Lessons from KUNM

To the editor:

I read with interest your report on the reorganization of KUNM-FM in Albuquerque, where I have worked as a volunteer and board member since 1981.

To your reporting, I would like to offer a historical perspective. I see KUNM-FM at the University of New Mexico not as a case study of the failure of administrators to control its broadcast outlet, but as a continuing victory for volunteers and listener-subscribers in the widespread battle to resist the standardization of public radio formats.

The history of KUNM is a model of college-, community- and public-radio development over the last 25 years. KUNM was first a college and then a community station, then finally joined NPR a dozen or so years ago. As the primary NPR station for 200 miles in any direction, we have to be many things to many people.

Yet despite being a university licensee, we have not been anchored as part of the host university's curriculum. This, more than the personalities of managers and volunteers, appears to me to be the root of KUNM’s ongoing difficulties. Not only is KUNM one of the most ardently democratic stations in the NPR system, with volunteers and a radio board having decisive input into policy and programming, we are typical of university licensees without connection to the parent university’s curriculum.

This is a problem which has emerged historically from the evolutions of student stations into NPR stations. Even a station as high-profile as KPBS-FM in San Diego, affiliated with San Diego State University, has, I was recently told, very little correspondence between its department of telecommunications and its broadcast outlets. To remedy a similar problem in New Mexico, over the last five years I have been developing a Radio Studies curriculum to upgrade the training of volunteers at the station and to provide opportunities for students to obtain credit for the practical experience they receive.

The lesson both independent producers and professional staff can learn from KUNM (and from WXPN at the University of Pennsylvania) is that many university-licensed stations are simply not taking advantage of the training and community-education resources that their stations represent, and that instituting from above a tried-and-true classical/jazz format is a poor idea. KUNM’s loyal listeners have managed to overcome capricious efforts of previous managers to throw out its locally produced freeform programming.

Much of the controversy on which your article centered has, of this writing, apparently been resolved. KUNM has come to epitomize many of the basic tensions in public radio broadcasting: professionalization of staff versus the gourmet-amateur volunteer programmer; the evolution of radio formats from freewheeling to revenue- and ratings-based consistency. Yet there is a moral here: any university- or school-district-licensee seeking to revamp the format of a popular station (or to resist such a revamping) must be certain of strong backing within its parent institution, including the staff, faculty, administration and students.

David K. Dunaway
Associate Professor, University of New Mexico
Albuquerque