

At a Penn Live Arts board meeting in 2025, Director of Education & Engagement Leah Falk led a conversation with two of the students who participated in [Arts & Education Career Connections](#) internships during the past summer.

### **FULL CONVERSATION TRANSCRIPT**

**Falk:** I'm so happy to be sitting here with Chenyao Liu (C'27) and Sylvia Erdely (C'27), who interned at Hidden Pictures and Fringe Arts this summer, respectively. To get us started, I'd love for you to both tell us a little bit about yourself, what you're studying, and a little bit more about your summer work.

**Erdely:** Hi. My name is Sylvia Erdely. I'm a junior in college, I'm studying English. This summer at Fringe, I was a festival coordination intern. I worked directly under the programs and development departments and also worked very closely with marketing, finance and the curation sides of production. Yeah, it was a very interdisciplinary experience, and I got to work with a lot of people from a lot of programs, which is really cool.

**Liu:** Hi, I'm Chenyao. I'm also a junior in college. I'm studying cinema studies and environmental science. This summer, I worked as a development intern at Hidden Pictures in Los Angeles. This was my first time in Los Angeles, which was very exciting. As a development intern, I was reading scripts and doing coverage, and I did some research as well. And I got to work with a lot of other interns from different film programs around the country.

**Falk:** One thing I always like to ask students is what surprised you about your internship? What did you think the work would be like? What were some things that were unexpected and what are some things that confirmed that you thought you were going to be doing?

**Erdely:** Well, I am myself not a performer. I love writing, and I love the arts. But I've never been part of theatre on the outward-facing side. So, I was pretty nervous going in about the people that I'd be working with. I was so intimidated that they would all be these theatre experts, these actors, these super outgoing performers, you know. And I got in there and I realized that everyone who works at Fringe Arts, whether or not they have a performing background, are just lovers of the arts. It just led to such a loving and positive experience there, like with all the employees coming from different arts backgrounds and still meeting in the middle to create something so interdisciplinary, something that stretched across so many different genres and bodies of art. It was really special and showed me that a position in the arts can really be anything. It can look like so many different roles, and there are so many different trajectories leading up to these positions. That made me feel a lot more comfortable in the path that I'm taking. I got to meet with so many people at Fringe who became mentors to me, and they all just had so many different interests. And, yeah, it was really cool to learn about how their paths led to Fringe Arts. And how the mine could lead to whatever it may be in the arts.

**Liu:** I think what surprised me the most was how much my opinion mattered. I think, in classes, I'd gotten used to a very academic level of writing. And then I was doing coverage and giving more general notes on an

episode of a show that I was watching. Especially for the first few days, my internship coordinator was always like, "Well, tell me what did you *really* think about it. Like, your own tastes and your own opinions." And I really appreciated that. I think because of the internship I was able to actually find out what my own tastes are, not just what I think is academically good. Like, what do I enjoy, what do I not enjoy in a movie or in a show. And then also, I think it was very collaborative environment, which I really enjoyed. And it surprised me a little, everyone was so welcoming. And at first, I went in thinking, "Oh, my opinion's not really going to matter."

**Falk:** That's fantastic. You both said in some of your writing about this summer that your experiences helped you take a step forward in confirming that this work is what you want to do, right? Can you talk a little bit more about what it was about this experience that really made you feel more confident in that area?

**Liu:** Sure. When I first came to Penn, and even last spring semester, I was really just an environmental science major. I applied [for this internship] because I was interested in cinema studies, and I thought I would just do that as a minor. But I didn't really see myself pursuing a career in it because I had never thought about what that would look like. And I ended up getting this internship opportunity. Getting to actually do the work and realize that I enjoy the work, and I probably enjoyed it a lot more than doing scientific research. I think it was a really big factor in me realizing that not only can I pursue a career in this but there's a really interesting, viable field that I want to dive more into. And because of that, just last month I added my cinema studies double major, and I'm taking classes to learn more about the production and development side. I think what stood out for me is that, when I compared how was feeling about the internship and doing the work, I realized that while I enjoy learning about the academic side of environmental science, I...don't want to do it. And while I definitely enjoyed taking all the theory classes I did in cinema studies, I realized even more that I wanted to be involved in actually creating things and making things. That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been in the workplace and seeing what it was like to create something.

**Erdely:** I can say that I've always loved the arts and wanted to do something in it but never really realized that that was something truly available to me. And through this internship, I think I realized that a career in the arts is not only possible but also very rewarding. I felt the most rewarded when I was, not only doing arts administration work, but also communicating with the patrons and the Fringe performers and directors. That was what made me feel the best and feel like I was really in my element, when I was communicating outwardly and then making it happen on the inside. And a small work environment is very conducive for getting to experience both the outward and inward sides of the job. Being in such a small environment allowed me to get that kind of experience to show me that, not only do I like making things happen on the inside, but I love to help the people on the outside who are coming to the company. I want to be that person on the forefront. And yeah, I never realized that before I don't think. You know, I was expecting to do a lot of internal communications work and internal organizing and planning. But it ended up being a really all-encompassing communication experience, where I got to know the artists, actors and clowns and comedians. It was just so awesome. And I could never feel so fulfilled without having that outward, patron experience.

**Falk:** Yeah. I feel like both of your answers just kind of alluded to this next question a little bit. But what is something that you feel like you could have only learned on the job this summer, as opposed to learning about it through a class or through some more theoretical learning experience? I mean, we talked about this a little

bit, like customer service and the process of preparing to make something. Anything else from your summer experiences that fall into that category?

**Liu:** This sort of experience where I was reading two or three scripts a day or different books – a lot of things which I would normally never read or never pick up – I think really helped me solidify what I actually enjoy. It really helped me also in writing coverage and getting feedback on every coverage I wrote. I think it was a lot more personal, back-and-forth relationship that I don't get in classes sometimes because the classes are bigger or the professor is busy or I wouldn't expect that from a professor anyway. I think that helped my ability to analyze something concisely that's still accurately describing what I want to say. And I think even though there are some classes in production and development – I'm taking a class right now screenwriting, where I do coverage for my classmates' work – it's so different being immersed in it for ten weeks, to be doing it everyday, and for that to be the only thing I'm doing. And I don't think I would have gotten the amount of knowledge I did if I wasn't actively working in that environment.

**Erdely:** A lot of the work I was given this summer, I had a sense of control over the assignments. You know, if I thought that the job could be done in a different way, I could do it in that different way. And I think that's really a step away from the kind of work that we get in class where there's a rigid set of instructions, you follow them as closely as possible, and you get the assignment done in the specific way that's been requested. And I find that doesn't really apply to a career, especially an arts career, where you're given so much autonomy in how you approach certain tasks. For, example, one of my tasks this summer was to arrange, a series of events called Preview Nights. I would call it like a variety show, summarizing and previewing certain cuts of the festival. And my only instruction was, "Plan Preview Nights." And I got to make with that what I wanted to. It was kind of daunting but also just so exciting to get that kind of control and trust. That I feel like you can never really get from an assignment. It gave me a lot of control and also a lot of confidence. I think that when you're following the guidelines of an assignment, you just follow them...not blindly, but without a critical eye. And on the job, when given a very vague set of instructions to complete a task, you have to approach it in your own way, and that builds confidence. And I feel like I really got that experience, building confidence in my own ability to complete a task, through approaching it how I see best.

**Falk:** I just want to acknowledge how special both of your experiences seem to have been in this regard. I don't know if anyone who's listening is thinking about their first jobs, their first internships. It's not necessarily a given to have the kind of trust and autonomy and, you know, feeling that your opinion matters. So, I want to shout out our internship partners for creating those environments. I think that's really important. And yeah, it can move you forward in thinking about your career in a really big way. I want to leave it enough time for anyone in the room to ask Sylvia and Chenyao questions, so I'll offer just one more question. Sylvia, you alluded to mentorship and continuing to be in touch with Fringe Arts folks as mentors. What do you both think makes a good professional mentor? And, do you want to talk a little bit more about those experiences this summer and how they're impacting you?

**Erdely:** My supervisor in the summer, Simon, throughout the summer would remind me that he was in the same place not long ago. He's in his mid 20s, and Fringe Arts is just his second job out of college. And so he would tell me, how impactful mentors were for him in guiding him to where he is now, how he has relied on supervisors to support him and recommend him to other places. That sort of empathy and recognition of

sameness made it so, so comforting and made him so approachable. And he knew that I wasn't going to approach him and say, "Hey, can you help me find a job for next summer?" But instead he would ask me, "How does this how does this experience affect what you want to do next summer?" Or, "Are there any fields that you want to explore next summer, or places you would want to work?" And even if I gave him the vaguest answer, who knows what I might do next summer, he would provide me contacts.

**Board:** Wow.

**Erdely:** Yeah, he was just so enthusiastic about putting me on a path to success, and I'm so grateful for his leadership. But even outside of Simon, the other employees at Fringe were just so caring and personable and just really, like, really wanting me to succeed. And we continue to stay in touch. Which is more than I can say for past internship experiences. Yeah, I'm so grateful for all the people that I met. And I think what made them all such great mentors was their reliability and their remembering what it was like to be a student interested in the arts.

**Liu:** I had two direct coordinators above me who were giving me direct feedback. And what I really appreciated was how honest they were. Not just being blunt about whether I was doing good or not, sharing a lot of things that I wouldn't think of asking and that maybe someone else wouldn't have thought of telling me. They were very honest about their experiences when they were interns, when they were assistants, how to move up in the film industry and what to expect from the industry. And I think because they were so honest with me, I was comfortable asking them stupid questions. Because everything about the film industry on the production side was very new to me, so I remember one time someone was like, "Oh, can someone read a treatment." Like, I have no idea what that is. But if you tell me, sure!

**Falk:** Awesome. I'm just so overjoyed that you both had wonderful experiences. And I'm grateful to our internship partners for creating those environments and experiences. I want to open it up briefly. These two do have to get to class at 1:45, but does anyone have questions for Sylvia and Chenyao or questions about the program.

**Board member:** Yes. How did you first learn of the program? And then how did you go about making the connections for it?

**Erdely:** I found out about the program through the Handshake website, which Penn is in partnership with. And all the Penn Live Arts programs were still in there. I just applied to one that sounded the most like me. I also knew about Fringe; I grew up in Philly, so I grew up going to Fringe festival shows. So, I was already pretty excited about the company, and seeing this opportunity was like, *ding*, perfect.

**Liu:** In the summer after freshmen year, I interned through Reals Arts at Penn at the Museum of Moving Image. I remember reaching out to [Real Arts] and asking if they had any more internships in the film industry, and they directed me to Penn Live Arts, where I applied through Handshake. But also, a very good friend of mine, [Bea Hammam](#), did the exact same program I did at Hidden Pictures. We both applied for the same thing, and then we were both very excited to get it together. Even though we worked opposite days and never actually saw each other in the office. But it was either her or Real Arts that first told me about it. And this year, I saw the listings on Handshake, and I've been directing people.

**Falk:** Oh, that's great. That's great for me to hear because I advocated strongly for that. Handshake is a student job board. Employers outside or within Penn can post opportunities there. And you have to be a student at the school where the job is posted to see the opportunities. So, we only list our opportunities through this program for students at Penn.

**Board member:** You mentioned how different your days were, in terms of needing to think creatively, needing to think in a different way. What could you try to take away from this situation? Bringing it back to Penn, how might you approach your coursework differently, or interaction with professors differently based on the positive experiences you have over the summer?

**Erdely:** I would say, in terms of my activities at Penn, this internship really steered me in a more artsy direction. I'm an artistic person and a creative person. But I realized after Fringe that I was really going to miss being directly involved in the arts. So, I'm now part of the Arthur Ross Gallery student advisory board, where we do somewhat similar event coordination that I was doing at Fringe, just for a much smaller degree. We plan one to two student arts events per semester with the same goal in mind of getting students out to experience the arts scene at Penn. And then I also, with my newfound, confidence in different tasks and assignments, I work at Penn's student-run cafe. And this semester, I finally stepped up and became a manager. It's quite different from the direct, pragmatic work that I was doing at Fringe. But it uses the same skills, you know, constant outreach, working both with people on the inside of the cafe job and the customers. And I find that I'm applying a lot of these skills that I refined at Fringe: communication, organization, deadline setting and making, you know, making sense of vague, nebulous tasks and breaking them down. It's definitely something that I've been applying for ever since my experience.

**Liu:** This is maybe not the best of me. But I didn't use to go to any of professors' office hours. But I think that, especially because this semester I'm taking a course on screenwriting and trying to delve into more of what I enjoy, I actually started going to office hours, being honest with my professors and asking for more direct feedback. And then outside of my courses, I'm producing a show for Stimulus Children's Theatre this semester. I don't think I would've taken on that role if I hadn't seen what goes into producing. Obviously, producing for film is a lot different than producing a student-run musical, it's a lot easier to do the musical. But I think I wouldn't have taken on that role, the creative team role, if I hadn't had that experience. It helped me in confidence but also helped me in taking more classes that are focused less on theory and being more opinionated, more myself. I also started writing for the 34<sup>th</sup> street magazine as a Film and TV reporter, which is less reporting and more...just me saying all of my opinions of what I've watched. But I definitely think the reason I'm able to do that is because I did so much coverage over the summer and really sharpened my ability to write.

**Board member:** So you're dropping the environmental studies, obviously. [Laughter]

**Liu:** I've only got three more classes! I'm finishing the major. So, my parents will feel better.

**Falk:** We could do an entire other panel on pleasing your parents. [Laughter.] Thank you so much, Sylvia and Chenyao. Again, I'm so overjoyed that you both had wonderful experiences. Please stay in touch with us. Thank you for being part of the conversation.