A Career in Entertainment?

Many NACA Associates, Other Entertainment Professionals Began as Student Programmers

By Nancy A. Oeswein

If you are a student involved in programming, there’s a good chance you had a stronger than average interest in the arts going in. It is also no surprise that the entertainment business is generously peppered with professionals who got their start in NACA just like you. There are very few degree programs that specialize in the business of entertainment, so not surprisingly, the majority of people in various related fields come from a diverse educational background. However, most got experience early on to help open doors in their careers.

In fact, when you look specifically at booking agencies catering to the college market, probably more than 50 percent of us got bitten by the entertainment bug as students involved in NACA activities and events. For example, the owners and majority of agents from Auburn Moon Agency (DE), Neon Entertainment (NY), and JOEY EDMONDS Presents (CA), just to name a few, got their start as students. Beyond that, there are former NACA members in all aspects of entertainment. On the following page are the thoughts of many such folks, describing the kind of work they do now and their advice to students who might be interested in pursuing their line of work.
I will say first that as owner of a college and performing arts booking agency, I love what I do. The blending of arts and education and especially developing the user known but brilliant artist into one national recognition is incredibly rewarding, but just the tip of the entertainment iceberg. Most agents specializing in college bookings seem to share a passion for the educational side of the arts.

"I knew that this is what I wanted to do through a series of internships and my job at the programming board," said Sue Albertson of The College Agency (MN). "In addition, bringing in the national acts at Luther College (IA), I interned at an NCA agency, a radio promotions company, and a large scale promoter in Minneapolis. I took tickets at clubs, I posted fliers, I did it all. The best part, though, is that I got to take what I loved from each and roll it into the job I currently have."

However, Melissa Carlson, also of The College Agency, cautioned students "to look at your choice realistically and objectively rather than idealistically. Make sure you weigh the pros and cons to being a booking agent and make sure that you completely understand what your daily tasks would be rather than just the 'fun inference scene.'"

Jeff Hyman of Auburn Moon Agency (PA) said, "I think the experiences that made me choose this career were working with agents and seeing that their personalities closely matched mine. I also had an excellent advisor who encouraged this interest. I knew that once I went to [an NCA conference], it was what I wanted to do for a living. Nothing else had struck like this. I felt the excitement, the energy of a marketplace where agents and students met and where students and agents met—everyone with a common experience all together in one place."

### Non-College Opportunities

There are certainly other arenas for booking agents, such as clubs, theaters,ivals and the corporate market. Michael McGregor of Hello! Booking (N) is an example of agents who work in other markets. He got his start as an NCA student and although he does some college bookings, he now primarily books his and private events.

Laura Sacks got her start on the production board at the University of North Carolina and is currently Director of Children's and Family Programs at the Arts Center in North Carolina. Her responsibilities in this position are quite varied, ranging from performance and visual arts programming to marketing and grant writing. There are hundreds of agencies and companies across the country, forming an entire related industry.

"My original career intent had been graphic design, but as I became more involved in event planning and programming, I began to think seriously about the possibility of presenting as a career choice," Sacks explained. "This decision was solidified during my senior year, when after several discouraging interviews at graphic design firms, I examined the amount of time I spent working on my academic major (graphic design) and the amount of time I spent in the union office. I was much more invested in programming and found that I enjoyed it a great deal more than graphic design. I've always been interested in the arts, both visual and performing, so transitioning to arts presenting was a natural choice. I worked for a few years as the development and outreach coordinator for the Carolina Union Performing Arts Series and then as the Conference Associate for the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, before coming to work at the Arts Center."

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Ari Nissman of Degen Management (NJ) pointed out that "NACA students get [exposure to] a very broad spectrum of putting on events in general and getting used to the music/comedy fields. While many of the students lunge into a booking-related field from there, there are so many other roles they do while putting on events. Publicity would be something students could consider if they were involved in marketing on their student activities committees. The work they did [communicating with] the college press, radio stations in town, and, if doing major concerts, also working with the bigger community/commercial stations and press, could vault them into a potential career in that area."

There are numerous publicity firms that specialize in serving the entertainment business. A degree in marketing or a related field paired with your NACA experience could be leveraged into entertainment PR (public relations), publishing or artist management.

A variety of backgrounds from English to engineering could land you at a record label. Be aware, though, that major labels are almost all major corporations and a new position with one of them might not be as glamorous or challenging as you might expect.

This is also true for certain entertainment conglomerates where you will literally start out as a costumed character or ticket taker in a theme park. Opportunities for advancement to real decision-making roles are extremely competitive.

Some other related fields where campus activities experience can be helpful include radio promotion, concert promotion and entertainment law. The latter obviously involves a law degree, and less obviously involves negotiating label deals, publishing, merchandising, management deals, etc. for a variety of artists.

In radio promotion, you send bands' CDs to college radio stations across the country and develop a relationship with the music directors at the stations to sell them on adding the CDs to their play lists. New recordings added to such play lists are regularly reflected in CMJ Magazine.

In concert promotion, you would likely find yourself handling ticket counts and reporting back to labels and agents, developing radio copy and proofing newspaper ads to promote shows, and being on site for each show to make sure everything runs smoothly and all of the money is handled properly. This tends to be paperwork intensive in the early years, but is a natural fit for a student with concert chair experience.

And of course, there is Hollywood. NACA experience can even help open doors for careers in film, TV and radio. Kat Widdden is the production coordinator for NBC Special Projects and Events, planning all live events (shows, red carpets, presentations for NBC, Telemundo, Bravo, etc.). After her years as an NACA student booker, she spent several years as an agent for Concert Ideas, Inc. (NY), booking and managing major concerts.

"Network events are not so different from planning a concert at a college," Widdden explained. "You deal with vendors, venues, publicity, budgets, communications, talent, etc. Because of my experience at Concert Ideas and prior to that as an NACA student, I was more than qualified to be able to do this job. [However], I started out like everyone in Hollywood—at the very bottom, as a PA (production assistant)."
Good News and Some Advice

Good news for those of you serving on your programming boards: all industry folks interviewed for this article agreed that NACA experience was their first ticket to get in the door, regardless of the area of entertainment business they pursued.

"The fast-paced, deadline-oriented nature of college programming was of great help in orienting me to the fast-paced, deadline-oriented world of arts programming," said Sacks. "I learned more from my experience at the Union than I did from any of my courses. At the time, I'm not sure that I realized how fortunate I was to be learning in such a 'safe' environment. We planned events using student fees and had the support of so many faculty and staff of the university. Take advantage of that. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to take risks—time in college programming provides a great training ground.

"If you are interested in starting a career in arts presenting, learn everything that you can while in this training ground," Sacks continued. "Ask about budgeting, contracts, technical riders and negotiation, and do your research—on performers, agencies and other presenting organizations. There are a lot of doors wide open to students that may not be quite as open upon graduation—use the resources that are available to you now. And have fun!"

Everyone interviewed also agreed that internships were crucial.

"What any student should consider is doing a solid internship while in their latter years of college (summers or field work during the school year) or right after they graduate," said Nisman. "The entertainment business seems so closed in recent years, and so many folks we talk to got their start by doing internships and then joining that or a similar company."

Hyman added that "it is an industry of knowing people and dealing with people. So you need to meet as many people as possible. You never know who will be in a place to help in some way with a show, as an agent or presenter."

"Jump in with two feet and try out a little of everything! This way, you see the day-to-day workings of a company and you learn what you like about a job and what you don't like," advised Gilbertson.

Carlson also recommended "jumping right in, but making sure one totally understands what he/she is jumping into. Never stop asking questions—ask questions of EVERYONE!"

If you are seeking internships, ask for business cards at NACA Conventions/conferences and ask for a good time of year to follow up with the contacts you make. The fastest way to NOT get an internship or job is to not respect that the agent’s main purpose at a conference most often isn’t hiring new staff.

And actively participate in CO-OP Buying for your school. This shows potential employers (who are in the room) who is effectively using the most important networking tool NACA has to offer. I, for example, have never hired an intern from a school that didn't participate in CO-OP Buying.

Widden also advises "patience, patience and some more patience. TV is very much a hurry-up-and-wait type of career, so I know now to pace myself since a 16-hour day is the usual."

That brings up an important point. While those of us in the entertainment industry love our side of the business, we all would agree that our average workweek is long, in most cases much longer than what student programmers have experienced. Our jobs are immensely rewarding and fun, but intense, hard work and long hours are the norm.

Finally, Widden suggests, "Be persistent, write thank-you notes after interviewing, and take advantage of any internship opportunities that are available through your school. Working in TV or film usually means starting off starving, and it’s easier to starve [while still] a student."

The following sites give useful information for pursuing internships in the entertainment business:

- www.mynmusicjob.com
- www.fmjob.com
- www.velvetrope.com

Check them out, and remember that whatever career you choose, know what you are getting into and how to get there.

Good luck. ☮

( Editor's Note: Associates and schools seeking candidates for internships or staff positions can post them at the 2005 NACA National Convention. The Career Services Center at the Convention provides an opportunity for associates and schools to advertise internships and jobs, as well as a convenient setting in which individuals can apply for them. See the forms on Pages 61-64. Also, complete Information on the Career Services Center is available in the 2005 Convention Brochure, which has been sent to NACA associate and school members.)

About the Author

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