

“Old Stock vs. New Stock”

Stock Photography, University Marketing, and Diversity Campaigns

Overview

Major universities, corporations, publishers, and media organizations frequently rely on stock photography companies to provide images for:

- admissions materials
- websites
- brochures
- digital advertisements
- presentations
- social media campaigns
- student recruitment efforts
- research publications
- campus branding initiatives

Commonly used providers include Getty Images, iStock, Shutterstock, Adobe Stock, Alamy, Unsplash, Pexels, Depositphotos, Dreamstime, and 123RF. These companies generally operate as licensing and distribution platforms for photographers rather than directly producing every image themselves.

Who Takes the Photos

Images are typically created by:

- freelance photographers
- commercial photography studios
- university marketing teams
- editorial photographers
- student photographers
- contracted contributors
- photojournalists
- lifestyle and branding photographers

- advertising agencies

Many stock images are staged for commercial purposes. Models may be hired, locations rented, and scenes intentionally designed to communicate a specific message or emotional tone.

Examples include:

- students studying together in classrooms
- campus social scenes
- athletic participation
- laboratory and STEM imagery
- medical and healthcare settings
- startup and business collaboration scenes

Common Locations for University and Stock Photography

Photography for universities and stock agencies is often produced in:

- New York City
- Los Angeles
- Miami
- Chicago
- San Francisco
- Phoenix and the American Southwest
- Toronto
- Vancouver
- London
- Paris
- Tokyo
- Seoul
- Singapore
- college campuses throughout the United States and internationally

Common settings include:

- libraries

- dormitories
- lecture halls
- laboratories
- cafés
- coworking spaces
- athletic facilities
- hospitals
- outdoor campus areas
- staged studio environments

Diversity Campaigns in University Marketing

Modern university marketing campaigns frequently emphasize diversity, inclusion, and representation (Now Known As DRE). Universities may intentionally select imagery that highlights:

- racial diversity
- international students
- gender diversity
- multicultural engagement
- accessibility and disability inclusion
- LGBTQ participation
- collaborative social environments

The stated goals of these campaigns often include:

- encouraging broad student recruitment
- reflecting institutional inclusion policies
- appealing to global audiences
- demonstrating openness to multiple backgrounds and experiences
- aligning with modern branding and public relations strategies

Some critics argue that university marketing materials may present an idealized or heavily curated image of campus demographics and social dynamics. Concerns raised by critics can include:

- selective representation

- overuse of staged diversity imagery
- discrepancies between promotional materials and lived student experiences
- commercialization of identity-based branding
- feelings of exclusion or invisibility among some student groups

Disclaimer and Perspective Considerations

Perceptions of university diversity campaigns vary significantly among students, faculty, administrators, alumni, and the public.

Some individuals believe that certain marketing approaches may unintentionally contribute to feelings of underrepresentation among white students or create perceptions that particular groups are being minimized within institutional branding efforts. Others argue that diversity-focused campaigns are intended to broaden representation and address historical exclusion within higher education.

It is important to recognize that experiences differ widely between institutions and individuals. No single marketing campaign can fully represent the complexity of campus life, student demographics, personal identity, or social reality across every university.

University promotional materials are ultimately marketing tools and should not always be interpreted as complete statistical or sociological representations of the student body.

Industry Consolidation and Ownership

Many universities ultimately license imagery from a relatively small number of large parent corporations.

Examples include:

- Getty Images owns iStock and Unsplash
- Canva owns Pexels
- Vista owns Depositphotos
- Adobe operates Adobe Stock
- Shutterstock controls multiple media and creative subsidiaries

As a result, visual narratives used across universities, advertising, publishing, and media campaigns can become stylistically and commercially standardized across institutions.

Ethical and Industry Concerns

The larger photography and modeling industries have also faced criticism and controversy involving:

- exploitative casting practices
- coercive modeling environments
- image manipulation
- unrealistic beauty standards
- consent disputes
- labor concerns involving freelance creatives
- misuse of staged imagery

Many photographers and contributors operate lawfully and professionally under licensing agreements, model releases, age verification requirements, and platform review systems. However, it is important to consider the modern dynamics of slavery, exploitation, and labor concerns that may also exist within parts of the photography and modeling industries, particularly in relation to activism and diversity campaigns.

Conclusion

Stock photography plays a major role in shaping public perceptions of universities, institutions, and social culture. Because these images are often curated, staged, and commercially designed, viewers may interpret them differently depending on their experiences, beliefs, and expectations.

Universities and media organizations continue to balance branding goals, representation efforts, and public relations strategies. Today, diversity campaigns also play a major role in shaping university enrollment and public perception. Critics argue that some promotional materials may reflect institutional or political messaging rather than fully representing the everyday reality of campus life.

D. Cowdrey

For context, this is a real and relatable photograph of university students:

