



## PROFILE OF EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT Academy of Television and Film Queens, New York

Every year in New York City, film and television production generates over \$7 billion and supports an estimated 130,000 jobs. The industry works with the city through the New York City Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment and is supported by tax credits to encourage the industry's retention and growth.

These tax credits, of course, can be controversial with taxpayers, and so the TV and film industry looks for ways to give back to the city and to locally source wherever possible. It is within this environment that city and industry leaders first started to discuss the creation of education programs that could directly link prospective employees to the city's many studios, production companies and supporting firms.

In 2005, members of the New York Production Alliance (NYPA), an industry advocacy organization, approached New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit education group that supports 75 district high schools and operates a series of charter schools, with an idea for a high school in western Queens that would connect students to industry employment opportunities. In April 2007, a team of industry professionals and educators began to define how private industry and public education could collaborate to support a small and rigorous Career and Technical Education (CTE) school.

The school was formed soon thereafter, and today, The Academy for Careers in Television and Film (ACTVF) is unique in providing students with meaningful entry points into a range of career paths, including a variety of "below-the-line" film and television production positions that are almost entirely neglected by existing high school programs.

### **About The Academy for Careers in Television and Film**

ACTVF is unscreened limited high school, meaning that, other than attending one open house at the school, there are no entrance requirements for admission although only a limited number of students can be enrolled. In 2012, for example, there were approximately 1200 students applied for admission into about 108 freshman slots.

The school was founded with a heavy focus on industry partnerships: The founding principal had a strong relationship with Alan Metzger, who had an extensive career in television and film cinematography direction and production. He decided to get out of the direct involvement in the film industry and enter education and was engaged in helping start up ACTVF.

Today the school has an extensive set of partnerships with companies in the industry. Many of these partnerships were developed drawing upon Mr. Metzger's professional contacts, but he stresses that developing and maintaining the partnerships is not necessarily an easy task. Metzger says that in the

film and television industry, there are massive numbers of postsecondary education individuals who are looking for jobs and who have advanced degrees from prestigious universities. So there is already an abundance of talent flowing into the New York marketplace that could fill entry-level roles in TV and film production. Nonetheless, given the large state investment in the television and film industry, and the high probability that interns with advanced degrees have neither the desire nor the interest to remain in “below the line” crew positions, business partners understand the value of hiring and developing the local talent pipeline.

The school works with various partners primarily through internships, an in-house production company, and ties to a local postsecondary institution.

### **Partnering with Industry: Internships**

Internships are encouraged, but not required, at ACTVF. Given the extensive time investment that the internships require, students who are on-track for graduation and plan to pursue a different career path may choose to participate in other enrichment activities like a College-Now citywide program, or SAT prep. Approximately 60 percent of high school seniors participate in the work-based industry internships.

The school’s workplace learning coordinator is Andy Lassman, who also teaches in the general production program, and was in the industry for over 20 years as a prop-master. Mr. Lassman’s responsibility is to work with employers on an ongoing basis to manage the student internships. He typically makes the first contact with the employer and visits the internship site to make sure that students will be working in safe conditions and be well supervised. He has extensive contacts in the industry, but also develops new opportunities through referrals.

Mr. Lassman knows that each internship sponsor has to see some sort of short-term or long-term value in placing the intern. As mentioned earlier, there is a general sense of obligation that television and film producers feel toward New York, given the generous production tax credit structure. But Lassman also says that some employers view interns as possible future employees, and also as future clients of the firm’s services. One site supervisor told Lassman that he had not been happy with the quality of professional technicians he was hiring, so he decided to get involved and help run a mini-apprenticeship program, with the goal of creating a better pool of technicians. Managers at another sponsor, Gotham Sound, say they want to have a hand in developing the next generation of sound technicians. Industry representatives also understand they need to bring more diversity into the workforce, which in the past consisted of mostly white men. Working with a very diverse school like ACTVF helps contribute to that goal.

Lassman indicates that most sites have never hosted an intern before from high school and can be nervous, wondering if participation will expose their firm to additional government oversight and scrutiny. Often, the ACTVF team will give support and orientation to a new intern sponsor to help them acclimate to the new expectations. If the students are paid for their work, then they are covered under the workman’s compensation plan that the worksite carries. For non-paid positions, the school district, through its own self-insurance system, covers the students.

ACTVF staff also lay out clear expectations for the internship with the employer, sharing a written document in which the worksite sponsor agrees to develop the student skills in the craft of that worksite, not just provide low-level “go-fer” type work. For example:

- In one internship at the Timberlake studios costume shop, the student had the opportunity to learn specialized costume construction techniques, and also organized costumes by historical era, learning a great deal about the history of design and culture.
- At another site, Eclectic/Encore Props, the student intern help organize and catalogue and extensive inventory of furniture and knick-knacks, helped pack items for shipping; and then restock the inventory. In the process, the students learned about historical factors in design and interior decorating.

Before the student's first day, the internship coordinator will help the student navigate the public transportation system and find their way to the workplace. This extra attention greatly reduces the anxiety and confusion that some students might experience.

Students in the program keep a weekly journal and give back by helping younger students as teaching assistants, sharing what they are learning. Sometimes the student experience actually helps improve the programming with ACTVF. For example, one student used his internship experience to suggest changes for how the school studio was organized to be more in keeping with professional standards.

Each week, the employer supervisor fills out a short form that reports on the progress of the intern and emails or faxes it to the school internship coordinator. About every two weeks, the internship coordinator places a phone call or visits the job site in person to make sure that the internship is going according to plan, and to address any concerns the employer has. On Wednesdays, Lassman will visit the internship site, check in with the worksite supervisors on how the internship is going, and take pictures of the student at the worksite to help validate the student's emerging portfolio.

Students are able to switch internships, but that does not happen very often. As long as the employer is fulfilling their agreement and treating the students well, the student is encouraged to stay in the internship and complete the assignment. Learning to persist through the internships is, in itself, an important life lesson.

#### **Partnering with the Community: NextStep Pictures**

Because internship placements are sometimes difficult to obtain, ACTVF has created a business venture called NextStep Pictures Incorporated. In this production company, owned and operated by ACTVF, students at the school work with local nonprofit organizations that need video and audio production expertise to promote their organization's mission. When the venture was developed, school leaders thought that the nonprofit organizations would develop their concepts for the use of video and audio, and just need the school's production expertise. It turns out that the nonprofit partners often needed help with conceptualizing their messaging and how the medium could be used to reach targeted audiences. Students therefore interact with leaders of the nonprofits throughout the brainstorming, conceptualization, script and storyboard development, production and post-production phases.

In addition to the interaction that the production company provides with adults, the venture gives more experienced students the opportunity to manage teams in a real-world situation, and also gives younger students a broad range of opportunities. For all students, the range of tasks and challenges they can experience through NextStep Pictures far exceeds what they can typically do during a professional company internship.

NextStep Pictures also generates revenue that can be used on behalf of the students. ACTVF is establishing a system whereby funding that the company generates can be provided to students in the form of postsecondary education scholarships. The amount of the scholarship for which students will be eligible will be based upon the amount of time that they invested in Next Step activities relative to other participating students.

### **Postsecondary Partnership: CityTech**

In today's television and film industry, very few students enter the industry directly from high school; most participate in a technical training program or in a film television production program at a four-year university. Thus, students at ACTVF are strongly encouraged to pursue college education in TV and film or in some other area of interest.

ACTVF has a close relationship with CityTech, a campus of the City University of New York (CUNY). In recent years, City Tech created a video production program, and an agreement is being developed with ACTVF whereby the programs will be aligned for content, and eventually some college credits will be awarded to ACTVF students.

### **Other Partnerships**

- ACTVF has an advisory board that provides guidance on the school's direction. The board does not take on the responsibility of reviewing the TV and film curriculum, but does provide general input as to trends within the industry.
- Capital One Bank provides a Junior Achievement/Finance Park program,<sup>1</sup> which offers an in-depth focus on developing financial literacy and culminates in a one day simulation experience for the students.
- ACTVF often runs after school workshops focusing on specific topics which are open to all interested students. Business partners often participate, helping teach such topics as lighting, camera grip, sound design, costume design, set design and set dressing, camera set up, and scenic art.
- In other after-school events, independent filmmakers will screen their work for students and then engage in a discussion period following the screening.

### **Tips and Lessons Learned**

- CTE teachers need to understand the industry of the business partners, so it is a benefit to have the industry experience.
- In a diverse industry, there will be companies you don't know. Before going out to meet with a new company, the school representative needs to know as much as possible about the company and its business.
- Engaging employers involves several reporting requirements. Since the employer is doing the school and the student a favor, ACTVF tries to make the paperwork requirements as easy as possible. The feedback form is very simple and easy to fill out, and sometimes ACTVF staff will take verbal reports and transcribe them for the employer.
- ACTVF staff emphasizes to their partners that working with students will not entail another layer of quasi-governmental oversight. They reinforce that they are helping kids and not putting the business at risk of violations.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ja.org/programs/programs\\_mid\\_park\\_mobile.shtml](http://www.ja.org/programs/programs_mid_park_mobile.shtml)

- ACTVF works to resolve situations quickly. For instance, once a student intern did not show up for work. The supervisor texted ACTF staff. The ACTVF staff responded immediately, and then the next day found the student in class early in the morning, and had the student call the supervisor immediately.
- ACTVF staff keeps all industry partners apprised of what's going on so they feel part of the ACTVF community and share that pride. Staff members send frequent personalized emails, versus generic "blanket" emails. In response, employers promote the ACTVF. For example, one sponsor, Gotham Sound, put information about ACTVF and their involvement on their own website and linked to ACTVF.
- Since many ACTvF internees have never been engaged in the workplace prior to their placement and may not even have been to the area of the city where their worksite is located, the Workplace Learning Coordinator personally travels with the intern immediately prior to his/her first day at the worksite, introduces the intern to the employer and is there for counsel if there are any questions relating to the internship.
- Interns are actively debriefed on an ongoing basis to guarantee that each intern has adequate "soft knowledge" (i.e. interpersonal skills, workplace etiquette, workplace 'political literacy' ) and "hard knowledge" (i.e. tool skills, equipment familiarity). Further, the debriefings serves to alert all CTE teachers of changes in the workplace and helps to keep instruction current.

### **For More Information**

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New York Production Alliance  
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Video showing the production side of the industry and endorsing the tax credit.  
<http://vimeo.com/nyproductionalliance/faces-of-ny-film-and-television-ny-film-production-tax-credit>

May 2013

*This program profile was prepared by the National Center for College and Career Transitions ([www.nc3t.com](http://www.nc3t.com)), working in concert with the Career Technical Education Technical Assistance Center of New York (CTE TAC of NY) as part of a project to strengthen employer engagement in CTE programs across the state of New York. To learn more about best practices in New York, visit the Business Partnership section of the CTE-TAC website at: <http://www.nyctecenter.org/spn/page/Best-Practices>.*