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Columbia U. Grad's DVD Gives Incoming Students Another Angle on Colleges

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(U-WIRE) WASHINGTON -- If guided campus tours don't always give incoming college students the most complete view of university life, a new series of documentaries could help add a little perspective.

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A set of five DVDs to be released next week intends to give prospective students an all-access look into life at the country's 50 most

popular universities from the classrooms to the party scene.

Devoting about 15 to 20 minutes per school, the documentaries are divided into eight sections that each highlight a different aspect of the college experience. The goal, said the film's producers, is to provide a less filtered look at student life than that offered by university marketers.

"What a lot of college students don't realize is that education is a big business, and colleges spend a lot of effort trying to market themselves," said Doug Imbruce, founder and CEO of The U, the company that produced the DVDs. "The tools that were there to help students make a decision were just really poor."

Imbruce, who graduated from Columbia University last spring, said the idea for the series came to him more than four years ago when he was himself deciding where to attend. Frustrated by the tedious process of visiting school

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after school, he wanted a simpler way to get a feel for a college's atmosphere.

"I remember how absolutely difficult it was trying to visit these campuses with Mom and Dad going, trying to get me to fill out my applications and get in the minivan," Imbruce said. "It was really hard to get an accurate picture of what life was like on these campuses."

To gather data for the series, Imbruce and his company recruited 300 student liaisons over the past three years from all the schools featured to do surveys and background research on their institutions. The producers then sent camera crews to each school to conduct firsthand interviews and get footage of the campus.

Narrated by stars of various WB sitcoms - Imbruce's relationship with the cable channel formed while he was an assistant on the network's program "Everwood" -- the films are fast-paced and youth-oriented. Each school's profile is interspersed with facts about the its academic programs and calendar format as well as more trivial tidbits, such as students' fashion tendencies.

Imbruce said the effect of the documentaries is achieved by the openness of the students participating in the filming. He stresses that the films are unauthorized, and interviews with students are intended to show the pros and cons of each school.

In a sample video of the University of California at Los Angeles featured on The U's Web site, students are shown praising the school's diverse location but also lamenting the large class sizes and lack of personal attention. One student candidly tells the camera that in many courses, he only attends the first day of class and exam sessions yet still manages good grades.

With the release of the documentaries on Oct. 25, The U plans to market the DVDs actively to both incoming high schools students and transfer students. The company has struck a joint advertising deal with U.S. News & World Report to run spots in its annual college guide and will give away nearly half a million sample versions of the film to high school counselors across the country.

Imbruce said he hopes the DVDs will help students make more informed decisions on where to get their college education. While many resources exist to help students in the college selection process, he hopes the films will add another dimension to what's already out there.

"The old cliché is that a picture's worth a thousand words," Imbruce said. "There's a lot to be gained from guidebooks, but there's a lot more to be gained from this."

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