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## Beyond Film School: A Producer's Guide to Navigating the Film Industry

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**Loyola Marymount University**  
**University Honors**  
**Program**

# **Beyond Film School: A Producer's Guide to Navigating the Film Industry**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

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### **Beyond Film School: A Producer's Guide to Navigating the Film Industry**

In the film industry, the title of a “producer” can mean numerous things and can encompass a lot of different responsibilities. Depending on the scale and genre of a film, a producer’s role can range from overseeing budgets, schedules, creative aspects, and much more. There are commonly line producers that have an emphasis on the logistical aspects of production then there are the creative producers that focus on the overall vision and artistic direction. To be able to fully understand the intricacies of producing, I conducted interviews with numerous experienced producers currently working in the film industry. These conversations taught me how a good producer must have experience in all facets of filmmaking to be able to effectively do their job. Since there is no pre-meditated roadmap for an aspiring producer to transition from college into the film industry, this exploration of producing has been my attempt to create a clear roadmap for an aspiring producer such as myself. Through my studies, I am now able to identify the type of films that I would like to produce, the steps that it takes to sell myself as a producer, the proper way to manage work life with stress, and how to best go about making money upon graduation. Hopefully, this paper will be a valuable resource for other aspiring producers as they get their feet off of the ground.

The first step of the producer roadmap is to identify the type of films that you would like to produce. There is a big distinction between producing fiction and documentary films. Both of these genres require an emphasis on different sets of skills. For documentary films, there is a big

element of embracing the unknown. You are dealing with real people and their lives. You can never tell somebody how to act or behave in front of a camera because at the end of the day, they get to decide that. Lena Jenkins-Smith, an executive producer and content creator that graduated from LMU, explains how “some people, when they get on camera, they get excited. The story is then so grandiose,” even if that’s not how it actually happened. You’re at the mercy of who you are interviewing. Producing for a documentary requires producers that are comfortable adapting quickly to unforeseen circumstances. Creative decisions in documentaries often arise naturally due to real life situations that couldn’t have been predicted in the first place. To many producers, including Lena Jenkins-Smith and Bettina Braun, a well-established German documentarian, this unpredictability is a beautiful thing that brings excitement and possibilities. You can mold your story as you go along. The edit is always changing. Bettina Braun adds in that, “scripted things suck the life out of it. There is a need to control.” This is why she dedicates all of her time to creating documentaries instead of fiction films. To other producers, however, documentaries brings too many possibilities and not enough structure.

Producing for a fiction film means that you have set characters, set actors, set locations, a set script, and everything is booked in advance. This takes away the major question mark of what might happen on a shooting day. Instead of preemptively worrying about situations that can’t be controlled, a producer’s focus is primarily the meticulous planning, budgeting, and scheduling. All of the creative decisions have already been made on the front end of pre-production. Now, a producer must worry about how to make things come to life. Producers then must think about how to deal with vendors, how to deal with different cities, and how to deal with hiring crew. David Maquiling, a film professor teaching at USC, explains how these are important skills to develop regardless of what department you end up going into; “As filmmakers, we are always

producing and always responsible for some budget and schedule.” Both genres have overlapping skillsets in many facets, but the biggest difference is comfortability with the unknown.

In the end, it really comes down to an aspiring producer’s personal preference with the unknown. Through my experience producing a documentary and two fiction films this semester, I know that I much prefer structure and certainty in situations. There were way too many curveballs that came with producing a documentary. Week after week, our interview subjects were dropping like flies. Since so many people backed out, the entire documentary concept had to take a major pivot because we lost our protagonist. On the topic of documentaries, Lena Jenkins-Smith adds that, “an actor wouldn't do that because an actor is contracted and paid to do their job. They're going to be there.” Dropping like this could ruin their reputation. I didn’t even consider the possibility of an actor dropping the day of set. This raised the question of *what now?* We planned out an entire day of set and now we have to pivot. There were also too many quick turnarounds for permits as decisions were constantly changing. I received a call 3 days before set that I had to permit a new location. Getting a permit under that time constraint is nearly impossible and requires a lot of strings to be pulled. Bettina Braun even touched on how “things take longer than you think.” Documentarians need to make sure that they have a plan and try to focus and pinpoint what it is that interests them but also being open to new things because in reality, things develop. But this development process might not be tangible if there is not enough time to get permission, permits, etc. Certain tasks that I was asked to do were just not feasible which is exactly why I like the structure and predictability of producing fiction films.

Once you have identified the type of films that you would like to produce for, the second step of the producer roadmap is to understand how to successfully sell yourself as a producer. After all, producing is all about selling yourself and marketing your projects. This is a skill that

can only truly be learned through lots of practice. A good producer must also foster long-term relationships. Through numerous informational interviews, I received beneficial tips on how to effectively position myself as an aspiring producer. Lena Jenkins-Smith spoke on the matter of pitching. She explained how a good pitch is all about how you present an idea to someone. In her eyes, “if you can't sell it to me and I'm not excited about it, why would then I give you money?” Aside from having the key elements that a pitch needs, the person pitching has to be enthusiastic and truly believe in the quality of what they are pitching to win people over. Furthermore, Dan McDonough and John Blanford, the co-CEO's and founders of Pastime Pictures, spoke on the importance of growing your network to increase the chances of selling your project. In the end, your network is everything. If you know somebody that knows somebody, they just might get you what you need simply because you know someone they know. It is habit for filmmakers to work with people that they know and trust. So never stop expanding your network.

While producing this past semester, I attempted to pitch and sell my projects to numerous people. I see areas in which I failed to do well. This helps me understand where I can better improve. I attempted to call the San Francisco Creamery, an iconic ice cream shop in the Bay Area, to ask if we could film there. I approached the conversation very professionally and logistically. They, however, denied my request insisting that they don't allow film sets inside. The director then called the San Francisco Creamery a month later to ask them again. He approached with a different tactic. He explained how he grew up in the area and how the creamery was his childhood. This created a very personal and emotional tie with the owner of the creamery. He was then granted permission to film there. As I continue pitch to professionals, vendors, and donors, I understand that there must be a mix of professionalism and a personal approach to what you are pitching. If you can connect with the person that you are pitching to,

you have a better chance at being successful. The art of selling myself and my project as a producer will be an ongoing journey of growth and will take lots of practice until I reach perfection.

The third step of the producer roadmap is to understand how to balance work and stress. Producing requires not only technical skills but also a keen understanding of how to balance your life. At the end of the day, if you are not mentally, physically, and emotionally well, you will not be able to produce effectively. This type of stress management is a skill that will take lots of time and effort to master. The three key takeaways that I gathered from interviews is that a good producer must be able to set boundaries, prioritize self-care, and have a resilient mindset. Many producers struggle with this balancing act. Lena Jenkins-Smith admitted that some days, she doesn't remember to eat. David Maquiling talked about how when he first got started in the industry, there wasn't a clear distinction between his personal life and professional life because his personal life was always secondary to earning a living. Bettina Braun also talked about how her personal life always interferes with production and shooting time. Even the most successful producers struggle with this balance. But just because it is a struggle doesn't mean that there aren't solutions. David Maquiling went on to highlight the importance of "setting up very clear boundaries of commitments of time." This has a lot to do with scheduling and time management. If our goals are to work really hard and to be really great, then we also have to take care of our minds and spirits and bodies so that we can relax and enjoy life, otherwise, our work will suffer. David Maquiling heavily recommends micromanaging your own life and scheduling your time simply by using Google Calendar. It's a simple way to make sure you aren't overcommitting. Lena Jenkins-Smith adds that "you don't have to get everything done every single day." You just

have to be productive and you have to, at the end of the day, do everything you could have done that day.

This semester, I attempted to put this into practice in my own life. I tried to micromanage myself by using Google Calendar religiously. I also scheduled reoccurring meetings with the directors so that we stayed on top of things and didn't get behind. Lastly, I attempted to take self-care days which included spending time with my roommate's cat, going on walks or runs, and hanging out with friends. This was successful to a certain degree. It was much easier for me to maintain these habits when I was already feeling good. But when deadlines were near, I would succumb to the workload again. I often felt like I couldn't stop working until everything had been accomplished. I still get overwhelmed and it feels like everything is crashing down. These are the times where I need to lean into my self-care routines even more. This will take practice and maybe even an accountability partner.

The final step to the producer roadmap is understanding how to make money while chasing the dream. Realistically speaking, it's going to be hard to make money right after graduating from school. Therefore, it is necessary to have a back-up plan to the back-up plan. In the case that I am unable to find a film related job that can financially support me, I plan on working part time at a restaurant, production house, or at LMU's Career and Professional Development. I currently work there, and I know that in the past, they have taken in students that just graduated and are still searching for their first job destination. While this is not by any means the dream, it is something to fall back on if I need to. I am also currently cold applying for positions through job boards and for paid internships that might connect me to some individuals that I could work for down the road. After discussing with David Maquiling, he explained that the best tactic to get a job is to try all of the above. This means cold applying to things and



reaching out to those in your network. He recommended looking into the tracking board, a website that is updated a couple of times a day that is the go-to place for people within the film industry. David Maquiling also recommended to come up with a list of filmmakers that inspire me and have a special place in my heart. Then write four or five sentences, very brief, and let them know how much they move and inspire me. But don't ask for anything. "You'd be amazed at how many people will respond," David Maquiling explained to me. From there, you can ask for a 5-minute call and can ask a few questions. Maybe then ask them to look at your resume. Start with small things so that you can earn their trust. This is how you build your network. And follow up is everything. Just sending an email is not enough. To make it, you have to be persistent. In the end, these are just people. You have every right to reach out and let them know how fabulously talented you are.

Being realistic about the first job out of school is that you have to pay the bills and earn a salary, but also have to feel like you're still learning as a filmmaker and making progress towards your end goal. It is essential to make sure that you are still meeting interesting people and staying cinematically inspired, gaining new wisdom about how the industry works, and how projects get made. Dan McDonough and John Blanford explained that if you choose to take the path of a personal assistant, be an assistant for someone driven to elevate you or that can actually elevate you if they wanted to. Otherwise you could get stuck. It is essential to surround yourself with people that know more than you and can elevate you to their level. You should also only work with people that are kind and respectful to you. Otherwise, you're going to be miserable and there's nothing worth making yourself miserable. When you're looking for a job, it is important to keep in mind that you're hiring them as much as they're hiring you. A paycheck,

obviously, is important, but there's no reason to live our lives around people who treat us disrespectfully.

I received a lot of insight from Lena Jenkins-Smith who started off working as a personal assistant for Cat Williams. She had worked with him for four years and he was the first person that made her an executive producer on one of his television specials. Cat Williams showed her the industry inside and out. He was very tough on her, but also very compassionate. Lena Jenkins-Smith explained how "he expected greatness regardless." He put her through all of the jobs on all of their productions so that she clearly understood the time that it would take somebody to do a task. Because at the end of the day, everything's project-based. There's always a deadline. You start from what date it's due and work backwards. Lena Jenkins-Smith also gave great advice that "if you mess up but you're professional, there's a different grace that's allowed." You're respected in a different light. Always behave professionally, even when doing the most mundane of tasks when you start off your career.

With the producer's roadmap fully laid out, there are still lots of unknown variables to be considered when attempting to make it as an aspiring producer. But hopefully, with this basis of knowledge, the path to success will be easier and more rewarding. Producing is tough, and it will take a tough person to fight for what they want to do. My last word of advice to an aspiring producer is don't lose yourself in the process.

## **Resources**

Jenkins-Smith, Lena. Interview. Conducted by Emily Kelly. 9 October 2023.

Maquiling, David. Interview. Conducted by Emily Kelly. 20 October 2023.

Braun, Bettina. Interview. Conducted by Emily Kelly. 23 October 2023.

McDonough, Dan. Interview. Conducted by Emily Kelly. 13 November 2023.

Blanford, John. Interview Conducted by Emily Kelly. 13 November 2023.