

## **REVIEW OF RADIO STATION WGLT**

Classification of Instruction Programs (CIP) Code: 90.0907  
Research and Public Service Center: Radio, Television, and Digital Communication

### **OVERVIEW**

Radio Station WGLT, with call letters reflecting the University motto “We Gladly Learn and Teach,” has operated as a radio station and public service of Illinois State University since 1966. The station is a unit of the School of Communication within the College of Arts and Sciences. This is the fifth self-study completed by the center since the station became part of the school in 1997. The most recent self-study occurred in 2015.

Radio Station WGLT offers a distinctive mix of local and national news, with jazz and blues as its primary music formats. The station broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week on the FM band. WGLT has provided an Internet stream of its on-air programming since 2000. Three additional web-only services have been added since 2006, streaming blues, jazz, and acoustic music. The broadcast station and its online streams annually provide 35,000 hours of content including 14,000 hours of locally produced on-air programming. WGLT has been a member of National Public Radio since 1979.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT**

#### **Introduction and overview**

The manager of Radio Station WGLT coordinated completion of the self-study, assisted by station staff, volunteers, and the Friends Council (an advisory group to the station). Data sources consulted and monitored during routine administration of WGLT operations included: website analytics provided by Google and National Public Radio, social media analytics provided by Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, audience measurement performed twice annually by Nielsen Media Research, fundraising data (including individual contributions, corporate underwriting, and grants) produced by WGLT staff, and annual external financial audits. Additionally, as in 2015, an email survey was sent, with respondents drawn from a list of WGLT’s financial contributors and those who have opted into the station’s email update list. The survey instrument was designed to closely replicate WGLT surveys administered in 2007 and 2015, to make possible longitudinal analysis of listener satisfaction. The station worked with University Assessment Services to design and administer a survey to solicit feedback from station financial contributors regarding station operations.

#### **Accomplishments since the prior program review**

##### Staffing

- Created the position of Digital Content Director, who launched a complete revamp of WGLT.org, WGLT’s social media program, and implemented new editing standards and processes for WGLT.org news.
- Created the position of WGLT Correspondent allowing retired and laid-off local journalists to work in a part-time capacity for WGLT. This has worked well for both the station and the individuals and has led to a significant increase in the scope of the station’s news coverage with minimal budget impact. Thus far, award-winning local journalists hired as part of this program include Colleen Reynolds, Willis Kern, Bryan “Lefty” Bloodworth, Breanna Grow, Laura Kennedy, Joe Deacon, and Edith Brady-Lunny.
- Hired a new Development Director to assist the School of Communication with its fundraising.

##### Academic

- Formalized new internship program, including positions for social media, news reporting, sports reporting, and photography.
- WGLT Director R.C. McBride and Reporter/Producer Mary Cullen each teach one class in the School of Communication per semester.
- McBride continues professional practice as television play-by-play announcer for both Illinois and the Missouri Valley Conference and has used this experience to create a talent pipeline for School of Communication students to become paid talent for Athletics’ ESPN+ productions of baseball, softball, volleyball, and soccer.

- Created a new WGLT scholarship annual scholarship (\$1500), with the scholarship being paid from WGLT endowment expendable funds. The winning student must be a past or present intern or paid part-time employee of WGLT.

#### Facilities and Equipment

- Illinois State University Gallery installed art in public areas of WGLT studios.
- Investments in facilities include replacement of 40-year-old carpet in WGLT front offices, hallway, music library, conference room, and production 2 studio, and the rest of the facility. Sound proofing was torn out of the conference room, exposing a window and setting the stage for a new master control/main studio/Tiny Desk Concert set in that room. A Mobile Social Media Analytics Command Center (SMACC) lab was installed in the hallway and new artwork installed on hallway windows.
- Major new equipment purchases included a new broadcast antenna, the NewsBoss news management software, new transmitter remote control and on-air processor, and a new station automation system (AudioVaultFlex) replacing the failing system dating from 2001.

#### Financial

- Implemented new budget and expenditure tracking procedures in 2017.
- Established a new record for individual giving during FY17 (excludes bequests).
- As part of the Redbirds Rising campaign for Illinois State, launched \$350,000 campaign to replace master control and production studios and audio chain. The campaign has raised about \$75,000 in cash and pledges so far. It remains in the quiet phase and has been paused during the absorption of operations of WCBU (see below).
- Balanced budget proposed for FY17, FY17, FY18, and FY19.
- Reached individual giving goal for FY18 (\$350,000) and set new underwriting/events record for FY18 (\$432,460, up \$16K from FY17).
- Finished operationally in the black in FY16, FY17, and FY18.

#### Programming/Operations

- Converted WGLT's FCC Public File to online.
- Partnered with the *Pantagraph* on joint investigative news series on at least four occasions since the pilot in December 2017.
- Compiled first-ever WGLT Operations and Business Continuity manual.
- Launched Community Conversation series (four events from Summer 2018-Summer 2019) with support from the Fell Trust.
- Coordinated, facilitated, and/or hosted candidate forums for the 13th and 18th Congressional District, the 105 Illinois Legislative District, McLean County Board, and Bloomington and Normal Mayor and City Councils. (The Community Conversation Series and Election Forums were the basis of the Civic Engagement award received in Spring 2019).
- Created the WGLT Hall of Fame, with elections to occur every fall. The first class was inducted in 2018, and included "Delta" Frank Black, Kathryn Carter, Don Munson, Ben Paxton, Ralph Smith, and Robert and Marilyn Sutherland. The inaugural Alumni Award recipient was Brendan Banaszak.
- Signed agreement to assume day-to-day management of WCBU in Peoria on April 17, 2019, with an effective date of June 1, 2019. This was a direct result of recommendations from WGLT's 2015 Program Review. This will result in financial and operational efficiencies for both stations – allowing both to increase service – and a greater presence for Illinois State University in the Peoria Area.
- Launched the new daily WGLT podcast “Up First” on May 6, 2019.
- Continued to maintain a listening audience of approximately 18,000 weekly.
- Continued to build a website audience currently at approximately 100,000 monthly users.

## **Assessment**

### 1. Assessment Strategies and Methods

WGLT's historic objectives include the provision and distribution of radio programming to a significant number of listeners (since broadened to "written and audio content to a significant number of users"), enhancement of Illinois State's community identity, fostering community engagement, and expanding development to acquire stable and long-term funding. Meeting this objective requires ongoing measurement and monitoring of a variety of metrics, including listenership data, website and social media data, peer reviews, and fundraising data.

### 2. Assessment Targets

WGLT and the School of Communication have historically defined the station's targets broadly in terms of overall success – chiefly, providing a level of professionalism and quality commensurate with the overall expectations Illinois State University sets for itself. After several years of struggling financially, the station has turned things around since 2016. This was accomplished by making strategic budget cuts and investing in efficiencies and quality talent in development and content production. WGLT is now in growth mode. Pressures on other local media outlets have created a growing opportunity and responsibility for WGLT to become a (if not THE) go-to source for the kind of quality local journalism every community requires to remain vibrant. At this point, the formula is fairly straightforward: success begets more success, and sustaining that pattern requires increasing both our reach and fundraising capacity. Specifically, WGLT needs to increase its reach digitally to convince users of the vitality of its service -- regardless of platform -- and the station needs to diversify its fundraising sources to include more local and national grants, major gifts, and planned gifts.

In the broadest sense, reach, engagement, and fundraising are all on the upswing. In terms of the broadcast ratings it should be noted that samples sizes in both the Peoria and Bloomington-Normal markets are quite small, raising questions about the reliability and generalizability of the data. That said, the numbers are universally recognized as the industry standard.

As with the 2015 Program Review, a listener survey was commissioned for use within this document.

## **Resources**

As part of its qualification for its annual Corporation for Public Broadcasting Community Service grant, WGLT undergoes an annual independent financial audit. WGLT is in a different – and better -- place financially now than it was during the last program review period. The station has ended each of the last three fiscal years (2016, 2017, and 2018) with a modest operational surplus. It took much work and planning to achieve this point including professionalizing the internal budgeting and expenditure tracking process, professionalizing corporate underwriting efforts, cutting some national programming, eliminating two outmoded FTE positions (though one of those will soon be repurposed as a content producer), and finally, the forgiveness of nearly \$80,000 in loans (of the \$122,000 borrowed) by the School of Communication and the Illinois State University Provost's office. We have also invested in productivity. Prior to 2016, computers were only replaced when hand-me-downs from elsewhere on campus became available. Now, WGLT has every computer on a 5-7 year replacement cycle, and that expense is reflected in the annual budget. We have also implemented an equipment replacement schedule, with every piece of broadcast equipment assigned a reasonable working life and scheduled replacements accounted for in the annual budgeting process.

Revenue components for WGLT include general appropriations from Illinois State University, business support/underwriting, listener contributions, events, federal and state grants, donated materials and services from Illinois State, and donated materials and services from other sources. WGLT staff are actively investigating other grant possibilities, especially from national and regional organizations that support non-profit journalism.

Illinois State allocates five full-time salaried positions to WGLT, and contributes a significant amount of in-kind support, including the costs of space, utilities, and administrative services. Collectively, this support represents about 40 percent of WGLT's operating budget. Without this support, WGLT could not be as successful as it is and would have to significantly scale back its service.

Federal and state grant funds are generally used for the acquisition of national programming and digital services, though some (usually no more than \$10-15,000) is used for equipment upgrades.

Except as mentioned above, all salaries (full time, part time, and student), operational costs, and equipment expenses come from business and listener support.

The recently commenced agreement to operate WCBU adds a significant, but likely jointly beneficial, complication to the budgeting process. All funds for each respective station are to remain independent, with separate Corporation for Public Broadcasting grants, accounts, budgets, and audits. In year one of the agreement, commencing June 1, 2019 (to coincide with Bradley University's fiscal year), WCBU funds will pay 10 percent of the salaries of the employees shared by the two stations. Specifically, those are the management and business employees – not content producers, who will remain focused on their respective local markets – including the WGLT Director, Development Director, Individual Giving Director, Operations Director, Program Director, and Business Manager. This arrangement will allow some time to turn around WCBU's fundraising operations, and in subsequent years, WCBU's share of those salaries will increase with an eventual goal of 40-50 percent. That, in turn, will allow WGLT to invest more money in local content production.

The annual budgeting process begins in March or April. WCBU's process is conducted entirely by the WGLT Director in consultation with Bradley University administration and with a June 1 fiscal year start. WGLT's budget coincides with Illinois State's fiscal calendar. The process involves analyzing expense reports from the previous two cycles in order to project expense needs for the following year. That information is combined with contractual increases and scheduled equipment and computer replacement expenses. Fundraising goals are set by the WGLT Director and Development Director and combined with other revenue projections. This establishes the baseline budget. At that point, budget requests are solicited from direct reports, who in turn have solicited ideas from their reports. Those are prioritized by the direct reports and WGLT Director and entered into the budget as revenue projections allow. At that point, everything is synthesized into a budget document, which is sent to the School of Communication Director for approval.

### **Response to previous program review recommendations**

WGLT has been aggressive in following the recommendations presented by the Academic Planning Committee following the 2015 review. The recommendations are presented below in italics, followed by a response.

1. *The primary concern of the committee in reviewing the self-study report is the concern articulated in the report regarding station finances: the “unsustainable imbalance between income and expenses over the last three years.” Clearly, ongoing dialogue involving the station, School of Communication, and university administration is needed to address financial challenges faced by the station due to concurrent downturns in corporate funding, individual giving, and federal and state grant allocations. While the downturn in private giving might be reversed, the level of federal and state funding in coming years is likely to be stable at best. In identifying the best approaches for pursuing long-term financial sustainability of the station, the committee looks to WGLT staff members, who best understand the business of public broadcasting and who have many years of experience soliciting funds to support station programming. To help station management decide which strategies to pursue, the committee suggests exploration of the following options:*
  - *With the station having recently implemented improvements to its corporate solicitation and billing processes, the committee encourages the station to closely monitor those processes for their effectiveness in reversing the recent downturn in corporate giving.*
    - Corporate support has increased dramatically, from 2015's low of just over \$250,000 to 2018's \$447,000. Some of this increase is a result of national buys coordinated by NPR, but the largest share is a result of a more sophisticated, professional approach created and executed by the station's two most recent development directors and corporate support specialists. More growth is possible, but the job is never complete.
  - *Existence of the four endowment funds may not be widely known by potential donors. The committee suggests additional publicity regarding the purpose of the funds and ways in which individuals, corporations, and foundations can contribute to them.*

- WGLT has launched a capital campaign to replace its master control/studio and audio chain, and part of the process has included informing prospective donors of the range of options available to them, including major gifts, planned gifts, and endowment funds
  - *The station has nurtured strong relations with other units at the University, particularly the School of Communication, to the benefit of the station, students, faculty, and staff. Some of these connections have involved other units contributing to station personnel costs, thus allowing the station to allocate private contributions and event revenue to other needs such as equipment and programming. The committee recommends that the station continue to cultivate such relationships, with the School of Communication but also with other units. Such arrangements could not only help the station financially but could further integrate station operations with the academic mission of the institution.*
    - It has been clear for some time that WGLT can no longer operate as part of Illinois State University solely when it directly benefits WGLT. In addition to the academic efforts and student opportunities listed above, the station has worked to create a mutually beneficial relationship with several areas of campus, including Admissions, Athletics, Annual Giving, Marketing and Communications, TV-10, WZND, the *Vidette*, and more. WGLT staff is working to get more involved in other campus efforts. For example, Director R.C. McBride serves on the campus Redbird Pride committee, and Development Director Melissa Libert works on the University's strategic plan marketing and communications task force.
  - *The committee suggests that the station explore the feasibility of supplementing its traditional fund drives with selective use of crowdfunding. Such an approach might be used to fund individual programs or events. Crowdfunding may also be helpful in engaging and expanding the station audience and in prioritizing station programming.*
    - Modernization of fund drives has been a struggle for public radio and television stations across the country. That said, WGLT has experienced some success with a “non-interruptive” fund drive, using short announcements and social media to inform donors. The station also continues to emphasize the importance of sustaining monthly donations, and this has smoothed out cash flow significantly.
  - *The self-study report sets forth a longer-term approach to financial sustainability, i.e., exploring collaboration with other public radio stations in the region to share operating or programming costs or to reduce costs through cooperative programming. The committee recommends that station management pursue this approach, perhaps through contacts with stations at the University of Illinois Springfield, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, or Bradley University, with the caveat that efforts be made to preserve the distinctive role WGLT plays in serving the University and communicating its contributions to the broader community.*
    - This recommendation led directly to WGLT's initiation of conversations with Bradley University regarding the future of WCBU. The model WGLT has created, which allows each station to maintain separate and robust local content creation staffs and individualized station personality while combining administrative, operations, and business functions, has attracted significant attention in public media circles. The model stays true to public radio's mission to serve local audiences and differs from some “statewide” models that feature a central hub in the state capital (or largest city) with individual stations treated as merely affiliates or news bureaus. As mentioned above, this new partnership should allow both stations to expand content offerings while operating in a more financially sustainable manner.
2. *The committee commends strategic planning efforts of the station and encourages the station to proceed with efforts to develop a revised plan, for the period 2018 through 2023. The planning process provides opportunities for stakeholders to help guide the station through its management transition and for critically examining options for achieving and maintaining financial sustainability. The committee encourages the station to consider in its planning discussions strategies for continuing and potentially expanding programming that exposes the listening public to a variety of disciplines taught and researched at the University, including the arts and humanities, sciences, and social sciences.*
    - Plans for a new strategic plan were put on hold pending the outcome of discussions with Bradley University. Now that the issue is resolved, a new strategic plan will be developed in calendar year 2020.
  3. *It is evident from the self-study report that ongoing processes are in place to assess progress toward meeting station goals set forth in the strategic plan and in annual budgeting documents. Metrics to support an effective assessment program are also in place, including audience data, peer reviews and awards, fundraising results,*

*and listener feedback through surveys such as the one conducted for this self-study. If the station has not already done so, the committee encourages the station to formalize its approach to assessment in a written assessment plan. Assistance with compiling such a plan is available from University Assessment Services.*

- While a formalized written assessment plan has not been developed, WGLT has created formalized internal processes, specifically in the areas of budgeting, fundraising, and audience measurement, for regularly tracking key metrics. Several of these processes are codified in the station's operations manual. A prominent and successful result of this process is the monthly digital metrics report.

### **Major findings of this self-study**

The center staff are pleased with the upward trajectory of WGLT. The new partnership with WCBU is very promising and discussions with colleagues throughout the state about other partnerships are ongoing. Listenership is steady, fundraising is up, digital use is way up, and community engagement – virtual and in real life – and the station's reputation in the community appear to be stronger than ever.

However, the center staff note that local journalism has never been more in peril, nor has it ever been more important. While WGLT and WCBU are poised to fill some of the growing gap being left by the tragic withering of formerly great local newspapers key questions regarding the future of funding for public radio and how the center can more tightly align its activities with to the University academic mission.

### **Initiatives for the next program review cycle**

The largest initiatives for the next cycle are likely to be among the largest WGLT has ever undertaken. Those include:

1. Create a robust new strategic plan that not only lays out what WGLT (and WCBU) should be, but also imagines what the station(s) *could* be. This plan, which should include input from listeners and users, University and community leaders, station staff and management, and peers from across the state and country, will attempt to answer the questions posed above and map out a path for growth in fundraising, staff, and content offerings, and a way to better integrate WGLT into the University community and the area at large. Balancing day-to-day news coverage, public affairs reporting, culture coverage, investigative journalism, and in-depth interest features is not easy. WGLT must establish that balance, focus on it, and grow the revenue required to maintain the professional staff to do the work.
2. Continue to pursue partnerships with other public broadcasting entities (and other media outlets) with the understanding that any partnership should strengthen business operations and financial viability AND increase service to the local community.
3. Develop the next generation of journalists, making increasing diversity a priority. Mentorship makes a difference, and WGLT (and all of public media and journalism) need to do a better job of training eventual replacements. This is central to their roles as public servants.
4. Look at new revenue models, including pursuing other grants and soliciting more major gifts. Just as importantly, WGLT needs to continue to reach new and younger users (who do not necessarily listen to linear broadcast radio) to encourage use and enjoy WGLT's offerings. They need to be converted to contributors. Old studies indicate it took two years to convert a new radio listener into a donor.

## **PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE**

**Review Outcome:** The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds Radio Station WGLT to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee thanks WGLT staff for a thorough, well-organized, and critical self-study report that evidences careful consideration of and reflection on radio station goals and targets using information from stakeholders and a wide variety of data sources. WGLT-FM, with call letters reflecting the University motto "We

Gladly Learn and Teach,” has operated as a radio station and public service of Illinois State University since 1966. WGLT has been a National Public Radio (NPR) member since 1979 and offered a distinctive combination of local and national news with classical, jazz and blues as its primary music formats until it transitioned to primarily news and information in 2013. Since 1997, the radio station has been affiliated with the School of Communication housed within the College of Arts and Sciences. WGLT has a widespread community impact, currently reaching nearly 18,000 listeners weekly and 100,000 website users monthly. The committee commends WGLT’s consistent garnering of peer approval through awards for its content from organizations such as the Associated Press and Radio Television Digital News Directors Association. WGLT continues to be more consistently recognized than its closest competitors (i.e., WILL at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and WUIS at the University of Illinois, Springfield) by more than a 2-to-1 margin. The committee recognizes and thanks WGLT for the proactive and measured manner in which it has responded to recommendations resulting from the prior center review in 2015.

The committee commends WGLT staff on their efforts to strengthen their connections to Illinois State and the wider community. We note that the radio station’s strategic planning is guided by *Educate Connect Elevate: Illinois State – The Strategic Plan for Illinois’ First Public University 2018-2023*. The committee commends WGLT staff on their actions that have increased the number of student employment opportunities (e.g., announcers, news reporters/producers, marketing/development assistants) as well as internships which help to prepare the next generation of journalists and communication specialists. We also recognize that some of the radio station’s staff serve as lecturers in the School of Communication and have been involved in other Illinois State campus committees and task forces. The committee commends WGLT staff for broadening their scope beyond radio and adopting a “web first” policy, with stories and features being written first for a reading audience before being adapted for a listening audience. The committee acknowledges the challenges that WGLT leadership has undertaken to broaden the scope of community engagement through the merger with WCBU, an NPR member radio station at Bradley University in Peoria.

The committee commends WGLT staff for the actions that they have undertaken to become fiscally sustainable. Revenue components for the radio station include general appropriations from Illinois State University, business support/underwriting, listener contributions, events, federal and state grants, and donated materials and services both from Illinois State and from other sources. The committee recognizes that WGLT has finished each of the last three fiscal years with a modest operational surplus and notes the hiring of a new Development Director to assist the School of Communication with its fundraising efforts. The committee commends WGLT’s investment in social media marketing which has resulted in a dramatic increase in its internet traffic and in the reach of fundraising efforts. We note the radio station has experienced some success with its “non-interruptive” fund drive model and that corporate support has increased dramatically. The reputation of WGLT for the quality and impact of its initiatives contributes to this fundraising success.

The committee recognizes that WGLT staff have made strides towards reflecting the diversity of the audiences that they serve. We commend the development of the radio station’s *Diverse Voice Statement* which outlines WGLT’s commitment to including diverse voices in every aspect of newsgathering, production, and development. These efforts encompass local activities (e.g., having a more diverse spectrum of news sources and on-air talent) as well as programming decisions about national and syndicated offerings. Because of the radio station’s increases in student employment and internship opportunities several women and persons of color have been able to contribute to WGLT’s *Sound Ideas* news magazine and written features on the digital platform.

### **Recommendations.**

The Academic Planning Committee thanks the staff of Radio Station WGLT for the opportunity to provide input regarding the radio station’s objectives and outcomes, contributions to student learning, and fiscal sustainability at Illinois State University through consideration of the submitted self-study report. The following committee recommendations to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle are provided in a spirit of collaboration with Radio Station staff. In the next center review self-study report, tentatively due October 1, 2023, the committee asks WGLT to describe actions taken and results achieved for each recommendation.

**Continue to contribute to the academic mission of the University.** The committee encourages WGLT staff to continue to pursue new, innovative programming to foster connections with Illinois State University through effective use of staff experience and the involvement of students. We also recommend that the radio station work

with the Graduate School to identify ways to increase opportunities for graduate student involvement in the radio station. Finally, the committee recommends that WGLT staff continue to explore opportunities to identify and partner with other campus units on civic engagement, sustainability programming, and outreach activities.

**Continue to focus on diversity, inclusion, and equity.** As indicated in the self-study report, the committee encourages WGLT to pursue its goals related to further developing a diverse, inclusive, and equitable environment that effectively supports students and staff from diverse backgrounds.

**Continue implementing assessment activities and develop a formal comprehensive assessment plan.** One of the recommendations of the prior center review was to formalize WGLT's approach to assessment in a written center assessment plan. While it is evident from the self-study report that ongoing internal processes are in place to assess progress toward meeting radio station goals concerning key metrics (i.e., budgeting, fundraising, and audience measurement) set forth in the strategic plan and in annual budgeting documents, the committee encourages WGLT staff to work with University Assessment Services to formalize the processes of assessing the radio station's historic objectives as provided in the self-study report (provision/distribution of programming to listeners, enhancement of Illinois State's community identity, fostering of community engagement, and expansion of development/funding) into a comprehensive plan for evaluating the quality, impact, and effectiveness of programs and services provided by WGLT and to ensure their alignment with both university and community needs.

**Continue the fiscally responsible and entrepreneurial approach to station planning, budgeting, and fundraising.** The committee was impressed with strides that WGLT staff have made towards establishing long-term financial sustainability of the radio station. The self-study report stated that, "Listenership is steady, fundraising is up, digital use is way up, and community engagement – virtual and in real life – and the station's reputation in the community appear to be stronger than ever." The committee encourages WGLT staff to keep being adaptive and innovative in developing and implementing initiatives, while at the same time actively assessing the effectiveness of these actions.