

# CAMPUS TECHNOLOGY



## Digital Media Initiatives

### Producing a Podcast: Lessons from U Buffalo School of Social Work

Determined to reach digital natives where they live, the School of Social Work at SUNY's University at Buffalo has taken on technology outreach projects ranging from a simple Facebook page to the launch of a course in Second Life. But the largest commitment in this overall effort has been to a biweekly podcast series. In part 1 of this two-part series, the podcast producers share some lessons they've learned in undertaking this digital media initiative.

- By Dian Schaffhauser
- 03/24/10

While the federal job outlook for social work is positive, the field faces impending shortages in trained workers. Nancy Smyth, dean of the [School of Social Work](#) at the [University at Buffalo](#) (part of the [State University of New York](#)), who called herself "a people person" and said she generally eschews technology, wondered whether that very aversion to tech was holding back the school from reaching young people as potential recruits to the field.

Determined to reach those digital natives where they lived, Smyth gave the okay to her staff to tackle several technology projects. Those included the start of a [Facebook page](#), the expansion of online courses, and the launch of a course in [Second Life](#).

Perhaps the largest commitment, however, has been invested in delivering a podcast titled [Living Proof](#). The series, launched in August 2008, features prominent social work professionals, interviews with researchers, and information on emerging trends and best practices in the field of social work.

Recent episodes have examined [the role of social work in the human rights movement](#), [the use of technologies such as GIS systems to understand social problems](#), [how effective sexual offender registries are in protecting the public](#), and [the support needs of veterans suffering from stress disorders](#).

A new episode is published every two weeks and requires the efforts of a team of nine, all members of the School's faculty and staff--none of whom had any previous experience in producing podcasts. However, "We had lots of listeners among us," pointed out Howard Doueck, professor and associate dean for faculty project development who acts as producer for the show.

The production team includes Richard Amantia, director of technology services and network administration; David Coppola, Web developer; Steven Sturman, instructional support specialist; Lesa Fichte, director of continuing education; and students Katie Clark and Josh Bradley.

Through conversations in the early days of planning, recalled Amantia, the fledgling team discovered that Adjoa Robinson, an assistant professor with a particularly rich voice, used to be a radio personality. "And we said, 'You're hired!'" Robinson became the first host.

Her co-host, Peter Sobota, a clinical assistant professor, was "strong-armed" into taking the position in late 2009 after conducting an impressive collection of interviews for the show.

The podcast production process followed by this diverse team provides plenty of lessons--and warnings--for other institutions interested in producing their own podcast shows.

### **Development of a Program**

The podcast crew has regular meetings at which members throw around ideas for future episodes and come up with a list of people to be interviewed, as well as people to conduct the interviews--typically faculty or community members. Producer Doueck contacts those individuals to see what he can line up and sets up a date for each interview. Doueck's criteria for potential interviewers are that "they know the subject area and would be able to engage in a good conversation with the person being interviewed."

According to host Robinson, since so many of the experts being interviewed are faculty members, it's often easier to get them scheduled in the summer instead of during the school year.

The interviews are either done in person, at the School, or through phone-to-[Skype](#) recording. Said Sturman, the phone interviews don't have the same quality as face to face sessions, "but it's much more feasible economically to do it that way."

The interview is recorded and put through a first editing cut by student helper Bradley. He also ensures that the audio quality is decent. He deletes "ums," "ahs," and other conversational fillers and cuts detours in conversation that the interview might take. Sometimes, he'll also move parts of the interview to different locations in the time span to make it sound like a smooth conversation.

Then the material goes through a content check. Doueck, Robinson, or Sobota will review the episode to make sure it fits within the mission of the podcast--"to make sure it's of good enough quality for the podcast in terms of what we're looking for," Sturman explained, "whether the research is sound and the topics are of interest to social workers in general." They also review the recording for content that might need to be removed, such as the mention of specific clients.

Occasionally, interview subjects will request that the crew remove certain topics that they regret saying or are uncomfortable with because they don't have data to support it. "They want to wait until they've done further research to make sure what they say is accurate," Sturman said. Typically, however, Sturman added, the subjects don't have the chance to review the podcast before it's posted online. "It would extend our deadline too much," he said.

The third and final check is done by Web developer Coppola, who's also an alumnus of the program with a master's degree in social work. That means, said Dean Smyth, "he can listen with many ears." As Doueck explained, Coppola goes through the podcast one more time, "to make sure everything

sounds right, that the quality is right, that we haven't inadvertently referred to somebody by first name at the beginning and by last name at the end, and so on."

The crew tries to plan about four to six weeks ahead of time, but once the recording is done, it's usually prepared for dissemination within two weeks. Coppola tries to finish that last quality check a week prior to publication date. The podcasts are made available Monday mornings.

The podcasts vary in length, between 20 and 40 minutes. Each episode opens with a bit of music, and Robinson typically introduces the show and explains how to subscribe to the podcast. Then either she or Sobota will introduce the topic and give a brief background on the expert who is being featured. If somebody other than Sobota is doing the actual interview, that faculty member will be introduced as well. This pre-interview content takes two to five minutes.

The two-week cycle the show follows, which Smyth calls "aggressive," was actually a compromise, according to IT Director Amantia. During the planning phase of the program, the crew had heard varied recommendations regarding frequency, varying from weekly to monthly. "I think it's working out well," he says.

### **Some Lessons Learned**

The crew willingly shared and recalled with humor the mistakes it has made in the course of producing the podcasts.

Co-host Sobota said he has recorded episodes where he just started talking and never quite got around to introducing who he was. (Web developer Coppola caught it during his phase three quality check.)

Co-host Robinson has tried recording without a script, but has discovered that she'll have to do it over several times. Now she sticks to a script.

When the podcast was still being developed, there was test audio on the School's Web site that was picked up and made publicly available because Coppola had failed to tell Google's bots not to index it.

Robinson said the crew has had some disagreements regarding the content in a handful of podcasts. "We've really had to talk about, is there a there there?" she explains. But, adds Doueck, "We've always been able to get a successful podcast." That has, on occasion, required a follow-up interview to do a bit more recording.

The next phase of podcast preparation is the marketing, the topic for the second part of this article series.

### **About the Author**

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