This is Part II of excerpts taken from an interview earlier this fall with Dr. Jeremy Parra, advisory member of STEM Provost’s Council at PSU.

What were some difficulties / challenges your team faced while working on the STEM committee?

Jeremy Parra: While universities do a good job in collecting a lot of data, there isn’t enough information about students’ expectations and how they are successfully making through our program. Although, there are some units who ask very pointed questions to students who enters- Why are you here? What do you want to achieve? We don’t ask those question to all of our students. Having not known the students, say freshman or transfer students, expectations out of their course / program, it’s hard to measure student’s success in STEM related courses because we didn’t know what they came looking for.

We don’t know if they came to PSU because, either they wanted to do their freshman year here and transfer to other college / department, or they wanted to take some classes as they start applying to medical school.

So, as soon as they leave without a degree we say they weren’t successful, when they would have actually got what they wanted.

When a student comes in, they might or might not know what they want, but, they know that they need a degree. As they develop their minds, mature and realize what they want, we need to make sure we maintain that continuum with them to measure if PSU is being successful at delivering what a developing student really wants. So, as a part of the STEM Provost Challenge project, we have put forward the project document that provides a status of what we can do with the resources internally.

(Part III of Jeremy’s interview will be published in March’s IAC newsletter)
Over the next few months we will feature excerpts from an interview with Dr. Candyce Reynolds, Professor and Chair of the Educational Leadership and Policy Department at PSU.

How do integrated learning practices improve student engagement? What additional benefits / challenges do these practices bring when (the concerned department) planning for sustained assessment?

Candyce Reynolds: I think integrated learning is really essential. Students can take a random assortment of courses, certainly pass those courses and demonstrate that they have learned it in the classroom. But, if they can’t figure out how that history course fits with that physics course, fits with that English course, they are really not making sense of it. And, this principle applies to their engagement in the outside world. It’s one of the things that employers are concerned about when they are looking for applicants. Yes, you got a great vitae and GPA, but when I talk to you, I have no sense that you really learned that you said you learnt. So, integrated learning is what allows us to be able to make sense of what we are learning, and be able to apply in the future.

What is your best advice to departments on integrating ePortfolios into their teaching and assessment planning?

Candyce Reynolds: The most important advice to departments is to think about the integrated learning practices ahead of time and not as an add-on. Like any assessment practice, you have to start with that in mind and move back through your course curriculum, to decide how integrative learning is going to fit in. The departments have to spend concerted time and efforts to say what is it that we want to accomplish through this initiative. It’s difficult to carve out time especially when there might be a potential conflict. It takes a dedicated effort even if you are thinking about including ePortfolios in your own course, it’s a new pedagogical practice and a lot of thought needs to be put in. Sometimes it’s easy to say that I will have them do it at the end. And that’s not promoting an integrative learning practice.

Departments can initially get started with ePortfolios as a medium to demonstrate their knowledge. Say, start with the case assignments and then move beyond and say, do a reflection of the key assessments, and make connection between other things. Doing other types of ePortfolios are a way to lead up to integrative ePortfolios. The pinnacle of ePortfolios are integrated learning practices. Any ePortfolios that’s not integrated and not student centered, may not be offering authentic assessments about student’s learning practices.

(to be continued in upcoming issues)