

How to get Great Photos for Your College Publications and Website

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Introduction

Most of us have heard the saying – “*A picture is worth a thousand words*”.

It is true – one image can immediately communicate what it will take many words to do. This may be more accurate in the 21st century than ever before. With the popularity of new technologies like iPods and photo phones, our world is visually on overload. Since two-year colleges compete for students, photography can play a key role in making a positive first impression upon prospective students of all ages. It is vitally important to the success of the college’s marketing campaigns, especially in publications and on the web.

If the photography of the institution looks of poor or low quality, this will negatively impact the impression of the quality of the college’s instruction—especially if the college offers photography courses. For the marketing department to produce superior recruitment and imaging pieces, a library of current quality photography representing the students and staff, campus environments, student activities and the college’s unique departmental study opportunities is of utmost importance.

Some will say – “We have a great digital camera and our staff can take the photos”. However, “a great digital camera” does not necessarily equal “great photography”.

So, Let’s Get Started! The following topics will be presented:

1. What makes a good photo? How to evaluate photography
2. Evaluate your college photo needs.
3. How to hire a professional photographer and negotiate prices for a shoot
4. How to manage the photo shoot day
5. How to find good stock photography

1. What makes a good photo? How to evaluate photography –

You may know if you like a photo, but you need to know why you like the photo. What about the image draws you to it? The first impression and overall image of your college will often be driven by the photography used in the marketing collateral.

The following are three elements to consider when evaluating your current photo library, the portfolio of a professional photographer or creating new photos. These will also help the understanding of why an image is appealing.

a. Look for overall composition – Use these questions to aide in your evaluation:

- 1.) **Look for the use of interesting perspectives or angles.** If the photo has people in it care must be given to the angle of the camera in reference to the person.
 - Does the angle enhance the appearance of the subject?
 - Do people look thinner or heavier?
 - Is a distracting physical feature accentuated by the camera angle? You will want your President to look good in his or her portrait for the various college uses. This applies to staff and students whether in a formal or casual setting.
- 2.) **Is it clever?** Does the photo show a different approach to a common subject? Do you think differently about the subject because of the new view presented?
- 3.) **Is your eye drawn to the featured subject?** Are there distracting elements taking away from the impact of the subject?
- 4.) **Do you see layers of interest – a primary and then 2nd & 3rd areas of interest?** This can often enhance the photo and add depth of interest. But is not necessary in all situations.
- 5.) **Is color or the lack of color used well?** Does the use of color bring interest to the image? If the photo is black and white, would it be stronger in color?
- 6.) **If people are in the photo, are they placed well in the composition.** Notice if they are at various depths in the space. This may be used to add emphasis to specific people. Some photos may use this to create areas or people in focus and other parts of the photo may be out of focus. If this technique is used, is it used effectively?

b. Look at the lighting techniques –

Lighting is often the component of a photo which will reveal if the image is taken by an amateur or professional photographer. The understanding of how to light a room, object or person for a photo is a skill and art requiring specialized lighting equipment and knowledge. Outdoor images using available light also require great care in lighting. These may appear to be more forgiving and easier to produce as in the case of a beautiful campus photo taken at sunset. However, if a student is introduced into the setting, additional lighting of some nature will be necessary to keep the eye sockets of the student from looking like black holes. Soft fill lighting is the answer. This is often created by reflective material or a soft light source from a photo umbrella. Lighting is also needed to separate the subject from the background.

Use these questions to aide in your evaluation:

- 1.) **For portraits - Is the subject separated from the background with light hitting the shoulder and hair?** Is the light too bright on the forehead creating a glare? Is the face softly lighted or is the light harsh? Is there a catch light in the eyes giving the person a more lively appearance?
- 2.) **Are gels (color theatre films) used to enhance the image?** Gels will add a dramatic effect which may be called for on occasion. They work well in lab type settings and other photos to add interest. They are effective in making a dull grey or beige room appear interesting, i.e. *CSI* television series. Depending on the desired outcome these should be subtle for most college applications.
- 3.) **Does the lighting present the subject well?** Is it flattering to the subject? Lighting may be cool or warm in tone and depending on the subject – one or the other may be used.
- 4.) **Is lighting used effectively to create emphasis?** Highlighted areas will come forward and shadowy areas will recede in the photo.

c. Look for attention to detail:

- 1.) **For a portrait, does the person have a shiny face,** is clothing smooth, are shirt cuffs pulled out from jacket sleeves for men, is hair in place, etc.? If in an office or conference room setting, are the secondary elements – like furniture, plants, pictures, etc. –well placed in the photo?
- 2.) **Are distracting items in the photo** – trash cans, cars, poles or objects coming out of the tops of people’s heads?

Remember: Every photo does not need to have all of these elements to be “good”. Though all “good” photos will have good composition, effective lighting and attention to detail.

2. Evaluate your college photo needs.

a. Evaluate current photos in your college photo library. Start by gathering samples of marketing materials created in the past few years. Remember billboards created. Also, review your website. If your photos are not categorized, use this opportunity to organize them. Check out a free software from Google – Picasa – an image organizer. Here are a few categories to consider to get started:

- **Campus Buildings.** It is helpful to have images of most campus buildings on file. Also to have them in various seasons of the year.
- **Portraits of** Executive staff, Administrative staff, Trustees, Faculty, Outstanding Alumni, Outstanding Students
- **Event Images:** This would include special events with signage and students at the event.
- **Award Ceremonies:** This should include President or other Executive Staff with award recipient.
- **Sport Images:** This should include images of the various teams and players with images of key wins.
- **Students and Faculty** in classroom environments including labs, the art studio, theatre and courses offered in unusual settings, i.e horticulture
- **Students in Extracurricular Activities** and in common areas on campus
- **Unique Programs and Campus images**

b. Ask administration and faculty what needs they have for photography.
This may be done via email with a due date for response.

c. Compile a list of photographic needs after “a” and “b” are completed. Consider your marketing initiatives for the next budget year. Determine what photos will be needed. Set a goal to provide professional quality photos for recruitment materials, webpage masthead, community presentations, foundation and funding raising efforts.

3. How to hire a professional photographer and negotiate prices for your shoot –

You will want the services of a versatile “location shooter”. They can photograph your president, board, campus, students, events, etc.

a. How can I find a location photographer in my area?

- 1.) **Ask for recommendations from the corporate sector of your community.**
Corporations need to illustrate the various facets of their business, as you do your college. Design firms and advertising agencies may also provide names.
- 2.) **Use the Internet.** This is a great way to view portfolios before you make a contact. If photos are not sharp and in focus, do not put the name on your interview list.

b. Review the Photographer’s portfolio online evaluating it with the above method in #1. If you like what you see proceed with a phone interview. You may have several recommendations for photographers. Interview as many as you can. This will help you understand the talent, experience level and fees of photographers in your area.

Also, check the website for a personal photo of the photographer. Do you see any concerns about his or her appearance as it relates to working with your executive staff, faculty and students?

c. Phone Interview – Once you confirm the photographer shoots on location and uses a digital camera, the following questions will be useful in your phone interview. This could also be done via email. However, the manner the photographer answers the questions on the phone, will give you an idea of his or her communication skills. This is an important skill in a photo shoot. Here are some questions to ask:

- 1.) **What type of file do you shoot and then provide?** You will want digital images of high resolution for use in any media – print to web – and able to be used at a variety of sizes. Best images will be “raw” images allowing for greater flexibility.
- 2.) **What type of lighting do you use for indoor subjects?** You want the photographer to bring in a light system (a power pack and multiple light heads). Generally, a flash on camera or “available light” will not be adequate for indoors. Some sort of fill is always helpful. Bounce flash may produce good results. Your time allotment for the shoot will affect the lighting possibilities.
- 3.) **Do you normally use PhotoShop on images before delivery?** This would be to clean up areas or to enhance the image whether for brightness, clarity, etc. Is this included in your fee or extra?

- 4.) **What is your day rate?** Range may be from \$800 to \$2,500+ per day – this greatly depends on geographical area and the photographer’s experience. Do not be put off by a high rate. Let them know the range of your budget and see if they will negotiate.
- 5.) **Will you do “work for hire” and we do have all rights to the images?**
 - You will want all rights and files to the format your designer needs.

During the conversation consider if this person will work well with your executive staff, faculty and students. Is he or she personable, helpful in the phone interview by volunteering additional information and asking you questions to understand your needs?

d. Hiring the photographer – Schedule a face to face meeting to finalize the hiring of the photographer.

- 1.) **Prepare for this meeting with the following:**
 - a.) **List photos needed** with the number of people to be in each shot and the possible location. You may email this to the photographer in advance.
 - b.) **Gather examples** or tear sheets from magazines, other college view books, business annual reports, catalogues, photographer’s portfolio, etc. of the type of images you want to capture for each photo on your list. This step is very important and will help you communicate with the photographer what you want. In this situation “words” may result in misunderstandings. Place notes on the samples of why you like the image and why it is appropriate for your needs. The explanation will help the photographer understand your choice and needs. He may offer another suggestion to accomplish the same goal. Create an atmosphere of collaboration where the photographer feels at ease in contributing to the project. If your ideas are not the best approach make sure the professional you are hiring feels comfortable telling you so.
 - c.) **A schedule for the day of the shoot.** Always add time into your schedule which will allow for traffic, people being late and unexpected delays.

The above preparation will require thought and research. This will result in a creative process which will flush out bad ideas and refine good ideas. Your time on the front end will produce better communication between you and the photographer helping to prevent disappointment and wasted time on the day of the shoot. The photographer will be impressed with your prep and organization. You may even get a better price and certainly will get photos closer to your expectations.

2.) Agenda for the meeting:

a.) **Go over materials prepared for the meeting with the photographer.**

Ask if he has suggestions or questions – particularly in the areas of location, photo style and timeline. Make adjustments accordingly. If portraits are to be taken, advise the photographer of the diversity of people, i.e. those who wear glasses, have darker skin tones, may have birth defects or deformities, weight issues. It will be helpful for the photographer to be aware of these conditions prior to the shoot.

b.) **Review the tentative schedule.** Discuss if the time is realistic. It is important to allow enough time for lighting set-up and movement from one location to the next. If doing outside shots, consider the time of day to take advantage of the best natural lighting as it may reflect on buildings or on people. Early morning light is cool with afternoon light providing a warm glow – often referred to as the “golden hour”.

If you are using students and actual staff as models, check their schedules and plan accordingly. Also, if you use indoor spaces on campus, confirm availability of rooms and make sure you have enough time to “dress” the room for your photo.

c.) **Outline what you will provide.** Here is a possible short list:

– **Models** – these may be students or staff. Select these people in advance. Consider appearance, gender and racial qualities – these will be the people representing the image of the college’s student body and staff. When you speak with them, ask them to sign a “model release” before you shot. Also, give direction on clothing. This should include colors, patterns, styles, accessories and fit.

Clothing and Hairstyle Note: These elements may quickly date your photography. Your photo shoot will be useable for a longer time if your models wear less trendy fashions and hairstyles. They should be current – but limit the extreme trends. Large hoop earrings may be popular this spring, but by fall small crystal earrings may be the rage.

– **Props** – This may be anything from plants to add color indoors or outdoors, tables, chairs, books, lamps, etc. Any item needed to enhance the photo to visually feature the attributes of your college.

– **Helper/escort to assist the photographer** in getting to the various locations in the shortest amount of time, knowing where restrooms are and providing extra hands to move equipment. This is NOT a photo assistant. It is a support person allowing the photographer to better focus on creating the photos.

– **Food and Water** –If your shoot will be an entire day, providing a lunch of sandwiches, pizza or other protein “quick and easy to eat” food will help to keep the energy level up on your shoot day. Additionally, providing snacks – both salty and sweet and fruit – is a good idea if you are shooting 8-12 hours or maybe for those 4 hour shoots. Ask the photographer for dietary preferences. This does not need to be expensive. You may consider using your college food service department.

d.) **Confirm what the Photographer will supply.** Here is a short list:

– **Photo files**

– **Lighting equipment**

– **Hair and Make-up Stylist (if people are in the photos)** – It is advisable to have a hair and make-up stylist through out the day if possible. If staff portraits are part of the day’s schedule, the stylist may come for that part only. Her role will be to powder shiny foreheads, smooth out skin tones and adjust hair. The photographer may give some direction for this or you may. At a minimum you will need to have a powder puff, loose non-colored powder (CornSilk), a hair lifter comb and brush. With these items a person with a good eye for detail and artistic abilities may be able to fulfill the “hair and makeup artist” role. While this is on the photographer’s list because they will have resources for hair and make-up stylists, this may be put on the college’s list depending on the expertise in this area.

It is important to note the duties of the hair and make-up stylist in this situation is not to apply full make-up as would be the case for television, film or a photo shoot for high profile advertising. However, expertise in these areas will provide the necessary skills should more make-up application be needed.

The stylist may also help with wardrobe. In this role, he or she would look at the clothing of the models – checking colors and patterns and rearrange if necessary to enhance the photo. Attention to detail is critical in this area.

e.) **Go over each set-up and scout locations if possible.** Depending on time, the photographer may need to return to the campus for the scouting of locations. This is especially true for outdoor locations where the time of day will be important. Check weather conditions for your scheduled date and arrange a back up plan if weather is bad. Generally, Spring and Fall are the best seasons for photographing campus exteriors. The colors of Spring flowers and trees or the leaves of Fall make for an inviting and beautiful background. Also, temperatures are moderate and models will not be too hot or cold.

f.) **Confirm the agreed upon fee and how payment will be made.** Keep in mind that your best value will be a full day shot if you have a number of photos to cover. Another option would be to break it up into several 4-6 hour shoots if availability of people and locations become a problem. Be aware this will cost more because the photographer will more than likely not be able to fill the remainder of the day with other work.

Prior to digital photography the expense of “film and processing” were part of expected photo expenses. Today the photographer is his own lab and processor. For an 8 hour shoot the photographer may spend 2 to 5 days processing, culling, retouching and uploading or burning discs of the images. The fee is based on the entire service from the prep time before the shoot through to the delivery of the images.

4. How to manage the actual photo shoot day –

The first step is to create a quick reference checklist for the shoot.

This should include all activities which need to be done prior to the day and on the shoot day. Include each task, who is responsible for the task, names and contact information (email and cell phone numbers) of those involved, props, food, timeline and budget expense and any other items needed.

The following is a guide for the day:

- a. Confirm** with your photographer, hair and make-up stylist, student and staff models and support staff one week and the day before the shoot. Should someone not be able to participate, this will allow you time to replace them.
- b. Prepare a shot schedule** for all participants. This should include the overall plan with each individually highlighted for the receiving participant. Notes should be attached to remind the participant about clothing requirements, props or anything they should bring. Advise them if hair/make-up touch up and if food and beverage will be available. These may be sent via email with both confirmations in “a.” This detail may “seem excessive”, but keep in mind if your models – student or staff – do not show up on time it will cause delays and may jeopardize your shoot. On the day of the shoot have extra printouts of the schedules for those who may need one.
- c. If you are providing food on the day of the shoot,** designate a person to manage this area. An ample amount of cold water should be available for anyone throughout the day. Also, provide light snacks and fruit for those who may be on site with the photo shoot for 2-4 hours. Review any food preferences the photographer mentioned in the hiring meeting and plan accordingly.

Keep in mind finger food and non-messy foods. Food should be nutritious with protein and carbohydrates. Provide napkins, any necessary utensils, plates and hand sanitizer.
- d. Make sure cell phones or a walkie-talkie system** is available to communicate across campus with staff. It is also helpful to have a “runner” for last minute or emergency requests. This person may be the person in charge of the catering.
- e. Take your original photo example sheets to the shoot** to be able to compare and communicate what you want as the photo shoot proceeds throughout the day.

f. If portraits of the executive staff are taken, make sure you or a staff member is at the location to introduce the photographer to your president, trustees and other key college personnel. Ask the photographer if you may look at the image. Make sure you are pleased with the image. In the case of heavy people who may have a double chin, a camera angle coming from a high point will minimize the chin. If the camera angle is low and looking up or at a level plane with the eyes, the image will be less flattering.

g. With each photo set-up check the image in the camera for the following:

1.) Check the cropping:

What you see from the side of the photographer with your naked eye is not the same as what the camera is reading. Most photographers will crop the image in the camera to what looks best to them. Remember you may always crop in on an image after you have the full initial image, but if the initial image is cropped in the camera you can never pull out for more image area. Consider the image and make sure you have all you need for your uses.

2.) Check the lighting:

For portraits, is the person separated from the background by a hair light and are the shoulders rim lighted? Is one side of the face in a harsh shadow where detail goes too dark? Is the light too hot or bright and not flattering?

For inside locations, does the lighting provide a depth to the image? If gels are used, are they too strong or too subtle? Are the gels in the right places creating a pleasing look? Are people well lighted? Faces should have soft lighting and eyes should not appear in the camera as dark holes? People should not make shadows on walls or floors, unless that is the technique you are wanting to create.

For outside locations, make sure the time of day is creating the lighting effect you desire. Check in the camera for the lighting of the people. You want light to separate them from the background and for enough front lighting to keep eyes from being dark holes. Dark shadows may not be attractive. High noon bright sun is generally not good photo time unless under white tenting to soften the natural light and to keep the eyes from squinting.

3.) Check for the details:

a.) If people are in the shot, look for these details:

- Are foreheads shiny?
- Are clothes adjusted properly?
- Are you seeing too much cleavage?
- Is a strand of hair blown over the face?
- Are the eyes looking at the right place?
- Are hands and legs in natural positions?
- Are the clothing colors working well?
- Are gender and race balanced in the composition?
- Do facial expressions look natural and real?

b.) Check the environment for these details:

- Are trash cans or trash in view?
- Are cars distracting?
- Are items like trees and poles oddly coming out of heads?
- Are inappropriate signs in view?
- If props are used do they look correct?

If you have any concerns or red flags, NOW is the time to speak up and ask the question. Do not expect the photographer to catch all of these details. He is very busy with the technical aspects of photography – exposure, focus, managing lighting, etc.

Fortunately with PhotoShop many image corrections are possible. But this will take additional computer time and may add to your budget. So, it is best to take care of these items on the front end.

It is advisable to review your staff on this list. The more eyes looking for these details and others you may come up with – the better.

5. How to find good stock photography –

Stock photography has come along way in the 21st century. The use of stock photography presents an alternate option to keep your photo budget in check. You will certainly need to have quality portrait photography of college personnel, special events, campus buildings, settings and unique labs, theatres and classrooms. These will only be achieved by hiring a professional as we have discussed.

However, the use of stock images representing students and college life offer these advantages to consider.

1. **The photos are a professional presentation** at a fraction of the cost of a photo shoot.
2. **The models are attractive** and can look like your students on campus.
3. **There is no worry the students in the photo will cause embarrassment** to the college – they are anonymous.
4. **The photo will not become unusable due to death** of the student or staff.
5. **They are inexpensive** and may be purchased regularly making the styles of dress and hair always current.
6. **Images are not dated** by the knowledge that a student graduated three years ago. Students generally move through the two-year college programs in two-years, so using photos of students over two years old may actually date the image unnecessarily in a negative way.

Searching on the Internet is the best source for stock photography. Because these services are always changing and being updated, the demand is growing from all business sectors. You will need to allow adequate time to create and update your browser bookmarks of stock photography sites.

Here are a few providers to get started:

Veer Images (veer.com)
The I Spot (theispot.com)
Artzooks (artzooks.com)
Jupiter Images (jupiterimages.com)
Shutterstock (shutterstock.com)
Getty Images (gettyimages.com)
iStockphoto.com
Photos.com

Some of these offer images for as low as \$3.00, while others may be \$500 for a CD of a hundred images to one image for \$795. You will also find subscription plans.

Remember: Good photography is a solid investment. It will pay for itself with an impressive image for your college.