Chapter 3. Zero to Sixty: Utilizing a First-Year Seminar to Scale a System-wide ePortfolio Initiative

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A challenge to building habits of life-long learning has always been the inability of students to integrate knowledge over the span of their four-plus years of higher education. In many cases, students take courses for their majors, minors, and core requirements without considering the connection between them. While they write papers, participate in projects, and create documents, rarely is there a central place for students to archive *artifacts* of those learning experiences for the purposes of review, *reflection*, and representation to others.

The provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs at our university wanted to address these issues in a proactive way to promote integrative thinking between curricular and co-curricular learning experiences. The vision for this initiative included creating a large-scale, institution-wide ePortfolio program as quickly as we reasonably could. Questions that needed immediate answers included: How can we scale this initiative quickly, going from "zero to sixty" as efficiently as possible? Where does one start with a project that is as inclusive and widespread as this one, considering the decentralized nature of a university? And what effective practices exist to introduce students to the what, why, and how of building an ePortfolio while supporting them in this process?

This chapter explores how one institution addressed these questions via a unique first-year seminar course where building an ePortfolio is nested within larger conversations about the nature of college learning. In the seminar, first-year students are introduced to fundamental aspects of the university experience, including such topics as the nature and purpose(s) of higher education, critical thinking, studying for and reflecting upon course material and learning experiences, academic and personal integrity, and setting learning goals, among other pertinent topics. Building a personal learning ePortfolio is the thread running through these conversations, during which the ePortfolio is framed for students as a tool to make the content and meaning of their learning experiences visible to themselves and others. In the pages that follow, we describe the process by which we decided to launch a system-wide ePortfolio program and the course we created as a means to launch it—a first-year seminar called Introduction to University Life.

Too often the structure of higher education encourages students to fragment their learning experiences. With core requirements, majors, and minors, students rarely have the opportunity or support to integrate their learning experiences in a holistic way. Indeed, core requirements become a checklist to "get through" before the students focus on the "real reason" they came to college: to learn skill sets to broaden their career opportunities. Seldom are they asked to critically reflect on their experiences in a holistic way or to integrate their learning as they progress through their academic lives. Another aspect of student life that continues to be ancillary to the learning experience is the co-curricular opportunities that occupy more hours than in-class seat time. Profound learning happens there, too. The college educational experience often occurs in academic silos that encourage students to focus narrowly on their major requirements. The isolation created by silos impacts students' ability to think and work productively. Drawing on the framework of Maslow's hierarchy, Gary Schulman, Milton Cox, and Laurie Richlin (2004) suggest that silos create a bubble where self-esteem and self-actualization are not met, thereby constraining the imagination, socialization, and awareness needed for supporting the potential for full development. Siloed learning environments do not promote integrative thinking—this can be as true among faculty as it is among our students. The provost at our institution felt that an ePortfolio would be a perfect tool to integrate and make visible the learning that occurs for students across the breadth of college experiences.

A steering committee representing both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs was established to develop a year-long pilot program. We spent many hours discussing not only how to structure and implement the ePortfolio program on campus, but also how to centralize the importance of mentoring students in the process of developing their ePortfolios. Mentoring quickly became a deeply held value of the committee. We were in agreement that we did not want to simply give the student an ePortfolio account without providing a context that included a means of feedback and support early on. Our desired outcome was pretty straightforward: to discourage fragmented learning and support *integrative learning* across a student's experiences at the institution (see Polly et al., this collection). The road map to achieve this goal, however, was anything but straightforward.

A primary objective of our initial discussions was to consider student learning outcomes in the use of ePortfolios. In the process of discussion and research, we encountered "habits of mind" used by St. Olaf College (Minnesota) that resonated with us:

- Reflective thinking: ability and habit of looking back at previous learning and setting those experiences in a new context by subsequent learning
- Thinking in community: ability and habit of seeking connections between one's learning and the learning of others who have shared interests
- Thinking globally: ability and habit of seeking connections between one's

learning in college and subjects, debate, and discussions in the wider world (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005, p. 5)

As well, our thinking about student learning outcomes was shaped by the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) "Integrative Learning Value Rubric" (Rhodes, 2010). Taking these existing approaches into account, in addition to our commitment to foster integrative thinking, we settled on the following mission to drive our work: "to create a community of reflective, integrative, and intentional learners who take responsibility for their education by assessing their experiences and making their work visible through the use of ePortfolios." Vis-à-vis student learning, we articulated the following desired outcomes:

- students will reflect upon learning process and outcomes
- students will integrate insights across general and specialized studies and co-curricular experiences
- students will organize, interpret, and represent learning experiences
- students will connect their learning experiences to personal values, a sense of meaning and purpose, and future goals

One of our first decisions was to find a name for our ePortfolio initiative that reflected the culture and uniqueness of our institution. We chose "FrogFolio" after our athletic mascot, the Horned Frogs. With the new name in place, we began to spread the word about FrogFolio and brought Digication, our vendor, to campus for a workshop with stakeholders on how to use the software. We decided to pilot our FrogFolio initiative focusing on both academic and non-academic programs within the university. We included a diverse group of approximately 200 students in the pilot: 70 third- and fourth-year honors students in our colloquia courses, 50 first-year students in our Chancellor's Scholars cohort, 40 first-year students in our Connections leadership development program, and 20 undergraduate student athletes. As noted, an essential part of the discussion was how to utilize faculty and staff to mentor students in the process of creating and building an ePortfolio (FrogFolio). We held train-the-trainer workshops on the use of FrogFolio for would-be mentors, at which time we educated them on ePortfolio philosophy and software navigation (see Balthazor et al., this collection). We created a simple template ePortfolio adopted by all students in the pilot that allowed them to *showcase* curricular and co-curricular artifacts.

We learned some important lessons from our pilot program:

- students created more thoughtful, reflective ePortfolios in the content courses than they did in institutional programs
- to successfully mentor a class of 20 students we needed two course instructors
- we would have to create a course to teach and mentor students on how to use FrogFolio as well as how to integrate course content

- we would need to create a structure to support students as they consider how to build their FrogFolio to demonstrate reflection and integrative thinking through their selection of and reflection on learning artifacts (see Garriott, this collection)

With the support of the provost, we hired a director of ePortfolio to oversee the implementation of FrogFolio in our institutional culture. The provost's charge to institutionalize ePortfolios spanned the seven colleges of our university—a daunting task. With our charge in hand, we had to consider an all-too-common question: what is the best use of our resources to make the greatest impact considering the parameters within which we work? We decided to put our energy into reaching as many first-year students as we reasonably could as they entered the "front door" of the university. We were not going to ignore the current, upper-division students, but we were not going to focus on them either. Instead, we chose to focus on new students as they came into our academic community. Once we were clear on this focus, we had to decide the means by which we were going to introduce students to the what, why, and how of an ePortfolio. As noted previously, our pilot program taught us that students who received their ePortfolio in a course that included instruction and guidance on how to use it created a more robust ePortfolio in terms of learning artifacts and depth of reflection on their learning experiences.

Our challenge, then, was how to introduce as many first-year students as we reasonably could to ePortfolios, and to do this in the context of a course. We chose to focus on students in their first semester in order to build habits of reflection from their earliest days as students. Unfortunately, our institution does not have a traditional first-year seminar or other similar course that is common to all (or most) first-year students. Our sense was that if we had such a course, we could embed the portfolio into that course and reach students via one method. This approach stands in contrast to a more scatter-shot method of using multiple entry points for ePortfolio delivery. In the absence of a common course for first-year students, we set out to create one. With the support of the provost, the director of ePortfolio began to put together a one-credit hour course that not only could serve as an entry point for receiving and building an ePortfolio, but that also could contextualize the portfolio within a much larger conversation about what it means to be a thoughtful, intentional learner in an academic community. The remainder of this article is the story of this course.

The Birth of Introduction to University Life

You may wonder why we did not simply use an existing course or courses—perhaps a large "gateway" course—as a course-based delivery system for getting ePortfolios into the hands of large numbers of students. The truth is, we did embed the ePortfolio within a large existing course (Oral Communication) in addition to creating the course that we are describing in this chapter. But our results were

not what we had hoped. In time, we found that embedding the ePortfolio within the large oral communication course did not serve either the ePortfolio initiative or the communications course since the ePortfolio felt like a contrived "add-on" to the course content. Our concern, therefore, was that introducing students to the ePortfolio via the oral communications course would taint student perception of the ePortfolio's usefulness to such an extent that they would not continue using it after completing the course (see Dellinger & Hanger, this collection).

Data from student feedback confirmed our sense when we learned from student surveys of both the first-year seminar course and the oral communications course that those who took the first-year seminar were 20% more likely to answer in the affirmative when asked whether they planned to continue using their ePortfolio throughout their student career. In hindsight, this result was not surprising. As you will see in the remainder of this chapter, the first-year seminar course provided the context for an intentional and coherent introduction of the ePortfolio to students, such that more than 95% of the students who took the course indicated their intent to continue using the ePortfolio throughout college.

It is worth noting that every institution is different. What works at College A may well have little chance of success at University B, and vice versa. A multiple entry-point approach to delivering ePortfolios to students may well work at institutions different from ours. That is entirely possible, given good leadership and coordination. Our fear was—and remains—that too many entry points creates a "quality control" issue to the extent that a thoughtful introduction to ePortfolio work for students becomes harder to maintain across multiple channels, potentially breeding incoherence. We put a great amount of thought and intention behind how we were going to introduce students to the ePortfolio. In the eyes of some on campus, we were perhaps thoughtful to the point of controlling. Admittedly, we were concerned—based on conversations with other institutions with ePortfolio initiatives—that if we did not have an intentional "front door" process, then the initiative would have an initial spark but no staying power.

As noted earlier, our primary institutional motivation for adopting the ePortfolio was for the purpose of promoting reflection and integrative learning among students. We were convinced that while our students were having meaningful learning experiences at the curricular and co-curricular levels, they were, in a sense, left to their own devices when it came to making important connections between and among those experiences. At its core, our adoption of ePortfolios was an attempt to operationalize our commitment to help students collect and reflect upon their learning experiences, and then creatively represent those experiences to others in such a way that (1) the students were more deeply immersed in the meaning of their learning and (2) others were more aware of the identity, knowledge, and skills of the student as a result of seeing the student's portfolio.

The name of our first-year seminar is Introduction to University Life. The course is an elective, one-credit-hour course that is offered on a pass/no credit basis. In our most recent offering of Introduction to University Life, approxi-

mately one-quarter of our entering class of students registered for the course. We put the idea of college learning at the heart of the course, which is designed to engage students in an exploration of what it means to flourish as a learner in an academic community. In addition, the students receive a tool—the ePortfolio—to assist them in telling the story of their learning in that community.

When students create an ePortfolio in the first-year seminar course, we start them with a particular template—a personal ePortfolio that is designed to cover the scope of their learning experiences as college students over the next several semesters, of which Introduction to University Life is but one aspect. In other words, the ePortfolio that students receive in the course is not course-specific. It is, in a sense, the architecture for students to begin reflecting and archiving artifacts across learning experiences. Students may well end up with multiple ePortfolios before their time is complete at our institution, but our purpose in this course is to start students with a personal learning ePortfolio that has both depth and breadth. We have chosen a broad, common template that applies to all students as the starting place in this course. The template "maps" the structure of a student's learning experiences, no matter their eventual major or discipline of study.

A unique aspect of Introduction to University Life is how we seek to combine or blend some traditional elements of a first-year seminar course with an intentional introduction to *portfolio thinking* and learning. Making the case that these two elements can or even should be blended has, at times, been a challenge. Students tend to latch onto the idea of building an ePortfolio to the exclusion of much of the course content and some faculty and staff wonder whether we have just "smashed" (their word) two disparate course ideas together into a single course. As a result, we strive to carefully craft how we talk about this course. We bridge first-year seminar elements with ePortfolio creation by emphasizing learning. Below you will find the course description for Introduction to University Life as it appears in the student syllabus. The description demonstrates how we frame and contextualize the ePortfolio within a broad conversation about learning and higher education:

> This one-hour course for first-semester students explores the university as a learning community and the student as a learner within it. Within this course, students are introduced to fundamental questions and issues of the university experience—the nature and purpose(s) of higher education, critical thinking, how to study for and reflect upon course material and experiences, the importance of academic and personal integrity, setting learning goals, self-management, persistence & follow-through, learning alongside a diverse array of people and perspectives, and the meaning and importance of learning that is reflective, life-long, and life-wide. A primary feature of the course is the creation of a FrogFolio, a dynamic digital platform where students reflect upon, organize, archive, and display their

significant learning experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. FrogFolio captures the breadth and depth of student learning as it occurs in the academic community. (Terry, 2016)

This course description makes clear that our first-year seminar is much more than an "ePortfolio course." We do not need an entire course—even at the one credit hour level—to thoughtfully introduce ePortfolio work to students. The intent was to create a course about learning in an academic community within which we intentionally tucked the ePortfolio as an extension of the learning conversation. Our position is that the ePortfolio is best understood in the context of the learning experience, as opposed to one more social media platform or a gimmick or a useful means to getting a foot in the door for a potential job. Introducing the ePortfolio within a course about learning in college allowed us to do something that was important to us—namely, to introduce a large number of students to the purpose and uses of the ePortfolio in a coherent way with consistent messaging. To help students better understand the ePortfolio and our view of its importance, one of us (Terry) wrote an essay about the portfolio that addresses both theoretical and practical concerns. The essay, called "Making Student Learning Visible" (See the Appendix at https://wac.colostate.edu/books/practice/portfolios/) is written as a guide to students and seeks to introduce them to the what, why, and how of ePortfolios as we ask students to use them. This essay is an assigned reading for all sections of the course during the third week of the semester.

True to the mission of our ePortfolio initiative, the essay frames the portfolio as a learning tool with showcase qualities. We impress upon students that the ePortfolio they create in the course is more than simply a "warehouse" of artifacts from their student experiences. It is a tool that allows them to reflect on important learning experiences, explore what those experiences mean in the context of their education, and make connections between those experiences and the TCU mission. As well, we note that the ePortfolio is a place to display specific skills and competencies related to a student's emerging professional identity (see Polly et al., this collection). In the essay, we emphasize to students that they are in the driver's seat when it comes to their ePortfolios. As the creators and authors, they determine what artifacts and learning experiences to include in their ePortfolios. In this way, they assume ownership and take responsibility for their "learning career" (Terry, 2014). We take this approach because when students take responsibility for what to include and how to represent their learning experiences in an ePortfolio, they are engaging in metacognitive thinking.

The Design & Structure of the ePortfolio in Introduction to University Life

The depth-and-breadth templated ePortfolio that students adopt within Introduction to University Life contains six sections. Because students in all disci-

plines, majors, and colleges take the course, the template is structured to apply to any first-year student that might enroll. The sections are as follows:

Home/ About Me	Personal Learning Goals	My Learning Experiences	TCU Learning Goals	Résumé	Attributions

Concerning the Home/About Me page, we coach students to craft an engaging introduction—major field of study, hometown, interests, passions, and commitments. As well, we engage them in a conversation about audience so that they will understand that peers, faculty and staff, and, eventually, prospective employers and/or graduate schools may see this ePortfolio as well. We strive to instill the idea that it is important to communicate a sense of professionalism, while also providing an informative introduction to their identity as a student. While a professional photo is not entirely necessary, we tell them if they choose to include a photo, it is important that they choose one that communicates the type of image they want to portray to others in the TCU community.

We strive for integration in the course by linking the course-content discussions we have with our first-semester students to the work they are doing in their ePortfolios. As an example, we take students through an intentional goal-setting exercise in class two weeks prior to the due date for the Personal Learning Goals section. Students work with instructors and one another to identify and articulate goals for their first year of college (and beyond). We take them through a frequently-used process of making sure that their goals are *SMART*—Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound (Rubin, 2002) (see Day, this collection). Students have two weeks to work on creating meaningful goals before we ask them to represent those goals in the appropriate section of the ePortfolio. Of course, goals change, shift, and (in some cases) go away over time, but we believe it is important to have students do this kind of reflection in their portfolios and update their goals along the way. The ePortfolio is a "living document" and as such is never really finished, even though we make certain sections of the portfolio due at certain times of the semester.

Each section of our first-year seminar course is team-taught by a faculty member and staff member. We chose to teach the course this way because it allowed us to mentor the students more intentionally in each section of the course. Co-instructors split the number of mentoring meetings in half, which allowed each student in the course to meet face-to-face with a mentor (one of their instructors) two times during the semester outside of class time. The purpose of the mentoring sessions was to check in with each student about their transition to college, but to do so by using the ePortfolio as the means by which to talk to the student about their learning experiences in college. By the time of their first mentor meeting, students complete two sections of their portfolio—the Home/About Me and Personal Learning Goals. Together, the student and mentor review the ePortfolio and talk about the student's reflections as presented in these two

sections. In this way, the ePortfolio functions as an occasion for conversation guided by the student's learning thus far in college.

By the time of their second mentor meeting later in the semester, each student completes a section of the ePortfolio that we call My Learning Experiences. This section of the portfolio is the most robust section in the template we give first-year students. It contains two pages: Courses and Co-Curricular Experiences. Within Courses, students create a page for each of their academic courses. Through class discussion and prompts embedded in the template, we coach students through writing a brief overview of each class, selecting learning artifacts from the class, reflecting on their meaning, and then representing those artifacts on the page. If a student is in a course with few artifacts (for instance, exams are the only means of evaluation), then we encourage the student to simply reflect on the impact of the course. For Co-Curricular Experiences, we encourage students to creatively tell the story of their involvement in groups, events, organizations, etc., that have shaped them and contributed to their learning in college.

Some of the best reflections in the ePortfolio emerge in the My Learning Experiences section. We try our best—both through prompts embedded in the template itself and through mentoring and class discussions—to elicit thoughtful reflection on the part of students concerning not simply what they are learning, but what it means to them as a learner and as an emerging professional in the world (see Sanborn & Ramirez, this collection). To this end, we coach students to contextualize the learning artifacts they choose to share in their ePortfolios. In the "Making Student Learning Visible" essay that students read for class, we invite them to provide a "context statement" for the artifacts they choose wherein they briefly describe each artifact and why they have chosen to share it with their audience. This practice fosters reflection, and reflection deepens learning. The My Learning Experiences section of the ePortfolio, once it is completed, follows the structure of the following example:

Courses: Fall 2015
Introduction to University Life
Basic Speech Communication
English Course A-B-C
Religion Course D-E-F
Economics Course X-Y-Z
Co-Curricular Experiences
Student Government
Chancellor's Leadership Program
Volunteer Experience at Community Agency 101

We introduce the ePortfolio during the third week of the semester. The first two weeks are reserved for introductions, housekeeping, and important conver-

sations about the meaning and purpose of college. Upon arriving for class in the third week, students are expected to have read the "Making Student Learning Visible" essay described earlier in this chapter (See the Appendix at https://wac. colostate.edu/books/practice/portfolios/)

Instructors and students take about half of the class to discuss the essay, during which time the instructors reiterate key points about the philosophy, purpose, and benefits of building an ePortfolio. Students then spend the remainder of class logging into their new ePortfolio account and following along with a video tutorial that explains how the ePortfolio software functions. The tutorial explains navigational features as well as sections of the template ePortfolio that students adopt. The video tutorial is a 20-minute instructional video created by the ePortfolio team on our campus, which is comprised of the director, a graduate assistant, and a team of student coaches we call "eTerns" (see Garriott, this collection).

A member of the team is present in each section of the course during the third week to troubleshoot issues, answer questions, offer tips, and generally coach students through the early stages of ePortfolio creation. eTerns lead most of these "workshops." At times, the eTern will pause the video tutorial to answer questions or clarify points before re-starting the video. We find that the presence of the eTern in class on this day lends credibility to the overall project, which helps with student buy-in. Additionally, our eTerns have a high level of expertise when it comes to how and why to build a robust, attractive ePortfolio. More often than not, eTerns are students that we have recruited based on the quality of their own ePortfolio work. When we have an opening on our team of six, we reach out to students on the merits of their work and recruit them to coach other students for several hours per week, with compensation. In almost every case, their level of expertise is significantly greater than either of the course instructors and their presence takes the pressure off the instructors to know the answers to the inevitable questions about software and utility that arise during the on-boarding process (see Garriott, this collection).

Our student eTerns are available throughout the semester and frequently return to classes later in the semester to answer lingering questions and to coach our most ambitious students through some of the more technical aspects of ePortfolio design. In addition to returning to classes as needed throughout the semester, our eTerns are available for consultation with other students in our FrogFolio Lab (see Garriott, this collection). The lab is located in a prominent location adjacent to our library and is open Monday–Thursday in the afternoon. We make students aware of the lab via the course syllabus, and throughout the semester instructors reinforce information about this resource during class. The eTerns and the FrogFolio Lab operate under the supervision of the ePortfolio director and a graduate assistant.

An additional level of support for students in the course comes in the form of online support resources developed with significant input from the eTerns. Many of our resources are found within a "FrogFolio about FrogFolios" that can be easily

found on the landing page of our ePortfolio system. We also link to the "FrogFolio about FrogFolios" from our website (https://tcu.digication.com/metafrog/About_ Me/published). This *metafolio* of resources features videos, tips, walk-throughs, prompts, and suggestions concerning the what, why, and how of ePortfolios at our institution. In some cases, we link to external resources that we have found helpful, but most often the resources found in the metafolio have been created in-house by our team to apply directly to ePortfolio use on campus. That said, the "FrogFolio about FrogFolios" is publicly accessible and, to our surprise, is frequently used by people beyond our institution. We believe that a strength of our metafolio is the array of student-friendly resources offered—best practices, design and layout tips, short how-to videos, prompts about reflective thinking and artifact selection, digital résumé tips, links to exemplary portfolios of other students, and many other resources. The students in the first-year seminar course are made aware of this resource and it receives several thousand "hits" per semester.

One of the ways we ensure that students receive a thorough immersion in the theory and mechanics of ePortfolio use is to weave portfolio creation into the fabric of the course over the length of the semester (see Castaño & Novo, this collection). As noted, we introduce the ePortfolio via a required reading, followed by an on-boarding workshop with one of our eTerns present. Thereafter, students work on different sections of their ePortfolios—beginning with their homepages—throughout the semester. The three primary sections that students spend time creating, as noted earlier, are Home/About Me, Personal Learning Goals, and My Learning Experiences. Students also complete the Résumé and Attributions[1] section during the semester. The TCU Learning Goals section requires a level of integration and thinking that is best reserved for students later in their academic careers, as it asks students to reflect on artifacts that "map" to cognitive and ethical outcomes for the university. We use this section to talk to students in the seminar about "higher learning," but do not expect them to begin working with this section in their first semester.

Each section of the ePortfolio—minus TCU Learning Goals—is due at different points throughout the semester, each approximately three weeks apart. This timeline allows students to focus on different (and increasingly challenging) parts of the ePortfolio throughout the semester. Spacing due dates throughout the semester helps ensure that students work on their ePortfolios over time, as opposed to hastily throwing things together right at the end of the semester. We are less concerned that students come up with a stellar final product by the time of each due date than we are with ensuring that students are working thoughtfully and consistently throughout the semester. Having benchmarks throughout the semester for ePortfolio submissions tends to yield stronger final products.

As noted earlier, more than 95% of students enrolled in this course indicated that they were either Likely or Very Likely to continue using their ePortfolios

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1.   In the *Attributions* section, students cite and give credit for images or sources used in the creation of their ePortfolio.

throughout their academic careers. Student evaluations of the course consistently rank above 4.0 (on a 5.0 scale) on almost every student perception question measured by our institution's course evaluation system. Students opt in to this course based on its merits alone. It is not a required course, although an increasing number of our colleges strongly encourage their students to enroll in the course so that their students will have a solid ePortfolio background before entering their major courses (see Day, this collection).

As we write this chapter, the provost at our institution has reiterated his strong support for growing the number of course sections offered in subsequent semesters. Our next short-term goal is for approximately one-half of our incoming students to take Introduction to University Life whereby they would be given the opportunity to receive mentoring as they create an ePortfolio in the manner we have described in this chapter. While there are certainly other ways for a student to receive an ePortfolio in their first year on our campus, we consistently find that among the roughly 40% of our undergraduate student population now working with ePortfolios, the vast majority of the students doing exceptionally creative and thoughtful portfolio work took Introduction to University Life in their first semester. We are convinced that this is the case because of the intentional way we weave portfolio thinking and portfolio best practices throughout the fabric of this semester-long course.

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Resources Mentioned in This Chapter

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