

PRIVATE Clubs

College Daze

Private counselors can help steer high schoolers down the complex path to higher learning. Is this route right for your child?

By Karen M. Thomas / Illustration by Serge Bloch

When it came time to think about college, Joanna Schiffman of Evanston, Ill., wasn't sure what she was looking for. Then a high school junior, Joanna knew she wanted a small liberal arts college with strong academics and a liberal-minded campus. But she didn't know what she wanted to study or what colleges and universities to consider. The guidance counselors at her large public high school didn't seem helpful.

"It was pretty stressful," she says.

Her parents, though, knew exactly what to do. They sent Joanna to Nancy Marcus in Winnetka, Ill., the same private counselor who helped guide her older brother through the college selection and admissions process.

With rising tuition costs and deepening competition at the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, a growing number of parents are turning to independent advisers to help their children find the right campus, coach them through the application process, and help counsel families through the emotional minefield of sending a child off to college.

Marcus helped Joanna develop a list of colleges. She told her to play up her math skills in admission essays because she knew female students who excel in math have an edge. She coached her on which classes to take her senior year and helped edit her essays. Joanna was accepted by early decision at her top choice, Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. She's now preparing to start her sophomore year and considers Wesleyan a perfect fit.

"She kept me organized," Joanna, 19, says about Marcus. "I got my applications and essays done early. My friends who didn't see counselors were overwhelmed and didn't even know where to start."

Growing Trend

According to Mark Sklarow, Executive Director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, a national organization of private education counselors, the number of high school seniors working with these advisers has doubled over the last five years, to well over 120,000. Consultants also have grown in number as the demand increases for their services. IECA, headquartered in Fairfax, Va., has been in existence 32 years with an average of 300 members, but now has 700, Sklarow says.

Counselors' fees start at about \$120 an hour and most packages average about \$3,500. The counselors offer usually at least two years of consultation and individualized attention to make sure that students like Joanna find colleges and universities that best fit their academic interests and personalities. They help students choose high school courses and encourage them to use their summer breaks to participate in science programs, art camps, or volunteer programs that enhance a student's profile.

The trend has grown in part, Sklarow says, because students no longer confine themselves to colleges within their home states as generations before them once did, and, therefore, need help discovering a wider selection of possible schools. The growing cost of tuition drives parents to make sure that their children choose wisely. And some parents also are clearly seeking an edge in the competitive admissions process.

“By and large, people come to me for two reasons: They either want me to find a college that they haven't thought about, or they're looking for me to maximize their child's chances to get into a top college,” says Steven Roy Goodman, a Washington, D.C.-based private counselor.

“As it becomes more difficult to get in, you don't need me to tell you Princeton is a good school,” he continues. “The issue is why should your child get in rather than your neighbor's child. I help students figure out what makes them unusual and help translate that into admissions speak so that a student maximizes their chances.”

Meanwhile, some parents say that high school guidance counselors are too overloaded to give their children individual attention. Even parents with children in private schools, where counselors typically spend more time advising college-bound students, say they want an even more individualized life coach approach to help their children navigate the college process.

Special Attention

Traditional high school counselors have met the trend with skepticism, saying that some advisers rob students of necessary personal growth by doing too much, from rewriting essays to filling out applications. Private counselors say that good advisers make sure students do the bulk of the work.

“I have nothing but the highest regard for high school counselors,” says Zelda Hantz, a Dallas mother of two sons who hired an independent counselor to help her children when it came time to apply for college. “I think the counselors tried very hard, but my kids were one of 399 or 400 kids who they had to deal with. It wasn't personal ... it was just a matter of the numbers.”

Instead, she turned to Catherine Marrs, who focused on each child and took the onus off of her. “I am a very nagging mother — the kind that says, ‘Where are you going and who are you with?’” says Hantz, a single parent. “I needed somebody who was going to take over my job for me and be far more patient and polite and yet hold their feet to the fire.”

Marrs, she says, wasn't only able to help her boys get into their first-choice schools — Washington University in St. Louis for 21-year-old Josh and Tulane University in New Orleans for 19-year-old Jeremy — she also helped them find scholarships and financial aid that Hantz says she wouldn't have found on her own.

Most consultants agree there are parents who think that their reputations are on the line if their children aren't admitted to top-tier schools. It is the consultant's job, they say, to help those parents develop more realistic expectations and to open an honest dialogue between them and their children, even as they help the children take their best shot at getting into those schools.

“Part of what a good consultant will do is help parents adjust to the fact that a kid can be successful in life if he goes to the University of Colorado as opposed to Yale,” Sklarow says. “They can help keep the family dynamic calm and positive by directing conversations so it isn't so anxious or oppositional.”

He predicts that the trend will continue.

“Parents are trying to make things better for their own kids. It's just so ingrained in American society, so parents show no signs of backing off when it comes to college,” he says. “People who hire consultants know there will be a better match in the end. It's not about getting into the Ivies. It's about getting the right match.”