



# The Orion Story: A Vision of the Connected Community



**J**essica is a pre-kindergarten student in El Paso, Texas. When Jessica started pre-kindergarten, she was provided with an email account from the Rio Grande Free Net, supported by The Orion Project (Orion).

Although for Jessica the email account is of not much use yet, Jessica's parents are the custodians of her account, and use it for access to email from her school. In addition, Jessica's family has the opportunity to use free dial-up access via Orion, as they cannot afford a high speed connection, and the free internet access provided by Orion allows them to keep in touch with Jessica's teachers, counselor and principal.

One of the great benefits of the account is access to the Orion portal. This portal provides Jessica's parents access to content specifically designed for Jessica, including content from her school district and school, libraries, plus access to information about community events and healthcare. In this portal, Jessica's parents can view school schedules, lunch menus, special events, school activities, as well as grades and other personal information about Jessica. Another benefit of the portal is that Jessica's parents can also see the same types of information for Jessica's sister, Maria, who attends a local high school.

As Jessica completes pre-kindergarten and moves on to elementary and middle school, many of her school projects have been scanned electronically and uploaded to Jessica's electronic portfolio. Her teachers are able to scan the work at school, as her parents do not have a scanner at home. Jessica's electronic portfolio is accessed through the Orion portal. The electronic portfolio is an organized collection of Jessica's academic work and it will follow her through college. Since this is Jessica's first year in elementary school, she is given a reasonable amount of storage space for her school work. As Jessica finishes each grade, she is given additional space to store her work. Over time, more of her work is already created in electronic word processing format, so she only needs to upload this work to her electronic portfolio.

As Jessica makes her way into high school, she thinks about her future and her college plans. By this time, Jessica is using her Rio Grande Free Net account through Orion to email family members living out of town, keep in touch with her friends, and chat online with her classmates and teachers. Her parents have even had a few online chats with her teacher about her academic work and college plans.





Her application to El Paso Community College is about 90% complete, with school information uploaded from her local school district. Jessica is accepted and is now a student at both her high school and EPCC. Jessica again goes into the portal to check on some information about her senior year in high school and she sees some new information from EPCC. Her student information is there, as well as other resources that all EPCC students receive. She browses this information and can't believe she's a real college student. Looking back at how far she has come, Jessica goes into her electronic portfolio and re-

reads some of the stories she wrote in second and third grade, and looks at some of her artwork from kindergarten. Memories are wonderful!



Throughout her educational experiences, Jessica and her parents periodically receive e-mails inquiring about her progress from mentors and counselors. These communications make the entire family comfortable with the educational resources in their community and they begin to feel "connected" to the Orion community. The counselors can begin the process of helping Jessica and her family understand educational and career options and identify the path Jessica might consider to attain her goals.

Jessica begins her senior year in high school and her first EPCC classes, Now, for the first time, she actually has to go online into the portal to get to her course materials from a learning management system. She gets her syllabus for her EPCC courses and emails the instructor a question she has regarding the schedule. She has access to a menu of internship programs and learns how to use the web to find scholarship and financial aid resources.



At the end of the year, Jessica has her high school diploma in hand, as well as some college credits under her belt. It's now time for her to enroll full time in college. Logging into the portal once again, Jessica registers at EPCC and continues her college education. Her online courses look the same as the ones she took in high school, so her level of anxiety is greatly reduced since that is one less thing she must learn.

All of Jessica's high school work is still in her electronic portal, which is expanding to include her EPCC work.

During her first year in college, Jessica is working in the EPCC Student Technology Services (STS) Program, which not only provides her with fundamental work skills, but also pays her a salary. Having made excellent grades at EPCC, Jessica is now ready to attend UTEP and continue her work in the UTEP STS Program. She goes into the Orion portal, and requests that her application for enrollment and all of her student records be sent to the UTEP Admissions Office. The process takes very little time and her application is soon processed. Jessica has a few items that she must provide UTEP (she finds this out through the portal that she is now able to access as a UTEP applicant). Once she is accepted, a copy of her acceptance letter is generated and emailed to Jessica.

During her first few semesters, Jessica attends both UTEP and EPCC, as her schedule for work requires her to take all morning classes. The good news is that her course work is very similar, as she is using the same learning management tool at EPCC and UTEP. As she continues through her UTEP studies, her UTEP and EPCC work are added to her electronic portfolio. How her portfolio has grown!

As she finishes out her college work, the EPCC specific information for EPCC students drops from the portal, but her electronic portfolio information remains intact. In fact, Jessica can access her degree plan, grade point average, and history in one convenient location in the portal, all the way through graduation.

As Jessica graduates from UTEP with her Bachelor's degree, she reflects on all of her work from pre-kindergarten through college. Orion has captured her progress, certifications, degree and work history. She submits her resume online. Can you image what her portfolio must look like?

Orion also serves as a portal to the business community. Jessica's resume and history match the requirements of several companies and she receives multiple emails offering her interviews. The Chamber of Commerce is quickly able to summarize the ready pool of graduates as well as those in the "pipeline" and present this workforce portfolio to companies inquiring about relocating to El Paso.

Jessica also knows that she will continue to make use of the El Paso educational resources through Orion all through her adult life. She will be able to take continuing education courses that are offered by UTEP and EPCC. She will also be able to use Orion for professional development and courses required to maintain professional certification. Orion will certainly provide her with educational experiences all of her life.

### Conclusion

As we reflect on the educational experiences of Jessica, we realize that it was the Orion infrastructure, the cooperation, coordination, and partnering efforts between UTEP, EPCC, and the school districts that made all of this possible. Although this story has a great beginning, middle, and end, accomplishing the infrastructure to make it happen is a significant undertaking; but not insurmountable. Many of the pieces that can make this story come true are already started in one or more of the partners, but they need to be tied into a vision that drives the decision making at the pre-K-12, community college, and university levels. It is critical that we all work together to make Jessica's dream come true.



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