



Cucalorus Training Institute

"Bluesky Barter: An Expanding and Contracting Institution"

The Cucalorus Training Institute is a seasonal staffing program providing on-the-job skill building for creative professionals from a wide range of fields and industries. These seasonal staff members work as independent contractors providing the critical services that make it possible to host one of the largest and most innovative festivals in the country. Filling key positions in every department, the program provides short-term, paid work for as many as 35 people each year. The program has its roots in the early years of the Cucalorus Film Festival as creatives donated their time and energy to grow the emerging event.

Working with Nello McDaniels of Arts Action Research, the program became an integral part of the Cucalorus cultural practice and helped to identify Cucalorus as an organization focused on institutional innovation. With Nello's guidance, this innovative cultural practice was defined as the "Bluesky Barter Model." The practice was explored in detail as part of a 2012 study entitled "Emerging Narratives in the Arts" that highlighted a handful of arts organizations who were embracing new language, positioning artists as entrepreneurs, and exploding the traditional hierarchies prevalent in 20th century institutions. Today, this treasured cultural practice has become one of the foundation's core programs and is called the Cucalorus Training Institute.

Students and recent graduates from regional colleges and universities make up the majority of institute candidates. The program supports the retention of locally trained talent and serves as a bridge between graduation and more permanent employment. These coveted applied learning opportunities have been recognized for their value as workforce development tools. Aswani Voley, the dean of the UNCW College of Arts and Sciences, said in a recent editorial about the value of these opportunities: "Applied learning has become the hallmark of a UNCW education. It gives students hands-on experience in their fields and sets our graduates apart as they enter the workforce or go on to pursue advanced degrees."

Specialized skills integral to the program: Facilitation, management, database development and maintenance, graphics, WordPress, hospitality, food service, talent management, media management, projection, audio, logistics, networking, communications, collaborative project development, Gig Economy --- essentials of working as an independent contractor - creating invoices, tracking project development, negotiating contracts, and more.

One of the key facets of the program is the organization's annual cycle of expansion and contraction. The annual expansion leading up to the festival creates a very special opportunity for future creative professionals to test their on-the-job skills in a temporary setting. One of the assets of the condensed scaling-up period, training institute candidates enjoy a business environment where advancement and responsibility are easy to come by. Highly motivated candidates often end up with job titles (manager, director) that increase their value in the marketplace.

The typical institute member works for Cucalorus for 2-5 years. Some stay longer, like Channing Duke who started as a volunteer screenings coordinator in 2010 and has served in multiple roles since, including technical coordinator, operations manager and board member. Graduates of the program secure employment in a number of industries including non-profit management, film production, finance, small business, communications, marketing, advertising, graphic design, hospitality, and food service. Alumni have gone on to work for Netflix, 20th Century Fox, Planet Logo, UNCW Film Studies and more.

Moving through the system: advancement, graduation and continuity

After each festival, Cucalorus Training Institute members have an opportunity to reflect and process the experience with several staff members. The outcome of this process is often a clear path towards the next festival and can include advancement to a higher position, graduation to a workgroup or board, or a plan to continue development in the same position.