WLSU: Telling Public Radio’s Story 2015-2016

1. Describe your overall goals and approach to address identified community issues, needs, and interests through your station’s vital local services, such as multiplatform long and short-form content, digital and in-person engagement, education services, community information, partnership support, and other activities, and audiences you reached or new audiences you engaged.

WLSU’s overall goal is to position public radio locally in the communities we serve; to make local what is typically heard as national or statewide public radio; and to address local news, culture, and music in the “public radio” style being sought out by our audiences. This is realized in the way we cover and present news and current affairs content with the depth and breadth typical of NPR and Wisconsin Public Radio; by the choices we make in presenting music, arts and culture that isn’t otherwise available locally; and by engaging in community partnerships when our participation can further the reach of events and activities that better inform, educate and entertain their intended audiences, as well as extending our goal of positioning public radio locally.

Community Engagement Conversations: In collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Extension and Wisconsin Public Television, we hosted another in this ongoing series of meetings to bring together community members to hear directly from them about key issues affecting our region. Stakeholders from the Barron County area, served by WLSU’s affiliate station WUEC, participated in an April 2016 conversation; they represented a diverse range of professions, neighborhoods, ages, religions, and communities of color, ranging from business to education to economic development to health care. Issues related to primary/secondary education, poverty, mental health, aging, community, the environment, work force challenges, health care, and rural Wisconsin were all raised during this conversation.

As a “content” provider, our primary service is realized through producing radio and online audio programming that addresses the issues, needs and interests of our local communities. We do so in conjunction with Wisconsin Public Radio, which provides coverage of statewide news, and NPR, which provides national and international news, all of which impacts the lives
of our local audiences. The news we cover locally ranges from stories unique to the greater La Crosse and Eau Claire communities served by our primary and affiliate stations, to local perspectives on state, national and international news that better frame these stories and their effect on the people who live here.

Initiatives of special note include Newsmakers, WLSU’s series of weekly one-on-one in-depth conversations with those making local news; and affiliate station WUEC’s weekly program about arts and culture – Spectrum West – which includes in-depth behind-the-scenes interviews and stories about area writers, musicians, theater, visual arts, and the humanities. In FY 2016 we continued to increase the availability of these locally-produced news and interview segments via Internet downloads and extended interview material that was created specifically for the web. Of particular note was launching Newsmakers’ year-long emphasis on issues related to aging; this series continues into FY 2017 and will be followed by an ongoing community engagement campaign to connect listeners with readily available sources of information and support for those addressing aging issues.

Additionally, WLSU/WUEC staff reaches out to the community through our involvement as a partner or sponsor for community discussions and forums, performances and educational programs. We do this in multiple ways, from on-air interviews and announcements that promote events, to offering our services as moderators or emceeing, to serving as advisors/board members with local organizations to help inform them on current affairs topics and potential speakers, to helping our partners organize their specific activities.

2. Describe key initiatives and the variety of partners with whom you collaborated, including other public media outlets, community nonprofits, government agencies, educational institutions, the business community, teachers and parents, etc. This will illustrate the many ways you’re connected across the community and engaged with other important organizations in the area.

Community engagement initiatives include partnerships with several local arts and cultural organizations, working with them to present a wide range of national and international musicians and artists to local audiences. In 2015-16 (FY2016) we sponsored more than 30 La Crosse-area performances, exhibitions, and educational events featuring musical programs about jazz and Dixieland, nationally-recognized folk singer/songwriters, touring theater, exhibitions about Eagles, the Mississippi River and the Driftless area, plus performances by local songwriters and storytellers, and community theater productions. We also partnered to present folk and arts festivals that highlight visual arts and crafts created by local artisans, including members of several ethnic communities in the region.
A sampling of partners during this year include: La Crosse Community Theatre, Viterbo Fine Arts Center, Pump House Regional Arts Center, Heider Center for the Arts, the Great River Folk Festival, Driftless Area Art Festival, National Eagle Center, Lanesboro Arts, Commonweal Theatre, Galesville’s Old Main, UW-La Crosse Theater Arts, and Minnesota Marine Art Museum; our affiliate station in Eau Claire added over 30 additional events to this list for that community, including partnerships with Literacy Chippewa Valley, Mabel Tainter Theatre, Stockholm Art Fair, Eau Claire Children’s Theatre, Eau Claire Chamber Orchestra, Chippewa Valley Book Fest, Chippewa Valley Writers Guild, Eau Claire Jazz Festival, and Chippewa Valley Cultural Center, among others.

We continued to work closely with our local University of Wisconsin campuses during the 2015-16 academic year by involving students in local operations and programming, mentoring of journalism students, and offering special-emphasis internships; we work with UW campuses in La Crosse and Eau Claire, as well as La Crosse's Viterbo University, in developing programming content relating to special topics, issues and events; members of our staff regularly present lectures and lead conversations in broadcast management, journalism, communications and marketing classes.

During the 2015-16 season we again partnered with an Alma, Wisconsin-based rural community theater to produce a series of local broadcasts that showcase area musicians, storytellers, humorists and authors. The show originates from communities between La Crosse and Eau Claire; three shows were produced and recorded for broadcast locally and more broadly to audiences throughout Wisconsin on network stations of Wisconsin Public Radio.

Finally, as noted in section one, we collaborate with UW-Extension and Wisconsin Public Television on community conversations to engage regional audiences in discussions about community issues and concerns that inform our programming and outreach activities in the future. During FY 2016 we held a conversation in Barron County in affiliate-station WUEC’s rural Wisconsin service area.

3. What impact did your key initiatives and partnerships have in your community? Describe any known measurable impact, such as increased awareness, learning or understanding about particular issues. Describe indicators of success, such as connecting people to needed resources or strengthening conversational ties across diverse neighborhoods. Did a partner see an increase in requests for related resources? Please include direct feedback from a partner(s) or from a person(s) served.

The successes of our community partnerships help local partners reach thousands of participants each year. This success is typically gauged in terms of attendance and balanced event budgets. To that end, all of the events we participated in during FY 2016 were successful and will be happening again in FY 2017, and we will continue to expand on them in the new year.
What we often don’t realize is how partnering with others to sponsor arts and music events, or addressing key issues with special programming content, affects people’s lives beyond their being informed or entertained:

“I want to thank you SO much for. . . the Keyed In concert Sunday. My daughter and I attended and even went to the preconcert talk, which was delightful. . . I live on nearly nothing and can’t attend concerts like I would want to, so this was a super opportunity.” (Dean, Viola)

“Having never heard of the town of Lanesboro, MN before (attending) a show at the Commonweal Theatre there, we were delighted to drive up yesterday afternoon to discover it. . . Thank you. (We) will definitely want to return to that lively town, and its incredible theatre you sponsor there. . . Just wanted to tell you how much we appreciated (it).” (Luci, Dodgeville)

“Thanks for playing (Stan Getz)...play more! . . . glad you play jazz — thanks!” (David, La Crosse)

“. . .we never said ‘Thank-you’ for. . . the Great River Folk Fest. We spent the entire Saturday afternoon and evening at the fest and had a great time. So thank-you again for providing us with an enjoyable outing!” (Laurel, Sparta)

“In the program it said that WPR was one of the sponsors for the show and I appreciate that you sponsor good local theater.” (Jan, La Crosse)

“Everybody was amazed that 97 people came to our Classical Norwegian Holiday. . . (it’s) a capacity crowd for us!! WPR is working very, very well to help build our regional culture by publicizing the work we and many others are doing. We very much appreciate it!!!” (Jim, Galesville)

“. . .such a memorable afternoon in Prairie du Chien. It was wonderful! I so enjoyed (Tim) who gave us a passionate background on the piano and its uniqueness . . . and the concert was spectacular, I loved it.” (Jeri, La Crosse)

Our FY 2016 Community Engagement Conversation, co-sponsored with UW-Extension and Wisconsin Public Television, brought together a diverse audience from a variety of ‘neighborhoods’ and generated many thoughtful comments reinforcing that our role as a community convener helps identify and expand awareness of issues, as well as articulating emerging community goals:

- Territorialism prevents sharing of resources and seeing neighbors as fellow community members.
- Need better technical education in public schools to support the local industry.
- The rural nature of this county allows community members to ignore the presence of poverty, homelessness and addiction.
- There’s greater support needed for substance-abuse victims in pursuing the recovery process; still a lot of problems with drugs – especially meth – and alcohol.
• A high number of students are living in poverty and coming from dysfunctional families, creating increased stress on the educational structures.

Additionally, our commitment to airing selected Public Service Announcements and events promotion direct listeners to community resources to learn more about the arts, culture, literacy, education and more.

4. Please describe any efforts (e.g. programming, production, engagement activities) you have made to investigate and/or meet the needs of minority and other diverse audiences (including, but not limited to, new immigrants, people for whom English is a second language and illiterate adults) during Fiscal Year 2015, and any plans you have made to meet the needs of these audiences during Fiscal Year 2016. If you regularly broadcast in a language other than English, please note the language broadcast.

WLSU/WUEC’s ongoing coverage of news and current affairs routinely include topics about and/or for audiences that would include our communities' general and minority populations. Our region’s diversity includes ethnic diversity – Southeast Asian, Hispanic, Native American and African-American families – but even greater diversity in age and income; to that end, we cover general topics of health care, housing, poverty, the economy, education, social services, local government, neighborhoods and urban development, the environment, and so on. Partnering with local organizers during the 2015-16 year, we also cosponsored community festivals featuring folk arts and crafts, dance, music and other traditions representing many diverse communities and ethnicities.

WLSU reaches out to visiting international students and guest lecturers, allowing them an opportunity to share their stories, their history, cultural differences and perspectives. Student-produced programming on WLSU’s affiliate station, WUEC, includes occasional discussions about student experiences in other countries, focusing on what they discovered about the people and cultures in those lands.

We have continued to expand our online services related to our weekly news and current affairs/community and arts/cultural programming to include more support materials—summary articles for reading, photography and slide shows, and extended versions of interviews. This provides more insight into the stories of diversity we share.

WLSU produces and broadcasts more than 50 hours weekly of locally-hosted jazz and blues programming, recognized for its cultural diversity and significance. Host Jonathan Overby’s Higher Ground provides four hours weekly of African roots music with a Wisconsin perspective. And Roots Gospel, a recurring series that explores the golden era of Black American gospel music and its intersections with jazz and blues during the middle part of the 20th century, continued to add new episodes in FY 2016. Additionally, WLSU collaborates with Wisconsin
Public Radio to broadcast the annual State of Wisconsin tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. each January.

Finally, for nearly 25 years, WLSU has been able to introduce a wide range of world, ethnic, cultural and mainstream musicians to local audiences through its acquisition and broadcast of The World Café. This daily music and talk program (the "All Things Considered" of popular music) explores the world through its musicians who write about their lives, their politics, their cultural beliefs and practices, their homes and their history. From protests to relationships, this music often helps us understand the challenges of diversity as well as the cultural stories behind the creative energy that drives these artists.

5. Please assess the impact that your CPB funding had on your ability to serve your community. What were you able to do with your grant that you wouldn't be able to do if you didn't receive it?

WLSU and its affiliate WUEC remain the only locally-based public radio news and information stations in La Crosse and Eau Claire; our CPB grant allows us to be locally-responsive to the needs of our communities in ways that other network-repeater services in our markets cannot. This includes locally-produced and originated programs created by locally-based community professionals (from area universities, as well as the UW-Extension Service), community volunteer producers/hosts, and radio staff that guide and train student/volunteer hosts. Without this grant, WLSU and WUEC would themselves simply be additional repeaters of public radio programming or music that originates elsewhere.

CPB funding allows us to attract and keep the best available local broadcast journalists; that level of professionalism provides a unique opportunity for our La Crosse- and Eau Claire-based reporters to be participants in the only statewide radio news organization in Wisconsin. Of particular note is that our La Crosse-based news team is one of only two full-time radio news departments in our home market; this would surely NOT be the case without CPB funding.

The scope of national programs broadcast on WLSU (and its WUEC affiliate) would be greatly diminished without CPB's support. NPR's Morning Edition and All Things Considered daily news magazines, hourly news around the clock, the World Café, jazz programs, and more are all critical to our role of keeping this community connected to the world, helping us put local content in a national or even international context, and giving us the basic building blocks of being a sought-out source of news and music in the communities we serve.

Strong funding from CPB and the community make it possible for WLSU and its WUEC affiliate in Eau Claire to create the local music, arts and cultural programming produced by students and volunteers who are trained and managed by the professional staff. This results in hundreds of hours of community-specific programs in La Crosse, as well as three hours weekly of student-created local programming throughout the academic year on WUEC.
Increasingly, this support has enabled us to expand our online services (noted earlier) to include greater accessibility to more of the local-only content—often including expanded versions of this material—to an audience that is becoming more diverse in how it accesses our content. CPB support also allows us to provide an alternative programming stream on WLSU’s HD2 signal that expands on its main-channel programming; this stream continues to be localized to better serve audiences as resources allow.