extra-curricular component derived from the ePortfolio program also achieves the goals of shaping an autonomous, self directed-learner in the peer consultants themselves.

### Theoretical Framework

Researchers have noted that self-directed learning is an important factor in creating meaningful learning experiences (Candy, 1991; Fink, 2003; Grow, 1991). As Fink (2003) pointed out, some of the principle objectives of this type of learning include “enhancing our individual life, enabling us to contribute to many communities of which we will be a part, and preparing us for the world of work” (p. 7). With the need to develop ways to design significant learning experiences, universities and educational programs have employed models to promote self-directed and autonomous learning to give students room to grow and hold more independent roles. These models include several high-impact practices, such as internships, service learning, and undergraduate research, and, as Batson et al. (2017) noted, these “often happen outside of the traditional classroom” (p. 2).

Grow (1991) also provided valuable information about self-directed learning. Viewing it as a process and a goal, he divides the development of a self-directed learner into stages ranging from “dependent learner” to “self-directed learner.” His Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) Model, consists of four phases: dependent learners, interested learners, involved learners, and self-directed learners (Grow, 1991, p.

129). Grow underscored that a key objective is to progress from dependency to self-direction. “The goal of the educational process is to produce self-directed, lifelong learners. Many current educational practices in public schools and universities, however, do more to perpetuate dependency than to create self-direction” (Grow, 1991, p. 127). When describing the fourth and final stage of learning, which he refers to as “Learners of High Self Direction,” Grow (2003) wrote,

Learners at this stage are both able and willing to take responsibility for their learning, direction, and productivity. They exercise skills in time management, project management, goal setting, self-evaluation, peer critique, information gathering, and use of educational resources. The most mature Stage 4 learners can learn from any kind of teacher, but most Stage 4 learners thrive in an atmosphere of autonomy. (p. 134)

In a similar way, Candy (1991) also emphasized self-directed learning as both a goal and a process. “The development of self-directed individuals—that is, people who exhibit the qualities of moral, emotional, and intellectual autonomy—is the long-term goal of most, if not all, educational endeavors” (Candy, 1991, p. 19). Candy (1991) discussed the overarching term, *autonomy*, and its different components within the paradigm of developing a self-directed learner.

It would seem logical that self-management is a subset of the broader domain of self-determination (or, as I will call it in this book, *personal autonomy*). This means that a person who is autonomous would be both willing and able to exert a degree of control over aspects of his or her learning situation, and likewise that the acceptance and exercise of such responsibility would be taken to indicate high levels of personal autonomy. (p. 20)

As mentioned earlier, high-impact practices can promote self-directed, autonomous learning, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has listed the ePortfolio as a high-impact practice. The electronic collection of and reflection on materials allows students to demonstrate their learning as part of a continuous and interactive process, and, correspondingly, institutions have implemented the ePortfolio in order to foster deeper student learning and attainment of program learning outcomes (Janosik & Frank, 2013; Scida et al., 2016). The AAC&U (2018) also noted that “because collection over time is a key element of the ePortfolio process, employing ePortfolios in collaboration with other high-impact practices provides opportunities for students to make connections between various educational experiences” (para. 8).

Other related high-impact practices include collaboration and learning communities (AAC&U, 2018). The ePortfolio provides a space that can contribute to collaboration among peers and promote self-regulated learning (Nguyen & Ikeda, 2015). Recent studies have focused on the collaborative nature of the ePortfolio and, more specifically, peer review and peer mentoring, emphasizing that peer review can enhance the ePortfolio product and process (Carpenter, Apostel, & Hyndman, 2012; Ring, 2015). Ring (2015) discussed a peer review program implemented at the University of Clemson, and noted that the feedback provided by peers helped students “develop critical thinking and communication skills. In addition, the iterative nature of the process helps students develop lifelong learning and collaboration skills” (p. 329). Likewise, Carpenter et al. (2012) examined the power of peer collaboration within the ePortfolio context, highlighting its contribution to fostering a student-centered environment (p. 168). Gordon (2017) pointed to the difficulties first-time ePortfolio students may encounter. Her study suggests that peer feedback can help ease initial challenges and bolster the development of skills connected to the ePortfolio, such as reflection and self-regulation (p. 114).

These bodies of scholarship shed light on the collaborative possibilities with the ePortfolio and its creation of a self-directed learner. This article adds to research on peer collaboration and self-directed learning, homing in on how ePortfolio principles impact peer consultants in an extra-curricular setting.

### **The ePortfolio Peer Consultants**

FLLeP was designed to achieve multiple student-centered goals in the classroom, including encouraging the establishment of links between foreign language learning and other academic pursuits, creating awareness of learning processes and goals, and supporting independent, self-directed, autonomous learning (Scida et al., 2016). The project began in 2014. It includes 60 foreign language faculty from seven foreign language departments and 30 beginning, intermediate, and advanced language courses, and encompasses 96 separate class sections, impacting over 3,500 students per semester. Consequently, technical support for such a large faculty and student population was an initial concern. In order to overcome this challenge, the project leaders decided to implement a peer-mentoring model (the ePPC program) focused on technology assistance during the 2015-2016 academic year. This program was comprised of students who worked with ePortfolios in previous courses and were familiar with the ePortfolio platforms DigiCation and WordPress. In order to be employed as ePortfolio Peer Consultants (ePPCs), the students submitted

applications, were interviewed, and chosen through a selective hiring process. As student employees, they were paid hourly for their services.

Prior to the start of the semester, the ePPCs participated in an orientation session. They were already familiar with the ePortfolio platforms and technology from past coursework; however, the orientation was designed to prepare them to work with ePortfolios in a different capacity: mentoring students and faculty. At the training, students learned how to explain and guide their mentees through the technology platforms. They also received insight regarding common issues that students in courses using ePortfolios have encountered in the past. Part of the ePPCs' duties included class visits at the beginning of the semester to market their group and inform students about their services. During the orientation they were able to plan and prepare for these presentations. The training ensured that the ePPCs were equipped with up-to-date knowledge necessary to provide quality assistance to current students and instructors using ePortfolios in their foreign-language classrooms. During the semester, the ePPCs offered technical troubleshooting support through weekly office hours in the language lab as well as scheduled appointments.

In addition to the initial orientation, the ePPCs participated in weekly meetings to discuss ePortfolio technologies and pedagogical practices, as well as updates about the program. The gatherings facilitated the ePPCs with a space where they could address new technology issues that they had come across or clarify any other doubts related to their position. During the meetings, they were also encouraged to reflect upon and consider the merits and values of ePortfolios. These ongoing conversations provided a valuable opportunity to explore the pedagogies of ePortfolios. Thus, in their capacity as an ePPC these students were able to learn about the principles and benefits of ePortfolios. This aspect differs from their experiences in a classroom where they honed skills related to course content, technology, collaboration, and reflection. The ePPCs sharpened these proficiencies in their mentoring role, but as an ePPC they were also able to learn about the unique features of ePortfolios and, in turn, instill agency into the individual students using them.

Following its initial launch in the 2015-2016 academic year, the ePortfolio peer-mentoring unit has continued to grow and evolve. During the first year, the project leaders hired five consultants who each worked three hours per week during the beginning and end of the semester, providing a total of 15 hours of weekly assistance. The increased hours at the beginning of the semester were due to higher student traffic as a result of initial ePortfolio set-up in foreign-language courses; more hours were available at the end of the semester to aid students polishing their ePortfolios for final

submission. Throughout the rest of the semester, the consultants each worked for two hours per week, offering a total of ten office hours.

The program expanded to seven consultants for the 2016-2017 academic year. These students also provided three hours of assistance per week during peak semester times (21 hours total), and two hours per week during the rest of the semester (14 hours per week). In total, roughly 130 students received assistance from the peer mentors per semester. The ePPCs carried out additional responsibilities during this academic year, as they became the primary organizers of FolioFest, the biannual ePortfolio symposium, which will be discussed in detail. This event showcases the best work of selected students across the College. These duties continued throughout the 2017 and 2018 academic year.

### Methodology and Procedures

In this study, I examine multiple sources of data collected iteratively over three semesters (Spring 2017, Fall 2017, Spring 2018). Two key questions are considered: (1) Does the ePortfolio peer-mentoring program foster self-directed learning? (2) What evidence indicates that the ePortfolio has encouraged self-directed learning?

The analysis begins with information from a focus group session conducted with the ePPCs in May 2017 at the end of the Spring semester (see Appendix A). In the focus group, participants discussed their roles as ePPCs and the different ways that they learned about technology. A second piece of evidence incorporates survey results that the ePPCs completed after planning and executing the Fall 2017 FolioFest event in December 2017 (see Appendix B). Other data considered includes (a) media items created autonomously by the consultants during all three semesters that demonstrate self-directed learning, such as their personal ePortfolios; (b) video tutorials for the FLLeP project; and (c) promotional videos for the ePPC program. A final source of data stems from interviews with the ePPC faculty coordinators at the end of the Spring 2018 semester.

## Results

### Focus Group Responses

The first data to discuss is the initial focus group session held at the end of the Spring 2017 semester in May with the ePPCs regarding the different ways that they learned about ePortfolio technology (see Appendix A). An analysis of their responses indicates that the ePPCs were indeed motivated to become (or were) self-directed learners. The consultants overwhelmingly expressed that they learned many ePortfolio technical

skills independently. Although they had knowledge of ePortfolio technology from prior coursework and their orientation training, unexpected technology issues arose frequently and required them to learn concepts and problem-solving techniques individually. As one student pointed out, these situations challenged and motivated them: "I like it when there is an issue that is not necessarily something that I've gone through a bunch of times before, and then I can work it out and do the problem solving." The student went on to say how "personally gratifying" the process was for her. Another student noted the importance of learning by doing "because you'll remember it and how to fix it if you do it yourself, instead of being told 'this is how you fix it.'" A consultant touched on the need to be prepared for anything because "there are so many problems that come up anyway that there is no way you could get an orientation course that covers all of it." Similarly, another participant said, "I don't think an orientation or any sort of short course or module taking you through WordPress or Digication would be able to substitute for just going through it and seeing what problems you come up against." As another student put it succinctly, "A lot of my skills I had to learn independently."

In addition to fostering learner autonomy, the students mentioned other benefits of the peer-mentoring program such as the acquisition of proficiencies in troubleshooting, customer service, teaching skills, and peer collaboration, all within the context of an authentic employment experience that point to the development of a self-directed, life-long learner.

### FolioFest Survey

Another indication of independent, self-motivated actions taken by the students comes from a survey conducted after the 2017 Fall FolioFest in December 2017 (see Appendix B). As previously mentioned, FolioFest is the college-wide symposium where selected students showcase their ePortfolios to the university community. Initially, the FolioFest was organized and facilitated by FLLeP faculty. In 2017, however, the responsibilities were shifted to the consultants. According to the ePPC faculty coordinators, this was motivated by two factors. First, one of the original intentions of the ePortfolio project centered on the promotion of student leadership. As Gordon (2017) noted, a powerful benefit of the ePortfolio is that it makes the student a "participant rather than a mere observer" (p. 114). The ePPCs' leadership role in FolioFest, then, emerged from the inherent nature of the ePortfolio. Giving the ePPCs responsibility for the event demonstrated a way to showcase the program as not just a technical support unit, but as a group that serviced the ePortfolio process as a whole. As a result, FolioFest became an integral

part of the ePPCs' duties. The peer consultants were responsible for implementing the event with tasks ranging from distributing invitations and arranging catering, organizing the sequence of the FolioFest schedule, to reviewing the ePortfolios to be presented and selecting exemplary student work to be showcased. Furthermore, the ePPCs publicized the event across the university community to ensure a high level of enthusiasm and participation.

In order to assess the decision to expand the student-centered role of the ePPCs, the ePPC coordinators collected survey responses from the ePPCs after the Fall 2017 FolioFest. The consultants responded to four questions about the value of the duties they had been given. The questions were designed to look at how the ePPCs perceived the significance of their responsibility, how they developed their understanding of ePortfolio principles, what impact they saw the project having on the institutional community, and how they saw its influence on themselves as an extracurricular activity.

The themes that emerged from their responses added to the clarification of the setup of the ePortfolio program. The first question, "Is it important for FolioFest to be organized and run by students?", sheds light on the students' view of student-centered learning. The ePPCs were able to explain their unique role in building the ePortfolio program. One student noted,

When students plan and run FolioFest, the event naturally becomes student-centered and this highlights a major theme of portfolio-making, student-centric learning. To align with this theme of portfolio-making in an event designed to showcase them only makes sense. This makes everything come together perfectly.

The consultants viewed a logical link between ePortfolios as a student-centered activity and the importance of their role as ePPCs in coordinating the FolioFest event. As one student put it,

For FolioFest to be organized and run by students contributes to the argument that ePortfolios are meant to contribute to students' educational and professional pursuits. Additionally, as ePortfolios are created by students—and as the peer consultants are students themselves—I think it's important for an event meant to celebrate ePortfolios also be created by students.

Another participant added, "It seems natural that the environment best suited for accomplishing these goals would be an environment structured by students themselves." These comments suggest that the ePPCs are aware of the student-centered approach to learning.

The consultants' answers emphasize that through self-directed learning, the students become prepared for the real, professional world.

In response to the question, "How did the FolioFest further develop your understanding of ePortfolios?", the students listed technical and pedagogical areas that had become clearer to them through the experience of implementing FolioFest.

My understanding (of ePortfolios) also branched out from viewing e-portfolios as a great tool for language classes. FolioFest gave me the opportunity to view e-portfolios that were used for art, teaching a hobby, or journaling and blogging. The various ways you can use e-portfolios is incredible.

Another consultant stated, "I was under the impression that ePortfolios were mainly used in English and language classes, but to my surprise there are ePortfolios being used in the Chemistry department."

Answers to the question, "How do you think an activity like FolioFest helps the development of ePortfolios at this university?", highlighted that consultants perceive the event as one that promotes collaboration among students and generates interest in ePortfolios at the university. One student noted,

FolioFest allows students to exchange ideas and enrich their knowledge of portfolios. This, ultimately, equips them to implement new and fresh ideas to future portfolio-making endeavors. FolioFest provides an environment to reignite a student's interest in developing their existing portfolios and making new ones.

Many of the ePPCs suggested that the event promotes creativity and demonstrates the versatility of ePortfolios. As one student responded,

FolioFest emphasizes that ePortfolios not only have academic and professional purposes, but can help facilitate and document one's creative process. Students don't often get to see what their peers are doing outside of class and FolioFest gives them an incentive to explore their ePortfolio options outside of their instructor's template, syllabus, course outline, etc.

This particular comment accentuates the connection between FolioFest, its contribution to creativity and the subsequent drive to "explore their ePortfolio options *outside* of the instructors' template." It underscores the development of a self-directed and motivated learner within the paradigm of the ePortfolio program.

The last question, "How does running an event like FolioFest enhance your extra-curricular education?", generated responses that point to the fostering of life-

long learners and the honing of skills that are applicable to a real-world context. One student stated, “Running an event like FolioFest enhanced my extra curricular education by giving me the opportunity to hone various leadership, communication, and organizational skills that are widely applicable in a variety of settings.” Other answers to this question indicate that the consultants learned from the challenges of the experience, citing difficulties that arose, as well as the need to plan for future events. As a consultant expressed,

I must say, being in charge of FolioFest was a bit more difficult than I had originally imagined. There are so many details that are necessary for the success of the event, which in turn calls for a lot of key decisions to be made by several different people with different visions on how the event should be. However, I think that the ePPCs did a stellar job with compromising and dedicating ourselves to this event. It was a lot of fun working with them and seeing all of our hard work finally come together. Lastly, we as ePPCs stress self-reflection throughout one’s work. I must include that FolioFest has made me reflect on how we should improve for future FolioFests to come.

These additional findings demonstrate that the peer-mentoring program fosters the attainment of ePortfolio-driven skills in a student-centered dynamic. They also reveal the benefits students receive when given the opportunity to view the final ePortfolio product in a public setting, witnessing how the peer-technology mentorship contributed to its success. Through their direct involvement with FolioFest, they were able to connect the benefits of creating ePortfolios with the real world, another example of transcending classroom boundaries. The responses also suggest a growing attainment of reflection skills and teamwork linked to the ePPC program.

More importantly, FolioFest allows students to take ownership of the ePortfolio program at the university. It is a student-led event that is not simply bestowed upon them, rather, it flows naturally out of the principles of ePortfolios. The ePortfolio is a vehicle that encourages student agency in the learning process; FolioFest is another manifestation of agency and group collaboration within the paradigm of ePortfolio use.

### Additional Evidence

Supplemental evidence supporting the hypothesis that the program promotes self-directed learning derives from artifacts created by the ePPCs themselves. It is important to point out that the ePPC faculty did not require the students to carry out these tasks, rather, the ePPCs autonomously sought out the opportunities.

**Independent ePortfolios.** A prime example includes the individual ePortfolios that the consultants created independently. Each consultant designed a personal ePortfolio on Digation. One consultant fashioned a professional ePortfolio including her resume, university and high-school course work, and professional goals. She also describes her experiences as a student at the university in an embedded video where she highlights the strengths and skills that she can contribute to a future career. This particular example links to Fink’s (2003) argument that ePortfolios prepare students for the professional world.

Another consultant created an ePortfolio that focuses specifically on her position as an ePPC. She explained the role that ePPCs play in the overall ePortfolio program and detailed the importance of ePortfolios in a video that she recorded and embedded. In the video, she pointed out the benefits of using ePortfolios in and outside of the classroom, such as viewing educational and professional growth, honing creativity skills, and interacting with other students. She noted that ePortfolios allow students to “form a community to come together and learn, be creative, and make our ePortfolio our own, which I think is very important.”

One ePPC’s portfolio showcased her experiences with ePortfolios both in the Spanish classroom and as an ePPC. She mentioned useful aspects of the ePortfolio, citing collaboration with other students. She also emphasized that ePortfolios allow students to hone proficiencies in technology and leadership. In a video that she embedded in the portfolio, she said, “I know that these skills won’t only help me in school, but also will help me succeed in the future.” Her comments suggest that she recognizes the importance of these abilities within the university setting but also noted that they are skills that can aid in future endeavors, a primary indicator of meaningful and self-directed learning.

These individual portfolios also suggest individual student growth as a result of their engagement with ePortfolio technology. As Firdiyewek and Scida (2014) pointed out, ePortfolio technology encourages reflection (p. 128). In the ePPC portfolios, many of the students reflect on their role as an ePPC, underscoring their enthusiasm for the position as well as the benefits of ePortfolios that they have observed. These individual portfolios also serve as another outlet for self-directed learning where consultants can explore the technology and experiment with new design capabilities and layouts.

**Informational videos.** Other examples of self-directed, autonomous learning are tutorial and informational videos about the ePPC program generated by the consultants, individually and collaboratively. During the 2017 spring semester, one ePPC recorded a tutorial video about the benefits of ePortfolios. The student shared this video with the FLLeP team, and it was later posted on the FLLeP website for other

students and instructors to consult. In the video, the ePPC discusses her personal ePortfolio that she had previously developed as a student in the French program. She focused on the professional aspects of the ePortfolio, mentioning that she could use the links from her ePortfolio to send to potential employers to “showcase my reading, verbal, and writing skills.” She gave personal advice to future students using ePortfolios, encouraging them to take advantage of the ePortfolio and the resources offered within the foreign language program. The student also pointed out the creative and design possibilities of ePortfolios, highlighting that learning how to utilize ePortfolio platforms is a valuable skill to have not only in the classroom but possibly in a future career.

A second piece of media evidence is a video that the ePPCs recorded together for the 2017 FolioFest. In the video, they interviewed members of the FLLeP program, instructors, and students using ePortfolios. They considered the versatile aspects of the ePortfolio, underscoring its significance both in and outside of the classroom. One ePPC said,

It’s a really beautiful thing when you start something, and then you look back and see how much you actually grow. You can look at your past work and see how you can become better in the future. I think that is one of the goals of ePortfolios to see how you can grow and progress.

Her comment alludes to a growing awareness of the reflective components that come with using ePortfolio technology.

These media artifacts, created autonomously by the ePPCs, are authentic indicators of self-directed and self-motivated learning. They point to several skills that link to the most advanced self-directed learner (Stage 4) from Grow’s (1991) model. They demonstrate evidence of “time management, project management, self-evaluation, peer critique, information gathering, and use of educational resources” (Grow, 1991, p. 134). Furthermore, the content of their ePortfolios and videos suggests a growing development of skills related to autonomy and reflection on educational and professional growth.

**Interviews with ePPC faculty coordinators.** A final component of this study includes an interview with the ePPC faculty coordinators conducted at the end of the 2018 Spring semester following the FolioFest event. One of the purposes of this conversation was to confirm the rationale for creating the ePPC program and what led to the decision to give students greater autonomy with FolioFest. One coordinator noted that the ePPCs were hired initially as a support unit, but it became clear that their role transcended that function. He said,

Once the program was established, however, and we saw how readily the students took to helping their peers (including creating, without any prompting from us, tutorials and promotional material), it was quickly apparent that the program was actually a “teaching moment”—one in which the students were teaching themselves.

The progress of the ePPCs led the coordinators to designate more responsibilities to them, primarily managing FolioFest. As one faculty member noted,

At first, we did not give the ePPCs full autonomy to run FolioFest. I and other staff members helped them with program decisions and management of the budget. When we surveyed them after the program, however, their responses showed a deep understanding of their role and an appreciation of the chance we gave them to be the “student face” of ePortfolios at the university. Based on that, we committed to giving the students full autonomy on the FolioFest we held this past spring.

The interviews also shed light on challenges and limitations of the program. However, they emphasized that these are not taken as “failures” but rather as evidence of authentic student work. One example stems from an observation at the 2018 FolioFest, an event that the ePPCs independently organized and successfully carried out. According to the ePPC coordinators, there were signs that the students had not adequately prepared for the use of technology, apparent through a glitch that prevented the students from publically showcasing an ePPC promotional video they had designed. One the one hand, the setback is positive in the sense that it demonstrated a truly student-run, self-directed event, underlining the authenticity of it; nevertheless, it also suggests that there were areas for improvement.

The coordinators cited another example of challenges that can arise with a completely student-centered program. In the initial year of the program, one ePPC often arrived late to office hours and was once even found sleeping on the job. Although this has been the only case of this nature, it is an instance that demonstrates that some students may require extra guidance in order to lead them through the process of becoming self-directed learners.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article discusses the University of Virginia’s FLLeP ePortfolio peer consultant group, centering on an extra-curricular dimension of the implementation of ePortfolios. An analysis of multiple sources of data indicates that the students working as ePPCs developed skills to become self-directed learners and were also

motivated to learn and seek new opportunities through the ePortfolio, demonstrating a significant and meaningful learning experience. Their efforts to learn more on their own are a demonstration of Candy's (1991) findings. The students took control over their own learning situation in efforts to improve their own knowledge and help their peers and professors with ePortfolio technology.

The results of this study support the goals of a student-centered learning approach connected to ePortfolio implementation. This particular peer-consultant program enables students to take charge of their learning in realms outside of the immediate classroom and become responsible for their individual knowledge. The ePPCs acquired many of their technology skills independently, indicating that they were motivated to be self-directed learners. Other significant evidence of self-directed learning derives from the FolioFest survey results. The responses demonstrate that the ePPCs value a completely learner-centered approach to education and recognize several benefits of utilizing ePortfolios, such as personal growth and collaboration. FolioFest in particular echoes the benefits of high-impact practices, and more specifically collaboration and learning communities, detailed by the AAC&U. These particular developments of other abilities are also rooted in some the principles of ePortfolios, such as reflection and leadership.

Furthermore, the survey data reveals the establishment of links between ePortfolios and the student-centered approach in realms beyond the classroom environment, such as transferring ePortfolio skills to future careers. The supplementary artifacts, such as the tutorial and promotional videos, as well as individual ePortfolios created by the ePPCs also point to meaningful and self-directed learning, as the students produced them without faculty prompting.

Although these findings are positive, there are areas for development and improvement. The ePPC members demonstrated signs of self-directed learning, but some indicators suggest that they were experiencing, as Candy (1991) suggested, a growing process, as highlighted in the interviews with the ePPC faculty coordinators. Despite some of the challenges cited by the coordinators, the student-run aspect of the program yielded positive results and denoted the attainment of self-directed learning skills in an extracurricular dimension of the ePortfolio program. These findings also suggest directions for future studies. Several pieces of evidence, such as the FolioFest survey responses and individual ePortfolios and videos, reveal the establishment and development of additional skills born out of the ePPC program. Next steps in this study might evaluate other components of a learner-centered approach, such as reflection and leadership. Furthermore, as a result of the significant

responses regarding self-directed learning and its link to FolioFest, future studies might also continue to monitor the student-led event. Another consideration would be collaborating with other universities with similar programs. For example, the ePPCs could expand FolioFest and invite students from other institutions to participate and present on their work. This would facilitate more opportunities for student autonomy and leadership by allowing them to plan and execute an inter-university ePortfolio conference.

The University of Virginia ePPC program continues to expand and evolve. Each year of the program provides new insight into ways to improve it in order to develop and foster self-directed and meaningful learning experiences. Research should continue in order to shed light on the benefits of the ePPC program, as well as innovate and determine possibilities for more collaborative and student-led initiatives.

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### Appendix A

#### Spring 2017 Focus Group Questions

- How has being an ePPC helped you learn more about technology?
- What other skills did you acquire as a result of working as an ePPC?
- In which ways do you feel that you've helped the students that have consulted you in office hours?
- What did you most like about your job?
- What did you least like about your job?

### Appendix B

#### Fall 2017 FolioFest Survey Questions

- Is it important for FolioFest to be organized and run by students?
- How did FolioFest further develop your understanding of ePortfolios?
- How do you think an activity like FolioFest helps the development of ePortfolios at this university?
- How does running an event like FolioFest enhance your extra-curricular education?