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Syracuse University Los Angeles: A Promotional Video

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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Honors Capstone Project in Television Radio & Film

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Abstract

Created in 2009, the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program has allowed students interested in the media and entertainment world to spend a semester working, living, and playing in Los Angeles. Despite being a well-constructed and impressive experience, the SULA program is still very much in its infancy. The purpose of this Capstone was to film, edit, and distribute a short promotional video that may be used by the program for recruiting initiatives.

The target audience for this project is current Syracuse University students considering the Los Angeles Semester Program, prospective Syracuse University students seeking additional benefits of studying at SU, and parents of these students. A promotional video of this nature must be brief enough to engage this audience for its entire duration, and entice the audience to ask for more. For this very reason, these videos are often referred to in the entertainment business as “teasers.” At the same time, a promotional video of this nature must provide ample details about the mechanics of the program, and clearly lay out benefits of enrolling. It is this dichotomy, and careful balance between disclosure and enticement that makes creating promotional videos a unique challenge in the realm of video production.

Once a concept for the video was decided, mostly based on the criteria above, on-camera interviews were conducted with several alumni in the Los Angeles area. Additional interviews were conducted with professors of the Los Angeles Semester Program, as well as the program director. Footage was also taken of the program facilities and the surrounding area, as well as tourist attractions in Los Angeles, to be used as secondary ‘B-roll’ intercut with the interviews. Additional interviews were conducted on the Syracuse University campus during both the Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 semesters. All footage was imported into a nonlinear editing program where it was organized and sorted into select sequences. These sequences were used to create the final edited product.

The Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program is an invaluable opportunity for many students interested in the entertainment world. It provides true real-world learning in a manner that any on-campus program would be hard pressed to emulate. Still, the program is one of the least known to the University community and beyond, and many misconceptions about it persist. This project was undertaken to share the benefits of the program with a wider audience in an effort to assist in its future growth, while presenting unique creative challenges in video production and editing.

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Executive Summary

Created in 2009, the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program has allowed students interested in the media and entertainment world to spend a semester working, living, and playing in Los Angeles. Despite being a well-constructed and impressive experience, the SULA Program is still very much in its infancy. The purpose of this Capstone was to film, edit, and distribute a short promotional video that may be used by the program for recruiting initiatives.

The target audience for this project is current Syracuse University students considering the Los Angeles Semester Program, prospective Syracuse University students seeking additional benefits of studying at SU, and parents of these students. While Syracuse University is not the only college with an off-site program in Los Angeles, the SULA Program is unique in its structure and rigor. SULA students face strong academic challenges, with coursework taught by active industry professionals. Additionally, they must complete internship work in the entertainment field. Lastly, the SULA Program is special because of the extremely close bond that the University shares with its alumni in the area. Sometimes branded the ‘Syracuse Mafia,’ alumni are constant sources of mentorship and insight for students spending several months in what is one of the world’s largest company towns.

To promote a unique program, a unique video is required. Crafting a promotional video is a very different challenge than shooting a film or television show. A

promotional video of this nature must be brief enough to engage this audience for its entire duration, and entice the audience to ask for more. For this very reason, these videos are often referred to in the entertainment business as “teasers.” At the same time, such a video must provide ample details about the mechanics of the program, and clearly lay out benefits of enrolling. It is this dichotomy, and careful balance between disclosure and enticement that makes creating promotional videos a special challenge in the realm of video production.

Production of this video followed a relatively straightforward track, though with some alterations along the way. First, on-camera interviews were conducted with professors and alumni in Los Angeles. Additional footage of the SULA facilities, and surrounding area needed to be captured for use as b-roll, or content intercut with the main narrative. This footage must then be digitized into an editing system. Final Cut Pro 7 was chosen out of several options for this Capstone. From there, sequences were edited and re-edited to begin to form the narrative required.

It was decided that a student voice was needed, and more interviews with students who had attended the SULA Program were conducted. Arriving at a fair balance between authoritative adult voices and student perspective was one of the largest challenges in crafting a usable narrative for this Capstone. After many iterations, a balance was hit.

A score was written and recorded for the piece, with careful direction and attention to tone and energy. Musical scores are a crucial component of video production, especially in short videos or promotions. The tone is supposed to suggest feelings of a Californian day on the beach, and excitement about opportunities to come.

This production was created with the future of the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program in mind. At only five years old, the program is still very much in its infancy, with huge room to grow and pivot. A piece such as this one promoting an opportunity like that must attract the best and brightest young minds, who are constantly driven to reach higher in the entertainment world. The most effective way to do that is creating a piece that one wishes that had. Extra attention to detail must be paid when crafting a video for an expertly educated audience. Assumptions were made that the target audience, potentially interested in pursuing a career in entertainment, and by extension potentially film or television production, would be expertly educated and critique any promotional items more so than a production for any other genre.

Video content, however, is one of the most effective ways to market such a program. The importance of this Capstone reaches far beyond the administration of the SULA Program. The program is open to all students at Syracuse University with an interest in entertainment and a desire to learn. SULA is the main west coast center for Syracuse, and the main authority on all things Orange for the

region. Any materials from their office are a direct reflection of the University and potentially impact the many alumni in the area. Finally, as SULA competes with several other programs in similar fields, as well as major film schools in the area, any promotional video such as this one must be held to even higher standards.

For the reasons above, and others detailed in the Reflective Essay, this Capstone presents a distinct creative and technical challenge in the field of video production.

Reflective Essay

In the spring of 2013 I spent a semester living in Los Angeles, working for a production company, and taking classes as a full time student through the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program (herein referred to as SULA). It was perhaps the most formative experience of my collegiate career, in regards to understanding the entertainment industry, which I consider myself a part of. In my conversations with professors and administrators I learned of the program's brief history, and got glimpses of what they hoped it might become in the coming years. It was then that I decided to give back to the program, by crafting a promotional video that they would be able to use to attract the next generation of Los Angeles alumni. The process of shooting and editing this video turned out to be one of the most challenging projects I have ever completed, for several reasons which I will identify later. At the end of this process, however, I believe I have grown to be a better shooter, editor, and overall producer for when my next project comes around.

First, it must be established that this was not my original intent for a Capstone. Approval had been granted to shoot a documentary exploring the differences in societal acceptance of sharks, and "shark culture" surrounding events and programs such as the Discovery Network's *Shark Week* specials. Consideration was to be given to North America, as well as Australia or South Africa. These locations were chosen to contrast an area with minimal shark attacks yet high

shark interest, with an area that sees substantial shark attack activity. This project became unfeasible after a research and planning phase led to heavier requirements for licensed footage that would prove too burdensome for the limited time and budget allocated. In April of 2013 the project was abandoned, and almost a full year into my Capstone and I was back at square one.

At a loss, I consulted with several friends and family for what to do next. The eventual answer was partially inspired by Clay LePard's 2011 Capstone, in which he created a mobile application from interviews he conducted with Newhouse Advisory Board members about personal stories relating to the University. I paired this with my current situation at SULA, which I was enjoying tremendously, and decided that was the best route for me to go.

Artistically, there weren't many choices to be made at this point. I had seen promotional videos for similar programs before, and had an aesthetic in mind. The larger challenge would be to capture the footage I needed in order to have coverage in the three weeks left before my departure back to New York for the summer. I began working very closely with Joan Adler, the Assistant Vice President of Regional Programs, to connect with alumni who would be willing to chat on camera. At the time, this challenge seemed almost insurmountable. There were alumni who were enthusiastic and willing to talk, but scheduling and traveling while trying to finish finals and pack and ship my belongings across the country was far from an easy task.

Aesthetically, I was confined by both the locations I had to shoot, and the equipment available to shoot with. SULA had recently acquired a videocamera and a tripod for student use. At this point, acting without a budget, I did not have any lights, microphones or other equipment to aid the quality of my video. At each of the interviews I conducted in Los Angeles I operated alone. This presented another challenge, in terms of framing and re-framing shots while conducting a conversational interview. This pressed my skills, as I would glance at the camera towards the end of an answer, reposition or adjust focus, while formulating my next question. This often led to my subjects looking at the camera instead of focusing on their answers, and sometimes distracted from the conversational approach I was hoping to achieve.

My interview style was always meant to be conversational. I spoke with several prominent alumni in positions of power in the entertainment industry, which tended to be intimidating. I found that a conversational interview, one in which I could comment and share my own reflections prompting a response, as opposed to rigid questioning, offset any intimidation and helped to level the air between myself and my subjects. My first interview was with Bob Gautieri, which was probably fortuitous. Bob spent many years designing graphics for broadcast networks, but dedicated an even larger part of his life to being a Syracuse fan. We shared several similar interests, and he loved to speak about the SULA program that he had watched grow from infancy. My interview with Bob also helped me to

establish my themes for questioning during the remainder of my interviews. Bob was an East Coast guy at heart, and moved to Los Angeles for the career opportunities. Many of the tidbits he shared during our interview were echoed again by others, but usually not as enthusiastically. He truly acted as a driving force of inspiration and reassurance that this project was important to the University community and the Californian alumni.

The following year, at the urging of my advisors, I conducted additional interviews with students who had been through the program. This gave more balance to the piece, and I felt it was important because the target audience is primarily students. Interviews with professionals lent gravitas to the piece, with authority figured who must surely know more than students. It was this mentality that initially led me to seeing out professors and alumni. Yet I eventually realized that the student voice was sorely missed by the piece. Being told you will learn a lot is one thing, but having a student say, “this was one of the greatest decisions of my life” carries just a little more weight. Unfortunately due to technical faults, my first few interviews with students had to be discarded. The second round was good, but I’d be sugar coating if I didn’t admit that the first interviews got to the very core of the message I was hoping to achieve. I was devastated when I found they were unusable. The second time around got the job done, but was not quite the same.

These initial interviews would also later shape my approach to the format of the video. The recurring themes and common threads among them became the tenets that I edited around. Artistically it felt as if my subjects had crafted the message for me, which was liberating. I will discuss later how I used these pillars and translated them into the final product.

One major artistic debate I had over a period of several months was whether or not to interview myself as part of the piece. My qualifications, having been an alumnus of the program at that point, made it a reasonable choice. While my conversational interviews had followed similar patterns for most of my subjects, sometimes how the message was delivered was almost, but not quite, what I had wanted to hear. I, however, knew exactly what I wanted and how I wanted it delivered. As part of my responsibilities as Communications Officer for Otto's Army as well as a University 100 Tour Guide, I have given countless interviews regarding the University and its benefits. More importantly, and discussed later, is the fact that I know how to speak in sound bytes which ease the editing process. I would have complimented the piece and tied up the loose ends. On the other hand, knowing exactly what I wanted to say could have made me sound scripted, and caused shades of doubt about the authenticity of the other interviews around me. Would my interview corrupt the sincerity of my whole piece? Further, one of the most uncomfortable things one can do is listen to themselves recorded. Would I be able to endure hours of my own voice, and image, trying to coax myself into the neat package I had to polish for a true promotional piece? After a long back

and forth I decided that I would not interview myself. The authenticity that came out of the conversational interviews I had done up until that point was more important to me than a couple of neat sound bytes I knew I could provide. I still question that decision, as it most certainly made editing a larger challenge down the road, but I suppose all artists have a “what if” moment when reflecting upon their work.

The vast majority of my creative decisions came after most of the footage was acquired, in editing. The first editing choice I had to make was which software I would use. Several nonlinear editing systems are available, each with their own benefits. The two I am most familiar with are Apple’s Final Cut Pro, and Avid’s Media Composer. As most of my effort on the project would be spent in post production, this choice was paramount. Avid has for a long while been seen as the industry standard on the news side, but Final Cut Pro is software I have been using for eight years. Initially, Avid’s clean support for large projects drew me to that option. In Avid I could easily create virtual bins that would help organize and sort through what was growing into hours of footage. Final Cut Pro’s advantages lie with ease of effects and the ability to manipulate footage into stylized looks expressly. I had worked in both programs, and initially felt that this particular project would be better suited for Final Cut Pro, with the intent of having a fast-paced, highly stylized product. This vision, however, changed drastically throughout editing, and towards the middle stages I began to regret my choice. I

don't believe that it artistically inhibited my work, but rather made the process slightly more arduous than it needed to be.

My creative editing process began by evaluating what exactly it was that I had. I watched all of the interviews that I had collected in Los Angeles (prior to interviewing students), totaling right around four hours before editing anything. After that, my first step was to begin creating "select sequences" where all of the good clips are assembled together. I had a lot of good content, but what I thought at the time were tough choices needed to be made. The actual tough choices would come much later. I managed to take four hours into about one, and from there my themes began to take shape. I felt that the most important ones, in broad strokes, were academics and classes, living in Los Angeles, internship opportunities, the "I wish they had this when I went to Syracuse" moment, and the overall SULA benefits. Each of these were their own sequences of selected clips. This process allowed me to form several mini-narratives that I hoped would come together for my fully assembled final product.

Additionally, I interviewed several professors, and dedicated a portion of each interview to discussing what their classes were about and why they might be different than courses on campus at Syracuse. Prior to having the student voices, this decision was one I hoped would lend a closer and more personal look into the program. I had two usable segments, one on Bruce Perlmutter's *TV Nation*, and one with David and Julie Chambers discussing *The Writer's Journey*. Both were

classes that I took while in Los Angeles, and felt they represented a nice, though small, sample of SULA's offerings.

After a couple of months of weekly editing sessions, though not as regularly scheduled as I would have liked, I had several cohesive sequences that I was ready to move into a single story. At this point I had exhausted all of the interview footage and figured out, for the most part, where my gems were. I had not given much thought to the total run time of the final deliverable. My only goal was for the video to be usable and useful for the SULA program after its completion.

With all of the knowledge I had at the time in mid-Fall 2013, I had settled on a roughly 10 minute narrative as my goal. This would allow me to create a fluid story that details what I perceived to be all of the beneficial aspects of the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program while only leaving a few minor details on the edit room floor. This was communicated to my advisors, who were happy to see my progress with the footage I had collected. This decision would be called into question very late in the process.

The first major criticism, however, came late in the Fall. A student perspective was very clearly missing from the piece. The question must then be raised, can you entice a student to enroll in a program without ever hearing that it's a good idea from a student? It's an interesting question, but the clearer answer was to include student voices interspersed. One of the major debates that went back and forth once these interviews (which I detailed earlier) were completed, was how

much of them to include. By the sheer number of interviews I conducted I had much more footage from adults than students. This also must factor in three student interviews that were unusable due to technical issues mentioned above. The artistic question was “what is the right balance between personal student connections and authority figures?” Authorities, especially ones that had been students and are now successful (read: people students want to grow up to be like) lend a very important gravitas to the video that makes it seem like more than just students going to play in California for a few months. However, the true personal connection of a prospective student seeing someone their age working, living, and playing in an environment that they want to be in can be a hugely powerful selling point. At the end of the day this creative work is meant to make that sale, and encourage new applicants to the program. I mulled the decision for a long time, with several versions that had more authoritative figures in them, and several others that were predominantly students, before settling on the near 50/50 balance that I believe I achieved in the end.

Something that was articulated to me by my advisors was how powerful it would be to see the students speaking about their experiences while showing footage of them in the classroom. This ‘day in the life’ approach was something that I had certainly considered. However this was one of several issues that practicality won out over creativity and potential impact. My project was conceived and approved with only a few short weeks before leaving Los Angeles. At the time, I had very little vision of what the end product would be. I failed to have the foresight to

conduct student interviews while in Los Angeles, and did not secure significant b-roll of the students I would later interview. This is definitely a regret from the process, but it has taught me the valuable lesson of mapping out the framework of a project before diving in. My diving in was mostly a result of being under heavy time constraints and pressure overpowering logical thinking. "I'll fix it in post," is a running joke in the film and television industry. It mocks someone who ignores a problem on set, suggesting that everything can be fixed in the editing room. Many things can be fixed in the editing room, but not all. And those issues that can be fixed are fixed at the heavy cost of time and, sometimes, partial sanity.

The other major criticism, and artistic choice was revisiting the issue of total run time. Though my goal had been roughly ten minutes, for reasons detailed earlier, I simply did not have enough b-roll to support the duration. Talking heads (a term referring to a static shot of someone being interviewed) rarely make for an exciting piece. I attempted to remedy this shortage in two ways.

The first was stock footage - footage shot by other professionals and available to license for use. There are plenty of stock footage shots of Hollywood, including the Hollywood Sign, walk of fame, and other famous landmarks. Two challenges came with attempting to use mostly stock footage. The first challenge was cost. Some individual shots can run upwards of \$100, and subscription services were prohibitively expensive. I managed to find a service that allowed a free trial for a week, and downloaded a fair amount of stock shots. The second issue I found

with stock footage is matching it to the footage I had shot. Every camera has its own unique look, and it became very apparent that the shots were captured differently. Additionally, even with more shots there was still not enough variety to cover a longer piece. I had captured my own footage of the Hollywood Sign and other tourist spots, and even if stock footage looked better, it is very difficult to repeat shots and have a piece feel fresh.

The second potential solution was asking a current student studying through the program in Los Angeles to shoot additional footage on my behalf. Robert O'Brien agreed to film additional footage, per my direction while in LA. I requested shots of the SULA signage, classroom scenes, and various other shots of students having fun. A few shots that were returned to me were usable, but many were not. There is a large difference between having a vision in your head of what the shot should be and holding a camera, and asking someone on the other side of the country to film it for you. I had great difficulty executing my vision through his hands.

Finally due to these factors, and paired with reasonable but not outstanding production values on my own interviews (due to the technical and time limitations previously mentioned) I received the harshest criticism yet. I was told by my advisors that ten minutes was much too long, and I would have to cut the piece drastically, more than in half, in hopes to salvage a usable promotion. Up until that point I had been content with the narrative I had been crafting, but

disappointed in its visuals. The latter caught up, and I was faced with the largest challenge of the entire process - cut almost everything I loved out of my piece that I had worked so hard on.

The biggest adversity however, would lead to the biggest realization on my part and paved the way for much personal growth. I was too close to my material. I was spending half my days staring at it for hours on end. I could recite almost my entire narrative before my interviewees flickered on the screen. I needed to step back.

I took a week off and cleared my mind. I reassessed what I thought the piece could be. My reader, Michael Schoonmaker, told me in no uncertain terms: "Five minutes in and it's unbearable. Instead, make me want more." Up until that point I had been pained to go anywhere near the delete key. Each sound byte I collected I felt was worthy to be enshrined in a golden tomb somewhere. What I needed to realize, and up until the that point had not, was that the audience didn't feel that way. It was that moment that everything changed. "If I delete this clip," I thought, "I would miss it, but will the audience?" They won't. They will never know it was even there. So I deleted. I cut and I cut and I cut until I had taken all of the fat off my video that I labored so hard to keep plump. At four minutes, it was just barely short enough to satisfy my audience without repeating itself. It no longer told you everything it could about the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program.

Instead, it told you just enough. It encouraged you to look further, to see what the program could do for you, and that was really the goal all along.

The final step was to create a unique soundtrack that aided my newly tightened visuals and set the tone I was aiming for all along. My advisor, Professor Goenka, connected me with a student in Canada, JP Kaya, who was willing to help. He sent me a melody that he thought might work for the main theme. I was hesitant. It was very pop-y. I felt the piece needed more of an alternative, beach-rock theme. This was the aesthetic I had been going for all along, and the mood I had set with my temporary music. Letting him run with it, I tempted fate. After several more iterations and notes via email and phone calls, I have the version included in my Capstone. It is still more similar to pop than I would like, but that is a creative challenge I faced similarly to having Robert shoot footage for me. I had difficulties translating my personal vision via long distances.

Overall, this process has allowed me to grow and learn in several regards. First, I better understand the importance of beginning any endeavor with a very clear plan and goals in mind. Even if that plan pivots and morphs entirely along the journey, starting with something concrete is more effective than what I did - grabbing a camera and going. An old adage from the film business is that you should always “shoot for the edit.” Similar to not being able to fix everything in post, shooting for the edit means to act on set to capture exactly what you will need for post production. Instead of fixing problems in post when your options are limited, take

the extra time, which I did not always have, to fix problems before they go into the camera and become problems. I also grew considerably as an editor. This was my first creative piece where I was truly too attached to the material to cut anything. When I was finally able to let go, it was a cathartic moment. I allowed my story to breathe. You don't always have to tell every detail to paint a full picture, and I had not realized that until that point.

There are several people who have helped me get to this point, and I need to formally thank them. Tula Goenka and Michael Schoonmaker were terrific advisors along this journey. They supported my ambitions, even when their own process might've differed. When I needed the harsh realities of where I was, they gave them. I have grown personally and professionally from seeing and hearing how they conduct themselves. I also must thank Robin Howard, who became the SULA Program director halfway through the making of my video. I had interviewed her as my professor, but reshot the interview under her new position. She has been nothing but supportive, and I know that her and the program do appreciate my efforts. There are countless others who have watched drafts and given me feedback, or simply listened to my frustrations and elations along the way. They know who they are and this project is much better for having them around.

Finally, I must thank my parents for their love and support. Without them, I would not have been able to go to Los Angeles to inspire this project, and I most

certainly would not have made it through this process. Those statements can apply to just about everything in my life, but they deserve special recognition for this video. They constantly urge me to do better and dig deeper.

I truly believe that I have done that. I have grown personally and professionally, and I believe I have delivered on my goal to help the Syracuse University Los Angeles Semester Program reach the next step. While this Capstone may be officially over, I plan on continuing to work with SULA to deliver material that will augment their ongoing efforts. Hopefully someday one or two of those gems on my very cluttered cutting room floor will see the light of day.