

Learning Curve

Film schools outreach to industry professionals to help graduates bridge the gap between education and gainful employment

By Minju Pak

The Academy Awards mark an occasion for the industry to take pride in celebrating high achievement, but some feel it's also a good time to take stock of what is being done to give back and develop the next generation of filmmakers. Film schools increasingly are seeking to connect with industry professionals who can help graduates bridge the gap between the academic realm and employment, frequently through internships, mentorships and seminars that provide real-world experience.

Screenwriter John August seems like the type of prolific Hollywood talent who must have grown up with moviemaking in his blood: His credits include 2005's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" 2003's "Big Fish" and 1999's "Go," as well as frothier fare including the "Charlie's Angels" films. But when he came to Hollywood in 1992 to study for a postgraduate degree in film, August says he had not even read a screenplay, and he certainly lacked the industry connections necessary to succeed in what can be a cutthroat business.

That's precisely what attracted him to USC's Peter Stark Producing Program.

"What's actually different about the Stark program, from other programs, is that there's not a lot of difference between working and being a student," says August, a 1994 graduate. "You have no books (and) no tests; it's all about industry professionals coming in and talking to you about their jobs. You start out asking really dumb questions and then, eventually, smarter ones — and the people that come into the room are those you hope to be working for."

Of course, the Stark program is not the only one through which real-world professionals train students and help them forge relationships with high-ranking agents, executives and producers.

"It's really important that you create a road map so everything that they're leaving with, in terms of the artistic and academic side, is also coupled with real, comprehensive knowledge of what they're going to need to know when they leave here," says Teri Schwartz, who in 2003 was named the inaugural dean of Loyola Marymount University's School of Film and Television.

About 10% of LMU's student body (534 undergraduates and 111 postgraduates) is enrolled in the SFTV. Some see Schwartz, an award-winning film producer who in 1995 partnered with Goldie Hawn to form Cherry Alley Prods., as one of the school's draws; she remains active in the business and is highly connected.

But Schwartz is not the only LMU faculty member with movie credentials. Former Propaganda Films president Peter Heller is director of the SFTV's Office of External Affairs and Development, and Kathleen McInnis, programming director of the Palm Springs International Short Film Festival and festival director of the 11th annual Slamdance Film Festival, is



Director Brad Silberling, with microphone, teaches a UCLA master class.

Todd Chenier



LMU's Teri Schwartz

the school's festival specialist.

For Schwartz, the creation of the SFTV's external-affairs office seemed a natural outgrowth of its commitment to students — as was the establishment of the Transition After Graduation program, which helps them maintain momentum when their education is complete.

"TAG takes our top students in the critical first year after graduating and gives them a full, comprehensive year

of festival finishing funds, production (experience) and key internships and mentoring opportunities," she says.

Similarly, UCLA's impressive alumni roster connects that school's students with some of the most storied careers in the business.

"Many of the courses are taught by people who are active participants in the industry," says Robert Rosen, dean of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. "Not only are they passing on their knowledge of how things really work but (also) they themselves are there for the students."

Last year, director Brad Silberling partnered with his wife, Amy Brenneman, to teach a 10-week UCLA master course on the process of collaboration. The co-instructors brought in a slew of other talent to talk about the subject, including Dustin Hoffman, Helen Hunt, Elisabeth Shue and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski.

"We regularly have master classes, people that come in and do one-offs, like (Francis Ford) Coppola (or) Rob Marshall," Rosen says. "Someone who will be teaching here for a more-considerable length of time is Anthony Hopkins."

UCLA's is one of 30 film-school programs in Southern California, but its proximity to the center of the industry helps it attract such high-profile instructors, visiting or otherwise. But what happens when a school is not quite so close to Hollywood?

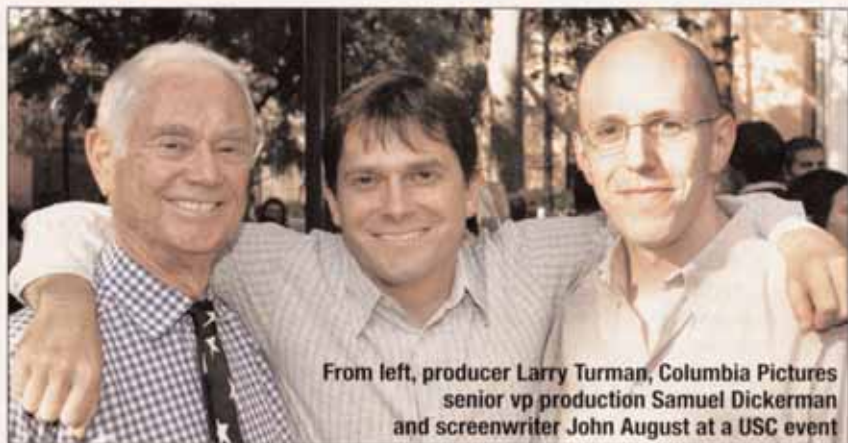
Dale Pollock, dean of the school of filmmaking at the North Carolina School of the Arts, has developed several avenues to help his students land industry jobs. Among them is a required internship that sees students work for such companies as DreamWorks and VHI.

"Sometime in those four years, you have to do a professional internship for a minimum of 200 hours; last summer, we sent our students to 45 formal internships that we set up," Pollock says. "The other thing we do is take as many of our graduating class as possible out to Los Angeles. This is really designed to help transition those students who are planning on going into the industry in L.A., but it's also for the student who wants to sell scripts (or) get an agent but doesn't want to move."

Pollock has seen solid results: 80%-85% of NCArts' alumni are employed in film, TV and media-related jobs. About 60% of those graduates move to Los Angeles, 10%-15% move to New York, and the rest stay in the Southeast, including some who remain in North Carolina. With such a burgeoning group of graduates working in the industry, job placement sometimes comes through alumni connections.

"We have a de facto, informal mentoring system," Pollock says. "I have one graduate, she's a producer and in the course of working on (ABC's) 'The Bachelor' and 'The Bachelorette.' She has hired 65 graduates."

In New York, location is not as much of a



From left, producer Larry Turman, Columbia Pictures senior vp production Samuel Dickerman and screenwriter John August at a USC event

concern. When it comes time for graduates of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts to transition into the industry, they can rely on several resources including Script Bank, which is connected to the school's Office of Career Development. There, students can catalog their scripts, noting the genre and logline of each project. "Students have sold their screenplays off the Script Bank," says Lamar Sanders, chairman of Tisch's undergraduate division.

Tisch also offers a class called Exit Strategies: Launching a Successful Career, which examines every aspect of the business and offers students a practical look at how they can turn their education into jobs.

Many colleges and universities have offices dedicated to assisting students with postgraduation job searches, but some film schools feel as though they must take that responsibility a step further. Larry Auerbach, associate dean for student-industry relations at the USC School of Cinema-Television, never went to college and used what he calls "street smarts" to make his way up the ranks at WMA, where he became executive vp.

"I thought I wanted to teach, but I realized I couldn't stick to a syllabus, so when USC called and was looking to start this up, it gave me a chance to give something back," he says.

Auerbach not only oversees USC's annual First Look Film Festival but also provides career advice and assists students with job-hunting.

"We get involved with students in many ways; the underlying reason for those who want it is to help them make the transition," he says. "My contacts, whatever knowledge I may have gained, I can offer that."

Sometimes, though, simply attending classes with other budding filmmakers or executives can help open the right doors to making it in Hollywood.

"There were 25 people in my class, and they were working all over town," August says. "Just by sharing information or helping people get in contact with somebody, that was tremendously more important than meeting somebody that was a few more steps up the ladder." ■

Brain Trust

There's more than one way to give back, and a popular alternative to the giving of one's time is financial support. During the past 13 years, the Multicultural Motion Picture Assn. has provided scholarship funds to about 130 film students from schools throughout the nation.

"We look for students that may need help, but we don't limit ourselves to students with high grades — even average students who are in need of financial help can qualify," says MMPA president Jarvee Hutcherson, noting that "a lot of the students we've helped are actually now working in the industry and are contributing back to the scholarship fund. It's built a great rapport with students once they complete the program."

The primary vehicles that support the MMPA Educational and Development Scholarship Fund are the group's annual Diversity Awards, handed out Nov. 13 last year, and its annual Student Filmmakers Pre-Oscar Scholarship Luncheon, set to take place Friday at the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel. The latter fete sees Oscar nominees rubbing elbows with film students, and entities including Fox, KNBC, Paramount, Sony and Warner Bros. have been supportive in the past, not only turning out but also, in some instances, providing site tours and mentoring programs.

"It's really nice to see those who have succeeded lend a helping hand," Hutcherson says. "We're proud to be a part of that."

— James Sims