

VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS



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Slippery Jelly at the Helm of a Dubious Idea

Wanna work at Wieden? Pay up, sucker

Ever hear about David "Jelly" Helm's famous "check" self-promotion he did when he was an ad school student?

He sent a box to The Martin Agency. On the outside of the box, it said, "I understand The Martin Agency is hiring art directors for \$22,000." Inside there's a check for \$22,000 made out to The Martin Agency, along with a note that said, "When do I start?"

Very clever. It made the One Show annual. And it helped Jelly get a job, so the story goes. But now he wants students to pay to work in advertising--for real.

He's starting a program called "12." It's a 13-month experimental ad school program, to be headquartered at Wieden and Kennedy's Portland office. Twelve students will be admitted per year, hence the name.

According to an article in ADWEEK, tuition will be \$13,000. When I saw that number, my eyes popped out of their sockets.

So what does the \$13,000 tuition buy them?

"They'll do everything from answering phones to shipping materials, creative, strategic development and media work," Helm told ADWEEK.

In other words, students will pay to do things other people get paid to do. With no guarantee of a full-time gig at Wieden, or anyplace else, after completing the program.

Is it just me, or does this program sound completely sleazy?

This seems quite different than a typical unpaid internship—lured by the promise of running their own "agency-within-an-agency," it sounds as if students are selling themselves into a year of indentured servitude, from which W&K and its clients may profit immensely.

Wieden & Kennedy seems to be taking a lesson from its largest client, Nike. Some of Nike's shoes are made in Indonesia by workers who earn \$2.50 a day. But even that's \$2.50 more than the Wieden kids will get.

It's reported that over 1,000 people expressed interest in joining 12. Yes, buying your way into the advertising industry has become an attractive option. We all know that attending an ad school is, for creatives at least, a method of getting to the head of the line. Hell, even a college degree comes with the unspoken promise of a better life.

But accredited ad schools (full disclosure: yes, I went to one) offer flexibility so students can get part-time jobs to defray the cost. Would anyone want a part-time job after working all day (and possibly night) at Wieden?

What about living expenses and room & board—other than sleeping on Dan Wieden's couch, how does Jelly expect students of "12" to pay for it all? Would any right-minded parents want their kid to do this? And does the tuition (assuming this is not an accredited educational program, student loans aren't an option) mean only rich kids could afford this?

I can't think of any other industry that recruits young people this way. Maybe Hollywood still reeks of a "sleep your way to the top" system. But even working in the mailroom of the William Morris Agency is a paying gig.

No, agencies don't train creative people anymore, and no they don't have time to waste on juniors who can't hit the ground running. But one man's real-world educational experiment is another's cheap help. Which means that Jelly will now be leading the newest legal form of slave labor. And since it's Wieden, not some direct-mail shop in Indianapolis, he can get away with this nonsense.

I hope there's more to this "12" program than what has been publicized so far.

I've met Jelly Helm, and I know he has a deep passion for advertising and a true desire to see advertising have a positive impact on society.

But this idea smacks of manipulation. Convincing hungry ad-industry wannabe's that they're "fearless, reckless, passionate and prolific" (as W&K's website suggests) when they're merely gullible, ambitious, desperate, and most of all, wealthy.

Perhaps Jelly should return to what he started out doing: making ads. He could art direct a sequel to his "Good vs. Evil" spot. And cast himself in both roles.