Use of an Electronic Dossier for Promotion

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Abstract

This paper relates the experiences of a faculty member in the Department of Bioresources Engineering at the University of Delaware who has participated in a pilot program that employs the Sakai Learning Management System (LMS) as a platform for construction of an electronic promotion dossier (eDossier). The eDossier is used in place of a paper dossier for the application for promotion from associate professor to professor. The electronic structure of the eDossier is discussed as well as the advantages of the electronic hyperlinked document format and web-based platform for presentation of candidate's statements, self-evaluations, and evidentiary materials supporting promotion.

Since the Sakai LMS was not designed with use as a promotion dossier in mind, the limitations of the Sakai LMS as a platform for building the eDossier are examined. Important considerations that must be dealt with in a robust manner include user-friendly access to electronic versions of confidential materials. Sakai allows various levels of permissions to be assigned to multiple users. The logistics of access to and distribution of the eDossier for review by external peer reviewers and by individuals and P&T committees at the university are examined from the standpoint of safeguarding confidentiality of specific items such as letters from external peer reviewers and letters of reference from colleagues and former students.

Introduction

IT User Services at the University of Delaware (UD) has been developing a configuration for the university's Sakai LMS that is intended to serve as a Promotion and Tenure dossier platform. I volunteered to test the online format with the application for promotion to professor that I intend to make next year. At UD, the application procedures and dossier formats are the same for promotions to either Associate Professor or Professor. The eDossier format would be essentially the same. The reason for piloting the program with tenured individuals seeking promotion to professor is obvious.

I have recently done scholarship of teaching work that involves use of student electronic portfolios (ePortfolios) for evaluation and assessment of program outcomes applied to ETAC of ABET accreditation of the department's Engineering Technology program. I appreciate the usefulness of the ePortfolio format and the richness it can bring to the communication of student achievements and skills. For the same reasons, I believe an ePortfolio lends itself well to the communication of professional accomplishments that a P&T dossier is intended to provide. I have been assembling the web-based dossier in a manner consistent with the (somewhat limited) ePortfolio capabilities of Sakai.

Other institutions have already begun considering the advantages of using an electronic dossier for promotion and tenure applications. The Office of the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Illinois (UI), Urbana, commissioned an ad-hoc committee in 2007 to study the feasibility of using an "electronic portal to collect all the information related to faculty promotion and tenure packages"[1]. The committee found that UI was already "heavily invested" in online reporting and management of faculty work products. That level of familiarity

should bode well for faculty acceptance of an electronic format for promotion and tenure (P&T) applications, but the systems that were in place would need modifications for such use.

The UI committee noted that other members of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), a consortium of the Big Ten universities plus the University of Chicago, were, in 2007, already experimenting with a wide range of paperless P&T approaches[1]. The Ohio State University (OSU) had already deployed such a system at that time, but the UI committee found that the systems available at that time were not well-suited for P&T use and would require considerable modification[1].

OSU has recently upgraded to a comprehensive institution-wide data management system known as "Research in View" that includes the capability of compiling a faculty member's data into an electronic dossier format[2]. It does appear that the report so-generated would merely be a component of the full eDossier, details of which would still need to be created and assembled, perhaps as a .pdf. Other examples of institutions that are promoting use of eDossiers for faculty P&T applications include [3], New York, Indiana University – Purdue University, Indianapolis[4], and Memorial University[5], Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada.

eDossier Platforms and P&T Protocol

Platforms for eDossiers can range from simple pdf files that can be shared through email (e.g. Indiana University – Purdue University, Indianapolis[4]) to online dedicated systems complete with secure access features (e.g. Memorial University[5]). At UD, the Sakai LMS[6] has been used for support of courses for several years. In addition to course sites, Sakai includes the capability of creating projects such as ePortfolios. In most respects, an eDossier is an ePortfolio configured as a promotion dossier. A key respect in which an eDossier differs from an ePortfolio is that the owner of the eDossier must give up some measures of access and control to accommodate university promotion and tenure conventions and to provide confidentiality of peer reviews, both internal and external to the university.

For the eDossier pilot project at UD, an Academic Technology Services (ATS) professional is charged with providing support to the faculty involved at the various levels of the P&T process. Access to the eDossier is supervised and provided by this professional, as is assistance with any of the document manipulations required at different stages.

At UD, dossiers must be submitted to the department P&T committee chair by August 1. Before that time the candidate for promotion has full and sole access to the eDossier site. The candidate assembles the components of the dossier within Sakai. On or before August 1, when the candidate has completed assembly of the dossier materials, the document is submitted electronically to the chair of the department P&T committee. At that time, the candidate's access to the Sakai eDossier project is disabled.

Read and write access is granted to the chair of the department P&T committee. By this time, external peer reviewers should have been recruited. Any other materials to which the candidate must not have access for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality have been or are in the process of being collected by the department P&T committee. These confidential materials can include items such as peer reviews of teaching, internal letters of recommendation, and letters of recommendation from randomly selected former students. The chair of the department P&T committee is responsible for making sure these confidential items are included in the eDossier.

When the eDossier is ready for external evaluation, the external peer reviewers are granted read access to the eDossier and provided with instructions on how to use the system and navigate the

eDossier. External peer evaluations are sent electronically to the chair of the department P&T committee who is responsible for getting those materials inserted in the eDossier. The remainder of the process looks like this:

- Once the external peer evaluations are posted in the eDossier, the rest of the department P&T committee is given access. The department P&T committee votes on the application and writes a letter of recommendation to the department chair that is copied to the candidate. With help from the ATS professional, the letter to the department chair is posted in the eDossier. Without the candidate's objection, the application is forwarded to the department chair.
- The department chair is given read access to the eDossier. Access to the eDossier is eliminated for the department P&T chair and committee. The department chair reviews the application and writes a letter of recommendation to the college P&T committee that is copied to the candidate. With help from the ATS professional, the letter to the college P&T committee is posted in the eDossier. Without the candidate's objection, the application is forwarded to the college P&T committee.
- The college P&T committee is given read access to the eDossier. The department chair's access to the eDossier is eliminated. The college committee reviews the application and writes a letter of recommendation to the college dean that is copied to the candidate. With help from the ATS professional, the letter to the college dean is posted in the eDossier. Without the candidate's objection, the application is forwarded to the college dean.
- The college dean is given read access to the eDossier. Access to the eDossier is eliminated for the college P&T chair and committee. The dean reviews the application and writes a letter of recommendation to the university P&T committee that is copied to the candidate. With help from the ATS professional, the letter to the university P&T committee is posted in the eDossier. Without the candidate's objection, the application is forwarded to the university P&T committee.
- The university P&T committee is given read access to the eDossier. The college dean's access to the eDossier is eliminated. The university committee reviews the application and writes a letter of recommendation to the provost that is copied to the candidate. With help from the ATS professional, the letter to the provost is posted in the eDossier. Without the candidate's objection, the application is forwarded to the provost.
- The provost is given read access to the eDossier. Access to the eDossier is eliminated for the university P&T chair and committee. The provost reviews the application and writes a decision letter the candidate. The provost forwards a recommendation to the university president and board of trustees who each would rarely if ever review the dossier.

The biggest difficulty with this procedure is its complexity. At every stage, multiple individuals must be granted or denied access to confidential materials and/or the entire dossier. Confidentiality must absolutely be maintained to preserve the integrity of the P&T process. The pilot project has involved only a handful of applications that are manageable by a single ATS professional. There are obvious problems when the operation is scaled up to handle the 40 to 50 applications typically submitted university-wide in any given year.

Sakai eDossier Interface

The candidate initially sees and works with an interface such as that shown in Figure 1. This is also a view seen by the ATS professional and the chair of the department P&T committee. The

candidate would typically upload documents or other artifacts to subfolders in the "Exhibits" folder. To make the interface friendlier for reviewers, the "For Reviewers" hyperlink on the left is selected to yield the screen shown in Figure 2. The contents can be accessed directly through the hyperlinked headings or more conveniently through the Table of Contents link. A warning is posted about preserving the integrity of confidential materials. The layout for the Table of Contents comes directly from the university's faculty handbook. Hyperlinks are provided for convenient navigation between documents and sections of the dossier. The Table of Contents is displayed in Figure 3.
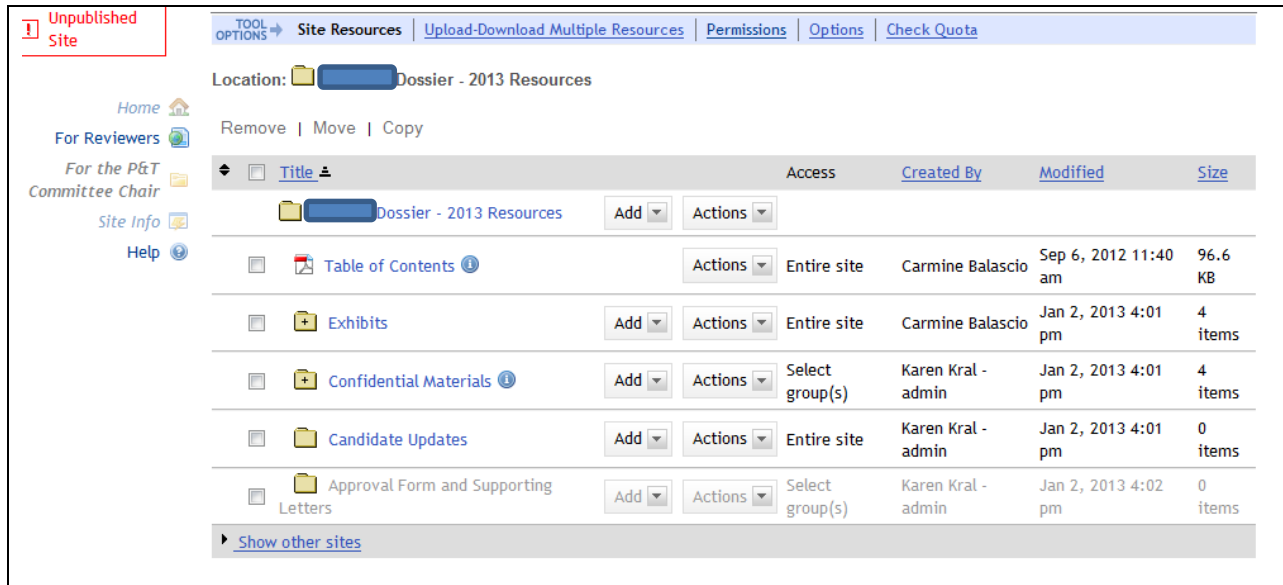
Figure 1. Interface seen by candidate (before access lost), department P&T committee chair, and ATS professional.
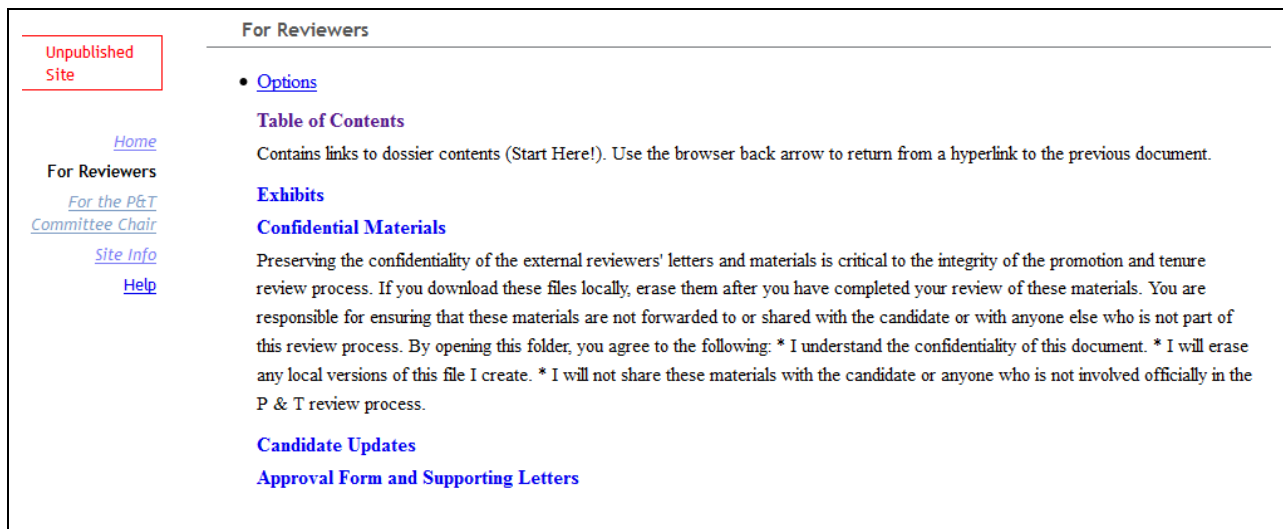
Figure 2. Screen seen by reviewers.

Table of Contents

Figure 3. Table of Contents for eDossier

The Table of Contents appears as it would when it is ready for review by the department P&T committee. At this point, there are no hyperlinks in section I.C. because no internal recommendation letters would have yet been generated. When the department P&T committee's

letter to the department chairperson is ready, it would be uploaded to the appropriate folder in Sakai and a hyperlink provided for item 1 under section I.C, Figure 3.

As noted earlier, Sakai has limitations as an ePortfolio or eDossier platform. The most convenient way to generate the Table of Contents would be an html editor within Sakai. The web page editor native to Sakai is crude and difficult to work with, however. It can be a challenge to get consistent formatting. One might attempt to use a more sophisticated third-party html editor – Mozilla® SeaMonkey Composer[7] would be a vast improvement, for example. The problem is that Sakai does not allow use of html files generated externally.

To get the functionality of html without the limitations of the native Sakai web page editor, a multistep process was required. The Table of Contents and most of the documents hyperlinked to it were created with MS Word®. Any hyperlinks within the documents were created within MS Word® with URLs obtained from the Sakai details screen for the resource. Figure 4 shows the Sakai Details screen for the Candidate's Introductory Statement (item I.B.1. in the Table of Contents). The URL is highlighted for copying back to the hyperlink in the Table of Contents. Once the Table of Contents (or other document) is finished within the word processor, it is converted to a .pdf file. The hyperlinks are maintained and the file operates much as an html file when hyperlinks are selected as long as the browser is configured to display .pdf files within the browser.

Originally uploaded by	Carmine Balascio
Uploaded	Jul 10, 2012 2:36 pm
Last changed by	Carmine Balascio
Last changed	Jul 26, 2012 11:20 am
Web address (URL)	Select URL (for copying) | Open
	https://sakai.udel.edu/access/content/group/f94b9728-b54f-4c28-9216-7df2e262fa08/Exhibits/1.%20Introductory%20Materals/b.%20Application%20for%20Promotion/Introduction.pdf
File size	15.3 KB (15,686 bytes)
File Type	application/pdf Change File Type

Figure 4. Portion of Sakai Details screen for Candidate's Introductory Statement (item I.B.1. in Figure 3) resource where URL is obtained.

Details of Access Management

Access is managed by first creating groups that have different permissions. The screen for creating groups is shown in Figure 5. Figure 5 displays a screen midway through creation of a group for "external reviewers". External reviewers will be given "Observer" status. Figure 6 shows the permissions screen for the Confidential Materials folder. We see that Observer status conveys reading permissions, only. Permissions would be set for each of the root-level folders displayed in Figure 1. No permissions need to be set for the candidate because he or she no longer has access to the eDossier site after it is submitted by August 1.
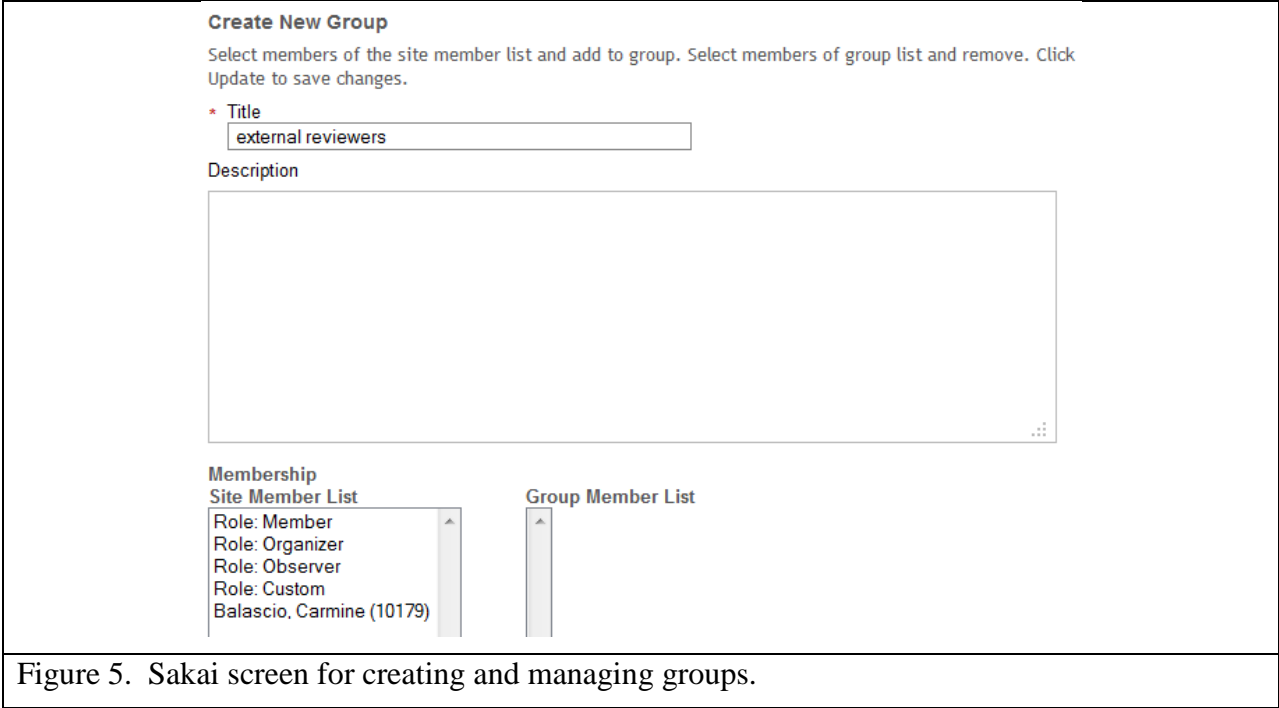
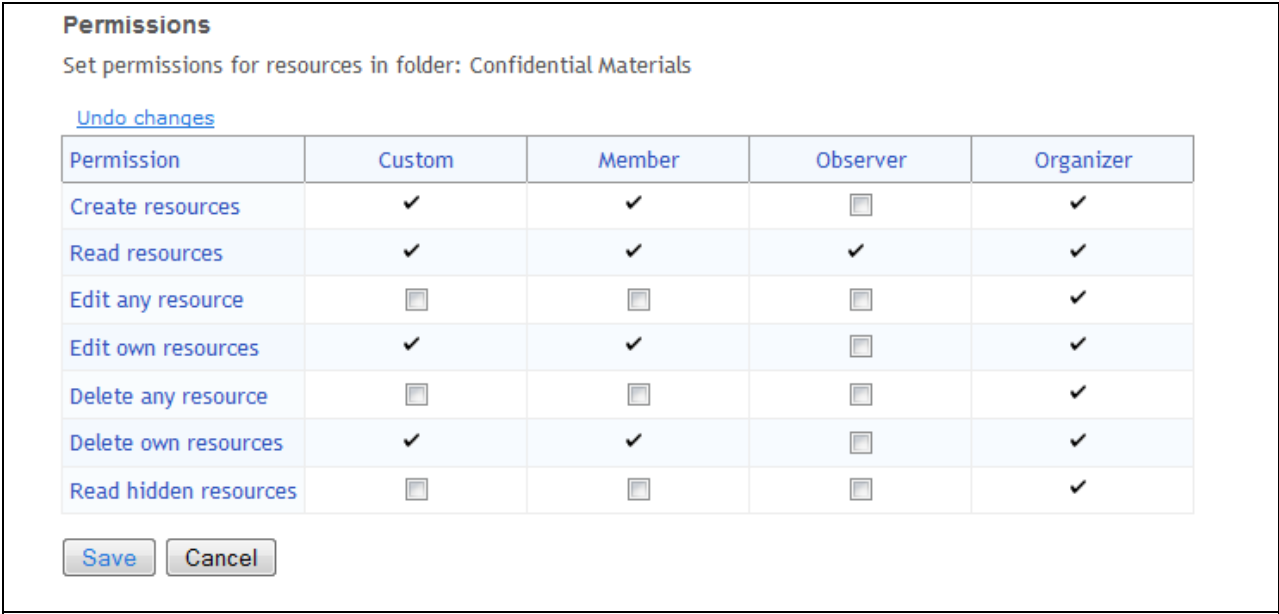Figure 5. Sakai screen for creating and managing groups.

Figure 6. Set permissions screen for Confidential Materials Folder.

Discussion & Conclusions

Sakai does not offer an ideal platform for eDossier creation, distribution, and review. There is considerable room for improvement. Access to confidential materials must be carefully managed with the help of an ATS professional who must also provide assistance throughout the P&T process to multiple individuals responsible for posting new information and documents,

some confidential, to the eDossier site. The prospects for improved eDossier ease-of-use, security, and distribution are, perhaps, greatest for a dedicated system that might yet be developed.

This process of creating the eDossier would be much easier if Sakai included a more sophisticated web page editor. Documents and other electronic artifacts could be uploaded to the appropriate folder and hyperlinks could be created seamlessly within an improved Sakai-native web page editor without the need for copying and pasting Sakai URL addresses in a word-processor document, converting the word-processor document to a .pdf, and uploading the .pdf to Sakai.

The end result, however-regardless of how it is created- is an eDossier that allows for flexibility and creativity in the presentation of the candidate's accomplishments and convenience for the reviewer in accessing the information. The eDossier format represents a significant improvement over the sometimes multi-binder paper dossiers typically submitted for academic P&T applications. The hyperlinks allow documents and artifacts to be cross-linked in a logical convenient manner that encourages thorough review.

With paper dossiers, a decision must be made regarding what should be sent to the external peer reviewers. Standard practice used to involve mailing a significantly pared-down hardcopy version of the full dossier to the external peer reviewers. Increasingly, .pdf versions of the full or partial dossier may be emailed to the external peer reviewers, but handling of confidential materials could still be an issue. With an eDossier, external peer reviewers can be given access to the full dossier. The external peer reviewers can individually decide the level of detail needed to complete their evaluations, and the eDossier format gives them the flexibility to do so efficiently.

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