Tina Ashford, assistant professor of information technology, was among the first faculty members at Macon State College to use an electronic portfolio to support her bid for tenure. Although the portfolio’s format wasn’t a factor in her tenure bid, she found that it offered several advantages over the traditional paper-based format that might make it attractive both to individual faculty members and tenure and promotion committees.

Ashford found the following advantages of the electronic format:

• **It’s easy to update**—“When you write a paper, complete a committee assignment, or have anything that you have to keep track of, instead of putting it at the bottom of a drawer somewhere like a lot of faculty do, you can simply update the file on your computer. And it’s a lot easier to keep track of your information and to keep it current,” Ashford says.

• **It can serve as a backup to paper files**—Paper files can get lost or destroyed. Having an electronic version of these files can prevent their irretrievable loss. While many paper files may already have electronic backups, it helps to put them in one place. For documents that have handwritten comments or signatures, you can save them by scanning them and creating PDFs. “I like to use the electronic portfolio as a backup of my print documents because I heard of an instance where a fire destroyed a paper portfolio, and there was no way to recreate it,” Ashford says.

• **It provides easy access**—One of the main reasons Ashford used an electronic portfolio was the access it provides. The electronic format ensures that all the members of the committee have access to the portfolio. “I’ve served on these committees before, and it was a little troublesome to have to trudge up to the academic dean’s office to check out a portfolio only to find that another committee member had it checked out. I thought if we went ahead and did this electronically, where everybody had a URL or a CD-ROM, then the members of the committee would have instant access to it, and it wouldn’t be limited to business hours,” Ashford says.

• **It effectively presents multimedia content**—Depending on the faculty member’s discipline or type of scholarly, teaching, or service work, the electronic format can provide the committee with a better idea of his or her work. For example, faculty members who create multimedia content or any type of work in the creative arts could provide that material online instead of just having a written document that describes it. Or if a faculty member takes students on a study abroad trip, he or she can embellish
the portfolio with digital photos or video of the trip. “From my perspective, just reading about someone who has taken a group of students to Spain sounds nice, but when I can connect the actual visual imagery of the students interacting with the culture, it brings it more alive to me, and I can identify more with it. I think if you make that visual connection with whomever is reviewing your material, it is just going to make a strong case for what it is you’re doing,” Ashford says.

“I do a lot of website development with my students. That would be something that would be much easier to showcase and highlight in an electronic format than in a paper format because you can actually show what the students have created. You can provide access to the actual websites and say, ‘Here is the end result of what the students in the class have been producing,’” Ashford says.

For faculty in computer programming, much of the scholarly work does not appear in traditional print journals. “I think that type of scholarship finds a natural home with the electronic format because most of the time we’re creating this stuff, we’re using a computer, and it’s already there in digital format,” Ashford says.

• **It can provide evidence of works in progress**—Even faculty members who present their scholarly works in traditional print publications can benefit from an electronic portfolio, Ashford says. The electronic format can provide an easy way of presenting works in progress. Anyone can say, “I’m writing a book,” but it’s difficult to provide evidence of that work in paper format, particularly if the tenure committee has strict rules about the size of paper portfolios. In electronic format, the evidence can be more easily presented.

Ashford believes that institutions will soon adopt electronic portfolios as the standard way of providing evidence for promotion and tenure. Before that happens there are several issues that need to be worked out:

• **Privacy**—Faculty portfolios contain sensitive information such as supervisor and student evaluations. One of the reasons for limiting access to paper portfolios is to restrict access to this private information. Providing a single copy that must be signed out of an administrator’s has been the traditional way of limiting access. If the portfolio is in an electronic format (online or CD-ROM), how will the institution control access to it?

• **Format**—Electronic portfolios can be presented in a wide a variety of formats, and some faculty members could be at a disadvantage if they have not mastered the technology. “At some point, deans and chairs will need to rein in faculty creativity a little bit, especially if committees are going to be reviewing these portfolios. There needs to be some cohesion across the board,” Ashford says.
• **Faculty support**—As with other activities that require technical knowledge, faculty members will need support and training in order for them to create their electronic portfolios. “I would love to see [electronic portfolios] encouraged rather than flat-out required. There needs to be a break-in period. Perhaps the school would decide to standardize by using one of the e-portfolio tools that are available and have some in-service training for faculty interested in doing it. Once you get a few key faculty doing it, it will likely take on a life of its own through a grassroots effort,” Ashford says.

*For more information, contact Tina Ashford at tashford@mail.maconstate.edu.*

**ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIO RESOURCES**

*The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*

Peter Seldin  
ISBN 188298269X  
365 pages  
Anker Publishing  
(2004)

**WEBSITES**

The Open Source Portfolio Initiative: [www.osportfolio.org](http://www.osportfolio.org)  
The Electronic Portfolio Consortium [www.eportconsortium.org](http://www.eportconsortium.org)