

Working for Admission

Getting into a good college has evolved into nearly a full-time profession. Which is why these days, many OC families hire professionals to guide them.

BY SUSAN SEGAL



There was a time when applying for college was a straightforward process. You worked hard for good grades, took the SAT's, consulted the high school guidance counselor, researched colleges, sent away for applications, filled them out, and crossed your fingers. Nowadays, at least among those who have the means and motivation, choosing and getting into a good college is a lengthy process that begins in the freshman year of high school and soon becomes an almost full-time occupation. And good luck to he or she who attempts this journey on their own. Such delicate matters, it is reasoned now, cannot be left to amateurs. The result? Private

college consultants who help navigate the journey.

The question of why over the last 30 years the college admissions process has become more difficult has a number of complex answers hidden inside one simple one: more competition. There are more applicants for a limited number of openings. In part, this is due to simple demographics. The number of new freshmen has been steadily on the rise and this will continue until 2008. Since the number of colleges and universities isn't increasing comparably, the schools can afford to be choosier, and this makes the going tougher for the average freshmen. Students with excellent grades and test scores are now ubiquitous rather than rare, and so the race to be the chosen one demands more accomplishments to record on the application.

Another California phenomenon is the shrinking of the world and the subsequent opening of minds. Until quite recently, the majority of California high school seniors wanted to go to school in their home state. According to Vicki DeFelice of DeFelice and Geller, Inc., a private guidance counseling service in Corona del Mar with over 20 years' experience, in the past, many local high school students hadn't heard of any east coast schools beyond the Ivy League. With the advent of the Internet, the increase in travel among young families, and the virtual avalanche of new how-to-get-into-college books, seniors are vastly more educated about the variety of college possibilities available nationwide.

And so they are confused.

Enter the private college consultant, a person who often has an admissions background and therefore knows what admissions people are looking for; who spends 20% of his or her time travelling the country

touring and getting to know more colleges and universities than any one applicant could ever investigate; a person who knows the time frame within which each portion of an application should be completed, and, perhaps most important, the one who, if hired early enough, can advise students as to how to "compose" their entire high school life to maximize their chances at getting into the college of their choice.

Years back, as the competition for top schools heightened, people started hiring private consultants to give them a leg up. "Once people [heard] about this," says DeFelice, "they didn't want to be left out." Now, at least in high-achieving (and high-earning) areas like coastal Orange County, hiring a private college counselor seems to be as commonplace as getting a car on your 16th birthday (as one high school freshman put it, "It's not a matter of if you get a car on your 16th birthday, but what kind you get").

Of course, the majority of college-bound students across the nation may find it difficult if not impossible to afford the extra help a private counselor can give - the service runs between \$3,000 and \$5,000. In an area like coastal Orange County, where it's not unusual to spend that much on a prom dress, cost does not seem to be an issue. However, there's little debate that using a private counselor puts those who can afford the extra guidance ahead of those who can't, and much debate about the fairness of this. But private guidance counselors (some of whom do some pro bono work) are here to stay, and most families feel that if they can avail themselves of the services, they should.

Most private consultants will tell you that while school counselors - even those in top private schools - do a good job, they are required to manage too many kids to be able to offer the individual attention and resources that a private counselor can. There is a definite tension between the two, with private counselors claiming public ones are threatened by their work, and public school counselors feeling that private counselors "package" the students too much, and do too much of the work for them. "It's sad there's not more open communication between high school counselors and private counselors," says Cindy Muchnick, a private college counselor from Newport Beach. Together, she says, they can only help the student more.

Still, the question of privilege is not resolved. "This is definitely a luxury item," says DeFelice. "On the other hand, it is so expensive to go to the good private colleges. It can cost upwards of \$150,000. What other investment of that magnitude would you make without talking to a professional?"

On Your Mark...

So, your hopefully-Harvard-bound prodigy enters high school and you think you have a year or two before the college frenzy begins? Think again, say the private consultants. Ideally, they start working with families as soon as the kids enter high school.

"Before they ever come to me I send [prospective students] a questionnaire so I can get to know them," says Muchnick. "If they come as freshmen, I have them fill it out the next year and the year after that,"

as their high school careers evolve. She usually meets with the students in fall and spring of freshman, sophomore and junior year, during which time "we barely talk about college. They need to just be high schoolers, and find out what they like to do."

DeFelice concurs. She, too, meets only once or twice with students in their early high school years, but she considers those meetings vitally important to the student's future options. In the freshman/sophomore meetings DeFelice talks with students about their courses, activities and leadership roles, as well as what they are doing with their summers, all with an eye to what will go on the college application. "There are decisions you make early on that have a long-term impact. If you don't take certain courses or get on the honor track early it can impact your college options." That is, if you qualify for the honors track. If you don't, counselors say, you have to radically alter your expectations.

Ellen Weinstein, of Academic Advisors in Newport Beach, meets even more often with her freshmen and sophomores: every six weeks or so. She immediately gets kids working on their resumes. "It helps them see what they've done, and what their goals should be. I even like to show freshmen a college application - not to frighten them, but so they'll see what the long-term goal is."

Counselors will encourage experimentation and exploration in the freshman year, though the pressure to decide on a viable extracurricular program heats up in sophomore year, and from the start, the importance of grades is emphasized. "Early on we discuss grades," says Weinstein. "If they're not doing well, we discuss study habits, homework habits, etc., and I advise them on how to improve. How to get their teachers to help them outside of class, how to get a tutor."

So much for the carefree days of youth.

Get Set...

If you are working with a private college counselor, as soon as junior year is over, you hit the ground running. Unlike the more infrequent meetings held in earlier years, the student will now be meeting with their counselor anywhere from 10 to 12 times on average. Some counselors, like DeFelice and Weinstein, charge a flat fee for the senior year, and others, like Muchnick, charge by the hour. The routine is roughly the same, however.

The initial senior year consultation or two is to get acquainted (or reacquainted, if the student is returning from earlier years) with the family, and with the student's interests and achievements. By this time, most students - and/or their parents - have a list of schools they are interested in. And here's where the counselor really earns his or her pay. "One of my major functions is helping students find the right places, not just the names they've heard of," says DeFelice. Sometimes the student has his or her eye set on a school that is inappropriate or unrealistic, given their class standing. Says DeFelice, "That's a key thing: To try to figure out a good fit. Frequently, a student will end up going to a college that when they came to me they'd never heard of."

"We start working together the day after they finish Junior year and work through the summer," says Muchnick. "We come up with a realistic

idea of colleges, because we now have a realistic transcript of their grades, rank, activities" Getting "realistic," is sometimes a challenge, Muchnick agrees. "Some of the students only know the schools their parents went to, or what's on their sweatshirt. My job is to educate them" about other options.

"We give the kids a 'leveled' group of schools," says Weinstein, who has a staff of five. "That is, schools we know they'll get into, schools they'll probably get into, and dream schools." That list is further refined by broadening the idea of a "dream" school. So if your ambitious senior just has to get into Harvard, but her record suggests that's unlikely, a good counselor will identify the qualities about Harvard that the student so ardently desires, and then see if another, more realistic school would fulfill those same needs. Also, they will make sure that all the schools on the list are truly viable, or they should be erased.

"I say to my students, let's look at the least competitive school on your list. Would you be miserable going there? If so, then you need to find other schools to put on there," says DeFelice.

Summer is also the time to review and refine last-minute activities and see what can be fine-tuned. Is there a great summer program the student can enroll in that will put the finishing impressive touch on his or her resume? From whom should they be getting letters of recommendation? Should they consider trying for early decision or early action? (Early decision is a binding agreement whereby if the student is accepted, he or she agrees to withdraw all other applications and accept the school's offer - conversely, if the student is rejected, he or she may not reapply in the main pool; early action is nonbinding, and allows a rejected student to possibly be deferred to the main applicant pool.) Do they need to try for financial aid? ("I don't do financial advising," says Muchnick, who refers clients to experts in that field. "Frankly," she adds, "most of my clients don't worry about money.")

Get Set to Test

Ah, the SAT. The bane of high school seniors' existence. Creator of sweaty palms, fluttering hearts, and the sudden inability to remember your own name. And yet, it remains the most utilized standardized test in the US, and still carries enormous weight with college admissions.

Whatever you think of the SAT (or its close cousin, the ACT) it is an unpleasant fact of college application life. Most private counselors don't do direct SAT tutoring. Some larger firms do offer it as a separate service (and fee), but many, including DeFelice, Muchnick and Weinstein, simply recommend that students go to Kaplan or Princeton Review, the well-travelled test prep organizations, or to private tutors. "I definitely recommend test prep," says DeFelice, even to students who expect to do very well. "It's the rare person who couldn't bump up the already good score."

The most important service the counselors themselves can offer in regard to the SAT is to advise the student on the best time to take it, based on that student's needs and abilities - whether that be to take it early and often, to take the PSAT first, whether and what subject tests to

take, etc. The counselors may not be able to aid in the actual test taking, but they can help alleviate some of the anxiety inherent in the process.

Go

Ask 100 high school seniors what the most daunting aspect of the college application is and you are likely to get 98 answers that are the same: the personal essay. Sometimes called the personal statement, over time, the personal essay has actually morphed into three: one long essay and two shorter ones, as well as optional ones that most counselors advise writing. To most applicants, even good writers, writing these essays is torture.

And yet, over time, the essay has taken on more and more importance to the colleges. With so many students being competitive in the quantifiable areas like grades and test scores, the student's ability to express him or herself clearly and creatively, along with the fact that good writing is a strong predictor of success in college, the essays count more than ever.

Most private college counselors spend a lot of time on the essay. Of course, the questions are straightforward and there are any number of books on the subject - Muchnick herself, a former admissions officer at the University of Chicago, has authored one of the most popular, *Best College Admissions Essays* (Thompson/Peterson Publishing), now in its second printing. Still, most applicants, left to their own devices, revert to the writing they're used to: the five-paragraph expository essay required in high school.

A good counselor will steer the student away from this formula, and away from the stock, turmoil-filled sob story students seem to think they have to write, the kind that is likely to make the admissions officers' eyes glaze over. Muchnick uses her questionnaire to help inspire her kids. It asks questions such as, What was your most embarrassing moment; What is your personal motto; What funny family tradition do you have? "Stuff that is revealing about them," Muchnick says, is what sparks the most interesting and thoughtful essays.

DeFelice, who has an undergraduate degree in English from Stanford and a Masters in Teaching from Harvard, offers an example of a successful essay. She had a student who had a learning disability that had impacted her whole life, especially in school. The student's instinct to write about her struggle with the disability was right, but, as with many applicants, she was about to write a sob story of her struggles. A definite snoozer for the admissions people. But when DeFelice questioned further, she discovered that the girl had had an amazing adventure with Outward Bound, the wilderness experience. "I asked her to see if she could combine the learning disability with that experience and it was like a lightbulb went off." The girl went on to write a compelling and moving essay that took a fresh perspective on an oft-repeated topic.

What about the accusation that hiring a private counselor means getting a pro to write your essay for you? Good counselors adamantly oppose that scenario. "We polish, we do not write the essays," says DeFelice. Muchnick argues that it's not in the student's best interest to let

anyone work on their essay for them, rather than with them. Most admissions people can spot those essays a mile off. "It's a red flag," says Muchnick. "It'll be an essay that sounds way too sophisticated for the student - and they'll have a B in English, or only an average recommendation from an English teacher, or the other writing on their application will give them away."

Not only that, such a scam can get you barred from a school system altogether. According to Marguerite Bonous-Hammart, director of Admissions and Relations with Schools for U.C. Irvine, the kinds of discrepancies Muchnick describes may be investigated, and, if it is determined that there was "academic falsification," the student will be barred from applying to any U.C. Ever.

Which is not to say that there aren't more unscrupulous counselors - and parents, for that matter, who do put their "personal stamp" on students' essays. "I had a student give me an essay and say, 'Here's an essay my mom wrote, what do you think?'" says Muchnick. "I handed it back and said, 'I think I'll read it when it's something you've written.' She said, 'Well, she did it for my older sister,'" who'd gotten into a good school.

Mom and Dad

Where do parents more appropriately fit? Most private counselors will include parents in the early, getting-to-know-you meeting. Counselors usually want to know about the parents' backgrounds as well as the kids': where they went to school, what their hopes are for their children, etc. After those early meetings though, parents are gently encouraged to stay home. "I have a much better working relationship with the student without the parents," says Muchnick. "When the parents come, they usually do most of the talking. Usually, the next meeting [without the parents] is when I get more out of the kid."

"I see a huge part of my job as listening and trying to get a good sense of the family," says DeFelice. "The family has a lot invested in this. Also, one of the major things we do is to help the parents get out of the nuts and bolts of the process. Parents will say, 'I don't want to be the one who does all the nagging,'" about filling out forms, writing essays, etc. "It's important to have someone who isn't emotionally invested" in the process. Ultimately, though, says DeFelice, "I consider my relationship to be with the student," though she is very cognizant that the parents are the ones paying the bill, and they may be the final arbiters of the student's future.

But perhaps the most important - and challenging - job the private counselor has in relation to the parents - far more than school counselors - is in getting the parents to take a realistic view of the possibilities for their kids.

What parent doesn't hope to see an Ivy League name on their kids' sweatshirts, even if those kids are more state university material? "Parents are usually far more unreasonable than the kids," says Weinstein. She says a good part of her job is to "educate the whole family and hope they're willing to broaden their horizons."



So, ultimately, is hiring a private college counselor worth it? Most families will say yes, if only because giving your child every advantage his peers have is de rigeur in a competitive community. Whether your child is headed for the Ivies or the UC's, the established east coast institution or the upstart west coast one, private guidance counselors promise not only to make your way easier, but to help you and your scholar think outside the typical box and ensure that they get into a school that they will enjoy and benefit from. As Muchnick puts it, "There's a place for everyone."

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