

THE CHRONICLE  
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## STUDENTS

# Colleges Find a Low-Cost Marketing Tool: Social-Media Influencers

By Grace Elletson | JUNE 12, 2019

✓ PREMIUM



Sonali Prabhu

Sonali Prabhu, who graduated in May from the U. of Central Florida, created a YouTube video as part of her work as a social-media ambassador for the university.

College looks a lot cooler when idyllic shots of a campus are complemented by subwoofed pop music.

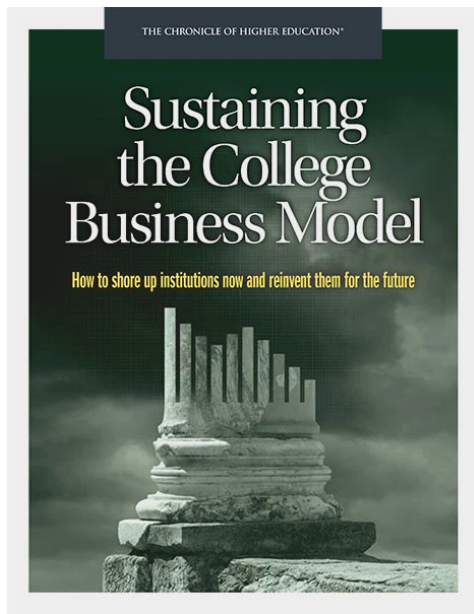
Just cut to the intro of The Campus Knights, a YouTube series produced by the University of Central Florida's team of student social-media ambassadors. The videos in the series, which dishes advice about campus life — like the top 10 study spots and tips for freshmen — were organized and produced by Sonali Prabhu, who graduated in May from the

university. She helped pioneer a marketing strategy at Central Florida that more colleges and universities have started to use: recruiting social-media influencers on their campuses to become brand ambassadors.

Prabhu enrolled with influencer status. She estimates she had about 10,000 YouTube subscribers as a freshman, attained by developing a reputation as a fashion vlogger in high school. The number has since swelled to 18,000. When she started making videos about college life, the university took notice.

Its social-media team asked Prabhu, a television and radio major, to become a content collaborator as a sophomore, meaning she would create and post videos about campus life to her YouTube channel and to UCF's YouTube channel.

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Social-media influencers are redefining how advertisers reach Generation Z. According to a market analysis by Mediakix, a marketing agency, influencers will produce \$1.7 billion in revenue for their brands by the end of 2019, and \$2.3 billion by 2020. And young people are paying attention.

That's why more and more colleges are creating ambassador programs in which students can apply to be social-media influencers. Their mission? Show prospective students why they should apply, current students how they can get more engaged, and alumni why they should donate — all through aesthetically pleasing and perfectly lit Instagram posts and YouTube videos.

The allure of student ambassadors is their authenticity, says Liz Gross, founder and chief executive of Campus Sonar, a higher-education consulting company, who estimates that a couple of dozen American colleges may have such programs.

“When students go to social media while they're looking for campuses, they are looking for more raw, unfiltered, unbiased opinions,” Gross says. “Not a snazzy marketing video from the campus. ... The tone and the storytelling and the voice and the visuals is more of that student perspective that we know students are looking for.”

Carly McCarthy, Central Florida's social-media manager, says her marketing team doesn't want to push traditional messages to prospective students. It wants current students to do the talking, which is why UCF created a formal ambassador program. She says ambassador content makes up about 15 percent of the university's social-media messaging.

McCarthy says she wants prospective students to see the university's ambassadors engaging in campus activities on social media and think, “That's exactly what I want to be doing — I should go to UCF.”

## **How Campus Ambassadors Influence**

The same thinking informed the creation, in the fall of 2017, of Rollins College's ambassador program, which now makes up about 20 percent of the Florida institution's social-media content, says Laura Kern, director of digital marketing. High-school students today want to hear from their peers, she says. “They want to see what their four years at college is going to look like from somebody that is like them.”

That view reinforces the notion in marketing circles that people's peers and word of mouth, whether in person or over social media, influence their buying behavior. The 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer found that 61 percent of respondents thought that people "like yourself" are very or extremely credible sources.

To achieve that peer-to-peer authenticity, Rollins encourages its student ambassadors to post about all things #RollinsLife. One ambassador, Isa Christensen, regularly posts quintessential beach pics on Instagram that document college life in Florida, sometimes showcasing a strategically worn Rollins sweatshirt.

Gillian Zucker, a social-media ambassador for the University of Delaware, has posted on her Blue Hen Instagram page about her study-abroad experiences as well as campus visits by Joseph R. Biden Jr., the former vice president. Most college programs include training and weekly or monthly meetings at which ambassadors discuss what to post and how to best get across their university's message.

Alumni associations are also picking up on the influencer trend. Some are enlisting ambassadors to share campus news on their personal social-media accounts — sometimes, as with Brown University's alumni-ambassador program, in exchange for points that can earn prizes. The goal of the program, according to Brown's website, is to reach "audiences that aren't tapped into the university's newsfeed" and to fuel annual donations.

To compensate students for using their online influence, most ambassador programs offer experience and other perks, not pay. That can reinforce the same exploitative logic behind unpaid internships, says Brooke Erin Duffy, an assistant professor of communication at Cornell University and the author of *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love*. The programs require free labor that benefits the brand more than the worker, and devalues the work that social-media engagement demands, she argues.

"I see it as taking advantage of young people who are interested in creative careers," she says.

Prabhu says she was happy to get the experience when she started collaborating with Central Florida's social-media team, but as a senior she was hired as an official intern and paid a wage.

Some ambassadors are offered exclusive access to campus events in return for their influence. McCarthy, UCF's social-media manager, says it has given ambassadors passes to get into the pit at campus concerts so they can share their experiences on social media.

At the University of Delaware students often get backstage passes or front-row seats to campus performances in return for documenting them on social media, says Sarah Goldfarb, the university's digital-marketing manager. Kern says her ambassadors receive free Rollins merchandise in exchange for regular social-media posts.

Campus ambassadors typically have a couple of thousand followers on their platforms. That's inconsequential compared with the hundreds of thousands of followers that would enable more-popular influencers to sell advertising on their feeds, or with the reach of celebrities who can sell Instagram posts for tens of thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Prabhu says other UCF ambassadors, like herself, were motivated mostly by love for their campus community.

The ambassadors "are people who are just genuinely excited to work with UCF and post about their school," Prabhu says.

And UCF is more than happy for them to broadcast that message.

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