

REVIEW OF RADIO STATION WGLT

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Research and Public Service Center: Radio, Television, and Digital Communication

OVERVIEW

WGLT is a public radio station owned by and licensed to Illinois State University, providing news, information, music, and cultural content to Bloomington-Normal and the surrounding community. A center within ISU's College of Arts and Sciences, WGLT is member of the NPR (National Public Radio) Network and is CPB CSG (Corporation for Public Broadcasting Community Service Grant) eligible entity, WGLT broadcasts over the air at 89.1 FM and online at WGLT.org, reaching 10,000 broadcast listeners weekly and 20,000 on-demand and streaming listeners, 136,000 unique website visitors and 300,000 page views every month, and has a presence of most social media platforms.

In 2019, WGLT entered into a Public Service Operating Agreement with Bradley University in Peoria to operate its public radio station (WCBU, 89.9 FM and WCBU.org). The organization employs 20 full-time staff and 6-10 part-time plus 8-10 paid student when fully staffed. The combined NFFS (Non-Federal Financial Support, which includes institutional indirect support) as reported to CPB for FY 2023 was \$2.6 million, of which nearly 70 percent is raised by station staff for operations.

Granted its first FCC broadcast license in 1966, WGLT's call letters stand for Illinois State's motto: We Gladly Learn and Teach. The station is regularly recognized by its peers with awards for journalistic excellence amassing more than 200 honors over the years. In January 2024, WGLT moved into brand new studios in a building shared with ISU's student newspaper, The Vidette, located on campus at 500 West Locust Street in Normal, culminating a multiyear capital campaign raising more than \$100,000 to update its broadcast equipment.

WGLT is McLean County's most trusted destination for local news while also serving as a training ground for the journalists of tomorrow, understanding that independent journalism is the foundation of a thriving democracy and is our public service duty, with content freely available to all.

Like most legacy media outlets regardless of medium or commercial status, WGLT has faced significant headwinds over the past decade resulting from a dramatically changed media landscape and evolving consumer behaviors. Despite a decline in traditional radio audience, WGLT has diversified its revenue sources and seen financial stabilization and even modest growth that has allowed the station to expand staff and service. As a result, the stations have experienced a significant expansion in audience size and engagement, though that audience has yet to provide an associated growth in financial contributions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

Introduction and overview

WGLT is Illinois State University's public radio station and a key provider of local news and cultural content for McLean County and beyond. A unit of the College of Arts and Sciences, WGLT operates both WGLT (89.1 FM) and, through a unique partnership with Bradley University, WCBU (89.9 FM) in Peoria. WGLT reaches a growing audience through broadcast, digital streaming, podcasts, and online content. With more than 10,000 weekly broadcast listeners and 136,000 monthly unique website visitors, the station has adapted effectively to changing media landscapes. It operates with 20 full-time staff, numerous part-time contributors, and a growing number of paid student interns. Since the previous review in 2019, WGLT has expanded its services, stabilized its finances, and strengthened its role as both a public media outlet and an experiential learning site for students.

WGLT's self-study process was informed by a wide array of continuously monitored performance metrics including audience analytics, financial data, social media engagement, and industry benchmarking. The unit engaged internal

stakeholders, external consultants, and national professional associations to assess its progress and plan for the future. This review addresses prior recommendations and highlights developments since the last program evaluation.

Overview, Staffing, and Strategic Planning

Since its FCC licensing in 1966, WGLT has evolved into a leading local news source and educational partner. It has transitioned through several university structures, most recently joining the College of Arts and Sciences in 2023. The station now operates with a growing staff and expanded student internship program. Strategic planning is guided by a revised mission and vision emphasizing community trust, journalistic integrity, and innovation. Six strategic objectives shape WGLT's ongoing work, including strengthening digital reach, increasing staff diversity, aligning operations with ISU priorities, and pursuing financial sustainability. Notably, WGLT has successfully grown its reporting staff and digital presence while maintaining high editorial standards and audience engagement.

Budget and Resources

WGLT operates with a complex funding model combining university support (30%), grants (10%), and community-based contributions (60%). The station has improved its financial health through expanded underwriting, grant acquisition, and donor outreach. Still, WGLT remains a "money-in, money-out" operation facing rising costs. Future plans include establishing a major gifts program and expanding endowment capacity to ensure stability and allow for staff growth.

Peer Comparison and Recognition

Compared to peer public radio stations in Illinois and nationally, WGLT stands out for its digital reach, fiscal responsibility, and fundraising success. The station has won more than 200 awards for journalistic excellence, consistently outperforming peer stations in content quality and audience trust. Benchmarking data affirms WGLT's position as a leader among university-licensed public stations of similar size.

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Access (EDIA)

WGLT is committed to diversifying its workforce, content, and audience engagement. While full-time staff remain predominantly white, the station has made progress through its paid internship program, accessible content, and inclusive event programming. The internship program, now funded at approximately \$100,000 annually, creates pathways for historically underrepresented students to engage in journalism and media production. WGLT also audits source diversity and actively seeks inclusive content strategies.

Alignment with ISU Strategic Plan

WGLT aligns closely with the core values of Illinois State's strategic plan, especially in areas of scholarship, individualized attention, civic engagement, and integrity. The station provides hands-on learning, reflects diverse perspectives, and fosters public dialogue on vital civic issues. Its programming and staff development efforts advance institutional goals in learning, equity, and community engagement.

Assessment and Student Learning

WGLT assesses performance through continuous data collection on audience size, digital engagement, and financial metrics. While qualitative impact measures remain a challenge, a new comprehensive data dashboard launching in Fall 2024 will help the station better track performance. Student learning is supported through paid internships and scholarship opportunities, with students contributing meaningfully to on-air and digital content. WGLT also now oversees The Vidette, providing additional learning and partnership opportunities.

Major Accomplishments Since Last Review

Since 2019, WGLT has: assumed operation of WCBU; launched new digital and podcast initiatives; expanded staff; remodeled its facility; strengthened its internship program; earned new national grants; and received ongoing industry recognition. It has also enhanced civic engagement programming and entered new partnerships supporting local journalism and student learning. These milestones demonstrate the station's innovation, responsiveness, and growth.

Response to 2019 Program Review Recommendations

WGLT has responded actively to all prior review recommendations. It enhanced academic partnerships, expanded student involvement (including at the graduate level), increased diversity efforts, implemented more structured assessment practices, and maintained its entrepreneurial approach to planning and fundraising. A new data dashboard and increased collaboration with campus units reflect these improvements.

Findings and Future Directions

WGLT's audience, reputation, and financial position are stronger than ever. However, the station faces ongoing challenges, including unpredictable funding, rising costs, and the need to convert digital audiences into financial supporters. Priorities for the next cycle include donor base growth, a new major gifts program, staff diversification, digital engagement expansion, and continued excellence in journalism. WGLT remains committed to its public service mission, educational role, and alignment with ISU's values.

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 concise and well-organized self-study report that demonstrates meaningful reflection on the radio station's mission, strategic goals, and broad-based community engagement. While the core report was brief, the committee notes that the appendices provided extensive detail, perhaps to a degree that could be streamlined in future reports. Nonetheless, the volume and range of documentation provided strong evidence of stakeholder engagement, including input from advisory boards, staff, community members, and an independent auditor.

WGLT continues to play a critical role at Illinois State University and in the region, exemplifying the institution's public service mission. The committee commends the station's successful transition to digital platforms and the expansion of its multimedia presence, including innovative short-form video content aimed at younger audiences. The station's continued recognition for journalistic excellence and the acquisition and revitalization of Peoria-based WCBU are both noteworthy accomplishments. While concerns were raised about the long-term sustainability of WCBU—given the absence of financial support from Bradley University—the committee recognizes that WGLT's leadership acted decisively to preserve an important regional resource and has since operated the station effectively under a renewed agreement.

The committee notes WGLT's thoughtful articulation of short-, mid-, and long-term goals, as well as alignment with the university's previous strategic plan, *Educate Connect Elevate: Illinois State*. WGLT is encouraged to align future planning efforts with the new *Excellence by Design* framework. The committee also recognizes that the station operates within a distinct revenue-based model, relying heavily on fundraising, underwriting, and community support. These financial realities, including the station's recent annual deficit and anticipated reductions in Corporation for Public Broadcasting funding, present significant challenges moving forward.

The committee commends WGLT's continued emphasis on student learning and involvement, noting the expansion of paid internships and student employment opportunities. Student interns are now engaged in various facets of station operation, and the committee acknowledges efforts to assess these experiences through exit surveys. While progress has been made since the previous review, the committee encourages continued collaboration with University Assessment Services to formalize and strengthen the station's assessment plan, particularly in evaluating student learning and community impact.

The station's accomplishments in civic engagement remain robust, with outreach extending to local high school students and community audiences. The launch of Highway 309 and other programming initiatives reflect a commitment to broadening the station's cultural reach. The committee also acknowledges ongoing efforts to diversify staff, content, and perspectives, and encourages continued attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion across all operations.

Despite a logistical challenge surrounding the condition of WGLT's former facilities space following relocation, the committee appreciates the station's successful transition to its new location and its positive impact on morale and operations. The committee notes some ambiguity regarding the debt management and administrative affiliation of WGLT and encourages further clarification of its relationship to both the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Communication.

Overall, the committee views WGLT as a highly valued institutional asset and commends its public service, innovation, and resilience. There is strong evidence of forward-thinking, mission-driven planning and a deep connection to both the university and regional communities.

Recommendations.

The Academic Planning Committee thanks the staff of Radio Station WGLT for the opportunity to provide input regarding the station's objectives, contributions to student learning, and fiscal operations. The following recommendations are intended to be addressed by the time of the next regularly scheduled review. The committee congratulates the Radio Station WGLT on a successful four years.

In addition to the center's noteworthy efforts and accomplishments, the Academic Planning Committee provided recommendations for consideration. The committee's recommendations outlined below are to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. Details describing the actions and outcomes associated with each of the committee's recommendations should be included in the next program review self-study report that is tentatively due October 1, 2028.

Continue to align planning efforts with evolving institutional strategies. WGLT is encouraged to align its future strategic planning with *Excellence by Design*, Illinois State University's most recent strategic plan. The committee recognizes the station's success in articulating long-range goals and encourages continued responsiveness to institutional and community needs.

Continue to strengthen student engagement and assess learning outcomes. The committee commends WGLT's expanded paid internship program and encourages continued collaboration with University Assessment Services to enhance assessment practices. A more formal and comprehensive assessment plan, with an emphasis on student learning and experiential outcomes, would further support the station's academic contributions.

Clarify administrative structure and financial responsibilities. The committee encourages clarification of the station's administrative and financial relationships—especially concerning debt management and its ties to both the College of Arts and Sciences and the School of Communication—to ensure transparency and facilitate future planning.

Sustain and diversify funding sources in light of emerging financial challenges. The committee encourages WGLT to continue its entrepreneurial approach to fundraising and budgeting, particularly in anticipation of decreased support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The station's efforts to expand donor support, enhance digital fundraising, and grow community partnerships are commendable and should be sustained.

Continue efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. The committee acknowledges WGLT's progress in integrating DEI principles across staffing, programming, and student opportunities. The station is encouraged to continue this work and expand its initiatives to ensure inclusive representation in all areas of operation.