

Building Synergy: Public Radio and Universities

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THE UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT
**CENTER FOR
COMMUNITY NEWS**

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Introduction

Public radio broadcast signals reach nearly 99% of the U.S. population. Public media is ubiquitous, free to listeners, and independent of shareholder pressures. In that vast network of public airwaves, there are more than 180 university-licensed public media radio stations. And yet, most of those stations do not have reliable reporting partnerships with their host universities.

[The Center for Community News](#) has seen firsthand how partnerships between public media and colleges can be impactful in communities; together, providing a sustainable and trustworthy source of local news for the long term, and reinforcing a culture of civic engagement across generations.

With this study, CCN sought to understand how public media stations are working with their local universities today, and what the obstacles are to creating stronger collaborations. A network of public media-academic partnerships across the country can help rebuild a more sustainable future for local news. CCN wanted to know what it would take to get there.

About the Center for Community News

The Center's mission is to document college and university programs where student reporting is contributing local news in partnership with local media organizations or sometimes in college run newsrooms. Local news is more than just a trusted source of critical information; it's an essential ingredient in a healthy democracy. Communities with dedicated local news organizations report higher levels of civic engagement, social cohesion, and effective problem-solving. The Center is focused on bringing together the skills of students and faculty and the resources of colleges and universities to address the local news crisis. The Center is funded by the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#), the [UVM College of Arts & Sciences](#), and individual donors.

Any corrections or additions should be sent to Hannah Kirkpatrick at hkirkpat@uvm.edu. We welcome comments and suggestions.

Key Findings

Based on CCN's survey of 95 public radio stations in 38 states:

- More than three quarters of public radio stations in the survey reported some level of student involvement.
- More than three quarters of current public radio-university involvement is limited to traditional internships.
- About half of the public radio respondents broadcast student-reported stories that are edited by faculty or staff.
- Only about 10 of the stations in the survey regularly partner with classes at a local university.
- 91% of public radio stations want to collaborate more with local universities.

In their open-ended responses, public radio stations listed primary obstacles to expanding collaboration with universities, including:

- Cost
- Not enough staff to oversee student reporting
- Inadequate institutional support from their university

Takeaways

Demand for more public radio-academic collaboration is high.

Public radio stations recognize the benefits of onboarding young reporters and working collaboratively with their local universities. They want more of it.

The old systems aren't working.

Traditional internships have not forged close relationships between public radio stations and their local universities, or established student reporting as a fixture in public newsrooms. To formalize these partnerships and create sustainable pipelines of student reporting, universities need to lead by creating formal programs that are woven into course offerings, with dedicated faculty attention.

The field is ripe for growth.

At least 182 public radio licenses are already associated with universities, and these stations are enthusiastic about greater collaboration. With this infrastructure already in place, and several successful programs already serving as models, the potential for growth is high.

Current Levels of Collaboration between Public Radio and Universities

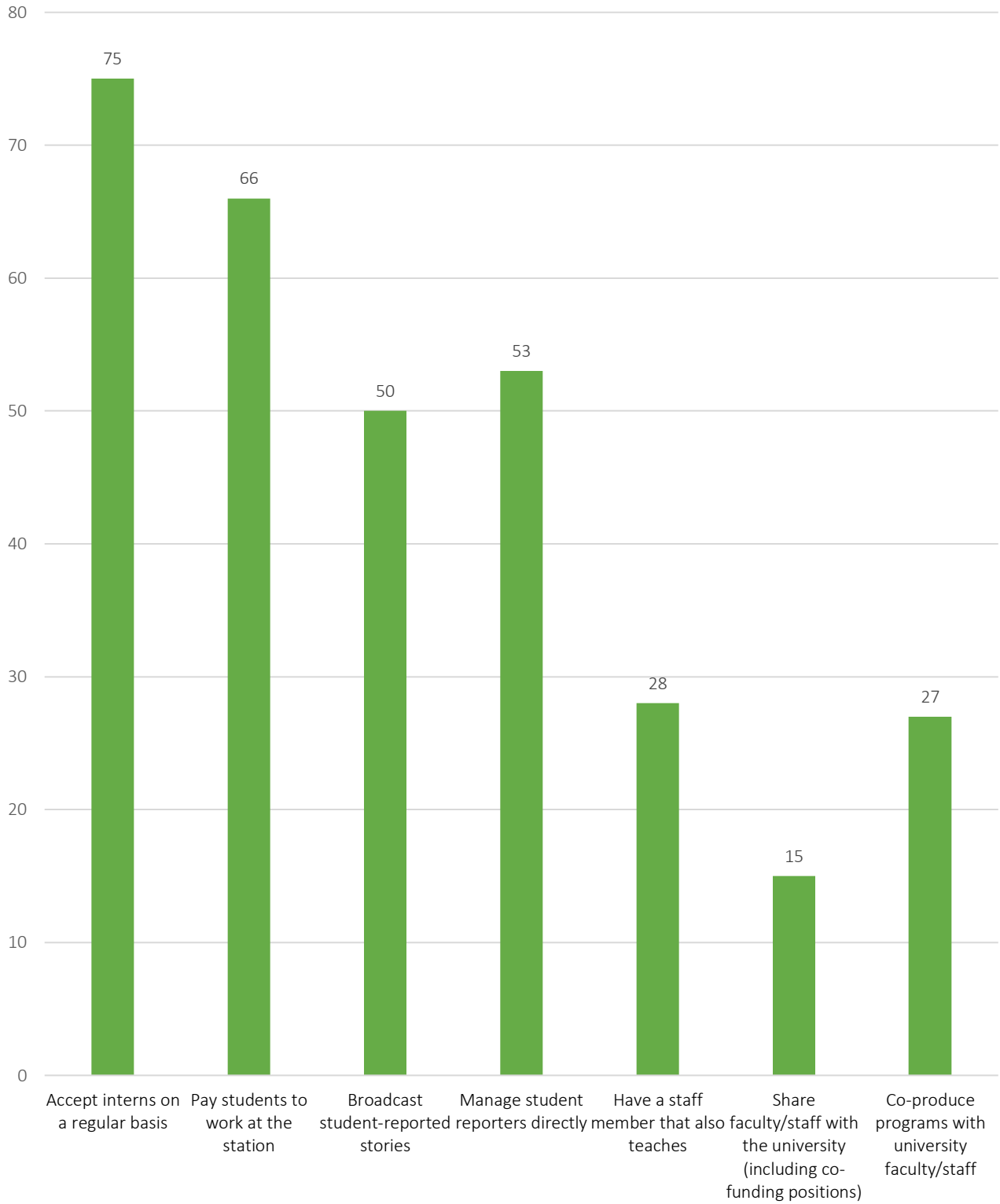


Table 1: Current Levels of Collaboration between Public Radio and Universities. n=95 partnerships

Potential for Growth

There are 182 public radio stations licenses associated with universities. In many cases these stations are co-located on university campuses. Although there are striking examples of public radio stations leveraging the resources of their host university to expand local news, many stations do not have deep collaborations with their university licensee.

Given the growth in news-academic partnerships, and the interest by some universities to contribute to local news, this report seeks to examine obstacles and opportunities for greater synergy between university licensees (or other public radio stations) and universities.

For this report, CCN focused specifically on partnerships between public radio outlets and university-led reporting programs. Under this model, universities take the lead in managing, mentoring, and supporting students; rather than rely on the traditional internship model of placing a student intern in a public radio station that is managed by the station. Here, university-hired professionals edit and guide student work, ensuring that all reporting adheres to professional journalism standards and ethics.

Types of Collaborations

CCN has identified three types of public radio-university collaborations. In each of these, the university leads student reporting and contributes resources.

Collaborations managed by a university journalism program

The first and the highest impact collaboration model is one in which the public radio stations are directly managed by university journalism programs. This includes [KBIA](#) at the University of Missouri, [WUFT](#) at the University of Florida, and [WAER](#) at Syracuse University. In these cases, faculty, often called “professionals in the practice” directly manage students who report for the station, expanding local news and providing applied learning experiences for students.

Collaborations managed by a faculty member

A second model is one in which the university hires faculty to manage students who report for a local public radio station. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for example, the university hired a faculty member who has taken student-produced and aired stories on [Illinois Public Media](#) from a handful to more than 300 a year. The professor acts as the editor and coordinator, teaching classes that provide the station with content. Several other universities do likewise. These faculty liaise with the station, produce content to be aired, and edit and vet the student work to ensure it meets professional standards.

Other variations: ad hoc partnerships, internships, etc.

The third category is a broad range of partnerships and collaborations, from single classes that work with a local public radio station over the course of a semester to produce professional content, to managed internship programs. For example, the University of Colorado Boulder has offered a special projects course created by the Boulder Reporting Project and the university's Center for Environmental Journalism. For this course, students collaborated with [KUNC](#), the public radio station in northern Colorado, and The Conversation to report on the Marshall Fire's health impacts during the aftermath.

Success Stories

Collaborations between public radio stations and universities are helping to fill critical gaps in local news reporting and they are expanding the breadth of topics covered around the country. Here are just a few of the successes CEN has identified.

- In 2021, Illinois public radio broadcast more than 350 student stories – generated and mentored through the student newsroom at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The partnership took a leap forward when the University hired its first “clinical” teaching professor in the fall of 2020. Students learn in a professional setting while still operating under the mentorship of faculty and delivering local content to Illinois Public radio is core to the classes.
- Abilene Christian University in Abilene, Texas has had a thirty-seven year partnership with local NPR-affiliate radio station, [KACU 89.5](#) Abilene Public Radio. Paid student interns are trained to help with the radio's coverage of state and local news in Abilene and are encouraged to pursue their interest whether it be educational, environmental, or political reporting. This news-academic partnership has been mutually beneficial for the station and the university's Journalism and Mass Communication department because the station relies heavily on student reporting to function and students gain experience and develop skills for a career in radio and journalism.
- At the University of Nevada Reno, content created through [The Hitchcock Project](#) and [Noticiero Móvil](#) also appears on the websites of partners like the local NPR affiliate [KUNR](#). The partnership between KUNR, This is Reno and Noticiero Móvil won a Murrow Award for coverage of the COVID pandemic. Partnership leaders report that the collaboration with the local public radio station is beneficial to their students, who get to work with experienced reporters and practice audio reporting.

Background

Public radio is vital to addressing news deserts but is not always prominent in discussions about revitalizing local journalism (Shapiro et al., 2022). News deserts, or areas where there is a lack of local news outlets, tend to be in rural and low-income areas of the United States (Patterson, 2023). Public trust in public radio is higher than other types of news outlets, but radio stations have constrained capacity due to low staff and lack of funding (Patterson, 2023). On average, colleges contribute less than 15% of funding to affiliated radio stations, and 80% of stations thought it was unlikely that they would receive additional financial support (Patterson, 2023). Most stations are funded primarily through listener donations, corporate and organizational underwriting, and grants.

While public radio stations have historically served white, educated, and more affluent audiences, stations employing more diverse voices and adapting broadcasting models to target a younger and broader audience will help local public radio survive (Kobayashi, 2022). Podcasting, for example, is an opportunity to expand public radio audiences, draw young people into the audio journalism profession, and stay relevant (Shearer et al, 2023).

Collaboration between educational institutions and public radio may be one solution to help bring in younger and broader audiences and draw young people into radio and audio journalism.

Research Methods

This report is based on survey responses from 95 public radio stations in 38 states. Of the public radio stations surveyed, 82.1% (78) are licensed to or owned by a university or college and the remaining 17.9% (17) were community or government licensed radio stations. CCN circulated the survey to individual stations between June and August 2023, with two follow-up emails and two follow-up phone calls. The list of stations was provided by the University Station Alliance and the Public Radio Program Directors Association which also promoted the survey to their members.

Responses were anonymized and sorted into categories by several broad themes. Quantitative and qualitative data coded for those themes is presented.

Appendix: Findings

Overview

More than three quarters of the respondents (78.3%) (67) of respondents reported some student involvement but the majority in the traditional model of placing internships at the station managed by the station. Most of the stations reported that they accept interns on a regular basis 78.7% (74) (n=95).

But when it comes to a deeper level of involvement, the number of participating stations began to drop. We asked three questions to get at the different types of collaborations that can exist.

In the first question, we asked if the station broadcast student reported stories that are edited by faculty and staff at the university to journalism standards.

About half of the respondents (54.4%; 50) reported that they broadcast student reported stories edited by faculty or staff (N=95).

In a second and related question, we asked if the radio station has a staff member that also teaches classes related to the program. Such cross collaboration may enhance other university/radio collaborations. Less than one-third of respondents (29.5%; 28) reported that they have a staff member teaching at the university.

And lastly, perhaps in the highest level of potential collaboration, we asked if the radio station partners with the university to co-produce programs. Only about 10 of the stations in the survey regularly partner with classes at the university, leaving 85 or 89.5% that do not (n=95).

Qualitative Findings

To dive deeper into the obstacles and opportunities to grow collaborative activities with their university, we asked survey respondents four additional open-ended questions.

In the first question, we asked respondents to simply list collaborative activities underway at this time. That list is included in Appendix: Responses and may provide ideas for stations/universities exploring ways to work together.

In the second question, we asked if the station would like to do more with their host university; and if so, to list some of the ideas that they would like to explore.

There was strong interest in expanding partnerships by the stations, with 91% of respondents indicating they would like to do more (75 of 82 responses).

All responses have been anonymized and included in Appendix: Responses.

Appendix: Responses

Curriculum

“We are exploring several collaborative activities including a potential citizen journalism training, a sort of 'master gardeners' program for journalism with cooperative extension as part of the university's land grant mission. We are also exploring a program with researchers in bio systems to work on data with our water reporter. We would love to be able to create a radio practicum course and train a class of students on how to do spot news, features, two-ways, writing for radio, podcasts, board operations, etc.”

“I would like for the station to be more a part of the curriculum, so that students are learning how to produce multimedia content that is of sufficiently high quality to be shared with our audience. Students producing the highest quality content would then have opportunities to work for the station in paid positions or internships. I would love to have more local and university news coverage and more assistance from students in media and journalism in creating news and other content.”

“Would like for journalism college faculty to push strong students to practicum class at our station; often, this is a missed opportunity because faculty does not consider the benefits available for students to gain real-world experience at the university-licensed NPR station.”

“The University is trying to rebuild journalistic capacity in its department of Digital Studies. Ideally, we would offer practical training for students in that program track and are working to offer outlets for student generated narrative & documentary storytelling through podcasts, and/or radio stories or documentaries.”

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Faculty

“Finding willing faculty is key for a successful, and continuing, partnership within the universities.”

“Would like to rely more on our institution's faculty as sources of expertise for local news stories, to further demonstrate our value to the institution. Would also like to expand our collaboration with communications faculty to host their projects online.”

“I think university-station collaborations are very useful and worth pursuing. The challenge in both public media stations and the colleges is simply time and someone to shepherd through things that usually everyone thinks are good ideas.”

University Support

“I wish they would do wealth screening and planned giving for us, I would like to have a pipeline for student-produced stories (edited, vetted) to air on the station. I would also like to have students do production and host on-air (middays, weekends).”

Why It Matters

“Building a young core of students interested in radio and developing in-state talent are big goals of ours.”

“Working with students is of tremendous value to (state) Public Media, challenging our assumptions and bringing new perspectives to the ecosystem.”

“We have, in many ways, a very good relationship with our university licensee - the real trick for us is to be a part of the university community while maintaining our autonomy as a professional public radio station. ... A public university has the mission to educate the whole population, not just tuition paying students.”

“Finding a way to have students involved with university owned public radio stations is important from many angles: programming, student education/growth, fundraising and university politics.”

“Working with students is of tremendous value to (statewide public media station), challenging our assumptions and bringing new perspectives to the ecosystem.”

“We have a select group of talented young journalism students who help produce our weekly public affairs show, produce features, and report spot news. We also have brought students and recent graduates on as part-time staff to tide them over until they secure a full-time job in journalism. This pipeline has been very successful for us! We consider ourselves to be, in essence, a ‘teaching hospital.’”

“I would be interested in facilitating more opportunities for our staff, reporters, and hosts to have a presence at our communication school to talk to students about the values of public radio and local journalism. As a former student myself, I think that the school gives short shrift to radio/audio in its broadcast journalism program, and there could be a strong opportunity for us to strengthen collaboration to inspire and train the next generation of audio journalists.”

Obstacles

Funding

The most common obstacles to collaboration discussed in the survey responses were lack of staff and funding to mentor, edit and manage students.

Of the 82 responses, lack of funding and staff was mentioned 70 times – 85% of the time. A small handful saw no obstacles and others mentioned issues like the academic schedules, lack of interest on the part of the university, lack of trust, lack of understanding of the how public radio works and bureaucratic challenges at the university.

“The main obstacle is capacity on our staff. It takes time and effort to coach and edit student journalists, and our newsroom staff is already stretched thin.”

“We no longer receive sufficient funding from our licensee. We do not have the staff to adequately conduct business or take on additional tasks and challenges. Additional funding would mean hiring more staff to be able to focus more engagement with the U and support that engagement.”

“Right now we're juggling so many things internally that finding time to oversee such a program, or mentor students, is almost impossible.”

Our station has only one full-time reporter - we would ideally need more news staff who can help with mentoring students. Another obstacle would be identifying students who have an interest in local news to fill the needs of the station.”

“As described above, the bureaucracy is an obstacle. We are not a department of the university, but our payroll is handled through the university (as an in-kind contribution to the station), and as such requires that student work hours and assignments be overseen by the student work office - which is not practical for the station.”

“Current staff is already maxed out, making it impractical for them to spend much time with students or interns. We would require a dedicated educational appropriation from our college in order to hire staff for that purpose in order to expand collaborations.”

“The main obstacle is capacity on our staff. It takes time and effort to coach and edit student journalists, and our newsroom staff is already stretched thin.”

“University budgets are tightening, and the university investment in the public radio station is either remaining stagnant or decreasing, forcing the station to rely more on funding from outside sources. Purchasing nationally syndicated programming is less expensive than hiring additional staff to manage student staff and assure quality of student content.”

“Mentoring interns and student volunteers takes a commitment of time and ability to teach convincingly. To do it right, you really need a full-time person devoted to helping students develop usable skills and to monitor and evaluate their activity.”

“THIS CAN WORK, but it takes A LOT of effort and a true collaboration. And I think it needs to go beyond just internships...a majority of our students had 2-3 years of practical experience before they did internships, so they were able to contribute immediately. There are young people currently interested in radio/audio content, whether over the radio or on a podcast...or both. And not just at large schools/programs. We need to harness that.”

University structures and trust

“There is a fair amount of bureaucracy within the university/academic environment that makes beginning a collaboration a longer and more laborious process than we would like.”

“There is a deep lack of trust between our station staff and the university as an institution due to a variety of factors and past/present interactions. The communication school does not make much, if any, effort to seek out opportunities to collaborate with us.”

Value of public media at institution

“We are seen as a burden more than an asset, those at the university don't pay enough attention to notice that there is great work that comes out of the station that they can brag about as well, so they think it doesn't happen at all.”

“The other obstacle is lack of understanding of how radio stations operate, and assuming that the station will accept and adhere to the teaching philosophy and timetable of the faculty member. This may not always be the case. In reality, public radio stations operate on a business model, complete with revenue generation, audience building, and adherence to regulations apart from the university's guidelines.”

“I would be interested in facilitating more opportunities for our staff, reporters, and hosts to have a presence at our communication school to talk to students about the values of public radio and local journalism. As a former student myself, I think that the school gives short shrift to radio/audio in its broadcast journalism program, and there could be a strong opportunity for us to strengthen collaboration to inspire and train the next generation of audio journalists.”

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On the Cover

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign students Charrice Jones and Vivian La in the Illinois Student Newsroom at Illinois Public Media. Photo by Chris Evans.

Corrections

Any corrections or additions should be sent to Hannah Kirkpatrick at hkirkpat@uvm.edu. We welcome comments and suggestions.

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