Through the Los Angeles Semester, students connect with alumni as they learn about work and life in the show business capital

BY DAVID MARC

FOR YEARS, ALUMNI OCCUPYING leading positions in the Los Angeles film, television, recording, and talent management businesses have kept up ties with the University. They have hosted students aspiring to careers in the entertainment industry and welcomed recent graduates to town in “soft landing” events. Building on the popularity and usefulness of such annual programs as the Hollywood Seminar during winter break and Aaron Sorkin Week during spring break, Southern California alumni have collaborated with the University to create SU’s Los Angeles Semester, an extraordinary educational immersion opportunity for students pursuing careers in the multibillion-dollar entertainment industry. Launched last fall, the L.A. Semester has benefited from alumni energy that goes beyond financial generosity to facilitating special events for the program, arranging internships at key companies, and giving personal attention to students by participating as speakers, faculty adjuncts, and mentors. SU Trustee Rob Light ’78, managing partner at Creative Artists Agency, a dominant international talent...
agency, expressed the satisfaction that he and fellow alumni gained in building a new educational advantage for Syracuse students. “This program allows us to give back to the SU community in a meaningful way, while also providing the next generation of industry executives with a richly rewarding experience,” Light said. (see “Alumni Power at Work,” page 40)

An average of 30 undergraduates participate each semester, drawn from television, radio, film majors in the Newhouse School and from the College of Visual and Performing Arts’ film studies program and Bandier Program for Music and the Entertainment Industries. Although the suggestion of sunshine in November or February may seem like a natural attraction, Andrea Asimow, director of the L.A. Semester, advises only the career-minded to apply. “This is no West Coast vacation,” says Asimow, a veteran film producer (Coco Chanel, 2008) who recently served as creative consultant to Diamonds, an internationally distributed television mini-series. “Each student performs a 20-hour-per week internship at a suitable company while attending evening classes taught by working professionals. They take online courses from the University as well. Even many of the social activities are tied to industry-related events.”

Many of the courses in the L.A. Semester are taught by distinguished alumni and all of them go right to the heart of student concerns. In Emerging Media, David Tochterman ‘80 examines how technological innovation may cause shifts in popular entertainment and create new opportunities. A senior vice president at Carsey-Werner with old-school sitcom credits (That ’70s Show, Roseanne), Tochterman made crossover history in 2007 as executive producer of Fat Guy Stuck in Internet, the first scripted comedy to break through from broadband-only to television distribution. Robin Forman G’76, who has produced films for HBO (Iron Jawed Angels, 2004; The Cherokee Kid, 1996), teaches The Business of Film & Television Development and Production, a course that prepares students for the realities of the second word in “show business.” According to Asimow, who teaches a weekly seminar that helps students get the most out of their internships, invited lecturers often bring student enthusiasm to a peak. “In all of our classes, we have a steady stream of extraordinary guest speakers—alumni, parents of students, and others,” she says. One speaker was Mark Canton, the father of Dorothy Canton ’11 and the producer of 18 feature films, including the 2007 hit, 300. After talking about his work, Canton distributed copies of an unproduced script to students and returned for a second class to discuss their feedback. “You could see how thrilled they were to have their comments seriously considered by a working producer,” Asimow says.

For many students, the whole of the semester, including a taste of life in L.A., may be a greater experience than the sum of all parts. Living in an apartment complex in Toluca Lake, a small community in the eye of a media hub that includes NBC Universal, Disney, Warner Brothers, and many smaller suppliers and services, they travel the freeways to far-flung internships and return for evening classes. Weekend activities may include a screening for the group at the Director’s Guild of America (DGA) on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood or venturing off to Silver Lake to try a restaurant that someone heard was great. “We are enhancing the educations of our students while preparing them for careers in a difficult field and for life in a fascinating, culturally diverse city,” Asimow says.

This program allows us to give back to the SU community in a meaningful way, while also providing the next generation of industry executives with a richly rewarding experience.

SU Trustee Rob Light ’78, managing partner, Creative Artists Agency
**Brittany Lahm ’11**

**Major:** Bandier Program for Music and the Entertainment Industries  
**Hometown:** New City, New York  
**Internship:** RCA Music Group, SONY Music Entertainment, Studio City

Tell us about your internship.
I worked for Tom Muzquiz, the senior director of publicity, and his assistant, Vanessa Fine. From the day I started, they treated me as more than an “intern.” I had my own desk and phone line. Tom acquainted me with a lot of his daily tasks and got me involved in them. I put together press requests and set up interviews for a band on our label that was on a huge arena tour. I also helped write press releases and create press kits for various artists. I had the opportunity to go to a music video shoot and coordinate the interviews. During this internship, I saw more concerts and live performances in one semester than I had seen in the past two years. It really was an incredible learning opportunity.

Did the internship benefit your education?
This internship exposed me to real-life experiences in the music and entertainment industry. It forced me to improve my time-management skills, become more responsible, and grow as an individual. I also concluded that I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my boss, Tom Muzquiz, and go to law school.

Have your ideas about the business changed?
I went out there with a pretty good understanding of the business from some past experiences and from what I’ve learned in class. I have gained more insight into every aspect of the business through hands-on work. I think my ideas about the business developed rather than changed.

Were your career aspirations affected?
Before my L.A. semester, I knew I wanted to be part of the music industry, but other than that, I had no clue as to “what I want to be when I grow up.” After a week of interning, I decided that PR was the field I wanted to jump into.

How did you like life in Los Angeles?
Although it was hard to be away from my friends and family back in New York, I can whole-heartedly say that coming to L.A. for the semester was one of the best decisions I ever made. Waking up every morning to sunshine left me speechless. The people, the sights, the place where we lived—everything was just breathtaking. I can truly say that I did not take one day out there for granted.

Final Comment:
Students wanting to work in the entertainment industry are absolutely out of their minds if they don’t take advantage of this opportunity! In what other “study abroad” program are you going to get the chance to network—and party—at CAA, one of the biggest international talent agencies, and meet industry moguls like Akon, Marty Bandier, and Rob Light? I feel lucky to have had that experience and wouldn’t trade it for the world.
Tell us about your internship.
Rigberg Entertainment Group, which was founded by Glenn Rigberg [’88], is a boutique talent management firm that manages actors, writers, and directors, and a growing production company. I was basically an assistant, but I was given lots of responsibilities—and I loved it. I covered the phones, greeted talent and guests, submitted our clients’ portfolios to casting directors, read scripts for TV pilots and feature films and did detailed coverage [evaluations], helped create actors’ reels and resumes, and whatever else was asked of me. One of the perks for me was attending an advanced screening of the movie Precious at Lionsgate a month before it came out because our company represented one of the supporting characters.

Did the internship benefit your education?
My internship allowed me to supplement textbook knowledge with real-life experience. There are some things that you can only learn on the job. I got to see an integral part of the business.

Have your ideas about the business changed?
I learned how much networking and building relationships are a part of good business. I’ve also realized that you need passion and determination to stay focused and to succeed in this industry.

Were your career aspirations affected?
I’ve made it a point to find out which jobs would allow me to be creative, but also to be business-minded. I’ve realized that I would most like to be a producer because I like the idea of finding a project I’m passionate about, whether it’s a book, script, or a real-life event, and using so many resources to get it made into a movie.

What was your most rewarding experience?
One of the most rewarding experiences for me was going to the party at Aaron Sorkin’s house in West Hollywood. I realized how lucky I am to be at a school whose alumni are so accomplished and who are so willing to give back to students.

How did you like life in Los Angeles?
I loved living in Los Angeles. It’s like a perpetual daydream. You’re surrounded by celebrities, expensive cars, and people who are committed to trying to make it in the industry.

Archie Page ’11 gets advice from Glenn Rigberg ’88, founder of the Rigberg Entertainment Group.
Tell us about your internship.
Lifetime Networks is a diversified multimedia company, committed to offering the highest quality programming that celebrates, entertains, informs, and supports women. I interned in the programming department for JoAnn Alfano, executive vice president for entertainment. I was responsible for reading the trades every morning and documenting articles that make reference to Lifetime and to competitors. I read numerous speculative scripts and provided feedback on each. I was involved in the entire pre-production process of a current television series: receiving the first draft of an episode script, viewing the table read, working on script revisions, and making production notes. I also viewed the taping of the episode through a live feed connecting the New York and Los Angeles offices.

Did the internship benefit your education?
This internship gave me hands-on experience and provided me with insight into the media industry. The experience resonates in me in ways that no book or classroom assignment could. More specifically, I have been able to pinpoint my ideal goals for a career within this industry.

Have your ideas about the business changed?
I never realized how much the business is evolving until I was personally immersed in it. I learned, firsthand, how much power my generation has in determining the progression of the media industry.

Were your career aspirations affected?
I was able to identify specific parts of the business I enjoy and other parts that I find less enjoyable. For example, a production coordinator was out of the office for a two-week period and I was given the opportunity to fill in for him, directly reporting to the two executive vice presidents of production. Through that experience, I realized that my aspirations were no longer solely confined to the programming department. I left that experience thinking about the possibility of becoming a production executive.

What was your most rewarding experience?
There were rewarding experiences in taking advantage of every single opportunity the L.A. Semester placed in our laps: a private party at Aaron Sorkin’s house, HBO premiers, DGA screenings, and alumni luncheons at the Four Seasons in Beverly Hills. There were never-ending opportunities to network within the industry.

How did you like life in Los Angeles?
I love life in Los Angeles.

LOREN HUGHES
CLASS: JUNIOR

Major: Television, Radio, Film
Hometown: Wake Forest, North Carolina
Internship: Lifetime Networks, Century City

Marc: Inside Entertainment
Published by SURFACE, 2010
Tell us about your internship.
Escape Artists is a production company that has a first-look deal with SONY Pictures. That means the company takes all its projects to SONY first. If SONY doesn’t want the project, then Escape Artists is free to shop the script or project elsewhere. The producers who own the company are Jason Blumenthal [’90], Todd Black, and Steve Tisch. At my internship, I mostly read scripts and wrote “coverage,” which is a short summary of the plot, along with what I thought about it. Put simply, I was on the company’s first line of defense for scripts that come in. I was responsible for telling them to pass on the bad stuff and to point out the scripts that had real potential to be movies.

Did the internship benefit your education?
There’s nothing like the hands-on experience I had in Los Angeles. As great as the teachers are at Syracuse, there are just some things you can’t teach in a classroom. There’s no substitute for the experience I had reading incoming scripts and the scripts of the movies in production.

How have your ideas about the business changed?
Based on the horror stories that everyone hears, I think it’s easy to view the business as a cold, cutthroat place. But since going out there, I don’t see it that way anymore. It’s not nearly as scary a place as I thought it might be.

Were your career aspirations affected?
Almost every speaker who came to class said, “Do everything, because that way you’ll find out what you don’t want to do.” This speaks volumes about the value of the L.A. program. Just from hearing speakers who come to class and talk about their jobs, I have a better idea of what I want to do—and don’t want to do. It’s hard to pick a single experience; the whole thing was rewarding. I think the networking opportunities made the semester worthwhile. Not only did we work great internships and go to events at the Director’s Guild, but we were introduced to the extensive SU alumni network in L.A.

How did you like life in Los Angeles?
I really enjoyed life in L.A. Even outside of the entertainment industry, there’s a ton to see in the city. I can definitely see myself going out there to live and to establish a career when I finish school. The program has been a big part of that.
LAST FALL, TRUSTEE ROB LIGHT ’78 hosted a reception at the offices of Creative Artists Agency for alumni, students, faculty, and others who helped get the Los Angeles Semester off to a roaring start. Joining Light at the celebration were L.A. Semester founders and shapers: Brian Frons G’78, president of Daytime at Disney-ABC Television; Jason Blumenthal ’90, producer and partner at Escape Artists, a film production company; Marilyn Ginsburg-Klaus ’56, G’57, proprietor of Grand House Management; and Sean Cary ’89, executive vice president for digital distribution at SONY Pictures Entertainment. (A complete listing of the program’s founders and of members of the University’s L.A. Task Force is available at lasemester.syr.edu/background.html.)

In the spirit of the L.A. Semester, the daylong November 12 event was a party—and more. Trustee Martin Bandier ’62, chairman and CEO of SONY/ATV Music Publishing, moderated a discussion on “Building the Right Team” in the music industry. Featured panelists were Light, who heads music operations at CAA, and singer-songwriters Akon and Sara Bareilles. A search for “The Future of Funny” was led by New Yorker media critic Ken Auletta G’77. The panel included filmmaker Judd Apatow (Funny People; Forgetting Sarah Marshall); veteran sitcom writer-producer Andy Borowitz (The Fresh Prince of Bel Air); and comedian Sarah Silverman, whose Sarah Silverman Program is seen on Comedy Central.

Larry Martin, associate vice president for program development at SU, has been escorting students on the Newhouse School’s winter-break networking trips to Los Angeles since 1984. Martin found the event particularly gratifying. “Many of the alumni who are making the L.A. Semester possible were wide-eyed students hoping to get a foot in the door someplace when I first brought them to town,” he says. “Now, as leaders in the entertainment industry, they’re showing they haven’t forgotten how important it is to meet people and learn your way around.” L.A. Semester director Andrea Asimow agrees. “Our students are overwhelmed by the warmth and friendliness of the alumni outreach,” she says.

Music industry executive Martin Bandier ’62 (far right, top right photo) quizzes Rob Light ’78 (left) and singers Akon and Sara Bareilles. Media critic Ken Auletta G’77 (top left photo) laughs during a discussion with comedian Sarah Silverman, writer Andy Borowitz (bottom left photo), and producer Judd Apatow.

Photos courtesy of SU in LA
Tell us about your internship.
Cornerstone is a lifestyle marketing company that deals primarily with music, television, and film. I assisted and did research for creative campaigns. I put together the necessary social media for certain projects and kept that up-to-date. I was also responsible for office work, such as organizing, filing, and mailing.

Did the internship benefit your education?
I have a better understanding of creative and synergetic promotional and marketing campaigns for different types of entertainment and a better understanding of an “office environment.” Hands-on experience, in my opinion, is nearly as important as the classroom education I’m receiving at Syracuse.

Have your ideas about the business changed?
I underestimated how versatile the company was. I always thought it primarily dealt with music and brand collaborations, but I found that they have a lot of projects throughout the entire entertainment industry.

Were your career aspirations affected?
I believe I’ll be able to take what I’ve learned and apply it almost anywhere in the entertainment industry. The internship opened my eyes to how many different occupations are out there, and I can search for the one that’s best for me, instead of just focusing on one specific aspect of the music industry.

What was your most rewarding experience?
My internship supervisor constantly invited me and my classmates to special events, such as exclusive openings, screenings, and concerts. It was a pleasure to go to these events and have a good time with all of the SULA students.

How did you like life in Los Angeles?
The weather there was great and there was so much to do. If you stay away from trying to rationalize the traffic, you’ll have an awesome time.

Final Comment:
If you stay up to date and try to relate, you’ll be fine.