

Press Play: Reaching Faculty Through Asynchronous Engagement

Dr. Sarah Otterbeck, Clemson University

Dr. Sarah Otterbeck is a Teaching Consultant, Research Specialist, and Program Coordinator at an R1 land-grant university, where she supports faculty educational development, student professional development, and instructional innovations across STEM disciplines. Her work focuses on inclusive teaching practices, reimagining engagement and participation, and student career readiness within a federally funded research center. She has led workshops, developed faculty resources, and contributed to national conversations through a leadership position in one of her professional organizations. Sarah's current projects include designing interactive math learning sessions for first-year STEM students, designing an engagement playbook for instructors across disciplines, and conducting a multi-level needs assessment to enhance graduate training programs in engineering spaces.

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Abstract

When engagement is the goal, format matters – press play on a set of lessons learned from a playlist-style initiative designed to reach faculty where they are. Across institutions, we all encounter the hard-to-reach faculty – those whose schedules prevent them from attending workshops, or whose professional incentives prioritize research over teaching. As a graduate research assistant in a center for teaching and learning at a large research-intensive institution, I launched the Playlist Series in Fall 2023 to meet these faculty where they are. Now, in my role as a Teaching Consultant in the same center, I continue to evolve and sustain the series.

Each month during the academic year, I curate a themed collection of short, idea-generating media – podcast episodes, TED-style talks and other publicly available content – hosted on free platforms like Spotify and YouTube. These bite-sized resources create flexible, low-barrier opportunities for faculty to reflect and spark new ideas.

From leading this series, I've learned three key lessons:

- (1) Even asynchronous offerings are subject to the rhythms of the academic calendar.
- (2) The relevance of a topic – especially when aligned with campus or national conversations – significantly affects engagement.
- (3) Sustaining this work requires a supportive team and shared vision.

Despite challenges, the Playlist Series model is adaptable. In this talk, I will share the design and evolution of the series, including advertising strategies, how engagement analytics inform future directions, and recent adaptations to include our new in-house Sparkshop series. Participants will explore how this model can be customized for their own contexts, while also reflecting on what asynchronous engagement might look like for their faculty. My goal is to exchange lessons learned and spark new ideas for extending faculty engagement through asynchronous approaches.

To share these lessons learned and explore the model's potential adaptations, I propose a talk format, allowing us to engage interactively with the playlists, reflect on implementation strategies, and consider how this approach might resonate in diverse institutional contexts.

Introduction

Hard-to-reach faculty can be found on all campuses and are often characterized by full schedules, potentially part-time contracts, and/or competing professional demands that constrain their time and availability. They may even be those whose professional incentives are in opposition to teaching-related professional development [1], [2]. Working in the field of Faculty Development with a focus on teaching-related professional development, our center realized and continues to respect that traditional (i.e., synchronous and in person) workshops and longer programs are not feasible for many faculty due to high demands on their time. In addition, just like students, faculty come from different generations with changing habits of when and how to engage [3]. This raises a critical question: How do we effectively serve this population? Do we maintain current patterns or explore new methods of engagement? To better serve our hard-to-reach faculty and appeal to younger generations of faculty, I developed an asynchronous Playlist Series – curated collections of short, publicly available media designed to spark ideas and reflection. For examples of how other centers have engaged hard-to-reach faculty, see [3] and [4]. My goal was to provide flexible engagement – faculty can listen when and where they want – and to spark interest and conversation in addition to our longer program offerings. This paper describes the Playlist Series initiative, analyzes engagement patterns, and shares lessons learned for adaptation.

Institutional Context & Positionality

I currently serve as a Teaching Consultant with Clemson University's Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation (OTEI), a role which began in July 2025 after working with the team as a graduate research assistant since 2021. Clemson University is a large public land-grant research-intensive institution, enrolling over 29,000 students, 61% in STEM. Additionally, Clemson University employs more than 2,000 faculty across its campus. OTEI serves as Clemson University's "hub for teaching preparation and development" where we work with "faculty, administrators, staff and teaching assistants based on evidence-based research, with an emphasis on community-building and attention to positive assets of all learners" [5].

Playlist Series Initiative Overview

A Playlist is a curated set of episodes I source centered on a common topic, theme, or teaching challenge from a variety of content creators (not limited to internal contributors). Importantly, the Playlist Series is not a podcast produced by our Center, but is rather short, publicly available media from multiple creators and assembled into a focused, theme-based listening experience. This makes the series distinct from traditional faculty-development podcasts because it offers a concise, cross-creator collection that faculty can complete in under an hour.

The goal for each Playlist is to deliver two (2) to four (4) aligned episodes with a central theme for a total listening time of 60 minutes or less. Because the Playlist is offered as an asynchronous faculty-development opportunity, faculty are able to listen and learn on their own time, pausing content as needed, and rewinding as desired. In addition to offering scheduling flexibility, the curated structure also helps reduce mental load for faculty. By pre-selecting short, high-quality

episodes and limiting total engagement time, the Playlist removes decision fatigue and provides a low-burden pathway for faculty to explore new ideas, many of which include explicit strategies they can try immediately.

To build a Playlist, I collaborate with the OTEI team to determine the possible topics of interest, scour Spotify and YouTube for episodes, and then bring the line-up back to the team for feedback. Once we are in agreement, I will write a short description of the Playlist and publish the webpage hosting the Playlist. Each Playlist runs twice a month in our OTEI newsletter, and all are added to the Repository which is linked at the end of all Playlist pages.

In launching the Playlist Series in Fall 2023, our team decided to leverage Smore “the newsletter tool trusted by schools” [6] for the easily editable templates, built-in analytics, and mobile-friendly design – which was particularly enticing for my target audience. The analytical tools offered by Smore, the automatic data collection from the moment it’s published, combined with the mobile-friendly design, made Smore a better choice for us than other platforms.

Analysis

The predominant metrics I use to inform Playlist development are the overall number of views, the temporal correlation of views with OTEI’s bi-weekly newsletter, and how time is spent on the Playlist through the combination of average reading time and links followed. Engagement analytics were collected in aggregate through Smore’s built-in reporting tools; thus, no personally identifiable data were used, and as such this work did not involve human subjects research. Across the first year, Playlists averaged 40 views at the initial release, with a click-through rate of ~20% from the OTEI newsletter – see figure 1 for some of the year 1 analytics. Engagement was at a peak in August aligning with the first ever Playlist being released and again in April with a topic well aligned to the current campus conversations. The Lessons Learned sections below dive deeper into how these analytics were leveraged to evolve and sustain the series. When reviewing the analytics and planning for future Playlists, I consider how many of the OTEI newsletter readers follow the link to the Playlist as well as once at the Playlist where the engagement time is being spent.

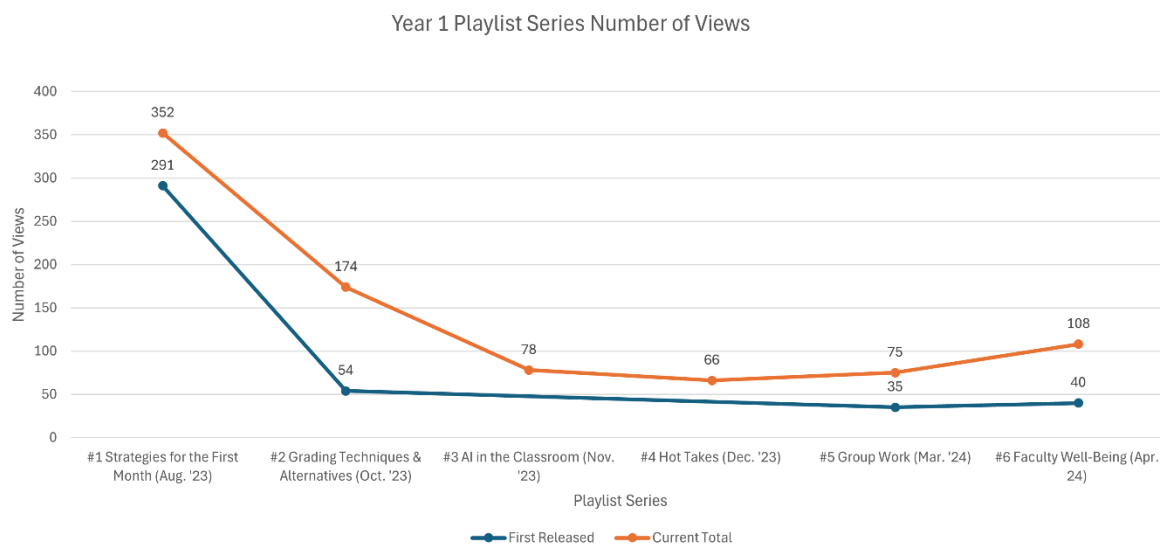


Figure 1: Year 1 Playlist Series Analytics by Number of Views with current total being accurate as of February 2026. Playlist #1, August & September 2023, had 291 views when first released with a current total of 352 views. Playlist #2, October 2023, had 54 views when first released with a current total of 174 views. Playlist #3, November 2023, has missing data for number of views when first released but has a current total of 78 views. Playlist #4, December 2023, similarly has missing data for number of views when first released but has a current total of 66 views. Playlist #5, March 2024, had 35 when first released with a current total of 75 views. Playlist #6, April 2024, had 40 views when first released with a current total of 108 views.

Lessons Learned

(1) Timing Matters

At the inception of the Playlist Series, the goal was to have a new Playlist every month for the entirety of the academic year. I soon realized this was not sustainable from the standpoint of curation on my part and from the viewpoint of faculty engagement. As the semester progressed, there was less engagement the closer we got to finals. Monitoring these analytics informed us to move to about four Playlists a semester. Typically, the Fall semester is a new Playlist in August, September, October, and November. With new Spring semester Playlists being advertised in January, February, March, and April. In December and May we tend to re-advertise the Playlist Repository. Other centers may also find early-semester engagement most effective as typical campus energy is higher earlier on.

(2) Topic Relevance

The sustainability of the program is directly tied to the ongoing support from the OTEI team. It is with their awareness of campus conversations, efforts in brainstorming, and willingness to review an episode a month that continues to allow the Playlist to be successful. By leveraging the conversations of the OTEI leadership with the OTEI Advisory Board, I can find and deliver Playlist topics aligned to faculty's interests and concerns. Early on, the topics of the Playlist were those aligned to past consultation requests – such as starting the semester strong, grading alternatives, and how to handle group work in class. Now the Playlists are more attuned to current conversations such as teaching during political unrest, the ethics of AI and assessments, and previewing upcoming OTEI events such as elevating the work of our conference keynote speakers.

With Playlists more aligned with current conversations, our engagement numbers per release are higher. Additionally, by paying attention to the ebbs and flows of the semester and focusing efforts of new Playlists early in the semester, engagement is more consistent. The best engagement we get is consistently at the very start of the semester. This is in part to the extra advertising that happens during our start of semester events (New Faculty Conference, Provost Orientation, or Teaching Conference (TC)) and the overall higher energy levels of faculty returning to campus.

(3) Sustainability

Finally, we recognize that using Smore as the platform for the Playlist Series has come to an end due to larger campus conversations and concerns with digital accessibility. Starting in February 2026, our Playlist Series was moved onto the blog system supported by the University and my hope is that this will help increase engagement as the Playlists will be easier to find within the university system and linked directly from the homepage of the OTEI website rather than being hosted from an external platform. This shift to an internal platform does introduce new learning curves for what analytics can be collected and how we will analyze them as well as adjustments to our templates for the Playlists' look and feel.

Until Spring 2025, the Playlist Series featured only external content such as podcasts and YouTube videos. Following the success of faculty-led sessions at our 2025 Teaching Excellence Conference (TEC), we introduced internally produced resources to elevate local expertise. In Spring 2026, this approach expanded to include a TEC highlights playlist and a new Sparkshop playlist designed and recorded by the OTEI Teaching Consultants. This semester's lineup – Spark Your Teaching (Jan), TEC highlights (Feb), and Graduate Voices on Teaching (Mar) – reflects our commitment to aligning content with campus priorities and start-of-semester interests. The Sparkshops playlist focuses on curiosity and questioning, cultivating a growth mindset, and strategies for teaching increasing class sizes, complementing the TEC theme of “Connecting with Students: Building Trust, Belonging, and Engagement,” a theme informed by feedback from our OTEI Advisory Board. Lastly, the March playlist builds off the TEC theme and highlights two of the graduate student presenters from TEC as well as a graduate student-produced external podcast episode. Integrating internal content is still a new endeavor for my Playlist series and requires intentional planning and team collaboration, but I am hopeful for successful outcomes.

Adaptability

This program is something that could be adopted across institutional contexts as the Playlist Series is inherently flexible and scalable, making it suitable for diverse contexts. The predominant reliance on publicly available content minimizes production demands and technical barriers, making the model feasible for centers with limited staff and or budgets. Beyond cost-efficiency, the design of the Playlists allows developers to tailor playlists to local priorities, disciplinary needs, or emerging trends without overhauling the entire structure. One could customize the themes to align with campus priorities, integrate internal resources, and or

leverage existing communication channels (i.e., newsletters, blogs, social media) to make this model more their own. Finally, the Playlist Series offers an opportunity for cross-institutional collaboration where centers can share curated lists or co-create Playlists to further reduce effort while fostering a broader faculty development community.

Conclusion

Over the past 2+ years, the Playlist Series has offered me a wide range of lessons – some I have already translated into concrete changes, and others that I continue to brainstorm on, iterate with, and plan for. I have learned how to time the release of new Playlists to better match the natural ebbs and flows of the academic semester, and I now more fully appreciate how closely faculty engagement is tied to the relevance of each theme. At the same time, I recognize that there is still more to learn, particularly around gathering and interpreting analytics that speak meaningfully to the Playlist's impact on faculty professional development. Developing clearer processes for analyzing and reporting these data will be essential for demonstrating the value of the series and sustaining recognition of this work.

These lessons – timing, relevance, and sustainability – represent the broader contribution of this paper. Together, they offered a practical framework for designing asynchronous faculty development that is both responsive to campus rhythms and adaptable across contexts. While these efforts are ongoing, I am encouraged by the anecdotal feedback we have received from faculty, many of whom have expressed appreciation for the Playlists and the intentional effort behind expanding asynchronous engagement opportunities. My hope is that the insights shared here will inspire others to embrace creativity when brainstorming offerings to meet hard-to-reach faculty.

References

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