

Conway's home-grown influencers boost engagement

By Shelby Fiegel

Arkansas communities are facing competition for resources, jobs, visitors and citizens regionally, nationally and internationally. In a global market, it's become even more difficult to stand out from the crowd. Our communities must get creative to attract social and economic investment.

One way to garner attention from new and diverse audiences is to turn to influencers. According to Influencer Marketing Hub, an influencer is defined as someone with the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others because of their authority, knowledge, position or relationship with their audience. Influencers often have a distinct niche in which they actively engage. Many communities engage influencers to promote assets within their communities, such as hiking and biking trails, arts and culture, culinary experiences and shopping opportunities.

While community leaders can turn to outside influencers to promote their cities and towns, what if we looked internally and developed our own "home-grown" influencers, people who already love our communities and have chosen to invest in them?

When the NCAA announced a policy earlier this year to allow student athletes the ability to get paid for their NIL (name, image and likeness), the Conway Convention and Visitors Bureau, in partnership with the University of Central Arkansas and the Conductor, saw an opportunity to develop influencers from the inside and create a program that was the first of its kind in the nation.

A diverse group of UCA student athletes signed NIL agreements with the CVB in July 2021 as a part of the 4+40 program. The program name 4+40 is a nod to the four years of college where the students learn the skills and acquire the resources needed to make them successful leaders in their careers, with 40 years representing the average career length.

The goal of the agreements is to utilize the students as ambassadors to promote the city of Conway's quality of life and place to potential visitors and citizens. Selected students have the opportunity to develop and participate in ad campaigns and testimonial videos

while also utilizing their own social media accounts to create organic content about Conway.

Every UCA student athlete was invited to apply for the program via an online survey developed by the CVB. Students were invited to be a part of 4+40 based on credit status, academic standing, interest in participating in the program and their passion for the city of Conway.

"This first class of NIL student athletes provides a unique perspective on Conway," said CVB Executive Director Rachel Shaw. "Some moved here from large cities thinking Conway would be too small to have anything fun. Some moved here from very small, rural communities thinking Conway would be huge and hard to navigate. All of them seem to have come to the same conclusion that Conway is neither of those things. We plan to use their testimonials, and other first-hand accounts of what makes Conway special, to promote all our city has to offer, no matter where you are visiting from."

The program is a benefit for Conway and for the students as well. The program serves as a workforce development program, providing the students with training in multiple areas, connections to the local business community and a professional headshot.

UCA Director of Athletics Dr. Brad Teague said, "We are fortunate to have this unique program in Conway and at UCA. The best part about this program is the educational sessions the CVB and the Conductor provide to the cohort. Our student athletes are educated on life skills, including finance, taxes, branding, entrepreneurship, job satisfaction and more."

The Conway CVB contracted the Conductor, a public-private partnership between UCA and the firm Startup Junkie that provides entrepreneurial resources and maker space, to serve as the organizer and developer of all training programs for the UCA student athletes. According to managing director of the Conductor Jeff Standridge, the NIL program will create many opportunities for student athletes. "Conversely, without the proper guidance, its many benefits could easily become devastating consequences," he said. "Our focus has been on helping our student athletes to learn how

to creatively tell their own authentic stories, how to optimize their personal and social media brands, how to plan for and manage the personal finance implications (spending, saving, taxes, etc.), and how to consider their lives beyond athletics in terms of employment, entrepreneurship or whatever other career avenues they might pursue.”

Currently, a program like 4+40 has not been replicated by any other communities or schools, but imagine if communities across Arkansas developed similar programs to engage local influencers, whether they are college students, business owners, nonprofit leaders or other thought leaders. The conversations led by those local influencers could be transformational in the way external audiences view our communities.

Our citizens are on the front line of promoting our cities and towns. If we can harness the power of those citizens, we can develop even brighter futures for our communities.

Interested in learning more about the 4+40 program and how you can kick start something similar in your community? Reach out to Rachel Shaw at Rachel.Shaw@conwayarkansas.org or Grace Rains at grace@arconductor.org for more information. 📧



Shelby Fiegel is the Director of the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development. You can contact Shelby at sfiegel@uca.edu or 501-450-5269.

ETC Engineers & Architects, Inc.
Engineers, Architects and Planners

1510 S. Broadway, Little Rock, AR 72202
Phone: 501-375-1786
Email: natem@etcengineersinc.com
Website: www.etcengineersinc.com

Designing A Better Arkansas since 1978