

POPPI UNIVERSITY IS HARDER TO GET INTO THAN HARVARD. COLLEGE AMBASSADOR PROGRAMS ARE BOOMING

Upstart brands are making moves on campus. They're gaining engagement, sales, and sometimes even future employees.

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When Poppi first launched its college ambassador program, Poppi University, in the fall of 2024, it received about 3,000 applications for 100 spots. “We were shocked,” says Caroline Taylor, the better-for-you soda brand’s director of collegiate and ambassador relations.

Two years later, Poppi University received more than 11,000 applications for the upcoming fall semester—including nearly 3,000 over just 24 hours—to fill 250 spots open across the U.S. and Canada. The response blew Taylor and her team away.

Those figures put Poppi’s college ambassador program’s acceptance rate at about 2.27 percent, making it more selective than Harvard and Yale, which have recently posted acceptance rates of 4.18 and 4.8 percent respectively. Through the eight-week long paid opportunity, students gain experience by creating social media content and hosting local events.

There’s a growing appetite among students for such ambassador programs, in part due to the current internship landscape. Internships are “a lot more competitive” these days, according to Adam Grant, co-founder of Campus Commandos, a Detroit-based company that has run student ambassador programs for brands such as Coca-Cola, Canon, HP, and Uber.

From 2023 to 2025, the percentage of college seniors using the career network platform Handshake who applied to at least one internship jumped from 34 percent to 41 percent, according to a 2025 report from the company. At the same time, internship postings declined by more than 15 percent, causing the average number of applications per internship to more than double.

As a result, students are “now trying to do more in terms of the fall semester and spring semester in order to have stories to talk about to secure that summer internship,” Grant says. “And so, student ambassador programs become more popular.” Case in point: Campus Commandos’ revenue grew by 50 percent last year.

That’s good news for brands like Red Bull and Adobe, which have offered such opportunities for decades, as well as younger companies aiming to connect more deeply with college-age consumers.

HOW BRANDS ARE MOVING ON CAMPUS

Some companies are crafting their programs to function like internships. Poppi is one of them. “The goal is to help these students build skills and networks that they can take with them,” Taylor says.

Here’s how Poppi University works: Ambassadors are required to host one event on their campus, make one TikTok or Instagram post, and create three stories each month, though Taylor notes that many ambassadors go above and beyond those deliverables. Poppi pays all of its ambassadors the same rate, which Taylor declined to share. Every fall and spring, applications open for the next semester.

Poppi does monthly virtual lunch and learns for its ambassadors featuring different teams within the company, including marketing, sales, and research and development. “Students love meeting with the R&D team to tell them what flavors they want to see next,” Taylor says.

Bubble Skincare—which ranked No. 259 on Inc.’s 2026 list of the 5,000 fastest-growing private American companies—works with college students through two different programs. Its college ambassadors participate in product launches, photoshoots, and events. Its college reps operate a step above, throwing events and distributing samples.

Shai Eisenman, Bubble’s founder and CEO, describes the rep program as “kind of like an internship.” The brand currently has around 300-400 reps and 19,000 ambassadors, each of whom receive event stipends and free products, experiences, and merch, according to a spokesperson. They also receive performance-based rewards and the opportunity to earn commission on sales.

Bubble’s ambassador efforts aren’t constrained to college students. Eisenman estimates that the brand works with a total of 112,000 people spanning from age 13 to post-grad. “We’re building three different communities to ensure that we really cater to the different ages and the different stages in people’s lives,” she says. “We have ambassadors that have been with us since 2020, so they’ve been going through each and every stage.”

Each community has its own GroupMe or Bumble BFF-based group chat, participates in different events with Bubble, and members regularly share their opinions with the brand about what kinds of products and partnerships they want to see next. “I think we’re the first brand in the world that actually did this at scale, so it’s something that we’re constantly perfecting and improving,” Eisenman says.

Both Poppi and Bubble have hired employees from their ambassador programs. Taylor says her team “definitely keep our eye on” participants who exceed expectations, “and if we have openings on the Poppi team, we do look at those ambassadors.” In fact, the brand recently hired a former University of Texas ambassador for a full-time brand marketing role.

There are, of course, tangible benefits for brands that run ambassador programs. Across the last four semesters, Poppi University posts have increased from 1,700 to 5,000, earned media value has grown from \$2.3 million to \$10.3 million, and impressions have surged from 17 million to 218 million—a 1,182 percent jump—according to a Poppi spokesperson.

Taylor adds that the brand's top 15-selling Targets in August 2025 were all in college towns. She also points to an example of an ambassador posting a video about Poppi's arrival to Starbucks stores in March. It featured her making a dirty soda by mixing a Shirley Temple-flavored Poppi and the coffee chain's coconut cold foam, and went viral, amassing 20.6 million views on TikTok and inspiring others to ask baristas to make the off-menu drink.

Poppi University has been so successful that the brand is expanding the program this year by bringing it to the U.K. and adding another version for two to four-person friend groups.

CAMPUS PROGRAMS, COMMANDO-STYLE

While Grant says the cost of Campus Commandos' services varies based on the number of campuses, channels, and what a brand specifically wants to activate, a focused pilot across a few campuses can range between \$15,000 to \$30,000, a mid-scale program across five to 15 campuses between \$40,000 and \$100,000, and national programs can reach into the millions.

"We always tell brands: start small, prove it on two to three campuses, get real data, then scale," he says, adding that philosophy is what leads to long relationships with big names like Coca-Cola, which has worked with Campus Commandos for the past nine years.

What kinds of results do such clients want to achieve? "Sales are still king," Grant says. "And there are a lot of programs that we run that achieve that." For example, his business held a college orientation event for HP a few years ago that focused on finance and engineering students; it achieved a more than 60 percent increase in online sales for a specific type of calculator.

Still, there are plenty of brands that see the value in activating on college campuses but don't offer a product that young people immediately purchase, such as insurance companies and wireless providers. Grant says those businesses often aim to establish themselves as thought leaders instead.

Campus Commandos' ambassadors, on the other hand, aim to get experience they can talk about in job interviews. "I've seen pictures of these campaigns all the time on LinkedIn where students are just dragging a wagon around or wearing a backpack and passing out samples," Grant says. "What does that really do for the student?"

Partaking in activities like organizing a sorority shoe lovers' party for a footwear brand, meanwhile, allows ambassadors to flex several different skills, including event planning, marketing, and public speaking.

Grant recommends that brands pay their student ambassadors more than minimum wage—and if they can't afford to do so, work out different ways they can compensate students such as providing samples or hosting educational sessions with experts from your team.

THE NEW DUDE ON CAMPUS

The uptick in demand for college ambassador programs has led more brands to enter the space. Dude Wipes, a Chicago-based brand selling flushable wipes, announced last week that it was kicking off its own ambassador program. It will span six schools—The Ohio State University, University of Alabama, University of Washington, University of Florida, Arizona State University, and Texas A&M University—with Dude Wipes hiring two representatives from each.

College is “such a formative time” in consumers’ lives, says Brittany Fish, senior manager of field marketing at Dude Wipes. “It’s when they’re building habits and they’re finding brands that they want to use for the rest of their life, essentially.”

The goal, she adds, is to boost brand awareness for Dude Wipes at these universities by hosting a series of activations in which ambassadors will give out samples, tell their peers about the product, and create social media content. In the fall, their duties will include handing out a cheeky “syllab-ass” which outlines how to keep yourself clean and hosting “Dump Zone”-themed tailgate pop-ups.

Dude Wipes is looking for students who are warm, approachable, inviting, trusted by their peers, involved on campus, and feel comfortable leaning into its signature style of humor. The brand plans to hold the program for the duration of the fall 2026 semester, with the hope that it’ll continue and grow, according to Fish. It will pay participants on a by-campaign basis.

The metrics Dude Wipes will track in order to determine whether the program continues are engagement and relationships, she says. “So, how many people did we get to have conversations with? How many people did we impact, but also how meaningful was it, and how much buzz did it really create on campus?”