

Film academy internship program attempts to move the needle on inclusion

Growing up in Chicago, Taty Garcia was a self-described “Disney nerd.” She didn’t just love watching Disney movies — she wanted to understand how they were made. As a young Puerto Rican woman, the closest Garcia came to seeing someone who looked like her on the screen was “Ugly Betty” star America Ferrera. Still, she dreamed of one day landing a job in Hollywood.

Even after studying film editing and post-production at Columbia College Chicago, though, Garcia wasn’t sure the industry would have a place for her. “It could be a little discouraging coming to L.A. and trying to get a break, especially because I’m an inner-city Hispanic and a first-generation college grad,” Garcia, 23, says. “I felt like there was just a stigma on me, and there’s not a lot of female editors.”

For Yousef Assabahi, who was raised in Yemen, Hollywood seemed even more remote. His country’s film industry was virtually nonexistent, and the often stereotypical images of Middle Easterners he saw in American movies and TV shows were nothing like the people he knew.

When Assabahi told fellow Yemenis he wanted to become a filmmaker, the typical response was bafflement. "Expressing the idea in my community was always something funny," says Assabahi, 23, who graduated this year from UCLA as a film major. "There is only one movie theater in the entire country. The only support I had was from my parents."

On an afternoon in late July, Garcia, Assabahi and 20 other young people from diverse backgrounds gathered on a soundstage on the Warner Bros. studio lot to watch makeup artist Rick Baker conduct a master class. Participants in a recently created summer internship program called Academy Gold, the interns, who must be college students to qualify, listened with rapt attention as the retired seven-time Oscar winner shared stories of working on such films as "Star Wars," "An American Werewolf in London" and "Men in Black," and demonstrated some of the tools and tricks of his trade.

"How many of you want to be directors?" Baker asked. Roughly half the interns, including Assabahi, shot up their hands.

Launched last year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Academy Gold internship program aims to boost inclusion in the film industry by exposing young people from underrepresented communities to various aspects of the film business through a range of workshops, panels and screenings that enable them to mix with established figures in

the industry. At the conclusion of the internship, the students are paired for eight months with academy members who serve as mentors to help get their careers off the ground.

In the program's inaugural year, the academy partnered with 20 companies across the industry — including all of the major studios as well as Creative Artists Agency, IMAX, HBO, Panavision, Annapurna Pictures and others — and enrolled 69 interns, 70% of whom were female. In its second year, which concluded earlier this month, the program expanded to 26 partner companies and 107 interns.

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**Academy Gold intern and aspiring editor Taty Garcia
(Maria Alejandra Cardona / Los Angeles Times)**

The Academy Gold program grew directly out of the

#OscarsSoWhite controversy, as the film industry's most prestigious institution — facing blistering criticism over its historically white-and-male-dominated membership — looked for concrete ways to address the deep, underlying inequities within the business, even as it began to dramatically alter the demographics of its own ranks.

"I think the academy was not the reason for #OscarsSoWhite, although I think we got the brunt of it," says Bettina Fisher, the academy's director of educational initiatives. "But I do see the academy coming forward to try to do something about that — and that's why we have our Academy Gold program. We know there are a lot of diversity and inclusion programs out there, but we wanted to have a program that was going to move the needle. And if it wasn't, we were going to try to figure out why."

Getting that needle to budge won't be easy. According to [a recent study](#) published by the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, diversity of representation both in front of the camera and behind the scenes has remained essentially stagnant for the past decade.

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According to the report, more than 80% of people working as directors, writers and producers on the top 100 releases of 2017 were men, while among 1,223 directors tracked over 11

years, only 5.2% were black or African American, 4.3% were women and 3.1% were of Asian descent.

Despite such stark statistics, Edgar Aguirre, who was hired in November 2016 as the academy's director of talent development and inclusion, says the Academy Gold internship isn't simply window dressing. He notes that the progress of the interns after their completion of the program is being tracked by an outside firm to gauge its effectiveness — and that the results so far are encouraging.

"From the data that we've been able to collect from the first year, over 50% of our students can attribute that mentor relationship with helping them get another job, another internship or another key introduction that helped them move the ball further in their career," Aguirre says. "I tell these kids, 'Ideally, if we do our jobs right, five to 10 years from now you'll be well on the pathway to be a potential academy member.' "

Babatunde Akinloye is among the program's early success stories. Since finishing his internship last summer, the Inglewood native has landed a job at the production company Macro, whose mission is to bring stories of people of color to the screen.

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"When I was coming out of UCLA, I was the only African

American in my class of 30 film students," says Akinloye, who credits his Academy Gold mentor, Disney production executive Tendo Nagenda, with helping him make key connections. "It definitely used to frustrate me — and there still is some frustration there. But to be part of Academy Gold and now be here at Macro, I've seen firsthand that things are trending in the right direction."

After completing her internship last year at the post-production company Light Iron, aspiring director Tracey Aivaz was picked to make a short film for Wal-mart and found herself being interviewed on the Oscars red carpet.

"It's very well known that women have not been given as many opportunities as men," said Aivaz, who was born in Iran. "But it's great to see the programs and opportunities that studios and networks are putting up and to see people like the academy staff who care about diverse voices and women. All of these things didn't exist even 10 years ago, so I feel very fortunate to be moving into this space at this time."



Academy Gold intern and aspiring director Yousef Assabahi
(Maria Alejandra Cardona / Los Angeles Times)

Growing up in Nepal, Saundarya Thapa, who interned this summer in the academy's oral history projects department, rarely saw mainstream Hollywood films, let alone gave much thought to the academy.

"Not too long ago, I think the only thing I knew about the academy was hashtag #OscarsSoWhite," says Thapa, 32, who majored in film studies at Smith College and is currently a graduate student at UCLA. "But in some of the panels I've been to, I've been really surprised by not just the women craftspeople but also the number of international people, like [Marvel Studios production executive] Victoria Alonzo, who is from Argentina, and [sound editor] Ai-Ling Lee, who's from Singapore. Seeing all these women from foreign countries up

there has been very inspirational and motivating.”

Cinematographer Daryn Okada — who serves on the academy’s board of governors and helped create a new production-track program for interns interested in getting hands-on filmmaking experience — says that cultivating that kind of direct, personal inspiration is critical.

“I grew up here in Los Angeles and didn’t have any way into the industry — all I knew was that there were no doors open,” says Okada, who conducted his own cinematography workshop for interns this summer. “Hearing where everybody came from, there’s a lot of value in that in terms of the students just having confidence. The message really gets through to them that if you have that desire and that creativity, just follow that dream and don’t give up.”

One of this year’s interns, Jordan Rogers has clearly taken that message to heart. Hollywood seemed a world away to Rogers, who grew up in Miami and studied economics at Morehouse College. Now he is intent on working toward a career as a creative producer.

“This program has been a transformative experience,” says Rogers, 23. “Before this, I didn’t even know that there was such a thing as production companies. I didn’t know the difference between a studio and a network. But now that I’ve been exposed to that and educated myself in those things, it

assures me that, with hard work and the right type of attitude and hunger, anything is possible.”

Despite such hopeful sentiments, Aguirre is quick to say that the academy is hardly ready to declare victory in its campaign to help boost inclusion. Still, he hopes to continue to expand the Academy Gold program, attracting more partners and resources from across the film landscape and the philanthropic community.

“We’re not saying the problem is solved by any stretch of the imagination,” Aguirre says. “But this concerted first step by the academy in partnership with the industry has created a really good gravitational pull for this program. It’s an idea whose time has come.”

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