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ON CAMPUS, IT IS ONE BIG COMMERCIAL

Monsieur Daniel NACCACHE

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The New York Times, September 10, 2011 by Natasha Singer

A growing number of companies are hiring college students to represent brands on campuses across the nation.

This fall, an estimated 10,000 American college students will be working on hundreds of campuses — for cash, swag, job experience or all three — marketing everything from Red Bull to Hewlett-Packard PCs. For the companies hiring them, the motivation is clear: college students spent about $36 billion on things like clothing, computers and cellphones during the 2010-11 school year alone (…)

Corporations have been pitching college students for decades on products from cars to credit cards. But what is happening on campuses today is without rival, in terms of commercializing everyday college life.

Companies from Microsoft on down are increasingly seeking out the big men and women on campus to influence their peers. The students most in demand are those who are popular — ones involved in athletics, music, fraternities or sororities. Thousands of Facebook friends help, too. What companies want are students with inside knowledge of school traditions and campus hotspots. In short, they want students with the cred to make brands seem cool, in ways that a TV or magazine ad never could.

It's a good deal for the student marketers, who can earn several hundred to several thousand dollars a semester in salary, perks, products and services, depending on the company.

Many college students are the heads of a household of one. But if a company can hook them early, it often has customers for life. And the choices students make — about shampoo, clothing, computers, smartphones and so on — can become the lifetime habits of future families or business executives, says Lisa Baker, director of education marketing at Hewlett-Packard, which has long promoted its laptops to universities. Red Bull, which has student brand managers at 300 universities and colleges, sponsors everything from chariot races to music lectures. Student representatives for Microsoft Windows give interactive product demonstrations each week to peers on more than 300 campuses.

Some universities welcome such programs, and the career experience they may provide, but others prohibit such activities, he says. The lines aren't always clear. University of North Carolina officials, for example, say they don't currently have a clear handle on how many students work as brand ambassadors — but it could be several hundred or more.