

Public Affairs Reporting for New Media

Spring 2009

Goal: The goal of this course is to create a package of multimedia and interactive stories and tools about the impact that North Carolina's rising high school dropout rate has on the people of the state. The components of this package will live on a site hosted by the UNC-Chapel Hill. Many of the components will also be made available for the state's news Web sites to download and publish on their own sites.

Partners: We are looking for news Web site partners. Our partners would use their expertise in local education issues to help guide the students' reporting. We are especially interested in finding partners who are committed to doing additional reporting that would augment the components of this package on their own site.

In exchange, partners would receive package components to publish on their own site. Publishers would be allowed to then sell advertising around this free content.

Some interactive components of the project (such as online discussion boards) will live only at a central site hosted by UNC-Chapel Hill. Through their print and online products, partner sites would recruit participation in these interactive components and be free to link to them from their own Web sites.

The Issue: The high school dropout rate in North Carolina is on the rise, jumping 6 percent between the 2005 and 2006 school years. Nearly a third of all students who enter high school don't graduate. There are more than 1.2 million North Carolinians who don't have a high school diploma, with more than 23,000 more students dropping out each year. The problem is even worse among minority populations – especially the state's booming Hispanic population. The state ranks 38th in percentage of its adult population who are high school graduates.

Adults who do not have a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated, more likely to suffer from poor health, less likely to earn enough money to support themselves or a family, and more likely to need help from government, social service agencies and charities.

To help find ways to reduce the dropout rate, the state legislature is giving away \$7 million to 60 efforts across the state aimed at finding effective solutions. The state Department of Public Instruction has launched a PR campaign to raise awareness of the issue.

We want to know:

- Who drops out? Why? Where do they live? What do their lives look like? What are their stories?
- What effect does a rising dropout rate have on most North Carolinians – the 90 percent who do have a diploma? Is this a problem of public policy or individual achievement and opportunity?
- What's being done to combat the dropout rate? What's working and what's not?

Project Components

The components of the project will be rolled out over the course of the Spring semester, between January and May 2009. They will be produced in this order.

1. Delicious Feed – Jan. 26

Students will use this social bookmarking site to collect and categorize relevant online resources. The collection of bookmarks will live on the Delicious site, and also (through RSS feed) live on the the UNC hosted site and any partner sites who choose to use it.

2. Student Blogs – Feb. 9

Students will blog the process of their reporting on this issues, creating a transparency and interactivity to their reporting. Each student will have his or her own blog. They will live on the UNC hosted site, with full text of the posts distributed to partners via RSS.

3. FAQs – Feb. 23

In FAQ format, and using links to outside resources, students will explain some of the key questions readers might have about high school dropout rate in North Carolina. These text stories will live on the UNC hosted site and be made available for publishing on partner sites.

3. Interview Your Friends/(Send Us Your Stories) – Begin collecting March 6

It's important to hear first-person stories about how the high school dropout rate is affecting North Carolinians. Using NPR's Story Corps as a model, we will encourage our audience to interview people in their lives who may have first hand knowledge of the issue. We will also solicit e-mails and use YouTube to solicit first-person video accounts. These first-person stories will be vetted before publication on the UNC hosted site and on YouTube.

4. Facebook Group – March 6

Students will create a Facebook group primarily for reporters, class members, story subjects. But we will link to it from the UNC hosted site and encourage and anyone else to join. This is more of a casual, keep-in-touch social group than a policy discussion.

5. Policy Discussion Board – March 16

UNC-Chapel Hill will host an online discussion board that will serve as a place for state and local policy makers and advocates to discuss causes and solutions. Partners can incorporate this discussion by linking to the UNC site. Students will manage the conversation to ensure that it stays focused on policy, and not on the personal.

6. Stories (March 24-May 7)

With the help of media partners, students will report out traditional stories that may include text, audio or video interviews or photo galleries. The stories we aim to cover are:

- Why should you care whether NC has a high dropout rate?
- Putting the current state in national and historical context.
- What are the risk factors for dropping out?
- What is being done to lower dropout rates? What's working and what not?
- What happens to dropouts?

7. Video Profiles (March 24-May 7)

With the help of media partners, students will conduct, edit and publish video interviews of people who have especially compelling stories related to the dropout rate. We will host them on YouTube, embed them on the UNC hosted site and make them free for use by media partners and others.

8. Flash Multimedia Package (May 7)

This designed, comprehensive package of videos, and other story elements will live on the UNC hosted site and be made free for publication on partner sites as well.

9. Database of high school dropouts (May 7)

Using the annual report produced by the DPI and the local education authorities, we will create an online database that will generate a map showing the locations of dropout events, their change over time and the demographic breakdowns. Users will be able to explore the data in a way that helps them answer their own questions about specific groups of students, their locations and their reasons for dropping out.

It will be hosted on the UNC site, with a search interface made available to partner sites.