

# Need help gaining admittance? Hire a private college counselor

The numbers are scary. It is getting harder to gain admittance into the nation's more selective colleges.

In fact, 60 percent of colleges and universities have reported increases in applications in the last five years. The competition is stiffer. The number of students scoring 600 or better on the SAT has risen by 18 percent. Your high school counselor may not have the time to devote to you. While a 250-to-1 student-to-counselor ratio is recommended, the average Illinois high school counselor works with 700 students.

Before you tear your hair out, calm down. Remember your life will not be ruined if you don't get into your first-choice college.

Private college counselors will tell you all this. They will also tell you that you could benefit from their services.

Private college counseling is not new. Nancy G. Marcus of Winnetka has been in the business 28 years. "The appropriate reason to come to me is to make a good match," she said.

Her clients run the gamut. Some come from wealthy families, but she has two students this year whose fa-

thers are out of work.

These services are also not just for those kids hoping to get into the Harvards and Yales. "I get under-achievers and overachievers for the most part," said Susan J. Bigg, a certified educational planner in Lincoln Park.

Every year Marcus said she gets a few students who suddenly wonder, "Oh my God, who is going to take me (in their senior year). Some have good test scores but bad grades."

But senior year isn't when the planning should begin. If possible, a counselor can help sophomores and juniors choose activities that will make them stand out later when they are applying, said Chuck Hughes, founder and CFO of one of the newest entrants to the field, Road To College, based in Massachusetts.

"I'm not giving them a directive to do something that isn't them," he said. Instead, he shows them the things that, within the spectrum of their interests, will look best on a college application. Hughes comes from an insider point of view: For five years he was a senior admissions officer at Harvard College.

Road To College offers various packages so students can choose among the services based on what they want and what they can afford.

But generally most counselors help students find the right college for them, aid in the application process so that students are presented in the best possible light and then try to get them to relax a bit.

Your average high school counselor is good at helping with the college search, but not on the other side of the application, said Hughes.

Once a student decides where to apply, a private counselor may help the student come up with a good topic for the essay and then review the finished product.

"I will help them with it, but I am not going to polish it to perfection," Bigg said. "It has to be the voice of a 17-year-old and some colleges are getting wise to too-perfect essays."

All say they attempt to calm both students' and parents' fears. "The assumption is that if my child doesn't go to a certain school, their lives are forever circumscribed and that is not the case," said Marcus.

*Merry Mayer*



**College counselor Nancy G. Marcus of Winnetka has been advising students for 28 years. —TOM CRUZE/SUN-TIMES**