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ABSTRACT

Many colleges and universities have student-operated radio stations, but in some instances these stations have deteriorated, becoming "electronic sandboxes" where students "play radio." This paper suggests that the educational value of student-operated radio stations can and should be improved. The broadcast industry traditionally has a low assessment of the quality of broadcast education. To improve the perceived quality of graduates of broadcast programs, students must be offered more professionally realistic experiences at student-operated radio stations. Issues regarding music programming, "alternative" programming philosophy, relationship to the faculty advisor, and difficulties faced by faculty advisors have contributed to the general decline of these stations. A plan for improving the educational value of student-operated radio stations is presented. It involves having the faculty advisor: (1) assess the present condition of the station in terms of talent, discipline, dedication, enthusiasm, and professional aspiration; and (2) concentrate on training, organizing, establishing a "vision" of the station, rewarding desired behavior, and pursuing a professional philosophy of station operation. (Author/PRA)

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*Enhancing the Electronic Sandbox:  
A Plan for Improving the Educational Value  
of Student-operated Radio Stations*

by

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**Abstract**

Many colleges and universities have student-operated radio stations, but in some instances these stations have deteriorated, becoming "electronic sandboxes" where students "play radio." This paper suggests that the educational value of these stations can and should be improved. First, the broadcast industry's traditionally low assessment of the quality of broadcast education is discussed. To improve the perceived quality of graduates of broadcast programs, it is argued that students be offered more professionally realistic experiences at student-operated radio stations. The paper notes the general decline of these stations, and discusses some possible reasons. A plan for improving the educational value of student-operated radio stations is presented. First, the faculty advisor should assess the present condition of the station in terms of talent, discipline, dedication, enthusiasm, and professional aspiration. Then, the advisor should concentrate on training, organizing, establishing a "vision" for the station, rewarding desired behavior, and pursuing a professional philosophy of station operation.

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College curricula designed to prepare students for careers in broadcasting have been in place for over fifty years (Chamley 376). Yet industry dissatisfaction with the quality of college graduates has been around for nearly as long. Often, the most frequent complaints from broadcast management center on a desire for college graduates to have a more pragmatic education, one in which essential skills of broadcast station operation are taught, developed and refined.

A 1942 survey of radio station managers found that they would like college graduates to have more "practical experience" and more "attention to commercial aspects of radio in college courses" (Baskette 387). By the 1960s, station managers were still generally dissatisfied with the quality of broadcast education, citing the need for "more emphasis on the economic side of the industry" (Starlin 66). The situation hadn't changed by the mid-'70s; the vast majority of station managers continued to feel that college training did not adequately prepare a student for a career in broadcasting (Taylor 59). More recently, broadcast executives asked in the 1988 Roper Survey to identify the "areas where higher education does not do a particularly good job" cited "practical knowledge" most often, followed by "hands-on experience" (Excerpts 22).

This paper will not challenge the validity of the broadcast industry's persistent complaints about broadcast education, although such a challenge has been offered by many of my colleagues.<sup>1</sup> Instead, this essay assumes that station management concerns about broadcast education are inherently valid for graduates seeking employment in the industry. There is substantial evidence that a perceived deficiency exists in the quality and quantity of practical skills exhibited by college graduates; the arguments in this paper assume that some specific actions can and should be taken to improve the impression our graduates make on prospective employers in the "real world" of broadcasting.

The focus of this paper is on one of the more common means of providing practical broadcast experience in higher education: the student-operated radio station. I argue that these stations, often seen by academic departments as administratively problematic, should not be allowed to become simply "electronic sandboxes"; they can be valuable mechanisms for delivering the practical education demanded by the industry, and therefore should be given greater emphasis in broadcast education programs. I first discuss reasons for the decline of student-operated radio stations, identifying four common problems that are preventing these stations from realizing their full potential as learning laboratories. I then offer a plan for improving the educational value of student-operated radio stations.

### **What has become of student-operated radio stations? or Who put the sand in the sandbox?**

Educational radio has been a part of American broadcasting from the beginning. Some of the earliest broadcasts originated from colleges, such as the experiments conducted at the University of Wisconsin as early as 1902 (Head and Sterling 251). In 1945, the Federal Communications Commission allocated a portion of the FM band for educational noncommercial radio stations, and three years later, started granting "Class D" licenses, very low power stations operating with as little as ten watts (Sterling and Kittross 267-268). The growth of educational radio has been remarkable; today there are over 1,400 educational FM stations, representing approximately 25% of all FM radio broadcasters (National Association of Broadcasters 1).

During the 1950s and '60s, many colleges and universities used their low power stations as training

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, the numerous responses to the Roper Survey published in the Summer, 1988 issue of *Feedback*, a publication of the Broadcast Education Association.

laboratories for students. But with the development of National Public Radio in the early '70s, the fate of Class D stations became unclear. As Head and Sterling point out:

The FCC's 1948 decision to stimulate growth of noncommercial FM by licensing stations to operate on the very low power of 10 watts proved an impediment to the growth of a strong NPR network. Several hundred low-power stations had gone on the air by the 1970s, often taking up frequencies for "electronic sandboxes" instead of giving serious broadcast training or service. Faced with growing demand for public radio licenses, the FCC in 1978 began reversing its course by ordering 10-watt stations to either raise their power to a minimum of 100 watts or assume a secondary status... (260)

Some of the low power stations went off the air, some increased power to the new minimum of 100 watts, and some took advantage of federal grants to become fully qualified for continuing support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.<sup>2</sup> Stations in this last category generally discontinued the use of student employees, dramatically reducing or eliminating the value of the stations as learning laboratories.

Where they remain in operation, student-operated radio stations have often continued to have reputations as "electronic sandboxes" where students "play radio." Even at institutions where a station is still seen as a genuine laboratory for developing practical broadcast skills, there may exist a tendency for a station to deteriorate without careful supervision. The difficult task of supervision is usually given to a faculty advisor.

The student-operated radio station poses some unique difficulties for the faculty advisor. Although a central goal of these stations is to provide students practical broadcast experience, subsidiary goals can sometimes intervene. Students, faculty and administration all bring their own agendas to bear on the station; this mix of goals is often inharmonious, which can detract from the educational experiences the station has to offer. Based on my experiences as a faculty advisor, and my observations of colleagues in similar situations, I have identified below some of the more common stumbling blocks facing faculty advisors of student-operated radio stations. These are reasons, if you will, for the sand in the sandbox.

### **Sand castle # 1: We wanna play our music!**

Students typically want to play "their music" on college radio stations; rarely is this the preferred programming choice of faculty or administration. Students take their music very seriously, and woe to the faculty advisor who takes this fervor lightly. As Allen Bloom has pointed out in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

...a very large proportion of young people between the ages of ten and twenty live for music. It is their passion; nothing else excites them as it does; they cannot take seriously anything alien to music... The continuing exposure to rock music is a reality, not one confined to a particular class or type of child. One need only ask first-year university students what music they listen to, how much of it and what it means to them, in order to discover that the phenomenon is universal in America, that it begins in adolescence or a bit before and continues through the college years. (68-75)

Although faculty advisors may wish it weren't so, music is a significant part of the lives of nearly all students. Underestimating the extent of this preoccupation is one of the more serious errors an advisor can make. I would

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<sup>2</sup> For example, KWJC, the student-operated station at William Jewell College, increased its power from 10 watts to 250 watts in 1979. The student-operated station at Northern Arizona University, where I worked as an undergraduate, increased its power from 16 watts to 100,000 watts in 1982, becoming a professionally staffed NPR station.

not suggest that students be given free reign in selecting music for air play, but care must be taken in persuading students to control their passions, and allow basic programming principles to guide music choices.

**Sand castle # 2: We must provide an alternative!**

Students often view a student-operated radio station as a medium for expressing their youthful rejection of social norms. Such students may want the station to pursue an "alternative programming philosophy," and may include in that term a disdain for commercially popular music, an open acceptance of sexually suggestive lyrics, jocular references to the drug culture, and a liberal political bias. Such a programming philosophy does not always impress the larger academic community, and in some instances has even brought the wrath of government broadcast regulators.

The concept of college radio as an alternative to commercial radio is a fairly widespread one; indeed, it forms the core programming philosophy of most NPR stations, where the most common programming staples are classical music and jazz, music rarely found on commercial stations. But what separates the philosophy of most public radio stations from the alternative philosophy at some student-operated stations is the severity of the reaction against commercial programming. The former sees itself complementing popular culture, the latter as counteracting popular culture. To the skeptic, the former is elitist and paternal, the latter is anarchist and prodigal.

The "alternative philosophy" of radio programming, however, does not provide an efficient model for learning the realities of broadcasting. It can detract from the educational experience of students by encouraging them to focus on the sources of programming, rather than on the audiences for programming. Whether someone is listening to a student-operated radio station or not is of little consequence to those subscribing to this philosophy, but such a self-serving approach would be anathema in the "real world." The philosophy is, by design, diametrically opposed to the prevalent philosophy of nearly every commercial radio (and television) station. Are the lessons the alternative philosophy teaches the ones broadcast educators want to provide students? Are they the lessons students would want to claim when they are seeking employment in the industry?

**Sand castle # 3: We demand radio freedom!**

Students sometimes view the work of faculty advisors as inhibiting their constitutional rights of freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Any attempts by the faculty advisor to place controls on programming can be seen as acts of censorship. These students may even demand that they cannot be told what to program, nor how to program, because the station is, after all, their radio station!

Although often cited, students never have a valid claim to ownership of student-operated radio stations.<sup>3</sup> In fact, no broadcast station can claim ownership of the airwaves; the "right" to broadcast is really a privilege granted for a specified time by an FCC license. Stations must regularly convince the FCC that they are operating in the "public interest, convenience and necessity" or they risk losing that privilege.

Furthermore, the broadcast media don't enjoy the same freedoms as the print media do (e.g., regulations on political broadcasting, restrictions on obscene or indecent programming, the Fairness Doctrine, etc.) and non-commercial broadcasters have even greater abridgement of their freedoms (at least with reference to commercial

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, some stations are carrier-current or closed-circuit operations, and are not required to abide by FCC regulations. But these stations would benefit from seeing their role as providers of a public service; such a perspective would provide more realistic learning experiences for students.

programming) than commercial broadcasters. Students need to learn these facts of broadcast life. If they perceive the faculty advisor to be "big brother," they should be introduced to the real "big brothers" looking over the advisor's shoulders.

#### **Sand castle # 4: It's more than I can handle!**

Some of the responsibility for the sand in the sandbox must lie with the faculty advisor. It's not that advisors put the sand in; they just generally lack a big enough shovel to get it out. In addition to the student-created obstacles already mentioned, some problems arise because of lack of adequate preparation, or are inherited from years of neglect.

Faculty advisors may have difficulties in adjusting to the multiplicity of roles required in the job. They may see the scope of the advising task as overwhelming, and often do not feel adequately compensated for it. Although they may be comfortable in classroom administration, they may lack the managerial skills required to supervise a radio station.

Faculty advisors may also find themselves in situations where there is little institutional support for improving the quality of student-operated radio stations. The school's administration may take a negative view toward the station. Budget constraints may have resulted in less-than-adequate facilities. The station may have been considered an institutional "joke" for so long that any serious effort to rectify the situation may be met with skepticism.

But no matter how hopeless a particular situation may seem, I believe a faculty advisor can make substantial progress toward improving the educational value of student-operated radio stations. Even with limited resources, an advisor who is willing to make the effort can turn the sandbox over, and build a learning laboratory of enormous potential. In the final section of this essay, I describe a plan that has worked for me. I offer it in the hopes that my colleagues may find some value in applying the concepts to their own individual advising difficulties.

### **A Plan for Improving Student-operated Radio Stations**

#### **First, take stock.**

Before one can adequately advise a student-operated station, an assessment of resources is needed. I'm not suggesting a simple inventory of equipment, although that can be a start. But a real assessment will look at the strengths and weaknesses of the student staff, the departmental/institutional support, and the faculty advisor's preparation for the job. This seems obvious, and it is; knowing one's assets and one's liabilities is important in any situation.

There are some areas that are particularly important to the faculty advisor, however, and these should be analyzed carefully and critically:

**Talent.** While student radio stations may have an abundance of character, the talents displayed by students are frequently not the ones desired by either the administration nor prospective employers. When assessing the talent of the student staff, then, the faculty advisor should assume the role of station manager. The advisor should consider whether the student staff consists of individuals who truly have the talent to succeed in a broadcasting career. When seen from this perspective, often the "talents" of the station's "crazy disk jockeys" are little more than superfluous idiosyncrasies.

**Discipline.** Any worthwhile venture benefits from a disciplined approach, but often student-operated radio stations suffer from a lack of discipline, especially when the advisor isn't looking. Do students show up on time for air shifts? Do they consistently attend the staff meetings? Do they maintain accurate records of the station's operation? Or do students seem to display a careless, "anything goes" attitude toward their work at the station?

**Dedication.** Many student-operated stations are blessed with staffs that have an esprit de corps, a strong sense of dedication to a common task. It is important to know, however, what the students are dedicated to. The camaraderie often evident at student-operated stations may simply be the result of strong interpersonal relationships, and should not be misinterpreted as reflecting a consonance with station goals. Is there a dedication to serving an audience, or serving the staff? Is there a dedication to the development of professional skills, or the determination to have fun?

**Enthusiasm.** An enthusiastic student will be able to learn a great deal in a short time. Unfortunately, enthusiasm is often a temporal quality, one that is most evident on the first (and sometimes the last) day of school. A faculty advisor should assess the initial enthusiasm of students, and seek ways to maintain a high level of enthusiasm throughout the year. Are students excited about working at the station? Are there more students wanting to work than there are available positions? Or do students exhibit a careless attitude, often failing to show up for scheduled air shifts?

**Professional aspiration.** Ideally, student-operated stations should attract people wishing to pursue a career in broadcasting. Unfortunately, this is not always the principal motivation of staff members. Some students want to impress their friends by being a "DJ," others may want to promote a particular style of music programming, and some are at the station because their boyfriend or girlfriend works there. An important question to ask of a potential staff member is: what do you hope to gain from your experiences working at the station? The faculty advisor should be aware of the real motivations of students, encouraging those with professional aspirations, while discouraging those who have little intention of extracting any educational value from their experiences working at the station.

### **Then, take action!**

Once a faculty advisor is aware of a station's unique strengths and weaknesses, it's time to take action. This can be difficult, especially if the advisor has not yet earned the respect and confidence of the student staff. At some stations, students may assume a defensive posture when an advisor attempts to invade their comfortable domain. Overcoming this "us vs. them" attitude will require some time, and perhaps some purging of the "old guard." Whatever actions are taken to improve the educational value of the student-operated station, they will be more effective if they are decisive and assertive, driven by a confident belief in the educational potential of the station.

Having identified five important areas for assessing the educational value of a student-operated station, here are some suggestions for improving upon those qualities:

**Training.** A student-operated station should have a clear methodology for educating its staff in the basics of broadcast operation. If possible, students should be required to take courses in announcing, radio programming and audio production. But much of the actual training does not occur in the classroom; students should be regularly exposed to structured learning opportunities as part of their work at the station.

Part of the weekly staff meeting time can be devoted to discussion of important skills. Students should regularly record airchecks; these can be evaluated by both advisor and peers. "Veteran" staff members should be encouraged to spend time with newer employees, introducing them to the practical techniques they have learned by experience. Orientation sessions should be carefully planned and offered at convenient times throughout the school year, not just at the start of the fall semester or quarter.

These efforts at firmly establishing the role of the station as a training laboratory should give students the clear impression that they are at the station to learn, not to play. Some students may resist this, but appeals to their vocational goals can help the advisor persuade most students to accept, and eventually appreciate, the educational value of the station. The advisor should encourage the development of truly valuable talents, ones that will merit the attention of prospective employers.

**Organization.** In most cases, a lack of discipline reflects a lack of organization. Where student-operated stations have deteriorated into "electronic sandboxes," it is often due to an unclear, vacillating infrastructure. If the advisor depends on students to organize the station themselves, the result is a structure that can experience whimsical changes as student leaders come and go.

The faculty advisor should be the major contributor to the station manual, or staff handbook. This document should be comprehensive, and regularly updated. All staff members should be familiar with the "standard operating procedures"; I have been known to give pop quizzes on the handbook at staff meetings. It is helpful to think of the handbook in the same way as one might view a syllabus; it is an outline of educational goals, a map of the route to be followed in reaching those goals, and a contract between teacher and learner.

Every organization has its leaders; the faculty advisor should develop a strong working relationship with the peer leadership of the student-operated radio station. At some stations, this may take the form of a student board of directors that shares supervisory responsibilities with the faculty advisor, while at other stations there may be a more structured hierarchy consisting of a manager, a program director, a news director, a chief announcer, and perhaps a music director. The advisor can and should demand a higher degree of discipline from those students in leadership roles, and staff members should see promotion to these positions as based on merit and maturity, not seniority or popularity.

**Vision.** Students should ideally display a dedication to the station's educational goals, but this is unlikely if these goals are not made explicit. Early in the advising process, a faculty advisor can be a driving force in shaping a vision for the station, clearly establishing the station's objectives, the reasons for its existence.

Perhaps this is best done with a "mission statement." It should be carefully and concisely written, broad enough to encompass all of the station's educational goals, yet brief and pithy. The writing should be inspirational rather than practical; it should appeal to the emotional need of students to be a part of a worthwhile enterprise. Unlike the handbook, which should be revised as necessary, the mission statement needs to be a constant, rarely tinkered with. For the value of the mission statement increases with time. As students continue to dedicate their efforts to this ideal, the mission statement can become the central part of a station's culture, the meat of its mythology.

Toward that end, the advisor can do much to promote the importance of the mission statement. The statement can be inscribed on a plaque and placed in a prominent position in the station's control room. It can be used as a discussion starter at orientation meetings and annual retreats. Excerpts can be part of a station's logo, or included

in legal ID copy. The mission statement can be printed on the station's employment applications, and prospective staff members can be asked to respond to the statement. An annual mission response statement can provide a worthwhile theme paper assignment.

Perhaps my arguments for the role of the mission statement appear a bit corny and overly sentimental. But my experience has shown that this is one of the most effective methods for improving the educational value of student-operated radio stations. It motivates students to be their best, to dedicate themselves to making the station the best it can be.

**Rewards.** Enthusiasm for working at a student-operated station is often related to the degree staff members feel rewarded. If students feel that the desired performance will consistently result in positive reinforcement, they will tend to enthusiastically seek those rewards. As one text on managerial methods puts it, "Water the performance you want to grow" (Mager and Pipe 67).

Rewards don't have to be monetary ones, and they rarely are at student-operated stations. But rewards can take the form of encouragement, peer recognition, promotion within the station, and high marks on evaluations. An annual awards ceremony can serve to honor those most deserving, and to encourage some healthy competition for the most coveted awards. Critiques of air checks and performance appraisal interviews are also effective means of providing a rewarding experience for students.

Perhaps the most relevant reward, and one that should be promoted with conspicuous regularity, occurs when former staff members successfully make their mark in the profession. It's a good idea to keep tabs on station alumni; encourage students to maintain contact with the station after graduation. Consider putting up a map of the U.S. somewhere in the station, and place colored pins on it representing where former staff members are now working. A newsletter is an inexpensive way to keep in touch with careers that began at the station. Annual alumni parties can bring back familiar faces, and provide tangible proof to present staff members that the hard work demanded by the advisor can eventually result in much greater rewards than they will ever experience as students.

**Professional philosophy.** It is not uncommon for students, faculty, administration, and even the audience to rationalize low-quality programming and amateurish station operation. "After all," I've heard many times, "they're just students. You can't expect them to be professionals!"

But that is exactly what should be expected. Students should be viewed as professionals-in-training, and to expect anything less than professional conduct severely restricts them from becoming professionals. Students should be encouraged to contribute to the station's progress, but those contributions must withstand the same challenging realities faced by other broadcast professionals. No excuses should be made; none should be accepted.

This professional philosophy should extend throughout the station's operation, including the programming strategy. Earlier I addressed some problems with the persistent demands for "alternative programming." I am not against such alternative programming per se, but there needs to be clear, defensible reasons for whatever programming decisions are made. A target audience should be defined, and steps taken to meet the programming needs of that target audience. Programming should not be done in a vacuum, but with an informed awareness of the radio market. Music should be chosen in accord with the tastes of the audience, not those of the music director. Programming should be by design, not by default.

Note that such a professional philosophy does not necessarily mean a commercial philosophy. The non-commercial nature of most student-operated stations is an inherently valuable quality. But I do not interpret non-commercial as meaning anti-commercial, and I would question those who would insist on such an interpretation. If being non-commercial means rejecting the professional standards, strategies and structures of the commercial broadcast industry, then I feel the perception of student-operated radio stations as "electronic sandboxes" will persist. If these stations are to shake off the sand, and become full members of the professional broadcast community, they should stop making excuses, and start taking serious responsibility for serving the "public interest, convenience and necessity."

### **Conclusion**

The student-operated radio station is a valuable resource for broadcast education, but in many cases, it has yet to reach its full potential for preparing students to become broadcast professionals. This is unfortunate, for (1) evidence suggests employers would prefer graduates with more practical broadcast experience, and (2) a station's reputation as an "electronic sandbox" can easily become entrenched, with little hope of achieving a position of importance in the educational goals of a department or institution. The plan presented here to improve the educational value of student-operated radio stations, while not claiming universal application, may provide some useful ideas for faculty seeking a higher quality of professional broadcast education for undergraduate students.

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