

Company Helps Colleges Increase Applications by Selling the Cities in Which They Are Located

BY JENNIFER JACOBSON

PHILADELPHIA COLLEGES HERE want students scouting where to go to school to get something more than a brochure about their institutions. They want them to fall in love with the City of Brotherly Love.

Seventeen Philadelphia institutions have hired Campus Visit, a Boston company started in 1994, to help them sell themselves and their city as a college town.

Campus Visit provides colleges like Drexel University, Swarthmore College, University of Pennsylvania, and Temple, among others, with 46-page magazines full of Philadelphia maps, lists of restaurants, and articles about the city that make visits easier for families.

The colleges can also direct families to Campus Visit's travel hotline and Web site, which they can use to make discounted hotel, airline, and rail reservations.

"Kids now apply to seven or more schools," says Todd H. Hoffman, the company's founder. "The chances of them attending a school they didn't visit are about nil. You wouldn't buy a car without driving it. You wouldn't go to a school without visiting it."

Mr. Hoffman founded the company when he was doing marketing for hotels in Boston that wanted to tap into the millions of

dollars families spend each year visiting the campuses of America's college town.

The Greater Philadelphia area has 87 colleges and universities, but lacks Boston's high-profile, higher-education reputation.

AN OLD IMAGE

Meryl Levitz, president of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation, says too many people still think of Philadelphia as a blue-collar town where Rocky Balboa jabbed slabs of sirloin in a meatpacking plant. Certainly, it's not spoken of in the same breath as cultural centers like New York and Boston.

Ms. Levitz's organization has spent close to half a million dollars since 1999 on Campus Visit to help its colleges highlight the opportunities for internships, variety of restaurants, professional sports teams and museums in the city.

"If you get the students more involved in Philadelphia from the get-go, they'll ... be more likely to stay afterward," Ms. Levitz says.

It's hard to tell exactly how much Campus Visit has stimulated the region's economy or increased the number of applications to Philadelphia-area colleges. But Mr. Hoffman says he would like to see the 74,000 freshman applications that Campus Visit's Philadelphia

institutions received for fall 2000 rise to 82,000 by the fall of 2002.

Joan T. McDonald, dean of enrollment management at Drexel University, also says that it's too early to gauge how much Campus Visit has affected the university's

of Temple's enrollment comes from outside the greater Philadelphia area, the half most likely to put the Campus Visit tools to use.

Mr. Hoffman says Temple averages 200 visits a month to the school's online college profile on

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increase in applications, which has more than tripled over the past five years.

Temple University joined for the same reason. "Everything that sells the city, sells Temple," says Timm R. Rinehart, associate vice president for enrollment. The university, he says, has had three "record-breaking" years of applications. For fall 1998, Temple received 9,000 applications for 2,600 spaces; it received 14,000 applications for 3,200 spaces for fall 2001.

Mr. Rinehart believes Campus Visit has helped because parents and students are telling admissions officials that they use the service and refer to its Web site and magazine. Mr. Rinehart says about half

www.onebigcampus.com, the program's website. Since May of this year, Campus Visit has also forwarded more than 4,500 "requests for more information" to its 17 Philadelphia-area partner colleges.

ADDING APPLICANTS

Mr. Hoffman is confident that Philadelphia colleges can increase their applications just as the 16 Campus Visit partners in Boston saw their applications rise from 97,125 in fall 1995 to 117,530 in fall 1999 — or 21 percent since Campus Visit first began tracking the numbers there.

Although Mr. Hoffman is not taking full credit for this fact, he says Campus Visit's work in Boston

certainly influenced the dramatic increase in applications there. Officials at Merrimack College, in North Andover, Mass., say the company, along with a full-time West Coast recruiter, has definitely helped the college increase its enrollment of students from outside New England.

Mary Lou Retelle, dean of admissions and financial aid, says two years ago, before the college worked with Campus Visit, only 30 to 35 students in its 550-member class hailed from outside New England. This fall's entering class had roughly 100 students from outside the region. Ms. Retelle says both Campus Visit and the college's recruiter "have

helped identify Merrimack more closely with Boston. We'd always say it's 20 miles north of [the city], but [students] really see it visually on a map Campus Visit supplied. It really helped us."

Katherine Zwier, of Pittsburgh, learned about Campus Visit / Philadelphia's Web site from Drexel's admissions office before she and her daughter, Erin, who now attends the university on a partial rowing scholarship, visited last October. Ms. Zwier used it to make discounted hotel reservations and find Amtrak fares from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. "It saved us from the hassle of looking things up separately," she says. "And it enlightened us about the area." ■