

Uncertain futures: How aspiring writers are navigating mass layoffs, decreased opportunities and AI fears within the film industry

Sarah Perkel and Hope Geissler

Osvaldo Espino, a senior film major at the University of Miami, has given up on the Hollywood job search.

The 21-year-old film student has long sought to write, direct and produce movies, with dreams of working for an indie powerhouse like A24. But, as graduation approaches, it seems like entry-level Hollywood jobs that would enable him to work on films and screenplays are nonexistent. As for why finding work is so difficult, Espino blames the impacts of the 2023 Writers Guild of America strike, which ground the entertainment business to a halt and ended after a five-month stretch in late September.

Now, Espino has fully pivoted his focus toward building a career in journalism, which has already proved more fruitful.

“There were many times where I would turn in applications and I just wouldn't get calls back at all,” Espino said. “I would just wait months and then hear, ‘Oh, sorry, we didn't pick you this time.’”

Espino submitted 25 applications before throwing in the towel, hitting all the major studios before scrambling for positions at smaller independent studios. But with countless applicants vying for increasingly scarce positions, Espino found that focusing on freelance journalism has netted him more money, and far less trouble. He quickly found freelance work for The Miami New Times, a local publication, almost immediately after starting to search for jobs in journalism.

Espino represents a growing number of graduating seniors majoring in motion pictures and screenwriting that are increasingly disillusioned with their job prospects. As major Hollywood studios and production companies have consolidated and new forces like artificial intelligence have risen up, threatening workers' long-term job security, many young writers have less faith in the sustainability of screenwriting as a long-term profession. As students leave college campuses for the brutal reality of the job market, more and more are finding themselves disillusioned.

Espino fears the potential that another labor stoppage could be looming in Hollywood. The twin strikes of 2023 — both among members of the Writers Guild as well as SAG-AFTRA, the union that represents actors and on-camera entertainers — were historic, costing the California and New York economy billions and slashing tens of thousands of jobs. “Let's say I start working for Universal in August. In a year and a half, there's a chance the WGA goes on a strike again,” he said. “Then I'll be a young broke kid.”

Meanwhile, the entertainment industry experienced [mass layoffs](#) last year, slashing more than 17,000 positions according to outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, as media and tech companies only continue to [lay off employees](#) into 2024.

Bella Clark, a senior studying film business, has also struggled to find a job or even hear back from the ones she already applied to, despite her film-packed resume.

Clark's resume includes being a member of the University of Miami's comedy television show, "Off the Wire," and the film fraternity, Delta Kappa Alpha, for all four years of college. She also spent a semester in Los Angeles interning for Artists First, a talent management company.

"I've been trying to find job applications which have been very difficult in this industry. I've started just looking up emails to try to cold email, while all my friends are having interviews for their business or marketing jobs," Clark said. "I'm scared I won't get any offers."

"Maybe I'll just become a barista for life," she joked. |

The aftermath of the writer's strike has left Hollywood weary of risky expenses, including new writers:

As Hollywood moves on from a brutal labor stoppage, studios are seeking to eliminate as much risk as possible. With the ink still drying on the WGA's and SAG-AFTRA's respective ratified contracts, studios are looking for ways to minimize the risk to their bruised bottom lines. For many, that means slashing the number of new productions, and hiring seasoned writers to tackle scripts that come with built-in box office appeal.

"A lot of these entertainment and media companies are in the process of laying off and shrinking their workforces in an effort to contract their bottom lines," said Betsy Mateu, a screenwriting professor at the University of Miami. "A lot of these companies have essentially overdeveloped, and they've underperformed," she added. "So, the strike was a substantial upset, and, on the heels of all of these cutbacks, it's sort of like a one-two punch for young writers."

Some students say that the studio's shifting appetites for content have essentially eliminated the chance to work on smaller indie or experimental programming, siphoning job opportunities away.

"Companies don't want to take a chance because of how the movie market is," Vivica Dunlap, a senior majoring in motion pictures at the University of Miami, told the Hurricane. "They're more focused on big picture things like tentpole franchises, for example, or films that they can make

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events out of, like ‘Barbenheimer,’” she added, referring to the blockbuster summer launches of “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer,” which [smashed box-office records](#).

“In the old days, we would only talk about the best story and creativity,” said Daniel Green, director of the master of entertainment industry management program at Carnegie Mellon University. “Now, if you look at award ceremonies or if you look at what’s on TV, it’s not always the best show. It’s what someone in the marketing department has distinguished people want to watch right now.”

“Do we need another Fast and Furious? I doubt it. But if people keep going to see Fast and Furious, you’re going to get a 13 or 14 or 15,” he added.

AI is only adding fuel to the fire: “In 20 years, our jobs will be done by AI:”

The unstoppable growth of artificial intelligence appears to present another threat to students, Dunlap said. While actors and writers railed against AI during the strikes, entertainment companies like Walt Disney Studios [have already used AI](#) in the making of their films, and investors are bullish about the tech’s potential to disrupt and streamline the content creation process.

“It’s like a joke with my friends now – ‘We’re going into film, so we’ll have no careers,’” Dunlap said. “We say, ‘In 20 years, our jobs will be done by AI.’”

Handshake, the University of Miami’s preferred job board for students, showed how few film opportunities there were for students. When filtering for full-time open positions in film, TV, and music, only 100 jobs appeared. And according to the [Career Outcomes data](#) provided by the University of Miami, only 15 out of the 34 students studying motion pictures in 2022 secured full-time employment after graduation.

In the wake of the strikes, as companies scramble to protect their bottom lines, AI in particular is looking increasingly attractive to major studios as a cost-cutting method. The technology is also evolving at a breakneck pace – Green, who pioneered the creation of a class entirely dedicated to AI in the media sphere, tells his students that what they’re taught at the start of the week may no longer be relevant by Monday.

Particularly in a post-strike Hollywood, students’ fears surrounding AI are only intensifying

“I feel like Hollywood is going to use it to make cookie cutter films instead of hiring people who want to create captivating content,” Espinosa said.

The atmosphere of anxiety that naturally hovers around graduating college seniors is deepening into a kind of despair, as the struggle for protections against AI have brought it to the forefront of conversation.

“It’s made us more cognizant of the fact that this is a real fear to have,” Dunlap said. “Originally, the big fear of AI was that it would replace STEM jobs, like eventually you would need it to do math or science. But now, since everything that happened last year, it’s become much clearer that the arts are also replaceable. It’s so terrifying.”

Professors are working to provide their students with a cushion, but the clock is running out for graduating seniors:

Students aren’t the only ones in the lurch — their professors, mentors, and career advisors are all grasping at ways to assist them as they go about the job search.

According to Green, preparing his students to enter a rapidly-evolving media landscape is proving increasingly challenging.

“I think they’re feeling the anxiety,” Green said about his students. “Especially what’s happened with the strike has been a big issue for a lot of people.”

Ana Francois is also the director of an internship program that allows students to experience a semester in L.A. She advocates not only for networking, but for accruing as much practical experience as possible before graduation. Enterprising job-seekers, she notes, may be able to combine both.

“The instructors in L.A. for writing classes are usually accomplished writers,” Francois said. “So, if you can get a class in a community college, for example, in the evening, it’s a nice way of networking, too.”

“We’ve had a lot of students go to the agencies to work at the agencies. I’m not saying they stay, but a lot of them start their careers there,” Francois added.

According to Mateu, the University of Miami film professor, major players in entertainment are struggling to develop profitable business models. Legacy networks, such as ABC, NBC and CBS, are losing eyeballs to streaming services at a rapid rate, while streaming services are “hemorrhaging money,” having overdeveloped expensive content without enough subscribers to support themselves, she said. Some have turned to advertising to try to plug the holes in their bottom lines, which took big hits after the strikes.

“You have a combination where the legacy networks are circling the drain and then the other factor, which is that streaming services are not showing profitability yet,” Mateu said. “So, all of that contributes to a pretty grim landscape at the moment for writers, actors, and producers.”

To battle the effects of a changing market that brooks no guarantees, professors and career coaches are falling back on age-old advice that worked when they were entering the industry: Polish your writing and, above all else, expand your network.

“You have to be in the right place, which is New York or LA, primarily, and then you've got to make sure that you understand how to market yourself, how to network, and have your elevator speech,” Mateu said.

Students are spending greater and greater chunks of their time establishing connections, rather than focusing on developing their portfolios.

“It's not like other careers where employers just post the job up on LinkedIn and hope someone applies in time,” said Ethan Gany, a senior majoring in motion pictures at the University of Miami. “It's like, ‘All right, we need a script coordinator, send out an email to anyone who wants to work in that field. Find someone who can do a good job and we'll give him the job.’”

Gany has only applied to two entry level positions off of LinkedIn, because they were all that were available at the time of searching. His friends who have managed to achieve employment have all known somebody who needed a last-minute replacement, he said.

Ana Francois, assistant professor of practice at the University of Miami, advocates for making the move to L.A., and hustling to get any job at all to support yourself as you break into the industry. Writing groups, she said, are a particularly useful resource.

Despite advice from seasoned professors, students are still running afoul of an oversaturated industry still reeling from the effects of a drawn-out labor stoppage. Even those who move to New York or L.A. and fully throw themselves into establishing their careers aren't guaranteed success.

Two of Clark's friends, made through her film fraternity, graduated with film degrees in May 2023 and moved to L.A. with limited success. Clark said one of her friends has been furloughed twice and currently works at a rental house, while the other works 55+ hours a week part-time at Trader Joes and a non-profit.

Though lining up post-grad plans can be a challenge for every college senior, film students at the University of Miami are being forced to jump through a complicated series of hurdles – moving to a viable city, establishing a wide-enough network and polishing their portfolios to a shine, all to varying effect.

Dunlap said that the only remaining hope for aspiring creatives lies not in perfecting their bodies of work, but in making as many connections as possible, Dunlap said. The majority of her time in undergrad has been spent networking, rather than polishing her writing.

“That’s the hardest part of the job – you have to have connections, going in,” Dunlap said. It’s always been true of Hollywood — a town that still seems to operate based on whoever is in possession of the best Rolodex — but never more so than in a time when it feels like there are so few opportunities to go around.

Despite the radical changes disrupting the fabric of the film industry, Mateu remains optimistic about its future, and about the role that young screenwriters will play in shaping it. Part of the reason for her positive outlook is because she expects more mergers between big studios and production houses, resulting in fewer companies that will be keen to staff up and poach from each other.

“I choose to believe, and I do believe, that once again, we will be in a growth period for entertainment,” she said. “Just like the financial market has bull and bear periods, the entertainment market does too.”

In two or so years, Mateu said, current fears surrounding job availability may no longer be relevant.

“I don’t want anyone to despair,” Mateu said. “The entertainment industry is going through an inflection point. It’s said about the weather, but I think it could be true about the entertainment business: ‘If you don’t like where it is, just wait a minute.’”