

# The World's Coolest Job

## A Broadcasting Career at WCC

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### The Profession

Steven Richards may have the world's coolest job. As music director/assistant program director at 94.7 FM in Detroit, he works with rock bands and celebrity DJ's while playing classic tunes from Aerosmith to Zeppelin. But his early experiments in broadcasting weren't nearly so glamorous. "When I'd watch a ballgame on TV as a kid, I'd turn the sound down and do the play by play myself," he recalls with a laugh. "I was the ultimate radio geek."

Richards' childhood passion led him to a job as a DJ, then a career off the air. "I became fascinated with the production side, how radio was put together behind the scenes," he says. "Now, beyond scheduling the music, probably most of my time goes into handling the on-air staff. It's different everyday – that's what keeps it exciting."

### The Hidden Side of Radio

Though DJ's and program hosts get most of the attention, jobs like Richards' drive the industry. A typical radio broadcast may involve everyone from producers and directors to technicians and ad sales agents. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, announcers make up only about 16% of all broadcasting jobs. And Richards warns that corporate consolidations and new technologies could lower that percentage. "Many stations now pipe in programming from a central network," he explains. "In many smaller markets, the stations are completely automated - some of them can run with just one or two employees. So nowadays, breaking into radio is a lot harder if you're just a DJ. Production and promotions probably offer the most opportunities now, so learn to use editing software, learn web design. Be willing to do anything."

Lucy Ann Lance agrees. In her 23 years in broadcasting, she's worked as everything from news director to talk radio hostess. "In radio you've got to be able to do a million things at the same time," she says briskly, during a commercial break in her morning show on Ann Arbor's WAAM. She gestures to her director while writing a note and scanning her computer screen. "If you're a one-task type of person, you should look at a completely different field!"

After the show, Lance reflects on how to get ahead in the industry. "Advertising sales and marketing are excellent jobs - that's where the money is. And of course sales requires good communication skills, so everything you're learning in your Broadcasting classes would still apply." The numbers support her. Government statistics put the median hourly

wage for radio announcers at \$10.49. For ad sales agents it's \$18.74 per hour, and for advertising and promotions managers it's \$28.42.

### **Internships, Internships, Internships!**

Whatever their focus, Lance has simple advice for radio jobseekers. "Internships, internships, internships!" she cries. "Get one any way you can, and be willing to do everything - from getting coffee for people to producing to going on the air. In this business jobs come up very quickly, so if you've made yourself indispensable, you never know where it may lead you."

Richards agrees. "Start out as an intern, learn the basic skills. During your internship, maybe a production or promotions assistant position will open up. Get in at a small station, then move your way up."

But whatever happens, he says, never give up. "You've got to work crazy hours, and there's not a lot of money early on. But if you stay with it long enough, it pays off. That's why you need a passion for the industry." He laughs. "I still get goose bumps when I walk into the studio. Once you catch the radio bug, you never lose it."

### **Faculty Profile: Dena Blair**

Many people struggle to find their true calling - but not Dena Blair. "When I was a kid my girlfriend had this record player that looked like a jukebox," she recalls. "We would play records on it and pretend we were DJ's, introducing the different songs. So radio has always been what I've wanted to do."

**Blair dedicated herself to making this dream a reality. After earning a Bachelor's in radio and TV production from Adrian College, she graduated from Specs Howard School of Radio and Television, then worked in the field for nine years. She later earned a Master's in communications at Eastern Michigan University.** While teaching at Eastern, she heard of a unique opportunity at WCC: the chance to design an entire program around her passion.

The Broadcast Arts program has caused a stir from the very start. "There was a lot of buzz and excitement before it even began," Blair says. "We had students saying, 'We love the radio industry - we have to be a part of this!'" And in her view, that attitude is crucial to success. "Number one, you've got to have a passion for the industry," she says, because the field is constantly changing and competition is tight. "There have been a lot of huge shifts in the business, with corporate mergers and the onset of satellite and internet radio. But radio will never go away. It will always evolve to fit into our lives. It's an amazing industry to be part of."

## **The Program**

“You love radio, so tell me... what would you do if you could create your own radio station?” That’s the question Dena Blair asks her Advanced Radio Production class. It sums up the hands-on philosophy behind WCC’s new Broadcast Arts program.

Established in the fall of 2006 as an Associate’s degree, the program immerses students in the real world of radio. Blair (who directs the program and teaches many of its classes) crafted a curriculum that covers everything from voice and public speaking to writing and interpersonal communication. “These skills are so important for just about any job,” she says, “and not just in broadcasting.”

The curriculum introduces students to the kind of work they’ll be doing in the field. Their production classes require them to host a weekly hour-long show on Orchard Radio, WCC’s Internet radio station. And the Orchard Radio Practicum rounds out their experience writing, programming and announcing on the air. As Blair puts it, “We have really integrated our classes with Orchard Radio, so students can explore the different aspects of working in radio.” Students leave the Practicum with professional-quality “demo reels” - portfolios of recorded work they can show to potential employers.

Students also get extensive experience off the air. For example, in Advanced Radio Production, each student designs an entire station from the ground up. They research actual station ratings and demographics to select an audience and a format. Then, using Orchard Radio’s studio and an on-campus production room, they create commercials, promos and other content geared toward these listeners. Many students add these productions to their demo reels.

But valuable as these courses are, there’s no substitute for direct experience. That’s why the program places all students in internships with area radio stations. “There are several stations we work with, in Ann Arbor and metro Detroit,” Blair says. “Students do an internship for 15 weeks, to see how a station operates. Interns get an idea of which aspects of the work interest them, and which don’t. And a lot of stations end up hiring their interns, so it’s a great opportunity to get your foot in the door.”

## **Student Snapshot: Karen Lynn Anderson**

“Put down your Ipod!” commands the voice on the radio, as a music montage blares in the background. “We’ve got you covered. This is Substream Radio, the radio refuge for bands who refuse to sell out!” The voice belongs to Karen Lynn Anderson, bass player, self-described “radiophile” and a student in WCC’s new Broadcast Arts program. The promo is part of a class project that opened her eyes to the possibilities of broadcasting.

“We had to design an entire radio station,” she explains. “We researched ratings, selected a format, produced commercials, recorded promos – everything.” These experiences whetted her appetite for her future career. “I’m really intrigued by trying to get a message across through sound, music and voice,” she says. “To be a producer or technician on NPR would be my super dream.” Whatever path she takes, Anderson feels she’s got a head start on the job search. “You come out of class with things you can put in your portfolio - and I was really surprised by how many stations want interns from WCC. It’s pretty awesome.”

A longtime music and radio fan, Anderson had struggled to find a career that suited her passions. She dropped out of Columbia College and spent a year at WCC before taking some time off to start a band. “The first time I went to college, my heart wasn’t in it,” she says. “When I came back they’d just started the Broadcast Arts program. Radio fascinated me, so I joined in. Now I’m not going anywhere!”

## **CareerCapsule**

### **The jobs**

There are over 13,000 radio stations in America. Smaller markets pay less but are easier to break into, while large markets have higher pay but stiffer competition. News and talk radio generally hire more staff than music stations.

### **The education**

An Associate’s degree is enough to launch a successful career. If you pursue a Bachelor’s, **take a minor in psychology, sociology or marketing to deepen your understanding of your audience and the diverse personality types you’ll work with.**

### **Key qualities for radio professionals:**

Creativity and computer skills are important in production work, and a natural, conversational speaking style is necessary on the air. But the first requirement for radio professionals is a love of the industry. Entry-level jobs often involve inconvenient hours and modest pay, but passion and persistence will get you through.

### **The salary**

Most starting salaries range from the high teens to the low twenties. But pay varies widely – high profile jobs in major markets can go to six figures and beyond.