

# **Educational Pathways**

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## **TaskStream: Online Tools Help With Planning, Organizing and Managing Program Evaluation, Learning Outcomes, Assessment and Accreditation Processes**

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Timely, Relevant & Accurate Information About Online Teaching & Learning,  
Educational Technology, the Globalization of Education & Information Literacy.

I was first introduced to TaskStream back in February 2002 while covering the early development of CalStateTEACH, an innovative, state-wide California State University online teacher-education program. At that time, TaskStream was providing online lesson-plan-building and electronic portfolio (eportfolio) tools to schools and colleges of education. The director of CalStateTEACH explained how TaskStream had “dramatically improved” their teacher candidates’ ability to write effective lessons plans that were tied into California state education standards.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Growing Company With a Solid Reputation**

TaskStream is growing rapidly, acquiring new higher education clients and further enhancing its software. In the late 1990s, TaskStream focused on providing K-12 schools and colleges of education tools for instructional design (e.g., lesson and unit building, rubric generator) and sophisticated eportfolio solutions. Now, the company has built upon these technologies to add to its offerings a system that supports K-12 and higher education institutions with tools to document and manage their student learning outcomes; assessment and accreditation activities; and strategic, operational, and school improvement planning initiatives across districts or an entire campus.

I started hearing and learning more about TaskStream sometime around late 2004 and early 2005 when conducting research on eportfolio vendors for the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. TaskStream was singled out as a leading eportfolio solution.<sup>2</sup> A few years later, in July of 2007, I was writing a special issue of Educational Pathways about Western Governors University (WGU), and TaskStream came up again in a story about WGU’s growing Teachers College.<sup>3</sup>

WGU is a young and successful, online, competency-based institution. Its teacher candidates, like those from many colleges of education today, create eportfolios to demonstrate their competencies for ultimately earning their teacher credentials. The educators and administrators at WGU, with TaskStream’s help, had implemented a highly structured and

advanced eportfolio system for its education students, and they had nothing but high praise for TaskStream.

Overall, to my knowledge, from talking with many educators and administrators in higher education over the years about eportfolios, TaskStream has always been noted as having a strong reputation for providing reliable software and top-notch support services.

### **TaskStream Today**

TaskStream today is a company that has parlayed more than a decade of its experience creating instructional design, lesson-plan-building, performance assessment, curriculum management and eportfolio tools to a new level of products and services that focus on accountability and learning. In March of this year the company came out with its newest solution, called the Accountability Management System (AMS), and the re-branding of its popular eportfolio system, now called Learning Achievement Tools (LAT). Both are being increasingly adopted by other disciplines outside of teacher education programs, as well as by institutional administrative units throughout the country.

AMS is a collaboration and resource hub for all of an institution’s accountability, outcomes assessment and continuous improvement initiatives. Institutions, for example, can use the system to build and share access to all documentation and evidence related to any of their accreditation processes. AMS is geared toward lessening the mounds of paper work typically associated with accreditation processes, as well as for facilitating more productive and real-time communications for all parties concerned with such processes, by providing its users with a fully online organizational planning, reporting and management system.

Perhaps the best way to succinctly describe TaskStream’s LAT is to call it an eportfolio system on steroids. Users can create rubrics and surveys with easy-to-use design wizards; produce customized standards, competencies, goals and objectives that can be mapped to instructional materials; develop and implement formative and summative assessment tools; and create reports based on an extensive list of sorting and filtering mechanisms. The reporting

features and functions of LAT also include the capability to create custom and comparative reports with inter-rater reliability ratings and/or weighting criteria, as well as the capacity to reveal individual, programmatic and institutional progress by managing, aggregating and presenting assessment results.

### **Elements of a System Set-Up for Evidence of Continuous Improvement**

AMS is a suite of online tools that allow a campus to create workspaces that can be populated with pre-defined sets of information to support continuous improvement, says TaskStream's Executive Vice President Webster Thompson. To support this kind of "task" requires that the learning outcomes of any given program be defined. Then the best methods for assessing whether or not those outcomes have been achieved need to be implemented.

Thompson explains that "the question should be asked: What are the quizzes, tests and portfolios, etc., that will be used to determine performance levels on these outcomes? Then what are the results of those methods and measures? AMS is a precursor to the implementation of an assessment eportfolio. In fact, that is how we came to build AMS. We worked with hundreds and hundreds of programs, and we were having the same conversations. They were asking 'how do we set up the TaskStream assessment eportfolio system?' Our answer was 'you have to go through an intellectual process. And that process is to first identify what your students should know and be able to do, and then identify what they are producing inside and outside of their courses for the evidence of what they know and are able to do. Collect all those things inside an eportfolio and then assess them based on learning outcomes.'"

### **Practicing What They Preach**

According to Thompson, "we apply all of the continuous improvement concepts and practices that we help our clients with, to our own business. We have objectives and outcomes associated with the departments here at TaskStream; we review those outcomes and are constantly striving to improve. We have rigorous quality review processes with our technology and support staff."

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Two Long-Time Adopters of TaskStream's Tools Discuss Successful Implementations at Their Universities:

### **How Texas Woman's University Builds Institutional Effectiveness Plans and Reports**

Texas Woman's University (TWU) is a TaskStream client with a similar mindset for developing continuous improvement concepts and practices. Carol Kominski, TWU associate vice president for Institutional Effectiveness and Research, has implemented an Academic Institutional Effectiveness System (AIES) where the goal is to get 102 degree programs on board to effectively utilize TaskStream LAT accounts for producing institutional effectiveness plans and reports according to pre-defined rubrics.

Kominski explains that TWU adopted TaskStream in 2006 as its campus-wide provider of eportfolio tools. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research then started using LAT for organizing, managing and evaluating Institutional Effectiveness Plans and Reports (IEPR) that have always been required by all 102 programs to submit to Kominski on an annual basis. "I was always overwhelmed by the volume of work involved in reviewing the institutional plans and reports, many of which needed improvements," she says. "TaskStream is great for organization and to keep track of things. I don't have to remember which folder I

put something into. It is all there. And I love its reporting features. It's very easy to view things quickly. It enables me to see the big picture very quickly and easily."

The way in which LAT is currently used by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research is a precursor for TWU to start adopting Taskstream's AMS for the organization, planning and management of future Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaccreditation visits slated for 2013. Thompson says, "Carol has effectively adopted the process that our AMS supports by using our LAT system," adding that implementation of AMS is currently in an early stage of development and adoption at TWU, as well as at other client institutions, particularly since AMS was launched by TaskStream in March of this year.

"We will transition to AMS maybe over the course of the next year," Kominski says, adding that "LAT is something we have been working with and are comfortable with, so I am building on that."

### **TaskStream in Action at TWU**

TaskStream tools are at the heart of managing TWU's AIES, which requires that program representatives (typically deans and/or chairs and their administrative assistants) prepare their IEPRs inside a Word document that covers five areas:

1. Program description
2. Outcomes
3. Assessment
4. Assessment results
5. Improvement actions

According to documentation published by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research, the program description is comprised of basic information, including a listing of faculty and staff, unique program features, departmental strategic plans, etc.

For outcomes, programs must address at least four distinct outcomes inside their IEPRs. At least three outcomes should relate to learning, and at least one outcome should be a strategic planning outcome (also referred to as an administrative outcome), such as enrollment

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growth, increase in student retention, faculty research productivity, etc.

For assessment, all learning outcomes should have at least one direct measure of knowledge and skills that should be diagnostic in nature. Terminal grades are not acceptable as direct measures. Examples of direct measures include course-embedded assessments, standardized instruments which provide information on discrete areas of skill or knowledge, comprehensive exams, portfolios, external evaluations of student work, and other assessments that objectively demonstrate student knowledge and skills. At least one of the three learning outcomes should have at least two assessment measures. One of these can be an indirect measure of knowledge and skills, such as an opinion survey or student self-ratings.

Clear and complete assessment results should be reported, with the analysis of learning outcomes identifying both strengths and weaknesses.

The improvement actions section includes a plan for evaluating results of such actions as part of the IEPR for the following year.<sup>4</sup>

The entire evaluation process is relatively simple. Kominski's administrative assistant uploads every one of the 102 IEPR Word documents into the Taskstream system. From there, Kominski creates evaluation summaries, using two monitors at her desk, one for viewing the IEPRs and the other for creating her evaluation reports. She uses two master rubrics, both also created with and residing in the Taskstream system, for conducting the overall IEPR evalua-

tion. One rubric is for evaluating academic assessment plans,<sup>5</sup> and the other rubric is for evaluating academic program year end reports.<sup>6</sup>

Like many rubrics in higher education, the IEPRs are evaluated based on a four-point scale. Four is “a model for others;” three is “acceptable;” two is “needs some modification;” and one is “unacceptable.”

Programs can view their evaluation summaries either online inside the TaskStream system or Kominski will send the program administrative lead a PDF of it via e-mail.

### Model Programs

On the website devoted to providing information and documentation samples related to the AIES, links are provided to model programs. Here visitors can see PDF documents of program IEPRs and the accompanying evaluation summaries.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Kominski points to the Master of Science in Family Studies, a fully online program that used TaskStream to go beyond the requirements of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research.

Essentially, the M.S. in Family Studies program created a public website using TaskStream, with sections that publicize the program’s learning and administrative outcomes, including notations on each of the outcome’s measures and evaluation procedures, all of which were taken from the program’s most recent IEPR.<sup>8</sup>

### Growing the Use of TaskStream at TWU

Some programs have utilized TaskStream more than others by using LAT for assessing student progress with eportfolios and submitting those as evidence of program learning outcomes. In addition to the Family Studies program, the Kinesiology, Health Studies, Nursing and Education departments have all been relatively strong users of the TaskStream LAT.

“There are others who are exploring it, and the School of Management is going to take it up in a big way,” Kominski adds. “We have an Executive MBA (EMBA) program that is going to require their students to have tracking portfolios. Students are going to submit products from different classes (to their eportfolios), and

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these are going to be graded by faculty other than their professors and possibly by people from the business community. We are just getting started. We looked at the syllabi for all the required EMBA courses, as well as some electives, and identified the learning outcomes for each course and then mapped those to the program learning outcomes. We selected assignments that these students will be doing that could be used inside their eportfolios. Some call for critical thinking, for example. The biggest task has been just mapping out what we have and identifying all the assignments.”

### Expanding on TaskStream’s Features and Functions

In the meantime, Kominski has been regularly presenting on her use of TaskStream at SACS annual meetings<sup>9</sup> and most recently at the Texas A & M Assessment Conference.<sup>10</sup> She is also putting together solid plans to enhance the production and organization of the overall AIES by asking more faculty and administrators to adopt the TaskStream tools.

“Instead of just having Word documents, we are going to have requirements for different components of the plans and reports (IEPRs) to be submitted separately (using Taskstream’s LAT features and functions),” Kominski explains. “This way we will have more ability to report in detail on learning outcomes. We can

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## UNCW Watson School of Ed One of Many in the Field Adopting Eportfolios

**L**ike many schools and colleges of education, the Watson School of Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) has transitioned over to requiring all of its student teacher candidates seeking initial licensure to create eportfolios.

These UNCW students use the TaskStream LAT to maintain what's called a "Foundations Portfolio," which is basically an electronic compilation of selected work from each of their foundations courses. TaskStream is also used later in their academic programs as a tool for gathering evidence of their work in meeting performance standards, and it becomes part of their exit requirements from the Watson School of Education.

### State Requiring Eportfolios

In a few years, notes UNCW Professor of Education and Department of Educational Leadership Program Coordinator John Fischetti, North Carolina will require that all teacher education programs have their students submit eportfolios as evidence of their ability to meet professional teaching standards that have been approved by the State Board of Education.

### Not Cost Prohibitive

"One of the reasons why we chose TaskStream was their cost is relatively low," Fischetti says. "Our students pay for it by subscription, which turns out to be cheaper for them per semester." In the past students created their portfolios on paper and published them in three-ring binders. Fischetti explains that when you consider the cost of the paper, notebooks, plastic sleeves and toner, the total cost is actually more than the cost of a student subscription to TaskStream. "So we haven't had too much pushback because it really is relatively inexpensive," he says.

### Outstanding Technology and Support

In addition, Fischetti notes that the overall technology and support provided by TaskStream has been more than satisfactory. "Their tech support, which they call 'mentoring services,' has been outstanding. You always get a real person, and you usually get an answer immediately. Functionality wise, they have evolved their tools to be friendly. They have made things streamlined and fairly straightforward. There is a lingo. What they call a Direct Response Folio (DRF) is actually an accountability portfolio that you can attach rubrics to. So, there is a language you have to pick up. For anybody, there is a short and slight learning curve, but one of the reasons why we liked it was that it is not very profound. Users just have to click and scroll through. It's pretty simple."

### Helps With Accreditation Management

Finally, using TaskStream was instrumental in the successful outcome of multiple reaccreditation visits. "Our use of TaskStream was one of the reasons why, in 2005, during our accreditation visit by the state and NCATE, we had 100 percent compliance, no concerns and several acclamations," Fischetti claims. "We had our act together and were able to present how we used TaskStream for analysis of our programs."

And as the Watson School grows, Fischetti adds that TaskStream will continue to be used "absolutely for ongoing program evaluation, refinement and course improvement."

**For more information, see Watson School of Education "Foundations Portfolio Taskstream Tutorials" website at <http://www.uncw.edu/ed/portfolio/tutorials.html>.**

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map the learning outcomes to things like critical thinking and writing, for instance, which a lot of programs have. We will be able to group them by using the TaskStream tools. That is an evolution that we are going to move to next year.”

When asked if she believes that the TWU administration will be fully supportive of such plans, Kominski says, “we are required to do this because of our accreditation. We are required to do this because everybody wants information about how we are doing. There are all kinds of pressures to do this, so I think it ought to be a compelling case for the administration to support us.”

### **Facilitating Constructive Discourse**

Moreover, Kominski claims that using the TaskStream tools more effectively and consistently across campus will ultimately facilitate more faculty discussions about program improvement and development because the overall process helps to build collaboration. “If you have faculty who do not talk to each other, who don’t communicate, it becomes very difficult to do an effective program evaluation. But, if you use TaskStream, you are forced, either in person or electronically, to share things with each other. I think that is a distinct improvement (over the old paper-based methods of grading and collecting data).”

She adds that using TaskStream’s eportfolio tools with rubrics is an effective way for faculty to incorporate more specific assessment and grading criteria that can be more easily quantified, compared, benchmarked and analyzed. This, in turn, will give faculty a clearer understanding of how and where they are progressing with regard to student learning.

Plus, “we need to communicate facts to our accreditors. This is a way of keeping good documentation and showing them all that we have done. I can go back every step of the way that was taken and see every submission and every revision. It shows that this is not something that was just put out there and not thought about. All those steps can be shown very easily with TaskStream. And accreditors look for that.”

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Thompson reports that TaskStream updates their tools twice yearly, with many of the added features coming directly from user feedback. He explains that “the future of TaskStream is strong; our early LAT adopters are seeing the value in our AMS tools, and usage has expanded across programs and universities, as continuous improvement and accreditation become strategic priorities for institutions.”

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