

Vandy in Hollywood

ADVICE FROM
INDUSTRY EXPERTS

Hoping to gain some clarity about this summer? We reached out to the Vandy in Hollywood Alumni Group to gather professional advice on alternative summer plans. Plus, we got some excellent tips about networking.

We hope this will help Vanderbilt University undergraduates who are interested in the entertainment industry make plans and navigate their summer.

A special thank you to Ashlie, Chad, Charlie, Jessica, Julia, Lauren, Megan, Rich, Winnie, and everyone who helps make the [Vandy in Hollywood Summer Internship Program](#) so wonderful.

Rich Hull

Major and Class Year: English, '92

Current position/job/company: Head of Streaming Services at Discovery Communications' VIX; Producer of 25+ films and TV shows; and Co-Founder of Vandy In Hollywood Summer Internship Program

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? That it's one of the few industries in the world which actually encourages you to reinvent yourself every few years. It still makes me excited to get up and go to work every day!

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? The Vandy in Hollywood Summer Internship Program! It's the bridge between Vanderbilt and Hollywood that didn't exist when I was in school.

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? Students contact me all the time. The smart ones first ask to hear my story and then show up with really good questions. That sends a message that they respect my time enough to have done their research on me. And it makes me more inclined to help them.

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? If you want to be a screenwriter, write a screenplay. If you want to direct, direct some videos on your iPhone. If all else fails, watch a ton of movies and TV shows so that when a potential employer asks you what your favorite films and TV shows are (which they will), you'll have some really thoughtful answers.

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1) Ask everyone you meet who they know in Hollywood and make a list; 2) Build a clear perspective on what you want to do in Hollywood...even if it turns out to be wrong; and 3) Save your pennies...Hollywood wants to know that you can pay your rent until you find your footing.

How can I stand out when students from all over the world will possibly be asking for informational interviews due to 'shelter in place'? When you reach out to companies, reference their movies or TV shows by name and explain the impact they had on your life. This will take a bit longer, but it's necessary at a time when you really have to work hard to stand out.

What pitfalls should I avoid if I want to work in the entertainment industry? What are things I should never do? Don't reach out to Vanderbilt alums you've never met and ask them for help getting a job. Instead, ask them to tell you the story of how they got where they are. Then, show up prepared, ask questions specific to them, and earn their trust. Once you have it, their help will come much easier.

How important is face-to-face communication when I schedule an informational interview? Should I have a phone call or Zoom? Does it matter? Video calls are better, but be careful not to demand them. Instead, politely suggest a video call, but make it known that you're happy to do a phone call as well. Let the interviewer decide.

My internship is cancelled, now what? Any advice on next steps? We're in uncharted waters here and it's unclear if the world will open back up before the end of the summer. If it does, take a trip to LA, see some sights, take some studio tours and just see how it all feels to you. If the world is slower to rebound, create something...anything. It could be a video about your family's experience in quarantine, or a written story, or a series of comically clever blog posts. Just create a calling card that'll also help you learn what you like and don't like about the storytelling process. At the very least, it'll give you something to talk about in your next interview.

Megan Seely

Major and Class Year: Film, Theatre, '13

Current position/job/company: Writer, director, actress; currently making independent feature film

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? There is a lot of noise and people telling you what you should do, it's really the best thing to ultimately listen to yourself.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? Vandy in Hollywood, connect with faculty, reach out to your favorite creators (you never know who might respond), ASB, VUT, and study abroad if that's an option.

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? They didn't ask anything of me (ex. to read a script, to connect them with someone else, etc.) but instead just aimed to get to know each other as fellow humans.

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Watch movies, make things, write, write, write (even journaling/diaries), get to know yourself and your taste.

Charlie Kesslering

Major and Class Year: Economics, Political Science, '11

Current position/job/company: Screenwriter

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? Hollywood is a war of attrition. Outlasting your competition, and working harder and longer than them at every turn, will put you in the best position for success. Eventually, a door WILL open, and it's only a question of whether you're still in LA--and have fought your way through enough menial, soul-crushing days in an agency cubicle or on set--to walk through it.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? Take as many classes, and participate in as many activities, outside your core area of study as humanly possible. In an industry reliant on reinvention and imaginative storytelling, diversity of experience and knowledge is perhaps the most prized commodity no matter your specific career goal. (Oh, and be sure to use Vanderbilt-in-Hollywood to get a much-needed foot in the door.)

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Read as many scripts as you can get your hands on (the internet is helpful for this). Good, bad, classic, experimental. Read the entire Black List for the past ten years. Knowing what makes a script great (or not) and being able to articulate it will make you invaluable in an internship or entry level job, and will inform your own creative work. Apart from practicing my own writing, reading hundreds of scripts was the best entertainment education I could've received (and much cheaper than grad school).

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1. Move to Los Angeles. 2. Move to Los Angeles. 3. Try to get a mailroom or assistant job at a talent agency in Los Angeles.

What pitfalls should I avoid if I want to work in the entertainment industry? What are things I should never do? Don't waste your time in grad school. In my personal opinion, working in an entry-level position at an agency or on set for those 2-3 years will give you far more applicable skills and experience, not to mention industry connections, than any graduate program. Also, you'll get paid, instead of racking up more debt (debt that will, in turn, force you to take jobs you don't want and waste even more years of your ever-shortening life).

Chad Gervich

Major and Class Year: Interdisciplinary (English, Film Studies, Theater), '95

Current position/job/company: TV writer/producer

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? The more laser-focused you are, the further you'll go, faster. Wanting to write, and direct, and also edit, and maybe do some acting, will not get you very far. Know PRECISELY what you want to do -- "I want to write low-budget independent horror films," "I want to direct multi-camera talk/variety shows" -- and you will go much further faster.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? Vandy-in-Hollywood! Intern in the real world! No matter how smart you are, no matter how much you've studied, I promise: you have NO IDEA how the real world of Hollywood works. Also, nurture and build your network. You will NEVER get a job because you're the most talented and most qualified; you'll get your jobs because you know the person doing the hiring -- so start building your network NOW!

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? Several former interns or students have also babysat for us; one, in particular, has become our regular babysitter -- we love her. It sounds weird, but babysitting is a great way to build a strong relationship and prove you're responsible & reliable -- and I will do anything for these people -- they've literally raised my kids! Plus, anyone with kids is looking for affordable, reliable babysitters!

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Get a job (when you're allowed). It doesn't have to be in the industry. The biggest complaint I hear from internship employers are that kids think they need to have entertainment-related experience on their resume, and they don't. Employers want people with real-world experience, whether that's flipping burgers, taking subway tickets, working as a janitor, filing papers, ANYTHING. They want to know you can take orders from a boss, interface with customers, show up on time, etc. So, get a job that will prove that on your resume!

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1) Move to Los Angeles, 2) Get an assistant job in the industry, 3) Keep writing and making stuff.

How can I stand out when students from all over the world will possibly be asking for informational interviews due to 'shelter in place'? Find a personal connection to the person you're contacting -- you both went to Vandy, you have family friends in common, you're from the same home town, you LOOOOVE their work, something.

What pitfalls should I avoid if I want to work in the entertainment industry? What are things I should never do? Don't be unctuous or obsequious. Have a thoughtful opinion, a real point of view. People don't need you to agree with them; they need to know you have a perspective that you can defend and back up.

How important is face-to-face communication when I schedule an informational interview? Should I have a phone call or Zoom? Does it matter? I always prefer face-to-face meetings, but even in normal times, I rarely have the time for them -- so I usually do phone calls that I can do when I'm in the car... which is fine. The important thing is, whether it's in person or on the phone, come to the meeting having done your research, prepared good questions, knowing what you want out of the meeting.

My internship is cancelled, now what? Any advice on next steps? Read everything. Watch everything. Make something!!!

Julie Sharbutt

Major and Class Year: English, Theater '04

Current position/job/company: Writer, Director, Actor

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? It is so important to be focused on one field. If your passion is acting, take every acting class, watch every play and film, go to every audition. If it's writing, write, every day. If it's directing, make films nights and weekends, or do everything you can to get on as many sets as possible. Apply yourself to one medium, at least to start. People respect direction, passion and focus.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? Vandy in Hollywood, alumni and faculty, internships, work-study, local productions looking for PAs or help, and volunteering at film festivals.

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? The students who impress me the most (and make me think "Gosh, I wish I had done that when I was coming out of school") are always the ones who follow up immediately when they can, and are direct and polite with their asks. It is okay to start a genuine professional/personal relationship with an ask, and the more specific the better because I can be more helpful, or if I can't help I can offer alternatives. Active follow up and respect for my time make a huge positive impression.

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Know what you like and watch, watch, WATCH. I'm always confused when I meet people who want to work in TV but don't watch TV. Get to know what medium (tv, film, theater), what genre if applicable (comedy, drama, reality, action), and what role you're drawn to (writing, production, directing). Pick a film you love and research every person who put it together - who is the director, the studio, the writer, what else have they done, at what budget, how did they get it made, where did their paths intersect. Also, read newspapers. Know what the world you want to make art for looks like day to day.

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1) Move to LA (I prefer New York so explore options, but LA is the film/TV capital) 2) Try to get an assistant job or internship at an agency or studio, somewhere you can read a lot of scripts and get a feel for the workings 3) Take classes, go to museums, and build sustaining communities of real friendships. I wouldn't want to do any of this without the friends I made in shows, classes, comedy bars, political groups and more.

How can I stand out when students from all over the world will possibly be asking for informational interviews due to 'shelter in place?' Be SO specific and brief about what you're interested in and looking for, and don't feel bad if the person on the other end doesn't have an optimistic answer right now. It's not personal, it's a weird time, but the business will find its feet again and just stay in touch.

What pitfalls should I avoid if I want to work in the entertainment industry? What are things I should never do? BE AN INTERESTING PERSON. That sounds nuts, but you have no idea what a blessing genuine passion is out here. There are LOTS of people who are trying to do what you want to do, people who are smart, connected, hardworking etc. What you can offer that they can't is what makes you unique. Be appreciative, be considerate, be brief, be yourself. Also SHOW UP FOR STUFF! Or in COVID-19 times, watch/listen to stuff, your friend's podcast, your bud's stand up, your cousin's college roommate's indie film, etc.

How important is face-to-face communication when I schedule an informational interview? Should I have a phone call or Zoom? Does it matter? It depends on what you need. If I'm hiring or trying to build a working relationship with someone, I definitely want to zoom meet or chat. If it's general information, I prefer email.

My internship is cancelled, now what? Any advice on next steps? Take this time to read, watch and learn. But also cut yourself some slack, make money how you can, and stay sane and healthy. Enjoy nature, think about who you are and what you like, paint, start a completely silly hobby Instagram, volunteer. Being of use and keeping your heart open are always good skills to practice.

Jessica Shields

Major and Class Year: English, Interdisciplinary Studies (Theater/Humanities), '07

Current position/job/company: Writer, Director

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? Your peer group should be aspirational. It's important to have a trusted few people who are a step or two ahead of you, from whom you can straightforward, genuine advice about all the things you didn't know you didn't know.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? Intern while you can and apply to programs, fellowships, competitions etc. that are specifically for students. Also get to know your fellow Vandy students who are also interested in the industry and plan to relocated to LA.

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? Both of the VU students I've spoken with were very lovely and polite. The ViH intern offered to buy my coffee (I appreciated the gesture), both were respectful of my time, flexible in scheduling and followed up with thank you emails. Conversely, I've had non-Vanderbilt students reach out who were much less flexible about where and when to meet and it rubbed me the wrong way. (I still met with them! I try to say "Yes" whenever I can).

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Read the trades, get a sense of the major companies and players in the industry. Watch as much as you can, read screenplays and pilots if you're a writer, take advantage of [now] free online courses like Masterclass and Sundance Collab and think about what you like in terms of content. Even if you don't yet know what you want to do in entertainment (and you can always change lanes) having a sense of what you like and your sensibilities is great for networking and getting more specific about what you may want to do.

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1. Make a list of everyone you know in LA. 2. Move to LA. Meet with everyone on that list and expand it exponentially. 3. Keep doing the thing that brought you here in the first place.

How can I stand out when students from all over the world will possibly be asking for informational interviews due to 'shelter in place'? If it's a Vanderbilt alum, I think they'll be happy to make the time for a call. Generally speaking, I think being sincere, succinct and specific is enough.

What pitfalls should I avoid if I want to work in the entertainment industry? What are things I should never do? Keep the ask reasonable and don't overstep the bounds of the relationship.

How important is face-to-face communication when I schedule an informational interview? Should I have a phone call or Zoom? Does it matter? ALWAYS try and get the face-to-face meeting if you can. Sometimes there's pushback, and people are very busy so you might be able to settle for the phone call but plan for a future coffee, or even say you don't mind waiting until their schedule frees up. I've done both. The personal connection is very important.

Ashlie Sapiro

Major and Class Year: Interdisciplinary (screenwriting & production), '15

Current position/job/company: Network Executive

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? I wish I would have known that being a well-rounded, interesting person is just as valuable as the hard skills. So, to that end, I wish I took a larger variety of classes in college (i.e. more history, political science etc.), instead of just focusing on English and Film classes.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? The Vandy in Hollywood internship program! Internships are your best friend. Also, get involved in VTV or any local productions if you can!

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? I always like when people check in regularly, and ask a lot of questions/for advice. There's nothing worse than not hearing from someone for a long time, and then having them pop their head out of nowhere to ask for help. Also, I like when people follow up with me and keep me updated!

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Keep reading Deadline, Variety and Hollywood reporter, and read scripts if you can get your hands on them! Google the 100 movies everyone should see, and watch those too!

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1. Move to LA! 2. Network as much as you can. 3. Be open-minded.

How can I stand out when students from all over the world will possibly be asking for informational interviews due to 'shelter in place?' Be specific about what you want from that company. Name the shows they work on etc. Make your letter feel really personal, not just like a template.

Lauren Mandel

Major and Class Year: Interdisciplinary (production & communications), '15

Current position/job/company: Producer

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? VTV, the equipment in the film department, your peers with similar passions and interests, the opportunity to make mistakes & of course internships (VIH!).

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? I love when students reach out with a genuine curiosity and interest in entertainment or what I do. They're not asking for a job or a good word (yet!), they're just looking to have a conversation about the industry, learn, ask questions, and establish a relationship.

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Read and watch as much as possible. Find a friend with similar aspirations and start a weekly check in and hold each other accountable. Talk about what you're watching/reading, set goals and give each other honest feedback.

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: 1) Make a list of people doing the thing you want to be doing. 2) Study those people - their career path, inspirations, companies. 3) Start

networking with people in that world (especially the people only a year or two into their careers who have that first job you'd like to have).

How important is face-to-face communication when I schedule an informational interview? Should I have a phone call or Zoom? Does it matter? My advice would be to set up a phone call. A lot of people in the industry are spending their whole day on Zoom and Zoom-fatigue is a real thing! Plus, this will give you an opportunity to follow up and ask to meet them in person once things go back to normal-ish!

Winnie Cheung

Major and Class Year: Interdisciplinary (media production & social change), '08

Current position/job/company: Writer, Director, Editor

What is something you wish you would've known about working in entertainment? I wish I learned more about the systemic and institutional structures that make it more difficult for women and women of color to make their own films. It also took many years after graduating from Vanderbilt before I found a way towards financial independence working in film and media.

What resources should I take advantage of while I'm still an undergraduate? VTV!!! The equipment & your community. Make as many films and possible with your friends! Don't forget to have loads of fun!

Do you have a good example of when a student started networking with you? Why was it better than some other approaches students have taken? I like to see passion and persistence from those who reach out to me.

Depending on how things go for summer 2020, what could I do at home that would help prepare me for an internship next year? Keep making your own work in your own voice. If you don't have a lot of resources at your disposal, writing is the most liberating skillset you can keep working on. Build characters and worlds that people haven't seen yet. People are drawn to quality and unique work.

A graduating senior who wants to work in Hollywood should definitely do these three things: I'm currently not working in Hollywood, but I live in NYC and work in indie films. My advice would be to find your ride or dies and start building a creative and working relationship with them that can last for years to come. At first you might be making films in your backyard, but then you might be shooting on location and then someone might pick up a bigger gig and bring you on to their project. You will learn to lift as your build.

How can I stand out when students from all over the world will possibly be asking for informational interviews due to 'shelter in place?' Be kind. Show kindness and interest in other people besides you.

What pitfalls should I avoid if I want to work in the entertainment industry? What are things I should never do? Have perspective. Be confidence in your own voice. Don't try to emulate other people's styles. People can sniff that from a mile away.

How important is face-to-face communication when I schedule an informational interview? Should I have a phone call or Zoom? Does it matter? I don't mind a phone call!

My internship is cancelled, now what? Any advice on next steps? Make your own work! Develop a deeper practice with your craft by finding time to practice every day. Your creative mind is a muscle and you'll be surprised by how much you grow by putting in a little bit of work daily.