Introduction

High school students want authenticity. When marketing your institution to prospective students, clear is the new clever.

“I read so many wonderful things about different colleges and hear so much from them about how great they are,” said one high school student, in response to our annual Social Admissions Report survey. “But they must have flaws just like everything else in the world, right?”

Current students are any university’s strongest brand ambassadors, but developing a student ambassador program from scratch is a significant undertaking. Prospective students are interested in what it’s like to eat in the dining hall, or what it’s like to live away from home for the first time with a complete stranger. It’s less about the polished, professional pictures of campus, and more about providing the most accurate representation of your campus community.

“One of the main things that prospective students want to connect with is current students, more than your viewbook or your website,” said Paul Sapp, Transfer Coordinator from University of Northern Iowa (UNI).

Although it’s important to provide your students access to admissions counselors and faculty members, students do not always trust the information they receive. They view current students as a much more reliable source than official publications.

“I would love to see more links to people that currently go to the college so that I could see what their thoughts are on the school and I could get in touch with them if I had any questions. I think they would answer more truthfully than say, an admissions counselor,” one high school student said.

We spoke with prospective college students and thought leaders in the higher ed community to outline a guide for building a student ambassador program.

In This Whitepaper, You Will Learn:

• The importance of setting goals for your ambassador team
• How to recruit, train, and manage a team of current student ambassadors
• How to empower and incentivize your ambassador team
• How to measure the success and ROI of your ambassador program
Goal Setting from the Get Go

Before spending any time hiring and training students, it is important to first set goals for your ambassador team. Any university initiative should have goals that clearly relate to larger institutional goals. Outlining these objectives will help you and your ambassadors stay on track.

Say, for example, your institution aims to increase diversity, maintain the gender balance, and grow out-of-state enrollment. The goals for the student ambassador team might then be to build awareness and increase engagement amongst these populations. But how do you measure these goals? Metrics such as reach, shares, and email/mail responses reflect your team’s progress on increasing awareness. Engagement can be measured by the number of interactions your team has with prospective students and their families. By clearly stating these Key Performance Indicators, or KPIs, you not only keep your team focused, but also make it easy to report on success.

Courting Your Student Ambassadors

Hiring the right students means hiring students who will help you reach your goals.

“Selecting the right student ambassadors is about helping to satisfy institutional goals,” Mallory Wood, Director of Marketing at mStoner, explains. “During my time as Social Media Strategist at Saint Michael’s College, we sometimes had to make tough decisions [when hiring one student over another], but we wanted to make sure that we had a representative group of the student body.”

For example, if your institution is trying to increase enrollment among a specific demographic, it’s important to have student ambassadors that are representative of those types of students.

The key to courting the right students is implementing a competitive application process. Wood asked student ambassador applicants to create a blogger account and perform the ambassador functions for a full month (blogging once per week, tweeting once per day, using Instagram, attending nightly group chats) before she made any hiring decisions. The process was designed to see who would burn out or not have enough time to participate in the ambassador program.

Sapp, on the other hand, relies on the help of his ambassadors to hire the right students. During informational sessions and informal interviews, ambassadors sit in and talk with applicants to determine who may be a good fit for the program. They can get a read for how personable and excited each ambassador applicant is about the program.

Another thing to keep in mind when hiring student ambassadors is that training starts with smart hiring. “I’m a very big proponent of training the online ambassador, not approving every piece of content they put out,” Wood says.

Being selective and hiring students who can naturally talk with people and are eloquent writers will make training your team that much easier.
Sample Student Ambassador Contract

Blogger Responsibilities and Benefits
2011-2012

Please read through the following responsibilities and guidelines. If you agree to the terms of the position, please return this signed contract to one of the advisors. Also, be sure to stop by Human Resources to fill out the appropriate I9/W2 forms, if you have not already done so for a work study position or an on-campus job.

RESPONSIBILITIES
As a Blogger you will be:

- **Required** to attend blogger training sessions, typically one per semester.
- **Required** to blog once per week (with leniency given during school breaks and holidays).
- **Required** to include pictures and/or videos in at least every other blog.
- **Required** to be authentic and focus blogs on the college experience, highlighting academics, extracurricular activities, events, etc
- **Required** to attend 2 Blogger Chats each semester.
- **Required** to maintain a presence on the Class of 2016 Facebook Group.
- **Required** to maintain a presence on Twitter and tweet daily.
- **Required** to maintain a Formspring account, answer questions in a timely manner, embed the widget in your blog, and feed answers to your blog.
- Encouraged to supply multimedia for YouTube and FlickR
- Encouraged to attend all monthly Founders Society meetings as well as any other scheduled meetings.
- Expected to act professionally, keeping in mind that you are a representative of the college. (e.g. appropriate language, pictures, videos, etc).
- Encouraged to participate in all other Founders Society programs.
- Encouraged to keep in touch with prospective students who have applied.

*If you are unable to comply with these guidelines, we reserve the right to replace you.*

BLOGGER BENEFITS
Your benefits include:

- Stipend depends on your experience. Payment per blog at discretion of Marketing staff.
- Interaction with a variety of new people (both prospective students & their families & other tour guides).
- Endless leadership training.
- The power to influence a prospective student’s decision to apply and attend.
- Recommendation letter from Director of Marketing or Social Media Specialist
- Networking opportunities with the Offices of Admission, Office of Marketing and Communications, and Alumni and Parent Relations.

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Name (print): ____________________________________________________________

Signature: __________________________ ID#: __________________________

Date: ____________ Cell: ____________ Room: ____________________________
Training Your Ambassadors

Your student ambassadors are acting on behalf of your institution, so it’s important to invest time and energy into training. First, make sure that you and your ambassadors are on the same page.

“We share as many of our institutional goals with ambassadors as possible,” explains Brian Apfel, Director of Social Media and Online Initiatives at Marist College. “We want them to feel like they’re applying the work they do to institutional priorities. It’s important for professional development.”

Sharing your institutional and team goals with ambassadors ensures that you are working towards the same results, and that you can hold them accountable. Paul Sapp hosts a thorough training for new ambassadors. He starts with a session focused on the history of the group, expectations, dos and don’ts, and important campus stats. From there, new ambassadors are required to attend three shadow tours with different ambassadors to see how it’s done. Once they are ready to lead tours, new ambassadors are paired with veteran members to continue learning.

Motivating Your Ambassador Team

Once your ambassador team is onboarded and trained, the feat of motivating them throughout a long enrollment cycle falls onto your plate.

There are multiple ways to motivate your team, but Brian Apfel has found two strategies that help ambassadors find the most meaning in their work. The first is to tie ambassador impact back to institutional goals. Say, for example, a student who attended a campus visit actually ends up enrolling. Apfel is sure to communicate this news back to the ambassador who worked with that student so he or she understands the direct impact their work had on institutional goals.
Secondly, tying the ambassador’s work back to their personal and professional goals shows that you’re invested in them as a person, not just as an employee. If an ambassador has an interest in writing, for example, offer the opportunity to practice this skill and develop their portfolio by writing for your university’s blog. These types of responsibilities give ambassadors more autonomy in their role and provide them a greater sense of ownership over their work. “We have high expectations for them,” Apfel says, “but we also give them the freedom to make their own decisions.”

### Incentivizing and Empowering Your Ambassadors

The first and most obvious way to incentivize your ambassadors is to pay them. Many schools, however, do not have the resources to run a full-fledged, paid ambassador program. Don’t let this stand in your way. Brian Apfel asked his ambassadors what most motivated them to participate, and the top answers include the opportunity to meet new people, networking/professional development, and a sense of giving back. In fact, a survey he conducted revealed that money was the smallest motivator for his ambassadors.

![Diagram showing the top motivations for ambassadors.]

- **Promotion Opportunities (Tour Guide/Office Worker)**
- **Sense of Giving Back to the University**
- **Networking/Professional Addition to Resume**
- **Opportunity to Meet New People**
- **Pay/Rewards**

Making the ambassador program elite and selective makes it a desirable group to join. One incentive many schools use is to give ambassadors special privileges, such as the opportunity to visit the president’s house or tour new campus buildings before anyone else. University of Oregon (below) gives student ambassadors access to the president’s suite at football games, which is an amazing perk.

It is also common to award scholarships to student ambassadors who go above and beyond. At UNI, the role is unpaid, but ambassadors have an opportunity to earn a scholarship. UNI awards five scholarships a semester for Outstanding Service, and the winners are self-nominated and peer recommended.

“If I’ve talked to some of my colleagues around the country who either have paid ambassador programs or volunteer programs that turned to paid program, and all of them have said ‘If you can keep it a volunteer program, do so for as long as you can because it’s a different mentality,’” Paul Sapp advises. “Their heart and soul isn’t in it as much as when they’re volunteering.”
Measuring the Success of Your Student Ambassador Program

Measuring success is all about setting KPIs that relate to your program goals. Whether it’s the number of interactions with prospective students or the reach of blog posts, setting metrics is the most effective way to hold students accountable.

At Saint Michael’s College, Mallory Wood polled incoming students, asking if they had interacted with an online ambassador via Twitter, Facebook, or their blog. The results revealed that 25 percent of applicants and 66 percent of enrolled students connected with their ambassador program. Considering that Mallory ran her program on just $4,000 a year, she was incredibly pleased with such high ROI.

Brian Apfel also tied ambassador interactions back to Marist’s CRM, allowing him to track which students attended a visit, or engaged online. This allowed him to measure their impact on enrollment goals. Setting these KPIs provides your team with transparency into the progress towards meeting institutional goals. It is paramount to being able to measure ROI, and your ambassadors will know exactly what is expected of them.

Key Takeaways for Your Ambassador Program

In conclusion, there are a few key steps that you can take to ensure the success of your student ambassador program.

1) Set goals early and tie them back to your strategic enrollment objectives.

2) Hire students that are representative of the types of students you want to attract to your university.

3) Invest in training your ambassadors on the history of your school and expectations for the program.

4) Communicate clearly and frequently to your ambassadors the program goals and your expectations.

5) Motivate your team by tying their work back to personal and professional goals.

6) Empower your ambassadors to take ownership over their work and give them the autonomy to work creatively.

7) Develop KPIs early to measure the success and ROI of your program. Don’t be afraid to change your goals or KPIs as your program changes.
See How Washington State University Connects Prospective Students with Ambassadors Using UChat

About Uversity

Uversity, formerly Inigral, is an industry leading student engagement platform currently partnered with over 140 colleges and universities to improve enrollment and retention. Uversity helps colleges connect students with the people and information they need to have a transformative college experience through its two products, Schools App and Uchat. Over 3.9 million student connections have been made helping schools provide a more personalized and engaging student experience.