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**ABSTRACT**

This study was conducted to document and identify operational problems of college- and university-affiliated cable television stations in order to present data on problems and concerns that a college should consider before starting a cable-affiliated station. Research questions centered around four areas: organization, budget, personnel, and equipment. A questionnaire consisting of over 100 identified variables, clustered under the four primary areas of interest, was administered by telephone to 92 directors of higher education-affiliated cable stations. A total of 87 college- and university-affiliated stations were surveyed--23 private colleges and universities and 64 public institutions. Responses from directors indicated that they were concerned about: (1) inadequate funding; (2) lack of faculty and administrative support; (3) lack of equipment or maintenance relationships with the cable company; (4) administrative overload; (5) inadequate professional development opportunities; (6) student worker unreliability; (7) lack of quality equipment; and (8) inadequate physical plant. Eight recommendations are offered for higher education institutions considering developing a cable affiliated facility or improving existing facilities. A 14-item reference list completes the document. (JB)

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A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
AFFILIATED CABLE TELEVISION STATIONS

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A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION  
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Abstract

For the past 40 years television has been primarily delivered by a limiting open-air broadcasting medium. The steady establishment of cable television within communities, recent technological developments in cable carrying capacity, and the loosening of FCC regulations have all fostered the potential for rapid cable growth and utilization. With increasing market penetration, many colleges and universities have all affiliate with local or regional cable systems providing a mutually beneficial relationship for training, programming, and public access.

The purpose of the presentation will be to report upon a selective and intensive survey which focused upon documenting and identifying operational problems these affiliated stations are having in accomplishing their respective missions. Results from the study will help in providing an understanding of the current range of operations and assist other colleges and universities to examine this option in television and education.

The primary areas of interest consisted of station: (1) organization; (2) budget; (3) personnel; and (4) equipment.

The paper will concentrate on the most significant problems identified given the four primary areas of interest. The paper will also provide recommendations that may be used by higher education institutions that are considering developing a cable facility and those existing facilities looking for ways to improve.

# A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF THE OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AFFILIATED CABLE TELEVISION STATIONS

## Background

For the past 40 years, television has been primarily a broadcasting medium. Signals were transmitted from antennas located on towers and picked up by home antennas. This system limits the amount of channels that can be broadcast due to overlapping and interference. Nearly one-half of the U.S. television audience cannot receive more than six broadcast channels; many receive less and the picture quality is inferior on many of the channels (Smith, 1979).

However, cable television has the potential to end the scarcity of channels. Many existing cable systems carry 20 television channels and some up to 40 (Williams, 1982). Fiber optics developed at Bell Research Labs make possible a greatly increased channel capacity numbering into the thousands of channels (Bittner, 1981).

Further cable growth has been fostered by the elimination of some FCC regulations in 1978 by the courts (Levenson, 1980). Estimates of cable growth are that 50% of about 95 million projected households in 1995 will be purchasing cable services. In the early 1980's, cable penetration is a little over 20% of 77 million households (Williams, 1982).

Many colleges and universities have television studios and often they are affiliated with local cable systems. These studios have several purposes with the most important being the instruction and training of students. However, many of these studios also provide public access for the community to the local cable company's channels. A study is needed to determine what problems these studios are having in accomplishing their mission. Such a study would be a help in providing an understanding of the services available and assisting other colleges to examine the option in television and education.

## Purpose

This study will focus on examining college and university affiliated cable television stations and the identification of their operational problems.

The purpose of this study is to present data on problems and concerns that a college should consider before starting a cable affiliated station.

There are four research questions that will be examined by the study. These questions will center around four areas; organization, budget, personnel, and equipment. The four research questions to be answered are:

1. What organizational concerns can be identified in college and university cable affiliated stations?
2. What budget concerns can be identified in college/university cable affiliated stations?
3. What personnel concerns can be identified in college and university affiliated stations?
4. What equipment concerns can be identified in college/university cable affiliated stations?

## Methodology

Ninety-two directors or chief executives of higher education affiliated cable stations were surveyed. A developed questionnaire consisting of over 100 identified variables, clustered under the four primary areas of interest, served as a controlled protocol for the 20 to 30 minutes in-depth telephone interviews. The majority of the questions requested a reaction to a statement along a value-continuum scale. The protocol also provided the opportunity for open-ended commentary which was later synthesized given identified patterns.

The consuming method of telephone interviews proved invaluable, resulting in information not readily attainable through other research methods. The 100% participation, frankness, and enthusiastic support of this research effort by those interviewed became rapidly apparent given the unique focus of this survey - on cable systems alone. For an indepth report on the methodology and a copy of the final questionnaire used in this study see Dudt and Lamberski, 1986.

## Analyses of Demographic Information

The survey gathered information from 87 college- and university- affiliated cable stations across the United States. There were 23 private colleges and universities and 64 public colleges and universities.

The size of the institutions of higher education surveyed varied a great deal. The smallest college had an undergraduate student enrollment of 780 students and the largest university had 65,000 undergraduate students.

The graduate enrollments of the surveyed institutions varied also. Twenty-six of the colleges/universities did not offer graduate education at all while one university had 10,000 graduate students.

A slight majority of the colleges and universities surveyed had ongoing continuing education programs, 46 or 52.9%. However, there were 37 institutions that housed cable facilities that could not answer the question. These directors did not know if their institution provided continuing education.

During the discussion on continuing education (non-credit adult education) with the directors, it was noted that only one director was using the station for non-credit adult education. The 37 directors that did not answer the question were totally unaware of their institutions efforts in this area.

The institutions were divided into three demographic areas; urban, suburban and rural. An urban institution was defined as an institution that was located within the city limits of a major metropolitan center of 50,000 or more people. A suburban institution was located within a one-hour drive of a major metropolitan center, a rural institution was more than a one-hour drive from a major metropolitan center. The majority of the institutions, 49 or 56.3%, were located in rural areas.

There is a great variation in the age of the higher education affiliated television stations; one station was founded in 1957 and the late in 1984. There was a growth throughout the 1960's and 1970's with continual but slower growth in the 1980's.

Thirteen facility directors were unable to establish when their stations began. Several of the directors were new to their positions and some said that there had been so much staff turnover over the years that the date had been lost.

Generally, it takes four years once a station has been founded to become affiliated with a cable company. The earliest date for cable affiliation was found to be 1966, according to the directors surveyed, with the latest affiliation being January of 1985. There were only four directors that are

unable to identify when their stations became affiliated with the cable company.

Programming of the vast majority (97%) of the higher education affiliated cable stations is part of the basic cable fee. In other words, individuals within the community receiving cable do not generally have to pay extra to get the college's/university's cable station. There were only six colleges/universities whose programming was not included within the basic cable fee.

The basic cable fee varied for \$5 to \$23 for cable service (all dollar figures were rounded to the nearest dollar). Twenty-five of the directors or 28.7% did not know what the basic cable fee was in the community where their programming was presented to the public. It is important to note that not all programming developed by a college/university is presented on the local cable. If there was no local cable company, often the programs were carried by a nearby company in another town or city. This helps explain why the directors were unfamiliar with the price system of the cable company.

There were only six surveyed facilities that had programming whose costs were not included in the basic cable fee. Only one director knew what the additional fee was for his programming. His cable company's basic fee was \$10 to get the pay television channel that carried the facility's programming. The other five directors had their programming on pay television channels but did not know what the consumer's fee was to obtain the programming.

The population of the communities that could potentially receive the surveyed facilities programming varied greatly, ranging from the smallest at 900 to the largest at 1.5 million. There were 22 directors that did not know accurately their community's population.

A large majority of the directors (72.4%) did not know how many households were getting cable and could receive their facility's programming. The 24 directors that did know generally how many households could receive their programming gave a large range from 200 households to 170,000 households.

#### Analyses of Station-related Problems

"What organizational concerns can be identified?"

Problems areas in instructional programming, reporting relationships, cable company relationships and public access were explored.

The most serious problem faced by the directors in providing instructional programming was inadequate funding. Some of this problem was caused by the general lack of funds in higher education, but there was also a lack of faculty and administrative support for the effort in some schools. Several directors related that their administration wanted the instructional programming but were unwilling or unable to fund the efforts at the proper level. Each director also stated that within the colleges and universities there was a minority core of faculty members that were against televised instruction. It is interesting to note that nowhere did unions provide insurmountable problems in providing televised instruction or telecourses.

Although the college/university administrators gave lip service to supporting the station's programming, they did not back this up with money for equipment and personnel. This was a serious problem for the directors.

Almost all of the stations had a four-year period of growth and adjustment before they became affiliated with a local cable company. This allowed for a stabilization of staff and programming before cable casting was begun.

Although the stations had a variety of administrative models, there were generally few problems in day-to-day management. The chain of command and the

power structure were not usually perceived as a problem. A few problems arose, however, when the source of funding conflicted with the day-to-day workload. This was especially true when the station was attached to an academic department and the station received its funds directly from the administration instead of through the department.

Generally there were few problems in the higher education cable stations relationship with the cable company. Once the cable channel has been provided, most cable companies have a "hands-off" approach. There are two problems that directors warned of: one -- do not share the channel with another programming source and two -- do not rely on the cable company for upgrading or maintenance of equipment.

Sharing the channel with another programming source creates problems for the higher education station according to the directors and very few still have a shared channel. Sharing the channel limits the station on when it can program and often causes a very uncomfortable competitive atmosphere. If the shared programming is popular, several directors stated, then the local public asked the cable company to provide more of the programming and less of the college's programming. One college station lost its channel due to this problem.

Most of the higher education affiliated cable stations do not have a functioning advisory board even though there is an advisory board "on paper." Most of the directors do not recognize a need to have an active advisory board.

Unless the higher education's affiliated station's programming is popular in the community, the cable company will not upgrade equipment or provide any type of maintenance. Most higher education directors do not have an equipment or maintenance relationship with the cable company.

Providing public access to the community is not generally a problem for the station. Most directors believed the benefits outweigh the problems. Public access affords an opportunity to provide realistic productions and programming experience for students.

"What budget concerns can be identified?"

Many directors believed that the college/university administrations wanted the station to provide more services than they were willing or able to pay for. Funding is a problem that some directors were unable to solve. The directors believed that they had a constant problem in educating the administration on the high cost of television.

Generally speaking, the cable companies have no, or relatively few, financial commitments to the station. The service that they most often provide is wiring and the transmission of the station's signal to the head end.

Most of the higher education affiliated cable stations only cable cast on the local cable system. Only four higher education facilities had developed linkage with other cable companies.

"What personnel concerns can be identified?"

The largest problem that the directors faced was that they had too many additional responsibilities besides the station's operations. Many directors were also teaching faculty members and were given a one course teaching load reduction. Several directors stated that this was not enough of a reduced teaching load. Many directors also complained that there were not enough professional staff to oversee the work load and this created a heavy reliance on students. The reliance on students also caused some problems getting work done

in a professional and timely manner.

The heavy time demands placed on the directors also caused problems with professional development. Several directors stated that they were not current in the latest developments in the television field. Care must be taken by these colleges/universities to prevent this from happening.

"What equipment concerns can be identified?"

The biggest problem that the directors had was a lack of equipment. The large number of students working at many of the stations created a need for more equipment than the university expected. Common equipment components that were needed were: remote equipment (switches, cameras, lights) and more editing facilities.

Important components were often missing and the quality was not at a desired level for many directors. Often the colleges/universities bought the equipment that they believed would minimally do the job. This equipment would then prove incapable of providing the technical quality expected. There was also a tendency to not buy new equipment soon enough and some directors were using equipment that was either worn out or outdated.

A lesser equipment problem that many directors faced was inadequate physical plant. Little or no air conditioning, low ceilings or high noise levels from the studio were common problems.

### Recommendations

This study provides information that may be used by higher education institutions that are considering developing a cable affiliated facility and those existing facilities looking for ways to improve. Recommendations 1-3 offer suggestions for planning and 5-10 suggest ways to developing the station.

1. A newly formed higher education facility should not immediately become affiliated with a cable company. Most existing facilities took four years from creation to cable affiliation. This time period allows the station staff to develop procedures, personnel and gain production experience. This conflicts with Zoglin (1981) who believes that a cable channel must be obtained before higher education makes a commitment.
2. A higher education affiliated facility should have complete control of its channel. This channel should carry only programs that are approved by the higher education institution. This action will ensure the station's programming does not compete with programming from other professional sources. Highly popular commercial entertainment has caused at least two stations to lose their channel to higher rated programs when the general public asked the cable company for more entertainment.
3. Create a functional advisory board and use it to develop a clear mission statement. Clemens (1980) has developed clear purposes for the advisory board. Most existing stations do not use advisory boards for long-range planning or to help in solving the major problems. This involvement of the community can help improve the public relations of the college (Clinton, 1981; Zoglin, 1981).
4. Develop a close relationship with the college/university administration. Many administrators do not understand the complexities of television and its

production; this lack of understanding often causes a lack of support. Many directors also believed that their facility was not getting its fair share of existing college/university resources. This may also be due to a general unawareness of the possibilities television offers (Carpenter-Huffman, Kletter and Yin, 1971).

5. Involve other faculty members in the stations operations. This increased involvement by higher education faculty benefits both the faculty and the station. Faculty benefit by having an outlet for research (Kichi, 1979) and an avenue for public service (Clinton, 1981). The higher education station benefits by the energy and input of the faculty members.

6. Develop linkages with other nearby cable companies. This would expand the influence of the station and the college/university. Few of the facilities surveyed were programming on more than one cable system. According to Zoglin (1981), this might create tension with the cable company; however, this researcher does not agree. Most cable companies do not have a large commitment to the college cable station and its programming. This finding agrees with Comanor and Mitchell, (1971).

7. Purchase the best quality equipment possible. The cable station will be on the dial with commercial stations and noticeably poorer technical quality will hurt the stations professional image. Audiences expect quality production (Brown, 1975; Turek, 1979) and the college/university must make this commitment to be successful.

8. The college/university should hire a full-time director. Currently, the station directors are forced to wear too many hats; teachers, administrators and production coordinators. This has led to staff turnover, a heavy reliance on students and inadequate ongoing professional staff development. Most directors are now working on one half or one quarter release time from other duties.

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