

9 Tips to Ensure College Radio's Survival

October 5th, 2010 by Jennifer Waits in [college radio](#)

I've been obsessively [following the sagas of KTRU](#) and [WRVU](#), two college radio stations that are in danger of losing their FM signals. As I write more and more about [the situations at stations](#) where licenses have been lost, where administrations have sold off frequencies and transmitters, and where radio station staff members seem powerless to stop the machine despite their eloquence and protestations; I'm realizing that there needs to be a how-to list for college radio stations in peril.

As much as I try to express to other radio stations the warning cry of: YOU COULD BE NEXT, it seems that most college radio stations don't rally until it's too late. As I was reading through one of the Save WRVU websites today, there was a [post](#) about how they are just now learning more and more about the history of their own station. While they are finding it instructive, it's unfortunately that they didn't have a more solid understanding of their station's history until now, as it's become useful information as they build arguments in favor of retaining their FM status to their governing organization.

So, here are my tips for all college radio stations in order to help secure your survival on campus. Whether your station appears to be in immediate danger or not, it's never too early to start communicating your worth:

1. Be a Great Station

This is obvious. But do a kick-ass job with your station's programming. Actively recruit new DJs and make sure that you have a large, active staff of on-air DJs. Air live shows for your entire schedule if you can. Automated programming can be the death-knell for a college radio station because it signals to listeners and the administration that not enough DJs care enough about the station to be on the air.

2. Promote Your Station

Spread the word about your station. Co-present events on and off-campus. DJ at parties. Have booths at local festivals and fairs. Regularly communicate the ways that your station interacts with and contributes to your campus community. Document listener comments and promote student involvement. Beef up your website, blog, Facebook page, and Twitter feeds to make it clear that you are an important voice on campus.

3. Compile Your Station's History

I'm always surprised by how few stations have well-documented histories on their websites. Take pride in your station's past and present by taking the time to archive stories, photos, and achievements from the past. [One of the Save WRVU Sites](#) is beginning this process now in order to help provide some perspective on their current crisis.

4. Embrace and Engage Station Alumni

College radio is a big deal to those who participated in it. Alumni of college radio stations are often ardent supporters and defenders of their beloved media outlets. Radio station alums have been known to make big donations in order to ensure the survival of stations that they valued while students and they have also been formidable forces when schools threaten to close down their cherished student activity. Reach out to alumni to get their stories about the station. Hold station reunions. Hofstra University station [WRHU](#) goes so far as to have an entire [alumni section](#) on its website, in which radio alums are highlighted by decade. For the past 2 years they've also been honoring stellar alums of WRHU by inducting them into the WRHU Radio Hall of Fame. This really helps to show people outside of the station that radio matters.

5. Become Self-Sufficient

If you don't already, do your own fundraising and try to become a self-sufficient organization on campus. Seek out underwriting, host station benefits, sell radio station paraphernalia (T-shirts, compilation CDs, sweatshirts, etc.), and consider doing on-air fundraising. The less of a drain that you are on your institution's resources, the better.

6. Build Up a Case for Your Station's Relevance

I think that every college radio station should work on a list of arguments in favor of college radio. If you can't convince yourselves of your relevance and importance, then it will be impossible to convince others. If you have a terrestrial signal, write out a list of reasons why it is critical to maintain it. Explain the value that your station has to students on campus, to the broader community of listeners, and to alumni.

7. Learn from the Experiences of Stations Fighting to Survive

Take a look at the [Save KTRU](#) website in particular. It's beautifully organized, making it clear how listeners can help. Do the things that they are doing BEFORE your station is in danger. Have a great website, start a blog, update your Facebook page and Twitter feed regularly, seek out letters of support from alumni and listeners, build relationships with key people in the administration of your school. Do all of this before your station is facing a crisis in order to make sure that you have listeners, alumni, and administrators on your side.

8. Lend Your Support to Other Stations in Need

It's good karma to spread the word about other college radio stations who are in need of help. Write letters of support, tell your friends, and argue for their survival as if your own station depended upon it. Right now that means speaking out for [KTRU](#) and [WRVU](#). Not only will this help other stations in need, but it will also help contribute to the overall discussion about why college radio is important and relevant.

9. Defend Your Terrestrial Signal Like Your Life Depends Upon It

When schools start contemplating selling off radio stations they are often lured by the promise of quick cash by radio suitors. The dark side of this equation is important to point out to anyone who cares about radio, the media landscape, and independent voices. Often those promising big bucks for radio station licenses are large conglomerates: mainly religious broadcasters and public radio groups. Much of the non-commercial radio dial is now taken up by non-local public radio entities and religious stations because they have the money to buy up empty slots on the dial. Unfortunately this means that there are fewer and fewer local independent non-commercial stations (let alone college radio stations), making for a far less interesting radio experience for listeners.

So, even though station owners like WRVU's Vanderbilt Student Communications like to say that the station's role on campus FOR students is of primary importance, I think it's irresponsible of them to ignore the damage that they might inflict on the local indie media landscape if they sell their station off to a non-local radio conglomerate. It's also important to remember that once a station gives up a terrestrial signal, it's very difficult (there just aren't that many frequencies even available), time-consuming (it can take years even if there is an open signal) and expensive to get a new license. Do not discount the value of a terrestrial radio license. There's a reason that these big radio groups want to buy them. The majority of people listen to terrestrial radio and it's still the cheapest way to reach the largest audience of listeners.

The mediageek's advice for college stations: Be true to your school

April 25th, 2011 by Paul Riismandel in [college radio](#), [free advice](#)

Having followed Jennifer's first-rate coverage of the unfortunate sales of college stations [KTRU](#), [WRVU](#) and [KUSF](#) I've been giving a lot of thought as to how college stations solidify themselves. As some readers may be aware, in addition to fourteen years of experience in community radio, I got my start in college radio twenty years ago and have been serving as advisor to WNUR-FM for the last three years. Therefore the survival of college stations is very dear to me.

Jennifer has already succinctly enumerated [nine tips to ensure college radio's survival](#). What I'd like to do is drill down on some points that I think are very important, adding some suggestions for action.

I have to credit WNUR's Graduate Advisor Brenden Kredell who made the astute observation that the time for a station to start girding itself against outside threats—like having its license sold out from underneath it—is way before any of these threats manifest. That is, if you wait until it seems like your station may be under threat, it will be a definite uphill battle. Nevertheless, I also think it's never too late to make a concerted effort to strengthen your station's place on campus and in the community.

I intend to share some concrete tactics and approaches that a station might put into action right now. I will do this in a series of posts each focusing on one particular principle. In forthcoming posts I will cover recruitment and student involvement, finances and publicity. Today I start with what I think is the most important piece of advice:

Be True to Your School

The principle here is simple: you want your station to be thought of as an integral part of your school's campus life. It appears that concerns about a station's role on campus are often expressed by administrators justifying the sale of a station. There are some simple and effective things stations can do to make positive contributions to their schools, and to also make sure students, faculty and administration can see and hear these contributions.

While there are no guarantees, I think that dedicating effort to the kinds of initiatives I'm about to outline will go a long way towards demonstrating your station's value. These fall into five basic categories:

- [1. Be student-run](#)
- [2. Be perceived as student run](#)
- [3. Provide service to your school](#)
- [4. Throw events on campus](#)
- [5. Document, document, document](#)

1. Be student-run

When I first started as advisor to WNUR I was given very smart and strategic advice by the school's previous advisor who had been in the position for over a decade. He told me that it was important that the station continue to be student-run, and all the more crucial that the station always be *perceived* as student-run.

WNUR has always been student-run; students fill all the positions on the executive board, produce and direct all major programming blocks and make up the majority of the station's staff. But, due to longevity and the fact that they don't graduate every four years, many well-known programs are hosted by community volunteers or alumni. So, it's almost inevitable that these folks who have invested many years of effort in the station will receive attention that student-hosted shows don't.

I personally think the contributions of community volunteer and alumni DJs can be valuable to college stations by providing some ongoing continuity, making a very direct connection to communities outside the immediate student population as well as serving as mentors. Nevertheless, it appears that one of the chief complaints universities and colleges contemplating a station sale have leveled at their stations is that they appear to be an activity for people who aren't students.

So, it's a fine line that college stations have to walk if they want to welcome community volunteer and alumni DJs into the fold. Most colleges and universities think of their student-run

stations first and foremost as a resource for their students. Therefore at this very moment I think it's vital that the management of college stations be as student-run as possible. At the very least the management should be majority students, although I'd advise bringing this as close to 100% as is practical. By doing this a station can immediately provide proof that students are in control, even if some observers claim otherwise.

2. Be Perceived as Student-Run

The other side of this equation is to try and make sure that the station is perceived as student-run. There a number of ways to do this, and many of them amount to making friends on campus and making sure they know about you.

One of the best friends a college station can have is its campus newspaper. Try and get them to write some feature articles about your station, especially the efforts of some of your most dedicated students. When it comes time for your big recruitment meetings or other events, contact the paper and pitch them as news items. At the very least make sure these listings make into the paper's events calendar. Also, you might consider running ads every so often to raise your station's visibility on campus. Be sure to include a line about being a student-run station; don't expect anyone to fill in that blank.

Many schools now also have online magazines or student-run blogs that are nearly as popular as the campus paper. The same strategy applies here—make friends with the editors of those sites and feed them information and story ideas. Make sure that your student staff are front-and-center in these pitches.

If your station has a website, a simple thing to do is to have a staff page that lists all the folks who run the station. Include their majors and graduation year to make sure it's crystal clear that they are students.

Many colleges and universities also have some kind of governing or coordinating bodies for their student activities or clubs. Consider participating in these groups if it's appropriate. This will serve not only to remind other students that the station is run by students, but also make the station seem more accessible and accountable to these campus leaders.

3. Provide Service to your School

The more visible your station is on campus, the more positively the campus community will regard it. But when the station also is making positive contributions to campus life then you're backing up that visibility with additional substance.

One great way to get involved on campus is to offer to DJ events on campus. I would suggest doing this for free, or perhaps in exchange for being listed as a co-sponsor. Doing this sometimes requires some strategizing on music choices in order to play something that will be pleasing to a wide audience without giving the wrong impression about the station that might come from playing Top 40 music. I've seen that emphasizing world musics, electronic music and other non-

rock forms can help bridge that gap. At the same time there may be organizations and events that welcome more exotic and experimental sounds—find them and beg to send them DJs!

Many college stations have a news department which can really help in this regard. Find a way to cover big campus events, from charity events to major lectures, and be sure that you alert the event sponsors to your coverage. By virtue of being on a college campus you have very easy access to a wide range of experts and newsmakers from a variety of fields. So highlight the professor making strides in cancer research or who authored a controversial article about gender relations. Then contact your campus' public affairs office to let them know about the coverage.

You also have valuable air time that you can dedicate to important campus issues and events. Find a way to do live broadcasts of the most important ones, or record them and get permission to broadcast them later. Even if you can't broadcast the event you can offer to publicize it. In exchange for broadcast or publicity ask if you can hang a sign or banner advertising your station.

Your sports department can also be an important ally in providing service to your campus. While the most popular men's sports like football and basketball tend to get all the glory, there are also lots of other sports played by men and women that get lost in the shuffle. If you can, try and provide live play-by-play of women's basketball, softball, lacrosse or soccer. Give similar coverage to the lesser known men's sports. If it's not practical to do live play-by-plays, then find a way to cover highlights during a weekly campus sports show or during news programming.

Whatever you do, work with the athletics department to see about getting some publicity. Ask them to list your sports programming on their website, printed programs or ads in the campus newspaper. If you don't have a sports department in your station, this might be a great opportunity to partner with the campus newspaper which probably does cover campus sports.

Of course this is just a sampling of ideas for getting your station more involved on campus. But the rationale here is clear: if students and faculty see your station as making a positive contribution to campus life, they're more likely to see it as something worth defending.

4. Throw Events on Campus

A perpetual challenge for most college stations is that only a percentage of students are regular listeners. This is usually due to the fact that college stations tend to focus on music and culture that is overlooked by the mainstream, while many students still have relatively mainstream tastes. These days many students aren't even radio listeners to begin with. However, that doesn't mean your station can't provide information and entertainment in other ways.

Throwing fun events on campus, especially ones that are cheap or free are a way to build awareness of your station, build good will and bring in some new listeners. Since stations typically have connections with local musicians, throwing concerts is a very natural way to share the station's expertise and connections.

This year [WCBN at the University of Michigan](#) sponsored a series of lectures on the value of freeform. The lectures brought together academics, theorists, artists and musicians to discuss the

concept of freeform in contemporary culture, stressing the value of freeform in radio as heard on WCBN. I think this was a brilliant idea because it created a space for WCBN within the scholarly discourse on campus, reinforcing its artistic and cultural place beyond simply being a broadcast station.

It's pretty common for stations to sponsor free film screenings or festivals featuring movies with themes around music and auditory culture. In a similar vein, stations can invite artists—not just musicians—who tackle subjects that relate to music, culture or politics of the sort heard on air.

Whatever kind of events your station decides to throw, you should dedicate significant effort to publicizing those events, too. The most obvious is to make announcements on air and to distribute fliers. But don't forget to call upon all the other campus connections you should be making. Make sure the film department knows about your screening, and the music students know about the lecture from the composer you invited. Don't wait and hope interested students will stumble upon your event. Invite them.

5. Document, document, document

Now your station has started efforts to do some of these things to make it more visible and integral on campus, or maybe your station already was doing some of these things. But memories can be short. In 2013, when half of the staff from 2011 has graduated, who is going to remember the events the station sponsored in September 2010? And what if that's when someone important inquires about what the station has been doing on campus the last five years?

It's absolutely critical to document all of the station's activities in a way that future station staff can access and add to. Ideally this is something that a station's advisor can help with, and may already be doing. In any event a station's student management should work to keep a record of everything the station does on campus, with as much detail as possible: the kind of event, the dates and venues, any other campus organizations who were involved, how that event relates to the station's mission. Having that data at the ready might also help when pursuing grant applications or future collaborations on campus.

It's not a bad idea to log that info on a station's website. It provides a single place to keep that info while also making it easily accessible to the campus and public at large. Simply, putting a record of your station's campus involvement only a Google search away means it's much more likely to be found.

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As I wrote in the introduction, there's no guarantee that doing these things will insulate your station from all threats. However, I don't see how there can be a downside to working hard to knit your station into the fabric of campus life. At the very least you will recruit new DJs and listeners. More optimistically, you create the opportunity to catalyze a productive interchange of ideas and culture on your campus that would not happen without your radio station.