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From Paper to Podcasts: One Grant Maker's Virtual Shift in Strategy

By Marty Michaels

Since it was established 64 years ago, the Teagle Foundation, in New York, has produced its fair share of printed annual reports and other publications.

But that tradition began to change significantly in May 2003, when W. Robert Connor took over as president of the foundation, which makes grants to strengthen liberal-arts education.

A former classics professor at Princeton University, Mr. Connor chose to focus not on ancient Greek texts but rather on hypertext.

"I was struggling with how a foundation of quite modest means could make a dent in a huge area like higher education," says Mr. Connor, whose fund has seven employees — including himself — and assets of \$187-million as of last June. "It became very clear that we were not going to make a big impact by the amount of dollars we gave to colleges and universities."

Mr. Connor realized the many reports and background papers on higher education that the foundation helped finance and produce were key, but he wanted to see that research being read and discussed, not buried on desks under an avalanche of paper.

So in order to communicate effectively with — and promote discussion among — liberal-arts institutions nationwide, Teagle seldom produces printed materials and has moved the vast majority of its research reports and other communications materials online to its [Web site](#).

And the approach is paying off: For example, in 2005, the last year the foundation printed and mailed its annual report, the materials went out to a list of 700 recipients.

In comparison, last year's electronic annual report was downloaded in its entirety 1,100 times, while the podcast of Mr. Connor's "president's essay" was downloaded 2,214 times.

The Teagle Foundation also tracks the traffic on its Web site, monitoring how many visitors go to the sections on grant making, as opposed to other sections, such as the one on research, which it says receive far more page views.

Says Mr. Connor: "Shifting from print to electronic communications was partly an efficiency move — getting more information out there more quickly. But we've also tried — and this is tricky — genuine communication with our audience."

The foundation has worked to spur discussions by redesigning its Web site to function as a sort of "academic commons."

To do this, the Teagle Foundation uses a range of Web 2.0 technologies, including RSS feeds and [podcasts](#).

The podcasts have featured interviews with such prominent scholars as Catharine Bond Hill, the president of Vassar College, speaking on the issue of college rankings, and Richard Hersh, a consultant to the Council for Aid

to Education, talking about a new approach to evaluating student learning that the council developed with the RAND Corporation.

Teagle has also begun what it calls "Virtual Listeners," electronic discussion [forums](#) that last two to four weeks each, during which participants can converse online about a designated higher-education topic.

All in all, Mr. Connor says, he's "trying to stop using the word 'dissemination,' because that implies that we've got all the know-how and it's a one-way street."

On his "[liblog](#)" — shorthand for "liberal-arts Web log" — Mr. Connor writes on often-provocative issues, such as "Do We Really Need the Humanities?" and "Women's Colleges: How Good Is Good Enough?"

It's a role that Mr. Connor clearly enjoys, and because Teagle doesn't have a communications department, it's also one that he necessarily sees as "being close to the center of my job."

Mr. Connor's self-effacing wit and love of the humanities are evident on the Teagle Foundation's new [six-part podcast series](#).

Titled "The Amazing Adventures of Indigo Jones, Classical Archaeologist," the project brings the old-time radio serial, complete with cliffhanger endings, into the virtual world.

The protagonist of the series has forsaken his former profession for the mission of "convincing the academic world of the urgent need for assessment, with consequences that make the perils of archaeology seem like small potatoes."

Like his alter ego, Mr. Connor feels passionate about his move to online communications. "There's obviously a cost-savings rationale for shifting out of print into electronic, but for me there's also a very visceral one," he says.

"I have a negative feeling when a slick annual report from a foundation comes across my desk," Mr. Connor adds. "I know how much this stuff costs, and I also know how much impact you can get from a grant of comparable size."

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