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The Bryant Faculty Spotlight

How to love your institutional repository

Upon examining the life cycles and workflows of scholarship in our institutional repository, our team at Bryant University noted that we often ingested materials into our repository that we left to sit, languish, and die. The end, period. Kaput. In an age of usage justifying the expense of our institutional repository to avoid cancellation, we asked ourselves if we were doing everything we could to get the most bang for our proverbial buck.

We weren't. So, we challenged ourselves to answer the question: How could we reinvigorate our institutional repository to increase engagement with its resources? How could we use materials housed in the repository in different ways to highlight faculty scholarship, to tell their stories, or to create other projects? We evaluated our library mission and department goals to see where we could inject opportunity for elasticity and creativity to begin brainstorming, then narrowed our focus on faculty publications and presentations, as they provide fertile ground for cultivating potential and alternative uses of scholarship. Instead of simply leaving valuable research assets to languish in our repository, we decided to create a scholar(ship)-centric podcast to take an active role in promoting the scholarship and thereby increasing the global research profile of our university faculty's intellectual property. In this article, we will share our successes and challenges as we pushed ourselves to give voice to our faculty, growth to our repository, and opportunity to our library.

How we got started

In 2018, a newly created position, digital services and research librarian, finally gave a much- needed focus and renewed attention to digital services and scholarly communication. With these changes, the librarians at Bryant University's Douglas and Judith Krupp Library broke out an ancient camera and wobbly tripod to test the wild idea of using a podcast and video to spread the word about a faculty member's innovative new open textbook on statistical inference. We started with two intrepid nonvideographer librarians. It went about as well as you could expect—meaning we created what is more aptly described as ransom-video-adjacent than a high-caliber piece of promotional material. If not for a serendipitous collaboration with a University Relations videographer and the willingness to fail, try again, then fail better, we may never have created a robust podcast and highly downloaded series to promote faculty scholarship, projects, and personalities.

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There are already too many podcasts, you say? We think so, too. Then why, you may wonder, did we think a podcast on faculty scholarship could compete with the endless lists of vastly more entertaining options about crime and murder and political intrigue? Sit ye down, naysayer. Despite the listicles and blogs recommending podcasts on fairy tales and code switching and history, we found zero podcasts with the specific aim to promote and to celebrate faculty scholarship. In most cases, scholars contribute to podcasts based on their areas of expertise, but these do not center around their own work, research interests, or pedagogical practices. Thus, the Bryant Faculty Spotlight came to be.

We recognized that one of the ways to strengthen and to maximize the already-paid-for-and-very-expensive institutional repository would be to put to work the work within it. Furthermore, many individuals take scholars and their research products for granted, and faculty assume that the public is uninterested in their thoughts. Neither of these misconceptions are true. We see this gap as one that librarians can bridge by translating highly specialized "academic-ese" to the public. This serves two purposes: it is part of a larger struggle against anti-intellectualism, and it also promotes the work our scholars and students do. To this end, we aimed to help scholars broaden their audience to include current and potential students, colleagues and other university partners, and the public. This broader audience now has a more accessible way to learn about faculty research, publications, and class offerings. Along the way we chatted with Michael "Kermit" Gravier, Michael "Sunshine" Bryant, and many other professors (who are not named Michael).

Pre-COVID-19, the Bryant Faculty Spotlight was both in podcast and video format. After our very first failed attempt, we asked one of the university's digital media specialists for help and began to interview faculty using a swanky Canon 5D Mark IV and audio equipment. We edited the audio into podcasts using Adobe Premiere Pro CC and sent the video to the expert, a videographer from University Relations.

When production was finished, we made our final products available through our institutional repository. Since the podcasts synched with the university's efforts to recognize academic excellence, we reached out to see if University Relations would collaborate with us for marketing. All was well. University Relations was happy to include our podcasts as content for their ongoing newsletter, Inspired to Excel. Our first two spotlights had several hundred views and downloads. We were making progress. Then 2020 reared its ugly head.

COVID-19 forced us into remote work in March 2020. We had gained so much traction with the project, and we wanted to continue it as best we could. Not many professors (none in fact) wanted to have their home offices, kitchens, or living rooms captured and shared for all-time in our repository. (Go figure.) So, we dropped the video and went with audio only. We purchased a Rode NT-USB Versatile Studio-Quality USB Cardioid Condenser Microphone ($169) to revamp the Spotlight. Zoom saved us, too. We were able to employ it to conduct and record interviews. After the recordings rendered, we downloaded the audio-only files and used Premiere Pro to edit them. Once completed, we sent the podcast episode to the faculty member for review and approval, then uploaded it to our repository. With so much social isolation during COVID-19, this virtual interview became almost cathartic, and provided the social connections many of us were missing.

Initially, we invited faculty who had recently published books to talk about their publications during a 45-minute interview for the Bryant Faculty Spotlight,[1] but we realized that

we were excluding faculty in article-heavy disciplines (e.g., marketing, business). We also did not want to reinforce the deleterious view of the monograph as the "holy grail" for academic achievement when many of our faculty publish prolifically in professional or trade journals.

So, we expanded our pool and scope, and began interviewing faculty to about their recently published work as well as their research interests, background, pedagogy, and ongoing projects. This led to an engaging conversation with Stefanie Boyer, who had recently created RNMKRS—a virtual sales simulation app. Our interview was heard by an individual in South Africa who then offered to donate funds to her initiative. Boyer's app has been a highly successful contribution to her field. As of spring 2021, she cites approximately 3,000 students using the program.

But something still didn't work. Our interviews began with very buttoned-up questions like, "What is your role at Bryant?" "Which failure did you learn most from?" "Do you have any unique hobbies?"

Are you bored yet? We were. We stopped playing it safe and started to think about how we could make it better.

Instead of applying the same questions to each interview, which, remember, was supposed to differentiate faculty, we decided to highlight what made those faculty members unique—we did what we think librarians do best: we learned. We requested faculty's articles, book chapters, or stories, and we read them thoroughly. It was a chance for our department to grow together and to work as a team to understand complex topics such as 18th-century obscurantist philosophy, the fundamentals of psycho-linguistics, or the intricacies of business-to-business trust building practices. Then, together, we crafted questions about the professor's work.

What did we hope for? Richer, higher-quality conversations. What did we get? Everything we hoped for and more. But what we had not expected is that the faculty would feel that we took them, their work, and their thinking more seriously than we had before. In the end they were more animated and engaged during the interview, and when it was over, they were open and more willing (we think) to collaborate with us on future projects.

Many of the challenges we anticipated never manifested, and the challenges we did have, we never could have planned to avoid. For example, we feared faculty might be loath to participate, but we secured their interest without much fuss or finesse. Maybe it was luck, or maybe a year of isolation made them eager to talk to anyone, even us. We decided to take whatever we could get. It helped that we had already built channels of communication into our workflow when we ingested their materials into the repository: each time they published a piece of scholarship, we sent an email congratulating the scholar on their recent research or publication. And—even before we added an excessive number of exclamation points to our email—we asked if they would be willing to sit down with us to discuss their work. Who would not want to talk about a recent achievement? That was one of the best parts of occupying this unique role as a librarian—at least one of the many hats we wore was a party hat, and it seemed that faculty were much more likely to join a celebration, especially if it was about their own work.

In ranking of our biggest challenges, reading a wide range of subjects and getting a grasp on the scholarship to compose meaningful questions in advance of the recording ranks at the top of the list. Learning the editing software, reviewing the podcast for flow of content,

and subsequently organizing its timely release was no cake walk, either. While you may read this and think, "Did they just tell me that everything in the process was a challenge?" We want to assure you that, yes, it was. The beginning was utter chaos, but we kept our focus on developing new ways to support faculty scholarship, which led us to something unexpected and original.

Each person in our four-person team (two librarians, two library assistants) has discovered their own untapped potential, and we feel more confident to try something different knowing that initial or apparent failure will not stop us.

Failing, then failing again paid off. From January 2020 through December 2020, we increased the number of downloads in our repository by 108%—or more than double the number from our prior calendar year. While it could be luck, we believe that this success is related to, if not caused by, the work we put into reinvigorating and activating the resources we already held. As of November 2021, with 8,028 items in our repository, we have 201,948 downloads, which means that for two calendar years in a row we will have had nearly a quarter-million downloads. Not bad for a small staff and the repository being only one of our many tasks.

If you decide to try podcasting to elevate your IR's contents, you might fail. Or maybe you lived your past life as an audio-engineer. (And if that is the case, then what have you been doing?) But whatever you end up trying, we hope that you can take with you our most valuable lesson: treat faculty with genuine kindness and interest, enrich yourself and learn about their work as best you can. It will be easier to ask them to work with you in the future. How else could we have started virtual book launches, an undergraduate journal, an herbarium, and a virtual art gallery? When scholars entrust something to a repository or to a library, the greatest gift we can give to them in return is to show them we value their work by putting it to good use.

Note

1. The Bryant Faculty Spotlight is available online at https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu /faculty-spotlight-podcast/. ℘