GatorWeather: Student Production of Television/Online Video Forecasts

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San Francisco State University's meteorology program began offering the Certificate Program in Meteorology for Broadcasters in an effort to provide the necessary curriculum to students interested in pursuing a career in on-air weathercasting and obtaining the American Meteorological Society's Seal of Approval for Broadcasting Meteorologists. The program was not initially designed to provide any realistic practice or instruction in front of an actual video camera or chroma-key as used in a real television news studio.

Wishing to fill this need, students of the meteorology program who were interested in practicing on-air techniques created “Gator Weather”. The term “Gator” comes from the fact that the San Francisco State mascot is an alligator (GATOR). The original tapings were done in the simplest format possible: the “talent” (student) would convey the forecast in front of a wall map or a computer screen very similarly to the way weathercasters of old would do it before the creation of computers. Lighting and sound was generally poor and three students would break the forecast into segments to make the presentation easier to prepare. However, from the beginning the forecasts were quickly posted online so the students could view and critique their meteorology and performance technique. This also allowed others to see the weathercasts and make necessary comments and suggestions.

As time progressed the video process became more sophisticated. A large green screen was added in an attempt to simulate a news studio's chroma-key and the weathercasters began wearing suits instead of jeans (in most instances). Special lighting was acquired and some forecasts were taped outside to simulate a news “live shot” on campus (See fig. 1). Gator Weather video tapings are now required as part of the completion requirements METR 698/798, Public Weather Forecasting.

Future plans include negotiations with the Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts (BECA) to gain access to their television studio with the possibility of true chroma-key rehearsals. Other plans include the possibility of live broadcasts once a week on the internet and appearances on local cable access television stations.

GatorWeather represents an innovative student-led and faculty proctored project designed to provide students with the kind of hands-on experience to prepare them for what they will encounter in the “real world.” It can serve as a model for other meteorology programs that would like to provide their students with training in media meteorology.
Figure 1: (Left to Right - Upper Panel) Original “On-Air” Talent for GatorWeather -- Eric Gose, Elizabeth Frieberg and Chris Meherin; Eric Gose points out the development of a baroclinic wave in the north-central Pacific. (Left to Right - Bottom Panel) Elizabeth Frieberg discussing the current temperatures over the San Francisco Bay Region; Chris Meherin with the “5-day” Forecast.