

# Decisions, Decisions



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**Maura Dunbar**, Vice President, miniseries and special projects for ABC, began her career working for a small entertainment firm. In 1986, she joined ABC as a temp secretary in the Story Department, and two years later was promoted to manager. One of her "passion projects," *The Broken Cord*, about fetal alcohol syndrome, was presented in a special screening to Congress. Ms. Dunbar graduated from Loyola Marymount University with a degree in communications arts.

Check your TV listings, grab your remote and **click!** You can choose what you want to watch. *But, who decides what's on TV?*

**Maura Dunbar**, Vice President of miniseries and special projects at ABC,

is one of the decision makers. As Project Manager, she nurtures a program from an idea through the morning-after ratings.

## The Process Begins

Throughout the year, Dunbar fields pitches from producers who have a proven track record, who know how to make a project work and how to finance it. Pitches may be based on an original concept, a play, magazine article or news story.

Marketing is part of the criteria for choosing a project: "Does it have that 'backyard factor'? Will an audience say, 'This could happen to me'? People gravitate to [a show] if they can find a piece of themselves in it. Also, does it fit into our demographics and, if so, what segment of the population? You can't think about developing a program without knowing how you'll market it to an audience, *your* audience.

"There are times when you know you have a slam dunk and there are times that you have a 'passion project,' a project that you love. You may not get the audience rating, the shares you need, but you do it for the right reasons. You fight for the ones you really believe in," says Dunbar.

## An Idea Becomes a Project

If a story idea seems promising, the department solicits a script that will undergo several rewrites. Once the script is in good shape, it's time to run

it by the network bosses. If the project gets the green light, Dunbar assumes command of a very hands-on process.

"Think of this job as a Project Manager," says Dunbar, "like an editor at a publishing company. I work with the producer and the writer to get a treatment, asking myself: Are the characters empathetic? Does this story line 'pay off' at the end of the hour, does it build?" And, "We have a special challenge: Can we tell this story in seven acts?"

The first step is to hire a director and work with producers to retain the best crew. Next comes casting. Dunbar gets very involved in casting the primary leads whose presence help "sell" the show.

Once the film starts production, Dunbar visits locations, watches the "dailies," exacts quality control and makes sure the producers stay on budget and on schedule.

When the film is put together, she reviews the rough draft before the final cut. Afterward, she signs off, usually with a few notes, but sometimes you'll even find her in the editing room.

## A Project Manager's Work Is Never Done

The film may be completed and ready to air, but that's not the end of Dunbar's job. All during the process, she is a "jack-of-all trades," interfacing with the legal department and publicity and promotions, as they

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arrange media coverage, photos, interviews and ad space.

After the show airs, she delivers the ratings, good or bad, to the producers. Finally, her job is over—at least for this project. Typically, ABC has 40-50 projects in development, with four or five in production, and Dunbar juggles several projects at any given time.

A Project Manager must be able to evaluate and summarize what a story is about. For Dunbar, nothing is more important than the basics: how to read and how to write.

“I had a voracious appetite for reading when I was growing up. I thought I was going to be a great writer. Reading is the cornerstone. You have to read, read, read—that’s where you begin to understand storytelling: how a story works, what makes a good story, how to tell it in the best way. You begin to understand dramatic theme and character. How do the people change from the first page to the last? Is this someone you care about? What conflicts do they face? How do they resolve those conflicts?”

“You also have to be able to articulate your ideas and understand the medium. My family’s meat-and-potatoes entertainment was TV. We loved television!

“I love what I do. I feel very fortu-

nate,” says Dunbar. She’s living her dream because she gets to do what her grandmother taught her to do: tell a good story. “I feel like a little kid in the candy store because I get to work with some wonderful people and make movies that, hopefully, entertain.”

### Discussion and Activity

#### Everybody’s Critic

Based on Maura Dunbar’s comments, have students consider the types of questions necessary to critique the effectiveness of a made-for-TV movie:

- Who is the target audience?
- Does the movie speak to this audience? Explain.
- Can you relate to the characters and their actions? Are they realistic? Funny? Moving?
- Is the story complete in “seven acts”?
- Is there anything

you would add or change to make the movie more effective?

Challenge students to apply these questions to *The Loretta Claiborne Story* or other made-for-TV movies. Then, turn the questions into a movie review complete with eye-catching headline and quotes from the movie.



*Arabian Nights*, scheduled to air May 2000, is one of Maura Dunbar’s “passion projects.” It is the classic tale of Scheherazade, including some of the best known and lesser-known of the 1001 tales.