



Stanford on iTunes U

Setting the power of knowledge free

By Alan Acosta, Stanford Associate Vice President of Public Affairs



Stanford University was one of the first pilot schools to work with Apple on the development of iTunes U, and its implementation was a resounding success. We asked Alan Acosta, associate vice president of public affairs at Stanford, to share the university's story and help give other schools a head start with their iTunes U programs.

"Let us not be afraid to outgrow old thoughts and ways, and dare to think on new lines as to the future of the work under our care," Jane Stanford wrote in 1904.

Stanford on iTunes U is an online repository of rich audio and digital content, utilizing Apple's iTunes technology to deliver course content, lectures, and event information to students, faculty, alumni, and the general public.

The ubiquitous nature of the Mac, iPod, and PC made the iTunes platform ideal for us, allowing for the free dissemination of knowledge—online and in step with a variety of learning styles, geographic locations, and educational goals.

From the very beginning, we knew that this was a great opportunity—not just for Stanford, but also for Apple—to use this technology in a way that transcended the campus.

We felt we had this huge audience and all of this content here, and knew that—while it would be a great tool for teaching—it also could be a powerful way of spreading the intellectual content we have beyond the university. It's knowledge in action, allowing the user to control the learning process independently through a centralized portal.

A universal university

The seeds of Stanford on iTunes U were planted in March 2005 when Scott Stocker, director of web communications, and I met with Apple to discuss participation in the Digital Campus program. The initial goal of that program was to support classroom-based activities via an academic iTunes U site. This would allow faculty members to supplement course materials by posting digital resources for students, who would then access them using a secure authentication and authorization protocol.

But, as discussion progressed, a new idea emerged: a public site that would share our rich treasury of content with the entire world.

Stanford, like a handful of universities across the country, was distributing miscellaneous educational audio and video content online through a number of different programs around campus. This created something of an audiovisual scavenger hunt for those interested in



online university content: an ad hoc jumble with no focus, no central location, and no overarching objective. We soon realized the need for an intuitive way of interacting with Stanford's repository of digital media, which would mean taking the iTunes U concept that Apple had created with Duke University to the next level.

We knew just how pervasive, even in 2005, iTunes already was—especially with young people, but growing among all segments of the population.

The interface was critical here. If our iTunes U public site utilized an interface that everyone was using, we believed that would make a big difference. It would turn the key to much of the content we had available here at the university and give it a broad audience.

Once the concept was in place, we secured the help of the Stanford Alumni Association for content, support, and its built-in audience. This was a critical step in the program's eventual success. Stanford alumni are a very large constituency, with over 200,000 people, many of whom have strong ties with the



university and high interest in what we do here. The alumni association staff is highly innovative and market-driven, and is always trying to think of ways to reach and engage its audience. Since the alumni association was already looking for something like iTunes U, we thought: What better partner than this?

Lessons learned

Many people think that the first step when undertaking this kind of initiative is getting money for it. For us, the first steps were demonstrating that this was a good idea and gaining support from important constituencies. Asking for money at the onset, without proof of concept, can set unrealistic expectations for project outcomes.

Since there was no existing program of its kind and no blueprint for how to succeed, progress was initially slow. We at University Communications put out a call to as many departments and programs as possible, asking for content or upcoming events that might prove interesting to document. Once this content was located, it then needed to be digitized, which meant redirecting some of our internal resources. Meanwhile, Apple worked steadily on the engineering side to make Stanford on iTunes U a reality.

Our first benchmark was to get a small program up and running, and we met that. Next, we did an iTunes U demonstration for the provost and asked if he would consider a funding proposal from us. He was enthusiastic about the demonstration and excited about the possibilities of developing it further. It made sense.

Top five things to think about when starting your own iTunes U site

Content, content, content

At a university, the most important thing is substance. So make sure you cast a really broad net that draws the best intellectual content to the site. The worst thing you can do is show yourself in a way that doesn't represent the core values of your university.

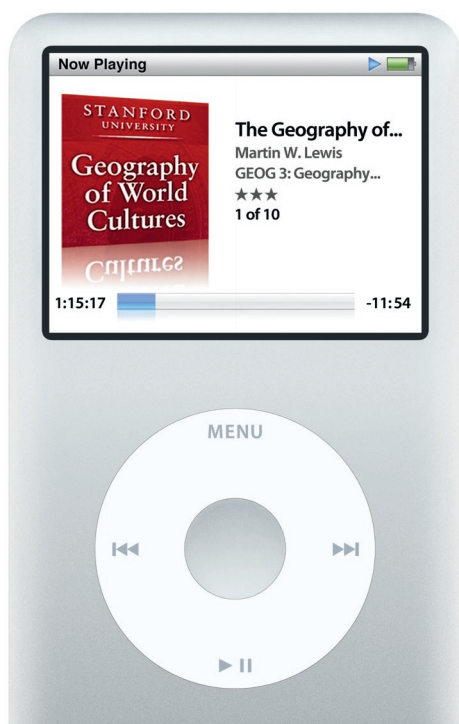
Stay focused Start small. Don't go into it thinking you have to change the communications landscape overnight. Just get a good, coherent, small program running. It's better to start with a few great pieces than a lot of mediocre ones.

Get support Enlist the support of critical allies in the university system. They could be alumni, or staff from the president's office, the chancellor's office, development, or any combination thereof. It's important to leverage the success of your iTunes U site to build awareness and get the right people on board.

Staff properly Look to student interns for staffing options. They're much more affordable than traditional staff and give you more flexibility: You can hire them for a quarter or a semester. Moreover, their technology skills tend to be up-to-date.

Set realistic expectations

Know that you're not going to have huge results right away. If you set expectations very high—with partners at your institution and in your own department—then you may be disappointed. It takes awhile for things to reach critical mass.



The provost and president have often said that the mission of Stanford is not just to create knowledge but also to share that knowledge in a way that serves the public. They felt iTunes U could help bring that mission to life for many people we might not reach otherwise.

The program launch was targeted to coincide with Stanford's annual Alumni Reunion Homecoming Weekend, when thousands of Stanford graduates return to the campus. University Communications and Apple sponsored a booth at the event that showed off the new site and taught alumni how to use it. Alumni then shared the site with friends and family upon their return home.

Making the grade

Today, the Stanford on iTunes U public site averages nearly 20,000 downloads a week, with over 1.8 million files downloaded since the site launched. The most popular downloads—in addition to commencement speeches and special, high-profile campus events—tend to be

course lectures, which proves that the resources expended to record these lectures were resources well spent.

I think it's important to note that there's a big difference between a million-and-a-half downloads and a million-and-a-half web hits. A click on a web page is a fleeting act that takes little commitment—people often move past the page in a matter of seconds. But a download is an assertive act. It's a different kind of connection than just visiting a web page. It implies a level of engagement that is important for an educational institution.

In addition to opening up a much broader audience for us, the Stanford on iTunes U site has also helped create dialogues within the university that may not have occurred otherwise. People are contributing content from all over campus, from athletics to the School of Medicine to student groups. And that's something that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't consolidated content in a central repository.

Adapt, adopt, and improve

We're working with the Apple engineering team to develop new features for the site to make it even more intuitive and useful, including enhanced search functionality and better ways of organizing the content.

This program has also helped serve as a laboratory, of sorts, for how content—particularly video—can be delivered to handheld devices and phones.

One of the most significant lessons we learned was that it's not about fancy new hardware or software, but about how to serve students better and how to bring our intellectual resources to a broader audience, unconfined by classroom walls.

At Stanford, we are always seeking innovative ways to share knowledge, to use technology in service of teaching. At the same time, we want to convey an intellectually dynamic experience—the experience of “being here”—in a way that a newspaper article or an abstract in a scholarly journal simply can't achieve.

With iTunes U, we believe the excellence of Stanford can be seen, heard, and “felt” in a compelling way by a huge audience. It's unlikely that Jane and Leland Stanford could have imagined a world where the iPod is ubiquitous, and where such reach is possible. But I think they would be proud that the university has not been afraid to outgrow old thoughts and ways, daring to think along new lines as it pursues knowledge in service to the public good.

Stanford on iTunes U stats

- An average of nearly 20,000 downloads a week
- Over 1.8 million downloads since the site launched in spring 2005