

**Reaching Out To Nontraditional Students Through Television Production: Workshops for Families, Children and Secondary Education Teachers**

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the increasing need for universities to attract nontraditional students to generate revenue and increase recruitment efforts. This is particularly true as many universities are experiencing budget cuts that reduce or eliminate summer and nonessential courses. Television production workshops for families, children and high school teachers are particularly effective in attracting students to departments of Mass Communications while creating additional revenue for

departments and their faculty. They can also meet university standards for community service as well as increasing recruitment of future students.

## **Reaching Out To Nontraditional Students Through Television Production: Workshops for Families, Children and Secondary Education Teachers**

### **Introduction:**

Today's university professor must contend with a host of issues and concerns that extend far beyond the classroom. This is particularly true for junior professors who must learn to balance the pressures of effective teaching with departmental duties, research activities, and community service requirements for promotion and tenure (Endres and Wearden, 1996). Adding to these pressures is the steady trend in budget cuts at many universities across the nation. These cutbacks have caused actions ranging from scaled-down personnel and curricula to elimination of some programs altogether (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1998; Baum, 1992; Healy, 1998; Smith, 1993).

Departments of journalism and mass communications, which are often considered expensive to maintain, have been particularly hard hit by the trend in cutbacks (Kosicki and Becker, 1994). Many state funded departments of communication are facing the same scrutiny and threats as those experienced in recent years at the universities of Washington, Oregon State, Arizona, Michigan and Ohio State (Becker, 1995; Stein, 1994,1995). While some programs have been closed, most have remained but with reduced budgets, faculty and lab facilities. Understandably, the financial problems affecting a department often translate to additional pressures on individual faculty members. Mass communication faculty cited concern over departmental budgets as second only to job performance issues in Endres and Wearden's 1996 survey of faculty stressors (p. 36). These concerns can

contribute to job stress and burnout as faculty members contend with a feeling of having to do more with less resources and time (Dillon and Tanner, 1995; Greenberg, 1984).

To address these difficult budget issues, increasing numbers of state legislatures are tying funding to institutional performance through performance budgeting and performance funding programs. Most of these programs are used to determine budgets and to reward universities that meet certain goals concerning efficiency, graduation rates and community service (Schmidt, 1998). Although it is difficult to outline specific criteria for standards such as institutional efficiency, methods range from increased fund-raising efforts to cutting courses considered nonessential. Often summer teaching budgets become a target for cutbacks as recently witnessed at Ohio University and South Carolina when reduced university and corporate support forced the suspension of summer workshops for minority journalists (Chepesiuk and Timbs, 1995).

As the pot of available funds for summer course offerings is reduced, faculty are under increasing pressure to find new methods of productivity over these summer months. One path available is to look outside of traditional college course offerings to other audiences who are interested in television production but do not have access to such classes. Television production workshops offers faculty the opportunity to reach these nontraditional audiences and generate funds for supplemental salary while satisfying the community service requirements of performance funding and many university tenure and promotion requirements. The workshop model can easily be modified for many nontraditional groups including children, high school teachers and families.

**Targeting Nontraditional Audiences:**

Bringing nontraditional students into the mass communications department meets three specific goals: revenue, recruitment and community outreach. And to the extent that all three are interconnected so are they also integral to the university's overall mission. Although the potential audiences for television production workshops are virtually limitless, three groups are most common: children and teens, families and high school teachers. While all of these groups have unique qualities and special needs, they share a common interest in producing the kinds of television programs they watch virtually everyday of their lives. As common as the college student who wants to be the next Diane Sawyer or Dan Rather is the youngster or adult who just wants to see how it is all put together.

Children and teens are among the groups most eager to participate in such workshops because they have a keen interest in the performing arts and television production. Many are skilled in computers and music recording making for a relatively easy transition to television equipment. And few schools have television shows or equipment (except for that used by athletic departments) meaning the workshop offers students a form of instruction otherwise unavailable to them.

A workshop for families is a natural extension of that for children and actually stems from a number of requests from parents enrolling children in this author's existing workshop for teenagers. A family workshop provides a terrific learning opportunity for parents and children to work together on projects, and virtually eliminates discipline problems as the parent is right there to make sure children don't cause excessive behavioral problems.

Finally, high school teachers present a unique opportunity for universities to attract educators who may be interested in mass communication but do not pursue Master's degrees because there is little

incentive in their school district to do so. Few high schools have media or journalism departments on the same level with departments of English, math and science. Consequently, it is hard to convince the educator who teaches the occasional television course or who advises the school newspaper or television show to pursue a graduate degree in mass communications. However, as media literacy curricula gain popularity throughout the United States, the television production workshop may fill a void in continuing education credits for high school teachers assigned these courses. The workshop may even serve as an entry point for teachers who eventually apply to a department's graduate program.

Regardless of what group instructors choose to attract planning and strategy are vitally important. Children and teens, for instance, may be perfect for short, intensive summer courses while this would not likely work for families where the adult is at work during the day. In this case evening or Saturday courses spread out over many weeks and months would be better. Duration of class sessions, specific lessons and assignments, as well as class fees will vary with each target audience and the university's rules and regulations regarding noncredit classes and institutes. Instructors should be sure to address these concerns prior to proposing a new workshop and should review those decisions again at the end in case adaptations are needed for future workshops. As each college course is different, so are workshops and changes and adjustments are common, if not expected.

### **Funding the Television Production Workshop:**

Coming up with the idea to do a television production workshop is easy. Getting it approved and funded by a university administration requires careful planning and organization. The instructors

must present persuasive and compelling reasons to fund such a program aimed at the nontraditional student.

The best place to start for short term, specialized workshops is the university's office of Continuing Education and/or Conferences and Institutes. Most universities use one or both of these offices to create programs for nontraditional students. However, these programs typically offer no salary for faculty, leaving only registration fees to cover expenses and salaries. In these cases it is advisable to consider enrollment limits and fees carefully to make sure that *reasonable* salaries are possible after all expenses are paid.

However, before contacting the Continuing Education office, organizers should determine if university resources already exist to support community outreach or community service programs. These programs are often designed for the sole purpose of serving the surrounding public community with short term, noncredit personal enrichment courses. Such programs often provide more funding than continuing education services.

This author's initial effort utilized just such an existing funding source. Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville's College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) funds summer workshop offerings within the area of Fine Arts, specifically in the departments of Art & Design, Music, Theater and Dance, and Mass Communications. This 13-year-old "Summer Arts" program has maintained continued success and support of several children's workshops in such diverse areas as acting, pottery and drawing, and advanced music training. The decision to offer the television workshop to teenagers made it comparable to previous CAS funded offerings.

A written proposal outlining workshop objectives, content and estimated expenses was presented in the spring. Prior to the submission of the proposal, an initial planning meeting was held to ascertain the availability of facilities for the proposed workshop period (three weeks) to avoid conflict with any scheduled classes, to determine materials needed and costs, and to involve important staff members, including the department's broadcast engineer who would be offering technical support.

The workshop was scheduled to begin prior to the beginning of the university's summer session to avoid conflict/demand for production facilities. Utilizing "down" time allowed efficient use of facilities when they would otherwise be idle. Expenses, therefore, were limited to salaries for the two instructors. Teaching assistants were graduate students receiving academic credit and the broadcast engineer incorporated the workshop into his Civil Service duties.

The proposal was accepted and approved by the College with funding for each instructor's salary. A \$75 registration fee for participants was similar to fees of other summer workshops. This money becomes additional revenue for the department to cover workshop expenses (videotapes, postage, printing costs) and facilities upkeep. Promotion and publicity for the workshop was included in a university brochure listing all summer offerings (science camps, sports camps, etc.), and the instructors generated additional publicity through press releases and public service announcements. No paid advertising was employed.

While this is an example of how this author's workshop was initially organized, each university department's circumstances will, of course, differ. The key is to create a detailed proposal that accounts for all costs as well as personnel and facility requirements. This will help ensure the university's

support whether it is through an existing community outreach fund or Continuing Education department.

### **The Production Workshop Model:**

For purposes of demonstrating how a workshop may be organized the model outlined below is for an intensive, summer workshop organized into three week, half-day (three hours) classes focusing on production skills and media literacy exercises. This works best for children and teens, and high school teachers who do not have summer obligations. Workshops geared towards families and obligated teachers are best structured around four to eight weeks sessions with one night or weekend class per week. Whatever structure is chosen emphasis should remain on hand-on lessons rather than reading exercises. There are no textbooks and no tests; rather, focus is placed on the experiential method of learning where students learn by doing. The absence of texts and tests is an appropriate approach given that this a workshop emphasizing processes and theory rather than the recourse of material (McKeachie, 1986).

### **Focus One - Media Literacy:**

The first focus of the workshop involves various media literacy lessons that teach participants how media are produced, how decisions are made regarding the content of media, and how such media messages may affect their lives. As stated in the Center for Media Education's (1998) vision statement media literacy helps young students Access, understand, analyze and evaluate the powerful images, words and sounds that make up our contemporary mass media culture,@ (p. 2). Suggested topics



include advertising effects (advertising appeals, function of advertising in popular culture, advertising in children's entertainment programming), news effects (the agenda-setting function of news, gatekeeping, news gathering techniques), media violence (violence as a form of conflict resolution, dramatic violence versus realistic violence), and stereotypes in media (gender and race representation in news, advertising and entertainment programming). These lessons should include a brief lecture (with handouts), and examples to illustrate points made in the lecture followed by a short activity in which students put into practice what they have just learned. This approach employs the Recall plus technique as students are expected to recall the principles, techniques and processes discussed in the lessons and then apply those to their critiques of actual programs (Milton, 1982).

The practice activities are also very important as these give students the opportunity to involve themselves in the learning process and give their input and interpretation to the theories and abstract ideas introduced in the lectures. By emphasizing the process of media and the messages imbedded in their content students are encouraged to understand more about the process, not the technology, of mass media (Nimmer, 1992). Although these are group-centered discussions, the instructor should always act as a facilitator to keep the group focused on the subject matter (Zander, 1979). Examples of media literacy lessons include:

**Advertising:** Students are shown examples of television commercials followed by a brief discussion about the make-up of each ad. Was music used? Were there people in it? What gender? What was the message? Who delivered it? This is followed by a brief discussion of the function/role of advertising

in society and as an economic support system for mass media. Students are then introduced to the basic appeals used in advertising based on the basic human needs: drink, food, comfort, safety, etc., and encouraged to name types of products that satisfy those needs. The assignment for that evening is a take-home sheet using the questions above and the basic appeals to be used while viewing three commercials.

**News:** An examination of news criteria. A brief discussion as what makes something newsworthy: interest vs. ability to affect, proximity, timeliness. How is news gathered? This is followed by discussion of interview techniques. Students are then given 10 minutes each to interview the person next to them. They then write (in news style) what they learn through their interview. The following day, each piece is read anonymously and students must guess who the news story is about.

**Gatekeeping/Agenda Setting:** Students are asked to name a story in the news within the past three to six months. Each response is written on the board. The exercise not only shows how news criteria are used but allows attention to be called to stories that are still pertinent but not receiving coverage. This exercise illustrates that agenda setting often results from news criteria rather than conscious effort to exclude.

**News selection:** Prepare a list of the news stories and ads from the previous evening's national news broadcast (all broadcast networks) and the local telecasts. Place at least two stations lists side by

side. Students can see the placement of the stories in the newscast and how they may differ by network/station. Also list the commercials to show the type of sponsors and to give a good estimate as to who is watching these shows. (Please note: This method of monitoring is used to avoid any problems with footage of stories that might not be suitable for young viewers.)

This examination also includes a discussion of hard vs. soft news and where soft news stories appear within the newscast.

Another exercise deals with production values. Students are asked to make note of graphics and how they are used in everything from opening credits to charts and graphs within stories. They are also encouraged to comment on the news set design and the newscasters. Everything from gender to clothing and hair styles is considered. Next comes footage vs. stills, talking heads, number and location of stand-ups. While these topics may seem advanced for younger students, most students are already aware of many of these principles as increasing numbers of school districts and private schools require inclusion of media literacy lessons within traditional social science classes. Carefully planned lessons will lead to very lively class discussions.

The media literacy lessons also present the perfect opportunity for occasional take-home assignments. These allow students to involve their parents in the workshop C a perfect alliance for the workshop geared specifically for families. Parents are generally interested in what their children are learning and assignments such as media inventory, news and advertising monitoring facilitate interaction between family members and increase the likelihood that participants C children and adults alike C will arrive with their take-home assignments completed.

## **Focus Two - Television Production Activities:**

The hands-on production activities are by far the most popular among nontraditional students and should be the main emphasis of the workshop's offerings. These activities compliment the theoretical lessons as students practice and execute the lessons from media literacy sessions and get to produce the media products they have been studying. And while it is always desirable to strive for the best quality project, emphasis should remain on the basic processes of creating media messages, rather than on technological perfection. It is always important to remember that this is a short term, noncredit course; instructors should put away their grade book and encourage creative and competency over advanced mastery of skills. Examples of television production assignments include:

**Music Video:** Working in small groups, students lip-sync and perform a song from a selection of music provided by the instructors. This activity introduces students to performing on camera as well as the basic production skills of camera and audio production. While students are encouraged to create their own choreography and costumes it may be necessary to provide a selection of music to avoid lengthy debates within teams that could consume valuable production time.

**Television Commercial:** Two-member teams produce commercials for two products **C** one assigned by the instructors, the other a product of their choice. As with the music video, assigning one of the commercials gets the process started so students concentrate on the production process rather than selection of the product. Still, student creativity and decision-making skills are stressed as the teams choose their second product. Students determine the target audience for their product, write copy and prepare a story board with camera shots before taping their commercials.

**News Reading Assignment:** This project introduces students to performance techniques in a news

setting. Working in groups of three, students deliver a short (3-5 minute) news segment consisting of news and sports stories delivered from a news set. Instructors pre-select the stories that are loaded into the Teleprompter while students script their own introductions.

**Weather Assignment:** Working off the skills they have learned in the news reading assignment, each student delivers a short (1 minute) weather update in front of a chroma-key wall. As before, the script and weather map graphics are selected by the instructors enabling students to concentrate on the difficult skill of performing before the chroma-key maps.

**Interview Segment:** Three-member teams (one host and two guests) conduct a five-minute interview segment on an informal interview set. To avoid Jerry Springer-style topics, instructors should assign topics to groups although the role of host and guests are chosen by the students themselves. Interview topics should relate to participants' interests. For example, for children and teenagers this may include issues such as adoption of mandatory school uniforms, sports figures as role models, and violence in video games.

**News Program:** Using pre-selected wire copy, participants serve as anchors (two), a sportscaster and a weather person--four positions for each newscast. Four other students serve as camera crew and floor manager. Two students assist the director in master control and one student works the Teleprompter.

The entire newscast, with news, sports, weather and PSA lasts approximately 8-10 minutes, and may include commercial breaks. As before, teams serve as production staffs for another's newscast meaning virtually all students participate in every newscast in some capacity.

**Field Trips:** In addition to the lessons and activities, it is wise to schedule field trips to local radio and television stations. Students enjoy the studio tour and meeting the on-air talent that they see and hear on

a daily basis. Contact can be made directly with area stations or through the local chapters of professional organizations such as the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences (NATAS), Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), or International Television Association (ITVA).

### **General Suggestions for a Television Workshop:**

In addition to the lessons and activities outlined above, there are many general principles that will help maintain a positive workshop environment.

**Limit class size:** To maintain a favorable learning environment the student-teacher ratio should be no more than 4 to 1. Graduate students and teaching assistants can serve as group leaders and production assistants to maintain order and safe production activities.

**Set a narrow age gap when working with children:** As with college students, persons of different ages have different life experiences. However, children of different ages also exhibit varying levels of maturity which can cause real problems in the workshop environment. Younger children with shorter attention spans may become bored, while older children can become intolerant of their younger classmates. It is best to work with a group of students who are no more than three years apart in age.

Workshops for families reduce the potential problems that exist when working with young children. Adult family members can supervise their own children, leaving the instructors to concentrate on course assignments not discipline.

**Set rules from the first day and reinforce on a daily basis:** Unlike college students who you see on a regular basis, noncredit students are infrequent visitors to your facilities and may forget the ground rules. They may need to be reminded that they must not operate equipment without professional

supervision, and that they should be mindful of the potential dangers in a television studio (cables, booms, etc.).

**Get health and equipment release forms signed:** Although it is unlikely that any accident will happen, medical release forms allow university personnel to administer medical attention. Equipment release forms make sure that adults and/or parents know that they are financially responsible for any damage done to university equipment. These forms must be signed and filed prior to the start of the workshop.

**Plan production activities so that students always have something to do.** Idle minds (and hands) can lead to boredom and chaos in the studio. Rotate students through various production positions so that all participants get the experience of operating different pieces of equipment and gain knowledge of the overall process of television production.

**Match production assignments to students= skill levels.** While you aim to introduce each student to all of the production skills, it may become apparent that some students have difficulty mastering certain skills (running a Teleprompter for instance) and should be assigned to other production positions. Remember that students want to produce the best projects possible and allowing one student to remain in a problematic production position can ruin another student's video experience.

**Be Flexible.** Start with a plan but be ready to shift the order of the exercises or even revise exercises to meet the needs and skill levels of participants. Plan daily meetings with group leaders at the end of every session to regroup and make plans for the next days projects.

**Small groups are efficient:** Using small groups (3-4 students) for most exercises serves a variety of functions. From the first day of the workshop it is wise to use small groups to ensure that the students

get to know each other. One-on-one interviews the first day help lessen the natural barriers and put students at ease with one another. In addition, rotating the group membership on a daily basis during the first week's activities identifies which students work well together.

**Consider making all assignments studio bound:** Carefully gauge the level of responsibility of the students. If there is any doubt about sending students out for campus field work, it may be wise to confine their efforts to the studio. This can be determined by the availability of staff to supervise the groups, the skill level of the students, perceived risk to equipment and university liability. An exception to this exists with workshops aimed at families and adults who have their own video cameras. This opens up the possibility for a whole host of assignments that participants can work on away from class or during field lessons throughout the workshop.

**Give Participants a Videotape of their work:** At the end of the workshop students receive a videotape of all their production activities. Although this means many hours of dubbing for the instructors it ensures that each student has a record of their accomplishments to be shared with parents and friends. It is a wonderful record of their work that can be shared with others.

### **Conclusion:**

Offering a television production workshop to nontraditional students has numerous benefits. It is a positive exercise in expanding good public relations for the university and in expanding awareness and knowledge about a process that fascinates many who see it. The more educators instruct the public about how a program is produced, how decisions are made and how media are financed, the more they may impact the industry in a positive way. The workshop also provides a hands-on learning



environment for those who are interested in learning how to produce the same types of programs they watch every day.

The benefits to instructors are also numerous. Teaching an age group or student type different from traditional college students challenges an instructor's techniques and skills. The workshop model can easily be adapted to different audiences and different studio facilities. The practical benefit is to provide summer income for instructors, but may also satisfy the service requirement for tenure and promotion. There are also numerous benefits to the university including recruitment of potential students and good will with the surrounding community. Departments operating under the scrutiny of performance budgeting can use the workshop to illustrate their commitment to serve nontraditional students and to seek alternative forms of funding. Lastly, this workshop can help individual instructors strike a balance among the pressures of effective teaching with departmental duties, university obligations to the community and budgetary constraints.

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