

Using ePortfolio to Improve Retention of Hispanic Students at a Predominantly Black College

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Abstract

This study investigates how technology is being used to improve the engagement of at-risk Hispanic students at a predominantly Black institution through the use of ePortfolio in a co-curricular context. Historically, attrition rates for Hispanic students at Medgar Evers College of The City University of New York have been high. In 2009, 5.6% of incoming freshman students were Hispanic. By Spring 2010 that number had dropped to 2.5%. Recently, concerned faculty have concentrated on improving Hispanic student engagement. In Fall 2010, the Education Department and the Association for Latino Studies Student Club (ALAS) were among a small group who participated in an ePortfolio pilot project focused on improving engagement, fostering integrative learning, and encouraging personal development through reflective writing. Preliminary findings indicate that Hispanic students' connectedness to the College increased after participation in this project.

Introduction

Medgar Evers College (MEC) is one of eleven senior colleges of The City University of New York (CUNY) and one of the few CUNY colleges that grant both baccalaureate and associate degrees. Founded in 1970 as a result of actions of New York State elected officials and community leaders in Central Brooklyn, MEC is a Predominantly Black Institution. MEC is in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, one of the largest, most densely populated and ethnically varied sections of the borough. Its students represent all areas of New York City, especially the surrounding Brooklyn community. In Fall 2009, 75% of the student body was female and over 90% was of African descent, a group historically underrepresented in higher education. The other 10% was comprised of Hispanic (5.6%), European American (0.9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.1%), Native American (0.2%), and other (1.7%). The Hispanic population at MEC is growing but the growth rate has been unsteady.

The mission of the College is to develop and maintain quality professional career oriented undergraduate degree programs in the context of a strong liberal arts background. MEC is committed to strengthening its academic programs to provide students with the knowledge and experience necessary to enable them to be competitive applicants for graduate education, to attain rewarding careers, and to contribute productively to society.

The current student population at Medgar Evers College is comprised of typical CUNY "boundary crossers" (Eynon, 2009): 36.5% were born outside of the United States and a large percentage of MEC students are first-generation college-goers who struggle to stay at college due to various social, personal, and economic

problems. The MEC academic community is committed to meeting the needs of its unique student population and creating a learning environment that will promote student engagement, facilitate active learning, and encourage students to address academic and personal challenges with the support of the college community.

Over the past year, MEC has implemented an electronic portfolio project, hereafter referred to as ePortfolio, to improve the engagement of high-risk students, to build a community of reflective learners, and to enhance social networking. Through the use of ePortfolio, MEC intends to develop a virtual learning community in which students feel comfortable sharing their lived-world and life-stories with peers and faculty. MEC's ePortfolio project aims to address learning and competency objectives through a student-centered reflective process that ultimately benefits all stakeholders by creating a positive teaching and learning environment. It is anticipated that the ePortfolio project will increase student engagement by fostering integrative learning and encourage personal development through reflective writing. Given the longitudinal nature of the development of ePortfolios, it is anticipated that student reflections will become richer and more complex as they advance in their academic programs. As ePortfolios are developed, the digital documentation of students' work should provide detailed information that can be used to examine growth and progress over time, and enhance our student, program, and institution based assessment efforts. We also anticipate that using ePortfolios will enhance Hispanic students' engagement in the MEC academic and social communities.

Problem

According to a report released in October 2010 by the Community Service Society of New York, young people who identify themselves as Hispanics are the largest single ethnic group among 16 to 24 year olds in New York City (CSS, 2010). There has been a very measured and gradual increase in the Hispanic student population at MEC over the last five years. Yet, the enrollment of Hispanic students at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI) in Central Brooklyn, continues to lag behind that of most other CUNY colleges. In Fall 2009, Hispanic freshman enrollment at Medgar Evers College was only 5.6 % of the college's total full-time enrollment. What is even more alarming is that of the 5.6% that enrolled in the fall, only 2.5% remained by the Spring 2010 semester. This article will examine the factors contributing to the high attrition rate of Hispanic students at Medgar Evers College through a discussion and evaluation of a co-curricular ePortfolio initiative designed to address the issue of Hispanic student retention and encourage overall academic engagement and success.

In recent years, there has been extensive research indicating that a strong sense of school belonging is positively correlated with "student's intrinsic values, expectations for success and academic effort" (Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005, p. 620). For Hispanic students, a sense of school belonging seems to play a greater role than for any other ethnic group. Hispanic students have a greater tendency to attend *hypersegregated* schools than African-American students (Gandara, 2010). As reported in recent studies, Latinos, as opposed to other ethnic groups, seem to thrive best when they are members of in-group peer networks. "Our results offer important evidence that co-ethnic friendship networks are positively related to Latino students' achievement... additionally, in-group ties are an important source of maintaining cultural heritage, identity, and a sense of community" for Latino students (Riegle-Crumb & Callahan, 2009, p. 627-628).

The Medgar Evers College ePortfolio Project

In the Fall 2010 semester, the College implemented an ePortfolio pilot project. That project, now in its second semester, has trained 15 faculty and staff representing the Departments of Education, Public Administration, Search for Education Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK), Credit for Prior Learning, the Freshman Year Program, and the Library. The ePortfolio Implementation Group has designed and implemented a comprehensive faculty development seminar series which provides participants the opportunity to learn the benefits and uses of ePortfolio for improved teaching and learning through reflective, integrative pedagogy and to encourage faculty to create or revise assignments that will foster the use of ePortfolio for course and program level assessment. Faculty who participated in the initial training sessions in fall 2010 are offering 19 ePortfolio courses for the Spring 2011 semester. In the Fall 2010 semester, the Education Department offered two courses that included ePortfolio. Once the ePortfolio team began to see the benefits of ePortfolio firsthand, the use of ePortfolio was implemented within a student club as a tool for community building.

Current Uses of ePortfolio at Medgar Evers College

At MEC, one of our goals is to increase our focus on integrative learning through the use of reflective strategies. The MEC Education Department has been using print portfolios as an integral part of accreditation and graduation processes. Historically, print portfolios are a collection of student self-assessments in the form of reflective essays. In general, students view print portfolios as a cumbersome task that has “no practical use.” As one of our students expressed, “Portfolios are good for collecting dust.” Students reluctantly assemble their print portfolio as a graduation requirement. However, as we have shifted to ePortfolio, students are more engaged in creating ePortfolios and in the reflective process. Yancey (2009) explains the nature of the paper to electronic shift: As portfolios have gone electronic, reflective texts have taken myriad forms — from concept maps to written texts to streaming video. In this shift from print to electronic, the claims for reflection have widened and increased as well (p.5).

Aimed at improving student learning and holistic development, the ePortfolio project at MEC is currently focused on creating scaffolded assignments that foster deep learning through recursive processes embedded in ePortfolio practice. At MEC, participating faculty are helping students to integrate what they have learned through traditional instruction with their lived experiences through a process of reflection. ePortfolio is used as a system of productive teaching and e-learning that addresses students’ comprehensive thinking, cognitive skills, and learning process. At the same time, ePortfolio provides continuous documentation of students’ learning processes, which includes evidence of their learning in the form of self-selected artifacts and allows faculty to view learning from the student’s perspective through reading their reflections. Through ePortfolios, both students and faculty have ongoing access to student work. Simultaneously, ePortfolio provides an alternative form of assessment in addition to traditional paper and pen assessments.

ePortfolios provide students with a space to collect and showcase their work, making connections across disciplines and engaging in self- reflection about the learning process. Students are able to present themselves electronically to graduate school admissions officers and future employers. At MEC, students use a *process and product* format to create their ePortfolios (Carlson, 1998). In process/working, ePortfolio students collect their work throughout their enrollment at MEC. In the product/showcase ePortfolio, they select and present their best work.

The ALAS Student Club ePortfolio Initiative

In Spring 2007, a small group of Hispanic students and faculty at MEC formed the Association for Latino American Students or ALAS, which, translated from the Spanish, means *Wings*. According to the original club president and founder of ALAS, this small group of students felt isolated, ignored, and disregarded and decided to do something about it. Thus, ALAS became the first Hispanic student club in the history of Medgar Evers College. Beginning in the 2010- 2011 school year, the MEC ePortfolio Implementation Group integrated ePortfolios into this Club’s structure to document the effectiveness of ePortfolio as a tool for community building. The overarching goal of this project was to foster integrative learning processes that would encourage Hispanic students to link their lived experiences and extracurricular activities to classroom learning, with the hope of increasing their sense of school belonging and, consequently, improving retention.

The process of ePortfolio integration within ALAS began in August of 2010 with the training of the club president in the use of ePortfolio. Once she was fully trained, she was given an ePortfolio account for ALAS. She was not instructed about how to construct or organize the site. The ALAS ePortfolio began as a file cabinet, initially used by the president to document past activities and events that the club had sponsored and/or participated in over the last three years. This was its sole function for the first few months. Later the president added a welcome page with excerpts from the club’s mission statement. Gradually the ePortfolio began to be used to advertise upcoming events and activities. It became apparent that the ALAS Student Club ePortfolio site would become more than a repository as illustrated in the following quote:

Josie: I am a vastly different person today than I was just two short years ago and I owe the majority of this change to ePortfolio project and ALAS. I showcased my ePortfolio at LaGuardia College Showcasing Event...It was awesome...I earned prestige and recognition...

Why Use ePortfolio in a Co-Curricular Context

Seamless learning environments allow students to “make meaning of the academic experience by connecting classroom learning with their own lives outside the classroom” (Kuh, 1996, p. 136). Kuh explained that the use of the word seamless implies that what were at one time understood to be discreet learning opportunities occurring in and out of the classroom are now considered to be continuous learning experiences. The implementation of ePortfolio within the ALAS club initiated the creation of a seamless learning environment that would allow Hispanic students to assimilate learning across their life experiences. Current research has found that there is a relationship between “student engagement in educationally purposeful activities” and improving persistence (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008, p. 542).

For most of the first semester of the ePortfolio implementation, the ALAS club president continued to be the only ALAS member actively involved in maintaining the ePortfolio site. This changed in November/December of 2010, when a new section was added to the ePortfolio. This section was titled “Why ALAS? – Member Testimonials.” This page was created to encourage members to share their experiences as Hispanic students at MEC and to discuss the reasons they had joined ALAS. In so doing, the students unknowingly began to build a seamless learning environment, bridging their experiences across classroom, lived, and reflective learning.

Reflective Learning

ePortfolios give students the opportunity to reflect on the learning process and to consequently identify the strengths and weaknesses of their own learning processes (Chen & Light, 2010). Reflection refers to the process through which students synthesize what they learn and explain their learning process to others, specifically the ePortfolio audience (Yancey, 2009). The structures created by students or provided in the ePortfolio format “invite, foster, and support reflection (p. 8). Students reflect on their learning in the context of lived experiences and begin to understand how learning can be transferred across the different parts of their lives (Chen & Light, 2010). Reflective learning within the context of ePortfolio begins with the creation of artifacts and extends to the selection of specific artifacts that illustrate learning outcomes. In addition to written reflections, students can provide video, audio, or visual reflections (Chen & Light, 2010, Yancey, 2009).

The first few students to post their experiences, aside from the club president, were ALAS alumni, the original founding members who had since graduated and moved on to employment or graduate school, but who had remained actively involved in the ALAS club. These former members expressed a desire to have their “legacy” as the founding members of ALAS remembered and acknowledged as ALAS moved into the future. Encouraged by these entries, the newer members began adding their statements, and the page has since continued to expand. At last count, 12 members had posted their statements. The following statements illustrate how students were able to make connections across learning experiences:

Mya: As a Latina woman I never had any issues concerned with race in all my years living in New York. After my first year as a college student at MEC I could write pages answering that question...

Sarah: Being Dominican-American in a college that is predominantly Black was not an easy experience for me. Most of my teachers at Medgar Evers College talked about the African Diaspora regardless of the subject they were supposed to be teaching, and I’m sad to say that I now know more about the struggles of African-Americans than I do about my own ethnicity.

These student testimonials illustrate how students were able to reflect on their personal experiences with race and explore issues related to their ethnic background. They were also able to transfer learning across the different parts of their lives as described by Chen and Light (2010) and synthesize their learning as discussed by Yancey (2009). As students reflect on the learning process they begin to make connections and integrate learning, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Making Connections: Integrative Learning

One of the major benefits of using ePortfolio is how it allows students to make connections across different learning experiences. The process of making connections is also referred to as “integrative learning” which allows students to integrate learning accomplished in and out of the classroom and the development of skills and abilities across different courses (Chatham-Carpenter, Seawel, & Raschig, 2009-2010). “Portfolios are fundamentally integrative, being composed of heterogeneous artifacts, the connections between which are explored through reflection” (Cambridge, 2009, p. 41).

In the case of the ALAS club ePortfolio site, students were clearly making connections across different learning experiences and because of the ALAS ePortfolio site, they now had a forum in which to explore and share their views.

Mya: I was the only Hispanic person in all of my classes for my first year in college. I felt as if I didn't belong. I had no one to relate to. My second year in college I became friends with two Latinas from the Dominican Republic. For the first time in my college experience I felt like I could express my concerns about attending an all Black College. We all had the same concerns and there wasn't a person that we could voice our concerns to.

Sarah: When teachers continued to discuss this topic [African Diaspora] in their classrooms, it left out the rest of the few students who were from different cultural backgrounds, and caused them to feel neglected. When teachers did so, it made me not want to try as hard in their classes because I was not being acknowledged as the person that I am, a Dominican-

American.... I noticed that when exposed to these types of classroom environments, my grades were usually lower.

In a qualitative self-study, Brandes and Boskic (2008) found that graduate students acknowledged how the use of ePortfolio and technology enhanced learning. The students also noted the importance of creating an on-line learning community, which provided opportunities for them to work with other students in small and large groups and share ideas. The ALAS students built an online learning community in which they shared not only ideas but also their feelings of isolation. The combination of the use of technology and the creation of an on-line learning community provided a means for students to "move from the personal to the professional, sociological, and cognitive aspects of learning" (Brandes & Boskic, 2008 p. 8). The ePortfolio experience allowed students to "link ideas and make apparent connections between concepts" (Brandes & Boskic, 2008, p. 10). In addition to making connections between ideas, ePortfolios also allow students to make connections to each other (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010).

The ALAS students were able to make connections between ideas. As they were exposed to and learned about the African Diaspora, they made connections between concepts related to Black history and their own Hispanic heritage.

Wilma: I believe that everything fell into place when I was feeling out of place. While Medgar students felt pride in belonging to a country or the history of Medgar, and ALAS students were being connected to illuminating Latin American history, here I was disconnected from the two. Because of the combination of both of these worlds I have experienced, I have now set out in search for my cultural lineage. I have now set out on discovering not only myself, but my people as a whole, and ALAS has helped make this possible for me.

And students were also able to create links between their academic and career experiences as illustrated below:

Sulnada: I am not out of place anymore. Like everybody else I have my ePortfolio. I am walking with everybody. I will take my ePortfolio with me for interviews at schools to show my computer skills and to show my work. Principals of schools can see beyond my Latina face and my accent and see what I have to offer. My ePortfolio shows who I am, where I come from, and why I came back to college...

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is the process of constructing learning that occurs across assignments, courses, and learning experiences. Assignments that incorporate multiple layers provide a framework upon which students build understanding through the construction of knowledge. Brandes and Boskic (2008) noted that as part of their ePortfolio, students were required to provide a site map that guided their audience through the ePortfolio with an explanation of how it was constructed and organized, and how artifacts were selected and interrelated. The process of constructing an ePortfolio, which includes organizing and reorganizing artifacts, reflecting on learning, receiving feedback, and revising assignments helps students to become deeply engaged in the learning process.

ALAS students constructed their own ePortfolio site, which provided them with a forum in which to highlight the mission of the organization, their own learning, and their feelings. The club mission statement, posted on their ePortfolio is as follows:

As the Hispanic population at MEC increases, ALAS seeks to fill the knowledge gap, left by the lack of academic courses on the history and culture of Latin America. We promote and support cultural diversity on campus and seek to educate the MEC population regarding the rich cultures of Latin America via cultural and historic events. We also seek to provide a safe welcoming haven for Latino students in the Brooklyn community here at MEC.

Through the reorganization of artifacts including the club's mission statement, announcements and descriptions of upcoming events, and personal reflections, ALAS students became deeply engaged in the learning process. ALAS students were able to construct knowledge as their learning spanned across classroom learning, co-curricular learning, and personal reflection which resulted in a scaffolded learning experience and improved student engagement within the context of a student organization.

ALAS ePortfolio: A Tool for Community Building

Electronic access to clubs like ALAS through ePortfolio serves to address the issue of community building and creating a positive identity by bringing the benefits of club membership and participation to a larger group. In general, the MEC student population is non-traditional and many students have full-time jobs and families. In spite of the proven educational value of extra-curricular activities, the majority of our students have a difficult time attending meetings and events. But, since ePortfolio allows students to participate in the ALAS club online, Hispanic students who are using ePortfolio have indicated an increased sense of belongingness and connection to each other and to the larger college community. Hispanic students' testimonies indicate that ePortfolio has provided them with a channel for self-expression and a forum in which they can write about themselves and reflect on the learning experience in an environment that allows them to include multi-media such as slides, pictures, videos, songs, and music.

Vicki's comments illustrate the intensity of the ALAS experience as expressed in the ePortfolio format.

Vicki: In fall 2010, I found ALAS or they found me. Joining them has strengthened my feeling of belonging in the MEC family. ALAS provided that support and extra encouragement I needed as a Latino in a campus community that has a high percentage of African American and Caribbean students. I feel fortunate that I was able to join such a positive and energetic group of people that can express and encourage diversity in an already diverse community...I can honestly say that my future as an early childhood education educator would be because of the strong support I have received.

According to a recent article, *The Latino Educational Crisis*, by Patricia Gandara (2010),

Latino students' extraordinarily high dropout rate is related, in part, to their lack of attachment to school and a sense of not belonging. A crucial means by which students attach to school and form supportive friendship groups is through extracurricular activities... Unfortunately, Latino students are less likely to participate in these activities, either because they perceive the club to be exclusive or because of logistical problems, like needing to work or help out at home after school or not having transportation or the money required for the activity (p. 29).

Gandara (2010) added the following related to developing a sense of belonging: "Schools that effectively address this issue, find ways to incorporate clubs, sports, and other activities into school routines and bring the benefits of these activities into the classroom" (p. 29). Electronic access to clubs like ALAS may serve to address belongingness as they bring the benefits of club membership and participation to a larger group of Latino students. Below is a student comment that expresses the impact ALAS membership has had on her educational experience at MEC since the integration of ePortfolio:

Josie: Having felt so powerless for the majority of my life due to having to conform to so many rules, I felt lucky to be part of a group that shared one voice, one mission, and one dream. No ideas are turned away without fully exploring the possibilities, which is why everyone feels that they can freely express themselves.

Overall, being both a member and [officer] of the ALAS club has been for me a transformative experience that has helped me to grow and develop in unforeseen ways. I am a vastly different person today than I was just two short years ago and I owe the majority of this change to ALAS.

As a result of this initiative, ePortfolio has emerged as a tool not only for collecting and documenting club events and activities, but also as a means of community building through the sharing of personal experiences. When reading the statements, patterns emerge, similarities are highlighted, and it becomes clear that all the stories are really one and that none of the students are alone in their hopes, dreams, and struggles.

In January of 2011, ALAS became the first MEC club to travel out of the United States (to Puerto Rico) to institute an Intra-Cultural Initiative with the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez. The event was planned and advertised on ePortfolio. After the trip those students who participated shared their experiences by posting pictures and reflections on ePortfolio. Shortly after returning from the trip, the ALAS members emailed a link of their ePortfolio to the College President and met with him to discuss their accomplishments, goals, and future needs, using ePortfolio as their documentation and presentation tool. In the space of a few short months, the ALAS ePortfolio evolved from a one-person file cabinet to an interactive group sharing platform and a community building and advocacy tool. The students reported the following within the ePortfolio format:

Mya: It wasn't until my third year in college that I became a part of a club that embraced my heritage. I met people that spoke the same language as I did and I was able to talk freely about being a Latina in an all Black College.

Johnny: When I first got to Medgar Evers, I felt like an outsider. I could not relate with my peers or professors, which in my mind was strange because most of my classmates come from the Caribbean, so one would think that I would feel at home. As you can imagine, at first I had some trouble adjusting... In addition, I think that most of my peers saw me as white because of my light complexion. And, to be honest with you I often felt white in class. When a discussion of racism arose in class, I used to voice my opinion and my classmates looked at me as if I had no right to be talking about racism because I'm "white."

Tanya: For me sometimes being a Latina of color in the United States of America is very frustrating. Don't get me wrong I love who I am and know who I am, but I am tired of not being considered enough. When I first came to Medgar Evers College I honestly did not think about it as going to a historically Black school, I just needed to go to a school that wasn't too far from my family, and where I could take classes at night. I never thought about how being a Latina of Color would play out for me.

The reflective thoughts of Mya, Johnny, and Tanya indicate that they made a connection within the digital environment. As they shared their thoughts and feelings through ePortfolio, students explored their sense of self, feelings of alienation and worth, and sense of belongingness.

Use of ePortfolio to Address Needs of a Minority Hispanic Student Population

at a Predominantly Black Institution

In addition to sharing their personal educational journeys, Hispanic student statements reflect the challenges inherent in being a Hispanic student at a predominantly Black College, an issue that has not been sufficiently researched and/or discussed in the current literature. Of the 12 students who posted on the ALAS ePortfolio site, nine expressed difficulties adjusting and or "belonging" to the MEC community. Feelings of not belonging have been found to lead to attrition (Gandara, 2010). But, for the ALAS students, having the opportunity to share their concerns did improve their sense of belongingness. ePortfolio also impacted students' personal and academic growth. A few ALAS club members have developed ePortfolio expertise and are working as Student Tech Mentors in the MEC ePortfolio lab assisting their fellow students as well as faculty members.

One of the benefits of using ePortfolio is its support of life-long and life-wide learning (Cambridge, 2008). Cambridge (2008) described lifelong learning as "learning that occurs across and between episodes of formal learning..." (p. 1228). The use of ePortfolio by Hispanic students at Medgar Evers College is focused on tapping into ePortfolio's capability for enhancing life-long and life-wide learning to connect students' learning across real life and classroom experiences with the goal of ultimately improving their engagement in the learning experience and academic success. Giving students the opportunity to share personal observations and learning in a safe and respectful environment provided a forum in which one Hispanic student was able to develop a teaching philosophy that reflected her own experiences incorporated with what she had learned in the classroom.

Another benefit of using ePortfolio is that it allows students to document and share their experiences with others (Bolliger & Shepherd, 2010). Through an examination of each other's ePortfolios, students recognize similarities across experiences, which can increase communication and improve feelings of connectedness. Clearly, the students in the ALAS club were able to share their experiences which improved their feelings of connectedness where before they had felt alienated.

Chen and Light (2010) noted how ePortfolios "can be tailored to specific individuals and groups" (p. 13). Students who have used ePortfolio have reported developing an enhanced sense of community (Brandes & Boskic, 2008). In their study examining how students view "communication and connectedness, learning, and value in online programs," Bolliger and Shepherd (2010, p. 296) noted that ePortfolio has been shown to address issues of isolation and improve community building. At Medgar Evers College, Hispanic students who are using ePortfolio have indicated an increased sense of belongingness and connection to the larger college community. And since ePortfolio provides a means of connecting to broader audiences (Cambridge, 2008), we anticipate that the broader Medgar Evers College community will also expand its connection to the Hispanic student population as they are exposed to the ALAS student club ePortfolio.

The preliminary success of the Medgar Evers College ePortfolio project has fueled the team's desire to continue and expand the use of ePortfolio at the college. The number of participants in the small ePortfolio pilot does not allow us to make generalizations to other settings and populations at this time, but as we expand the use of ePortfolio in curricular and co-curricular settings, we plan to continue our research and to document how participation in ePortfolio is related to students' sense of belongingness and their persistence.

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