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Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Newsroom" (2006). *Newsroom*. 26.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/newsroom/26>

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University experimenting with new way to reach students

DECEMBER 5, 2006

Today's information overload makes communicating with today's tech-savvy college students a challenge. To break through the clutter, the College of Information Technology at Georgia Southern University is experimenting with a new Web-based application from Evoca, a Savannah-based podcast-hosting site

"Students entering college now have grown up bombarded by messages, whether it's from television, e-mail or cell phones," says James Bradford, dean of the College of Information Technology at Georgia Southern University. "It's no longer enough to try to inform students, but you have to provide them information that they will pay attention to on their terms."

Using Evoca, subscribers can create audio files that are hosted via the Internet, and then sign up for the site's RSS feed to receive new content.

Making a recording is as easy as using a telephone, according to Diego Orjuela, the company's co-founder and chief operating officer. He said subscribers can call an Evoca phone number to create audio input that is converted into an MP3 format, or users can record messages via a computer microphone and upload them to the Evoca Web site.

"Is there a better way to alert students, faculty and staff to what's going on in classes and around campus?" asks Bradford. "We don't know. Research indicates that e-mail is not the most effective way to reach students, so we are exploring the potential for using recorded verbal messages as an alternative."

Evoca's Web site is similar to other social networking sites like Facebook. Subscribers are able to establish and join groups to listen to others' public recordings. However, groups can be limited to memberships decided by the administrator. For example, CIT professors will be able to establish groups for their classes and then post recordings for students. In turn, students will be able to respond to these messages as well as create posting for classmates.

"It has the capability to extend discussion beyond the classroom," said Bradford.

Other potential applications include oral history projects, for which Evoca can provide written transcripts; distance learning classes, to provide students a sense of classroom interaction; and as a recruitment tool on a college's admissions Web site, to allow college administrators to provide audio messages to prospective students or for future applicants to provide verbal feedback.

CIT will evaluate the effectiveness of the application during the course of its six-month trial, which runs through mid-spring.

“The software contains some tracking tools that will let us know how many times messages are accessed. We also will establish focus groups and conduct surveys to determine how recordings were used and perceived,” said Bradford.