

College Radio at Central Washington University

By Iris Dimmick

History

The radio station wasn't always the sleek, well equipped, well funded and centrally-located station that it is today. There was a time when KCWU was KCAT, a part of the Communications department much like the Observer or Newswatch.

The programming could only be heard through cable.

Yes, through a television channel.

Students in dorms were the main audience and broadcast majors dominated the programming and took classes about radio technology, news radio, and announcing.

The Communications department experienced a breaking point in their budget between radio, television and newspaper expenses. The department was not receiving enough money to support all of them.

"The Dean was of the opinion that the department was doing too many things with too little resources," said Phil Backlund, communication department chair.

"There is always a budget problem," said Professor Robert Fordan, professor of broadcast journalism.

Fordan was hired in 1991, a time when finding an advisor for the radio program was becoming more and more difficult.

Fordan remembers the day in 1992 when Backlund asked him:

"We're not going to fund both radio and television, which do you want?"

Fordan chose television, as did a majority of the department faculty and administration.

"I love radio," Fordan said, "but the growth of industry was not in radio, it's in television."

The radio station was briefly passed on to Continuing Education, where it remained relatively stagnant for 2 years. In 1995, the radio station was absorbed Student Life and began drawing funding from student fees.

The university was unable to provide for the station while it was a feature of an academic program – but found available funding through the S&A fees.

It wasn't until 1999, by way of a four year student-led campaign, that The Burg was broadcast live over the air.

Chris Hull was the student general manager during that time and is now one of four full-time employees that manages the station and student employees.

How much money?

Over the past 6 years, from 2005 to 2010, the radio station has received an average of about \$200,800 a year of student money through S&A fee allocations totaling about \$1.2 million dollars of student money.

What we get for our money:

A non-commercial* radio station run by four full-time (non-student) staff members, nine student employees and over a dozen student-volunteer DJs.

Approximate percent of total expenses by expense (2005-2010):

Full Time Staff (exempt and classified, plus benefits).....	36%
Student Staff.....	23%
Goods & Services.....	23%
Equipment.....	15%
Travel/Food:	0.05%

A student voice?

Ultimately, decisions about programming and content are up to the full-time, non- student staff. According to student employees and volunteers, meetings are held quite frequently for student input.

Student employee Colleen Carroll, associate music director, has been working for the station since Fall 2010. She said she feels that students have a large amount of control of content through these meeting and every-day decision making.

“Most of the time it’s like a brainstorming process,” Carroll said, “They approves all decisions because it’s their heads are on the chopping block – they’re sort of like the last gate of logic.”

The radio station, just as any public/community broadcast, must follow Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations and copyright laws. There are

*The term, “non-commercial,” may seem incorrect to listeners who hear what sounds like commercials for local businesses. To the untrained ear, Hull said, the recognition of under-riding support may sound like a commercial.

“The sponsor buys acknowledgement of their support,” Hull said if you listen closely there are no “calls for action, pricing, or sale information... (it’s) an identification of the business rather than to sell their products.”

Money from sponsors come from a foundation account earmarked for special projects, programs, or general activities as specified by the donor.

restrictions on offensive content and language, especially of a sexual nature, and carry large fines if violated.

It's this punishment that would put the full-time staff on the "chopping block," and the university at risk for a lawsuit.

No Student Media Board affiliation

The Student Media Board is an official university committee that aims to ensure the student's freedom of speech.

Board member Cynthia Mitchell, professor of journalism, said the main purpose is to make sure student content isn't censored or influenced by advisors or other faculty.

"They (the board) provide a good layer of protection for the students, to make sure their first amendment rights don't get infringed upon," Mitchell said.

The board's charter also has specific protections for advisors, who cannot be fired for student content decisions. First amendment rights existed before and can exist without a Student Media Board, but, Mitchell said, the board provides a good channel for recourse.

The Observer, Newswatch, and the Pulse magazine currently follow the Student Media Board's guidelines. The radio station was asked to participate this year, but Hull declined.

Hull cites the complications of FCC regulations and the possible lack of accountability that comes with a "hands-off" administrative approach as reasons why he didn't feel the Student Media Board would be a good fit.

Any changes the station's structure, Hull said, would have to be carefully analyzed.

"I've been asked by superiors to be cautious," Hull said, "We've put a lot of arduous work to get the station where it is today."

The Top 40 Debate

The brainstorming process of full-time staff and student employee meetings does not always produce a decision that everyone agrees on.

Last year, during the fall quarter of 2009, the results of a student survey, a culmination of survey results from various community and campus events, displayed a student desire for more popular music. The demographic information and results from such surveys are also used to attract sponsors.

Hull said this led the radio management to a significant shift the focus of content towards more popular, or top 40, music.

“The surveys indicated that there wasn’t a mass buy-in to the radio station,” Hull said.

The goal, Hull says, is to make the station accurately reflect the student body and to provide a “real-world” environment for the student employees and volunteers.

“We program to the majority, but have those time slots that are devoted to the DJs that know the music that’s lesser known,” Hull said.

Former student employee Cameron Jessup worked for the station for two years, first as a staff assistant then as a production director. Jessup led a petition that called for a stop to the programming shift towards top 40 that collected 400 student signatures in one day.

“I considered it selling out,” Jessup said, “Yes, there is an audience for (Top 40), but we’re the only outlet for independent artists in Central Washington.”

Jessup said that he was not opposed to DJs choosing to play more popular music, he was opposed to the station emphasizing Top 40 and more so the handling of his opposition. Jessup said he felt forced to drop the petition in order to keep his job.

Carroll, who was not on staff during the petition or programming shift, had similar complaints, but eventually found logic in the change when

“At first, I was not down with the whole Top 40 thing,” Carroll said, “I (felt) like, ‘Oh, I’m really selling out because I’m playing all this Top 40 music – but we have some shows that aren’t... (and) our motto is to be the music for the entire campus, so you have to follow through on that.”

Jessup was not the only employee that resisted. Hull remembers several students who did not support the shift, but he says they were not in the majority.

Hull said he recognized, and understood the argument but that, ultimately, it’s a not black and white – Top 40 or “alternative” – issue.

“We’re judged on how well we’ve appealed to a larger audience,” he said, “We want to be able to expose people to things they’ve never heard, but also want to play our cards wisely.”

When Jessup re-applied for the production director position, he was instead offered a position as an assistant to the director.

“My pride got in the way and I walked away,” Jessup said, “I left the show and the job that I loved.”

Educational value?

Despite his differences in philosophy, Jessup said the radio station has provided him with unique facilities and equipment to further his abilities as a communicator.

“It’s a wonderful opportunity for students who want to become involved,” Jessup said.

Volunteer DJs seem to agree.

Lauren Rice, a broadcast journalism sophomore, says she’s learned many personal and professional skills.

“It’s opened me up to (many) more options,” Rice said.

By organizing and working at events, Rice said it’s made her a better communicator and has given her more confidence.

Biology and english freshmen Kucera Bishop says she walks out of the studio feeling confident as well.

“I feel I have freedom of speech,” Bishop said, “I (just) have to clean up my language.”

DJs are required to pass two tests after a quarter of training, written and recorded performance, in order to be on the air. Students are tested on FCC rules, station rules, voice tempo, audio transitions and other operating procedures.

Bishop said the written test is relatively easy because it’s open book (manuals). The tests mimic industry standards, but there is no official certificate given to approved on-air DJs.

Future Plans

A \$300,000 project to install an advanced radio tower on the SURC is currently in its planning stage. The lease for the off-campus tower expires in 2015.

Hull expects that while the upfront costs are high, the long term savings of the new tower will pay for itself by saving on lease expenses, electricity and long-distance management costs.

The new tower will, potentially, be more energy efficient.

According to Hull, the SURC building fund will provide the station with \$200,000 for the project, leaving \$100,000 for either the students to fund through S&A allocation or sponsors to support.