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Cheers for College Amateur Radio: Sis-boom-bah!

“Dating back to 1867, the onomatopoeic phrase “sis-boom-bah” imitates the sound of a skyrocket flight (sis), the burst of the fireworks (boom), and the reaction of the crowd (ah). College Amateur Radio clubs offer the ideal bridge between youthful interest and lifelong participation in our community — and they’re regaining popularity.”

When we asked the organizers of Boxboro — the ARRL New England Division Convention held in Boxborough, Massachusetts — to arrange a college Amateur Radio forum last September, we had no idea that the response would be overwhelming. ARRL HQ staffers Sean Kutzko, KX9X, and Bob Inderbitzen, NQ1R; ARRL Lab volunteer Dr. Martin Ewing, AA6E, and I feel a little bit like the dog who caught the school bus. To begin with, and almost on a whim, ARRL held two forums at Boxboro, to standing-room-only attendance. Representatives from New England schools attended in numbers we hadn’t expected. And the post-event e-mail and telephone traffic has been gratifying. We’ve had colleges and universities from across the country and around the world step up to participate or comment.

The first of the two forums was hosted by Yale’s W1YU and Harvard’s W1AF. Each organization presented a timeline history that spanned nearly a century. Attendees heard about the almost identical experiences of these two clubs, facing waxing and waning fortunes as Amateur Radio rose and fell in popularity over the years. The record, as Harvard’s club president Douglas Maggs, KK4UHK, remarked, is somewhat sinusoidal, and Yale’s experience — as well as that of other clubs attending — matched Harvard’s.

The most common difficulty stems from uneven interest over time. Even the strongest leaders in college Amateur Radio graduate every 4 years, sometimes leaving their clubs without adequate continuity or leadership succession. As Yale has demonstrated, capable administrators can fill the breach, but at colleges, “recognized” student activities still require students in order to maintain their recognition.

Add to this the constant upheaval of moving from space to space as a university’s needs change. Both clubs have been plagued by fires, thefts, and administrative foreclosure over the years. Moreover, fewer universities permit students or faculty to climb towers, push cables through walls, or make major modifications to their designated space without serious administrative oversight. Everybody seems to share the same squawks and face many of the same challenges.

We came away from Boxboro with the sense that there is a vital college radio interest, and we might be on to something. Then the cards and letters started pouring in. On the Monday following the event, Army Captain Matt Sherburne, KF4WZB, the faculty advisor of the US Military Academy’s station, W2KGY, contacted me. The day after that, I spoke with Martin Atherton, G3ZAY, at Cambridge University Wireless Society’s station, G6UW. The Citadel followed. Dartmouth College checked in. The University

of Arkansas. Scott Westerman, W9WSW, at Michigan State University. Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, a women’s college of about 1,000 students. I could go on, but you get the point.

It occurred to us that, if college Amateur Radio could galvanize these interests, then colleges might just provide the ideal bridge between youthful interest in the subject and lifelong participation in our community. With the demands placed on undergrads in colleges today, early pursuits often fall victim to a grinding course of study and competing social activities. The possibilities of college are exciting: West Point conducts high-altitude balloon launches, but also operates outreach programs in which more than 100 Latino students from all five boroughs of New York City have the opportunity to engage with Cadets and the technologies used in Amateur Radio. Like all colleges, the service academies are competitive. Captain Matt suggested a competition with Annapolis. One of QST’s leading advertisers suggested a new set of college brackets for Big Ten, ACC, Ivy, NEC, WAC, PAC-10, MAC, for college-oriented contesting and other GOTA events — just the thing we’re looking for to advance the art and enjoyment of Amateur Radio.

As for advancing the science of Amateur Radio, the world’s college talent can and will make enormous contributions. ARRL can kick-start that process by sponsoring a technical competition open to members of college Amateur Radio Stations. Would the ladies from Agnes Scott College care to whoop the geeks from MIT? Your suggestions would be welcome here at HQ. And to provide a channel for all that high-octane energy, ARRL has received permission to re-brand the Collegiate Amateur Radio Operators Facebook group as the ARRL Collegiate Amateur Radio Initiative, thanks to group admin Sam Rose, KC2LRC. You can find the group at www.facebook.com/groups/ARRLCARI. Whether you are a student, faculty member, administrator, or radio club alumnus, we need your involvement. Join us.

On a warm Sunday in September, we heard that rocket, saw the flash, and felt the crowd’s roar. I am deeply indebted to Martin, AA6E, and especially to Yale’s Dr. Ed Snyder, W1YSM, who has been an Amateur Radio operator for less than a year, for lighting the spark of this event.

Now where are my beloved *Quakers*?

73,