

The Realities of Film School in 2013

A Guide for the SMC Counseling Department

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There are three kinds of film schools available to SMC's cinema majors who, nearing graduation, want to apply to film schools today: Industry, Independent, and Experimental. The industry schools, most typified by USC and AFI, train students to insinuate themselves into the Hollywood system with the expectation that producers will give them large amounts of money to make feature films. The independent schools like UCLA, NYU and Columbia train students to strip down their filmmaking to the barest essentials and then raise their own money to make their films, independently of the Hollywood system. The experimental schools like Cal Arts and the San Francisco Art Institute don't teach students to raise large amounts of money, or to make feature films. They teach students only the art of film, and encourage students to make art without any thought of the business of film. None of these is better than the others; it's a matter of personal preference. Independent feature film-making is hard work, and is financially risky, but it gives people complete artistic control within the limits of their financial backing. The Industry is hard to get into, and it restricts creativity to whatever is marketable, but once film students have completed their education and are in, they can be financially secure for life. Experimental filmmaking is a calling, not a living. Its chief practitioners do it because they are driven to, not because they expect to make money doing it. The independent schools encourage independence both in school and out of school. They provide their students with equipment, but the students have to come up with their own money to pay for film stock, transportation, food, and so on. The students have a great deal of freedom to make the films they choose, but the financial burden can be staggering. AFI and USC pay for the films their students make. This reduces the financial burden on students considerably.

But the students pay a high price in other ways; every student wants to write and direct a film, but at USC the faculty only chooses a handful whose films the school will fund. As a result, students spend most of their first few years trying to divine what the faculty wants. Students write scripts to appeal to the faculty, not to create an original work with an original viewpoint.

Students make practice films to show off their flashy technique, not to experiment with new techniques (and risk failure) in order to learn how to best tell a story in an appropriate way. Another drawback is that Industry schools like AFI and USC claim ownership of every film made with their equipment. Students might be allowed to keep copies for their own use, but they are not allowed to enter their films in competitions or to distribute them without the schools' express consent. Each kind of film school reflects that part of the real world in microcosm. The independent schools are microcosms of independent filmmaking, as filmmakers who never have quite enough money for what they want to do help one another out as best they can. The Hollywood-style film schools are a microcosm of Industry filmmaking, where there are fabulous riches to be had, but only for a few lucky people, and the students compete furiously with one another to try to get their hands on it. The experimental schools are full of quiet, artistic people who mostly work alone on shadowy projects that few eyes ever see. As such, film school can teach more about the filmmaking way of life than about the technique of filmmaking.

More people are applying to film schools now than ever before. The most popular film schools now have to turn down twenty applicants or more for every one they accept. Thousands of people every year are graduating from film schools and trying to make a living in the film industry.

Film is a language, and like all languages it's not much good if students don't have anything to say. I strongly recommend that college students study literature or history or political science, or an exact science, or just about anything academic as an undergraduate. There is no substitute for the classic "liberal arts" education that was so strongly encouraged in earlier decades, and such a well-rounded education is especially valuable for the would-be filmmaker.

There are filmmakers out there right now writing screenplays and directing films without having seen anything of the world other than what they have seen in movies. As a result, many of the films being made now are not about life, rather they are about what the filmmakers think life is like based on movies they have seen. This is unfortunate for audiences, who have to sit through these empty, pointless films, and it is unfortunate for the filmmakers, who may have learned great technical skills, but who will never make a great film.

In terms of which film school to choose, there are certain considerations worth mentioning to students in counseling sessions. Some schools have more cachet in Hollywood than others. If a student tells a producer he or she went to USC, the producer will probably smile grimly and change the subject. Because of the school's size and location, USC alumni--graduate and undergraduate--make up a large portion of the film community in LA.

You can't throw a rock in Hollywood without hitting a USC graduate, and chances are the one you would hit has never made a film. So, producers will often be impressed if students tell them they graduated from any school other than USC--from Columbia, or Florida State, or the Chicago Art Institute, or AFI. But, on the other hand, they are only impressed by schools they have heard of--students won't wow anyone in Hollywood by telling them you went to Ohio or Carbondale or Milwaukee. Still, if a student has made a great film at Ohio or Carbondale or Milwaukee, and has won awards, and has had it shown in major festivals, then that student won't need to wow them with his or her degree. A great short film is worth more than a certificate from the best film program. Many filmmaking students are encouraged today to emerge from their graduate programs with a strong M.F.A feature-length film project that they have written and/or directed under the benevolent guidance of their M.F.A program instructors. If these first features are good enough, they may not only get seen in major festivals (such as Sundance), but also, they are considered distributable and saleable commodities within the independent film circuits.

Student loans are available to most students. But while other expensive fields of study like Medicine or Law give a virtual guarantee of lucrative employment after graduation making it possible to pay off loans fairly quickly, film programs offer no such guarantee. Indeed, the vast majority of film school graduates are unemployed for some time after they graduate. New York and Los Angeles are already stuffed with M.F.A. graduates from respected institutions who write screenplays in the evenings while they office temp or wait tables or fill out unemployment forms during the day. It is important that students know this from the start.

Another important area worth counseling students about - length of the programs. The major film schools are remarkably dishonest about the time their programs require. USC calls itself a three-year program, but in fact takes four, or five, or six. NYU calls itself a three-year program, but no one has ever graduated in less than

four. On the other hand, some schools call themselves two-year programs, and really are two-year programs.

All film schools, of course, have websites that can be passed on to SMC students. They should be encouraged to contact each college individually, and have them send full packages of information pertaining to the cinema programs being considered, including financial aid applications, if needed.

The following are Southern California's top film schools:

American Film Institute
California Institute of the Arts
Chapman University
Loyola Marymount University
California State University, Northridge
California State University, Long Beach
University of California, Los Angeles
University of Southern California

The following are the top film schools beyond Southern California:

Bard College
City University of New York
Columbia College, Chicago
Columbia University (New York City)
Florida State University
Howard University
New York University
Northwestern University
Ohio University
Savannah College of Art and Design
School of the Art Institute of Chicago
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale
Syracuse University
Temple University
University of Miami
University of New Orleans
University of Texas at Austin
Ohio State University
University of Utah
University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee