University of Vermont

Center for Community News

The Surprising Breadth of Student Reporting in Public Media

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Key Findings

The Center for Community News at UVM launched this project to identify the breadth of college student involvement at local public media stations, as well as the potential for more collaboration.

CCN combined FCC data, original research and outreach to stations to map the extraordinary overlap between America's colleges and its public media outlets – overlap in mission, skills and physical infrastructure.

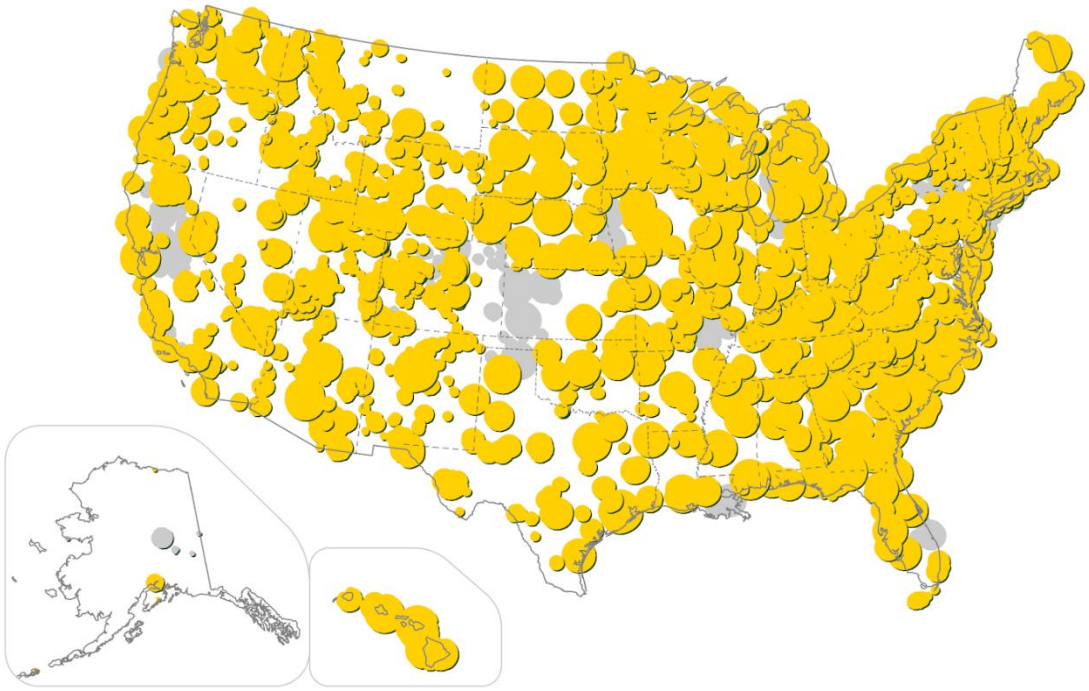
Both institutions have long served as pillars of our democracy, but there's more to this story: their collaboration can amplify impact and promote long-term sustainability.

At a time when both public media and universities are under attack, our research shows surprising breadth and scope of college student journalism at public media organizations:

- **88 percent** of public media organizations provide opportunities for college students to help cover their community (282 of 319 NPR and/or PBS affiliates).
- **59 percent** of public media organizations provide intensive, regular, and ongoing opportunities for college students (188 of 319 stations).
- Many public media organizations (41 of 319) make teaching students their core mission - **13 percent** of local stations are "teaching hospitals" for journalism.
- Students at public media organizations serve rural, suburban and urban audiences, many in news deserts. Public radio signals reach **over 95 percent** of Americans.
- **50 percent** of all public media organizations are licensed to a college or university (161 of 319 stations).
- Even more student journalists could contribute to public media organizations through deeper news-academic partnerships involving both internships and in-class production.

Mapping the Data

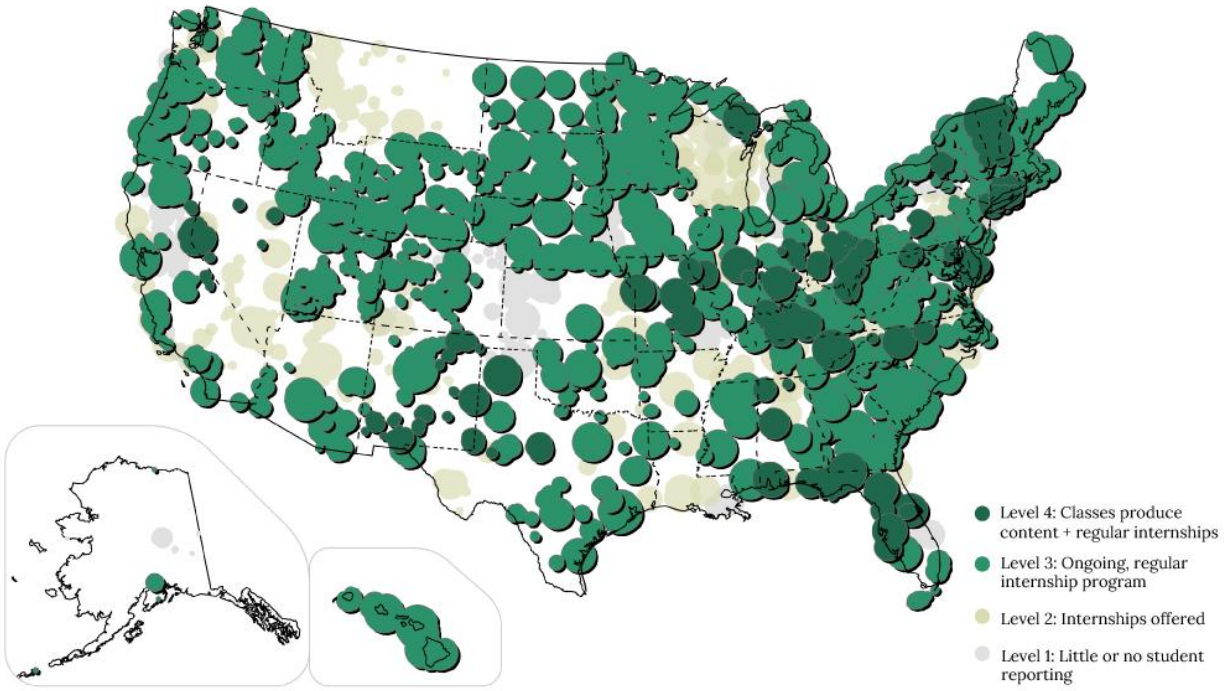
88 percent of NPR stations provide opportunities for college students to cover their community, representing 91 percent of the U.S. population.



Each circle represents the area served by a local NPR station signal.

- The **gold circles** represent stations that give college students the opportunity to help cover their local community.
- The **grey circles** are stations with little or no student engagement.

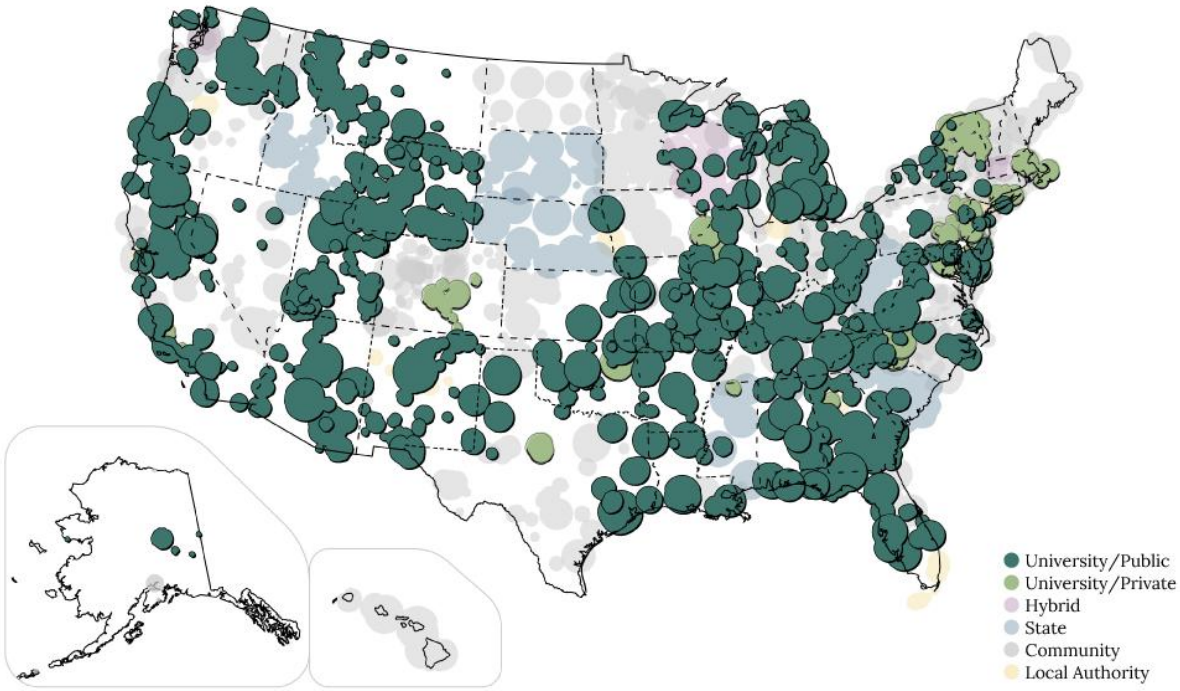
59 percent of public media organizations provide intensive, regular and ongoing opportunities for college students (Levels 3 and 4 on the map)



Each circle represents the area served by a local NPR station signal.

- The **dark green circles** are stations with the highest level of student involvement.
- The **light green circles** are stations with a high level of student involvement.
- The **light yellow circles** are stations with some student involvement.
- The **grey circles** are stations with little or no student involvement.

50 percent of public media organizations are licensed by a college or university.



Why It Matters

Access to reliable, trustworthy local reporting is an essential ingredient in thriving communities. The presence of a local news outlet is correlated with high voter turnout and strong civic attachment (Pew Research), robust and competitive elections (Urban Affairs Review), and less partisan voting habits (MIT Sloan School of Management).

Successful communities have local news outlets that are by and for the people who live there. At its best, local news helps establish a shared baseline of verifiable truths. It holds powerful people and institutions to account. And it cultivates a common identity and distinct sense of place.

Local public media organizations are uniquely positioned to strengthen America's civic infrastructure, especially when they join forces with colleges and universities.

Public media organizations are locally controlled and governed. They reach more than 95 percent of the nation's population and are located in every corner of America.

As other local news outlets decline, public media can fill critical information gaps in their communities. When they work with college students, stations have the potential to do even more.

Thriving Collaborations with Room for Growth

Local public media organizations play a large and underappreciated role in the training and education of college students, according to our research.

Discussions of public media often focus on national news and education programs. This ignores the key roles the 319 NPR and PBS stations play in their local communities in emergency services, local news, and education.

Local public media organizations are independent from the national networks, governed by local universities, nonprofits, and governments. They also are extremely diverse, from tiny stations serving Alaskan villages to massive news and education producers in our largest cities.

In addition to distributing national PBS and NPR content, these organizations have local service missions tailored to meet community needs, including local news.

At more than 200 NPR affiliates, approximately 3,000 journalists produce local news (NPR), as do many PBS stations. Between 2011 and 2018, NPR affiliates grew their newsrooms by an estimated 1,000 reporters (Federation of American Scientists).

As other local news sources are in decline, public media organizations have attempted to step into the breach. Local stations are eager to fill the local news vacuum but lack the resources to do it (Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School). Eliminating federal funding to public media would make it even harder for these stations to cover local news - especially in news deserts.

Meanwhile, colleges and universities have increased their efforts to help students cover local communities, as newspapers have declined. The Center for Community News has documented the growth of news-academic partnerships. CCN identified 227 programs in 2025: a 27 percent increase over the year before (CCN 2025 Impact Report).

We asked the question, how much overlap is there between these two trends? How common is it for academia and public media to work together to inform local communities?

It turns out, extremely common, with almost nine out of 10 public media stations providing opportunities for college students to serve their community.

This is a striking statistic. In almost every corner of America, college students can receive real-world experience at their local public media station.

Some of this is because of who licenses and controls local public media stations. About half are licensed to a college or university, giving them access to students and motivation to participate in their success.

Still, many stations that are not university licensees are providing these opportunities for students. Whether governed by a community board, tribal council, or state government, these stations still see the benefits of student involvement.

Different Forms of Student Opportunities at Public Media Stations

The most common opportunity provided by local stations is internships. About 88 percent sponsor at least occasional internships, while 59 percent have a regular, sustained internship program.

Interns most commonly help produce news, but they also work in production (audio and video) and other departments.

Often, these internships are supported and supervised by station staff, with no additional compensation from the college or university.

For these internships to succeed, dependability is important. The more regular the internship, the better the experience for students and the station.

Some stations have developed content-creation partnerships with college faculty. These faculty have been deputized as editors for the public media station, producing everything from Instagram reels to half-hour news magazines for stations.

We see potential to increase this type of class-based content partnership. The station receives content it otherwise could not produce, and student work reaches a broad local audience.

About 13 percent of stations see educating college students as their primary local service mission. Like a teaching hospital, these stations serve the community while training dozens or even hundreds of students each year.

Recommendations

Local public media organizations are already important stakeholders in news-academic partnerships nationwide. One recommendation is to recognize and celebrate the important work they do with college students.

We shouldn't take for granted that public media stations can continue to sponsor student journalists. Among the 12 percent of stations who don't sponsor interns, several blamed budget cuts for the elimination of their program.

In fact, there is much room for growth. Internships are not the only way for students to contribute to local news.

Today, only 13 percent of stations regularly air or publish class-produced student journalism - despite it being the easiest way to increase student-produced content in public media.

Programs with the deepest student involvement collaborate directly with classes where faculty provide edited content that meets public media standards. Their stories also bring something new to public media audiences - perspectives they would otherwise have missed.

Also, students can help stations look beyond the broadcast and reach new audiences on digital platforms. Some stations lack the staff to consistently post on these platforms. College classes could fill that need.

The most successful news-academic partnerships involve resources and buy-in from both sides. They have dedicated faculty and staff committed to the partnership's success.

Meanwhile, colleges and universities would be wise to partner with public media organizations. It is difficult to stand up a new local news outlet and build an audience for it. Public media organizations have the reputation and infrastructure to reach local communities today.

Public media organizations and universities both have extensive donor networks to tap for sustainable support for these programs. They can attract donors from both worlds interested in the future of journalism and democracy.

As both academia and public media come under attack, these news-academic partnerships make even more sense than before. Working together, they can help reverse the decline of local news while providing students with real-life learning opportunities.

Student Journalism Takes Many Forms at Public Media Organizations

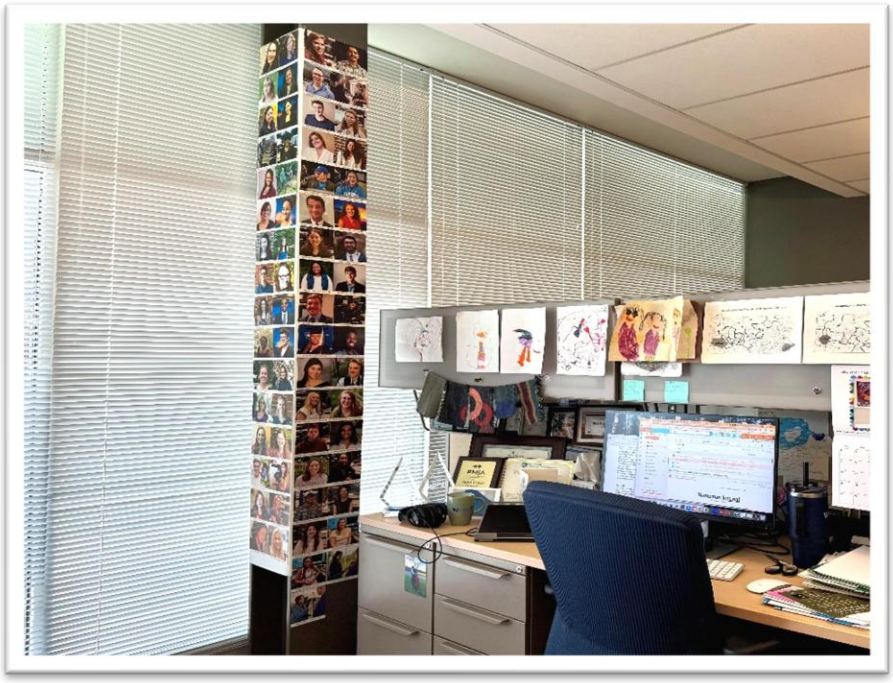
College students are involved in a variety of ways at public media stations. We conducted dozens of interviews with station leaders and faculty to better understand how these partnerships work.

The best way to appreciate the impact of student journalism at these stations is through their stories. The following stories help illustrate how and why different public media organizations partner with colleges and universities.

A Pillar of Support

Public media station: WPSU

College/university partner: Penn State University, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications



WPSU news director Emily Reddy is running out of room for photos of her former Penn State interns. Photo Emily Reddy, WPSU

Program Description:

A 10-foot column of photos rises above Emily Reddy's desk. Each picture is an intern she's mentored over the past 16 years.

"I'm running out of space," said the WPSU news director. "I'll have to find a new place to put them."

These photos are a testament to the ongoing, accumulated impact of WPSU's internships. In news, WPSU sponsors a graduate assistant and 2-3 interns every semester. There are other opportunities for interns in video and digital production.

Reddy supervises the interns, who mostly come from Penn State's Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications.

These interns are paid, thanks to individual donations, Giving Tuesday campaigns and Community Service Work Study funding. Two WPSU donors created endowments to make sure internships were supported into the future.

"We always identify interns on the air," Reddy said. "A lot of listeners are educators. They like to see the progress of our reporters on-air."

In addition to internships, WPSU-TV serves as an important platform to distribute a class-produced show. Centre County Report is a potential model for other collaborations: led by Penn State faculty and staff, produced by students, and distributed through WPSU.

WPSU plans to continue expanding opportunities for student journalism, despite budget cuts from the university and the potential loss of federal funding. The Bellisario school recently hired an editor to help more student-produced news reach the larger community, including through WPSU. Reddy was on the hiring committee.

"This Is Authentic Learning"

Public media station: Central Florida Public Media

College/university partners: University of Central Florida, Nicholson School of Communication and Media



University of Central Florida professor Rick Brunson with CFPM news director LaToya Dennis. Brunson recently took a semester sabbatical to work as a reporter for Central Florida Public Media. Photo Rick Brunson

Program Description:

Usually, it's the students who work at a public media station. But recently, a faculty member at the University of Central Florida spent an entire semester working in the newsroom of Central Florida Public Media (CFPM).

Journalism professor Rick Brunson was looking for a chance to keep his reporting skills sharp. UCF agreed to pay his salary to work there, full time.

"Rick could have gone anywhere, but he wanted to partner with Central Florida Public Media on this to better equip his students," said LaToya Dennis, CPFM news director.

CFPM is licensed to a community board, not the University of Central Florida. But Dennis says the station sees value in working with the university, faculty like Brunson, and its student journalists. Brendan Byrne, Central Florida Public Media assistant news director, is also an adjunct instructor at UCF.

Every semester, CFPM offers at least two unpaid internship positions in their newsroom. One focuses on reporting while the other focuses on show production, specifically *Are We There Yet?,* a podcast and radio show focused on space which Byrne hosts and produces.

The station also partners with a UCF class on a project called "Sounds of Central Florida."

Early in the semester, students are paired to work on a non-narrated audio story exploring what it sounds like to live in Central Florida. They pitch their story to the CFPM news team, which gives students feedback on how to shape the piece. The strongest stories are broadcast and put up on CFPM's website.

"The work that they produce, this is authentic learning," said Brunson, who has previously taught the course himself. "Thousands of people hear you or read your work, and it matters."

Recently, two "Sounds of Central Florida" stories won local news awards.

"As an audio guy, that just really makes my heart skip a beat," Brunson said.

Small Station, Big Student Impact

Public media station: Delmarva Public Media

College/university partners: University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Salisbury University



UMES student journalist Sydney Rutledge-Smith interviewing Gov. Wes Moore, D-Md. Photo courtesy Delmarva Public Media

Program Description:

Delmarva Public Media only has 12 employees, but it looks a lot bigger, thanks to its student journalism program.

Delmarva stands for Delaware, Maryland and Virginia, and the station serves all three, centered around Chesapeake Bay.

The station is licensed to two institutions: Salisbury University and University of Maryland Eastern Shore, a historically Black land-grant university.

The station works closely with both schools to provide students with a variety of experiences: classes, internships for credit, federal work study jobs, and volunteer opportunities.

Students produce an award-winning weekly newscast called “The Five-Minute Fly-By.” The station also created the Intergenerational Beats Initiative, which pairs a student journalist with a professional one and together, they cover a beat in the community.

This partnership has grown over the last several years, according to Bryan Russo, Chief of Content and Operations for Delmarva Public Media. Russo started by developing relationships with the faculty at both schools.

The first collaboration was with Salisbury University’s Environmental Studies Program. Russo taught senior seminar students how to produce an hour-long audio documentary. Later, he became an adjunct professor at University of Maryland Eastern Shore teaching audio journalism.

Russo said the student initiatives help prove their station’s worth to university administrators. They also allow the station to cover more of the Delmarva peninsula.

“The students are helping us grow and improve our offerings to the community without breaking our small and frugal operating budget,” Russo said.

Professionally Supervised, Student-Powered

Public media station: WOUB

College/university partners: Ohio University, Scripps College of Communication



Ohio University students hosting NewsWatch on WOUB. Photo Ohio University

Program description:

The number of college students who walk through the doors of WOUB on a weekly basis outnumber the entire staff of some public media stations.

“A lot of students – journalism majors, broadcast meteorology majors, media production majors, visual communication majors – they come and they volunteer,” said Atish Baidya, editor in chief of the WOUB newsroom. By “a lot,” he means 75 students in the past year.

WOUB is a university licensee, as a non-academic unit of the Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University. Its television and radio broadcasts reach parts of Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

Students contribute to all aspects of the multiplatform newsroom, with stories going to the web, radio, and television. For example, they produce NewsWatch, a nightly TV newscast. The half-hour program airs Monday through Friday, and includes news, weather, and sports.

Students also produce a weekly high school football TV show, Gridiron Glory, in the fall and then produce Hardwood Heroes, a high school basketball show, in the spring. They make a radio sports talk show called SportsBeat, as well as a news and information podcast called The Outlet.

“They're getting the skills introduced in the classes, and they have an opportunity to experience, to practice them more here at WOUB,” Baidya said.

The majority of students volunteer their time, though some with higher levels of involvement at WOUB are paid for their work.

Last year, students created approximately 500 news and sports articles for WOUB’s website, nearly 100 hours of television news programming, and close to 40 hours of audio programming for radio and podcast distribution.

“We like to say we are a professionally-supervised, student-powered operation,” Baidya said.

A Symbiotic Relationship

Public media station: KUNR

College/university partner: University of Nevada, Reno, Reynolds School of Journalism



University of Nevada, Reno student Kat Fulwider, reporting from Costa Rica for KUNR. Photo KUNR

Program Description:

KUNR Public Radio is an integral part of the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno. It's the result of years of collaboration, according to KUNR General Manager Brian Duggan.

"We have symbiotic goals," Duggan said. "Dean Gi Yun, and prior to him, Dean Al Stavitsky, worked as partners with KUNR to build our capacity as a 'teaching hospital' for the Reynolds School."

Between 3 - 4 interns each semester report on politics, local government, education and more. They work directly with KUNR's managing editor, Vicki Adame, who also recruits these students from the Reynolds School.

“They are, in effect, members of our newsroom who are learning the ropes of readers, features, audio editing and pitching stories,” Duggan said.

In addition to internships, the Reynolds School has professor-led practicums that directly partner with KUNR. These practicum classes develop reporting projects for KUNR’s website and on-air, under the guidance of KUNR’s managing editor.

KUNR supports their interns through a variety of funding sources, including donors who specifically want to support KUNR’s internship program.

“We have two donors who provide funding for two positions each semester because they are deeply committed to training journalists to sustain the future of democracy,” Duggan said.

KUNR also benefits from various endowments at the Reynolds School that directly support students working in journalism. Its longest-standing relationship is with the Reynolds School’s Hitchcock Project for Visualizing Science, which supports a reporting intern who covers science-related topics in their region.

“KUNR’s audience directly benefits from the work that students produce, while the Reynolds School is able to highlight a successful pipeline for students seeking careers in journalism,” Duggan said.

All-in on the "Missouri Method"

Public media station: KBIA

College/university partners: University of Missouri, Missouri School of Journalism



University of Missouri student Katie Quinn won an award for reporting on "Save a Life," an event on overdose prevention hosted by KBIA. Photo University of Missouri

Program Description:

Since 1908, journalism students at the University of Missouri have been learning by doing. They call it the Missouri Method.

Students report on central Missouri for five news outlets operated by the University of Missouri. They include a local newspaper, a commercial TV station, and the local NPR affiliate, KBIA.

KBIA news director Stan Jastrzebski is "all-in" on the Missouri Method.

"Give students the respect to treat them as full journalists," Jastrzebski said, and they will rise to the challenge.

Sources are more likely to respond to a student's request when it is for a KBIA story, and not just an in-class assignment.

"It helps students get access to people they otherwise might not be able to reach," he said.

In addition to being news director, Jastrzebski is an Assistant Professor and researcher in the J-school. He and all of his six journalists edit and mentor students as part of their job.

Several classes produce stories for KBIA, and the station recently created volunteer opportunities for students to receive even more hands-on experience.

Jastrzebski likens Mizzou's J-school to a teaching hospital.

"The goal is making new doctors, as well as saving patients," he said, much like KBIA trains new journalists while covering the community.

Missouri's journalism school is the world's oldest, and one of the largest, but Jastrzebski says any university can engage students in covering their communities.

Setting up the program takes time and effort, he said. But with good processes in place, it gets easier.

"No matter where you are, you can always find talented students who want to become public media journalists," Jastrzebski said. "You can always work them into your newsroom."

On Campus, for the Community

Public media station: WEMU

College/university partners: School of Communication, Media and Theatre Arts at Eastern Michigan University



Eastern Michigan University student Josh Nieman scanning CDs into the WEMU database. Photo WEMU

Program Description:

WEMU is a public broadcasting service of Eastern Michigan University. It is not a campus radio station, but a community-facing NPR affiliate.

Mary Motherwell, the General Manager of WEMU in Ypsilanti, MI, said this distinction is important.

“Public broadcasters are not student stations,” she said. “They are community stations that give students an opportunity to learn about professional broadcasting.”

At WEMU, that's exactly what happens. Up to 5 students from Eastern Michigan University join the station as paid employees, helping the permanent staff of 19 with the behind-the-scenes work that keeps the station running.

The station also awards an annual broadcast scholarship for sports reporting, since WEMU carries EMU football and basketball.

Meanwhile, students in Professor Sadaf Ali's radio & TV newswriting course get the chance to air their work on WEMU. Through various multimedia assignments, students hone their broadcast writing and interviewing skills.

"It's becoming more and more challenging," said Sadaf. "The newer generations don't consume as much news, they watch a lot of things online, they watch TikTok. So, this concept of writing a professional piece is really difficult for them sometimes, but we work through it."

At the end of the semester, students put their pens to the test with a final project that could be broadcast to WEMU's audience of more than 50,000 regular listeners.

"You always want to develop the next generation of public broadcasters," Motherwell said. "And more than anything, the impact for the students here is to understand the purpose and importance of public broadcasting."

On Mission and Good Business

Public media station: Illinois Public Media

College/university partners: University of Illinois, College of Media



University of Illinois student journalists Charrice Jones and Vivian La reporting at Illinois Public Media studios. Photo Illinois Public Media

Program Description:

To Moss Bresnahan, developing student journalists is both on-mission and good business for Illinois Public Media.

“We want to focus on our core values,” the executive director said. They’re part of a land grant university, where their mission is the broad dissemination of knowledge and training students.

“It also happens to be cost efficient,” Bresnahan said.

The station hosts up to 60 students a year in news and video production. They power the Illinois Student Newsroom, where student journalists from the University of Illinois College of Media work side-by-side with media professionals to produce award-winning community news.

They also help produce “The 21st Show,” a weekday radio program distributed throughout the state, said Reginald Hardwick, the station’s news and public affairs director.

Hardwick sees another benefit to the work they do. His student journalists come from a variety of backgrounds. Many choose to become journalists after they graduate, and some stay in public media.

“This is a way to build a pipeline from all backgrounds,” Hardwick said.

Methods and Definitions

Our goal was to document college student involvement at local public media organizations in the U.S. We use the term "station" interchangeably with "organization." Both refer to a locally-controlled legal entity broadcasting to a limited geographic area. Most stations operate several transmitters to broadcast their signal.

For the purposes of this report, we focused on stations who are affiliates of either national public media network, PBS and/or NPR. We did not include student-run college radio stations or other community broadcasters who are not part of the NPR and/or PBS network.

Our data comes from three sources. First, we reviewed the reports each station is required to file annually with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). These files include employment data, and often stations describe internships here.

Next, we reviewed the websites of all 319 PBS and/or NPR affiliates, looking for evidence of college student involvement. We also reviewed the Center for Community News database of news/academic partnerships for public media involvement.

Based on this research, we placed every station in one of four levels of student involvement at the public media organization:

1. Little or no student reporting that we could document
2. Internships are offered, no formal partnerships with universities, periods without interns working in newsroom
3. Regular, formal internships, with interns working year-round or nearly so; often there is a formal agreement with one or more colleges or universities
4. University classes produce content for the public media organization in addition to regular internships

Finally, we sent an email to the main contact for each station, providing the information we found for their station and asking for clarification. We also paid for an advertisement in the Public Media Journalists Association newsletter, asking station news leaders to review their information. We incorporated this feedback into our database.

The maps in our report depict the general service area for NPR-affiliate stations. We chose not to include PBS-affiliate stations in these maps because of substantial overlap with NPR stations that would make them difficult to read and understand.

NPR-affiliate stations were identified using licensee data in the FCC's Licensing and Management System (LMS) database. The base contours are derived from FCC FM Service Contour Data Points.

Because the underlying FCC model is approximately 75 years old, it systematically underestimates the coverage achievable by modern, more sensitive receivers. To correct for this bias, a 10-mile buffer was applied to each contour, creating a more realistic footprint of the potential listenable area, including fringe zones. This footprint remains a generalized model, as actual reception will vary based on local terrain, obstructions, and user equipment. Population estimates were derived from the 2020 U.S. Census.

Corrections and Additions

We will update our work as we learn more about news/academic partnerships in public media. To correct or amend any details in this report, our maps or our database, contact Scott Finn: scott.finn@uvm.edu

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About the Author

Scott Finn is public media advisor for UVM's Center for Community News, which documents and builds news/academic partnerships between local media organizations and colleges and universities. Finn also teaches UVM classes that produce journalism for news outlets throughout Vermont.

Finn has worked in local journalism for 25 years, first as a reporter and news director in West Virginia and Florida, and more recently as the leader of two local public media organizations: West Virginia Public Broadcasting and Vermont Public.