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# **A Guide to Lead You through the College Maze**

Independent counselors can be a huge help in choosing the right school

Two years ago, high school junior Jennifer Beekman knew she was headed for college. She just had no idea where. An avid tennis player, Beekman figured she would like to play intercollegiate sports and take sports-related courses. The North Potomac (Md.) teenager also wanted to stay on the East Coast. Other than that, "I was completely confused," she says. "I didn't even know where to start." What's more, she wanted more individual attention than she thought she could get from her high school guidance counselor.

Beekman's solution? She sought the help of an independent college consultant, who was able to suggest schools that fit her tastes and talents, and then advise her on how to get in. On the recommendation of her counselor, Shirley Levin, Beekman applied early to Ithaca College in Ithaca, N.Y., a small liberal arts school that offered an intriguing communication arts major focusing on sports. Lo and behold, she was accepted and entered as a freshman there last September. "I fell in love with it immediately," she says. "And I would never have applied if it weren't for my counselor."

Her experience is one shared by an increasing number of college-bound students. About 11% of last year's freshman class used a private counselor for help with everything from selecting colleges to learning interview techniques, according to the Independent Educational Consultants Assn. (IECA) in Fairfax, Va. That's up from 1% in 1990. The ranks of full- and part-time counselors also is growing, to about 3,000 today from 300 five years ago.

Students often turn to independent counselors to get a competitive edge, especially as the number of applicants to top institutions has surged. The University of Pennsylvania, for example, accepted just 22% of applicants in 2000, vs. 42% a decade ago. Result: To get into an A-list school, even the best students must try harder. And everyone else must consider a broader menu of choices than they might have in a previous generation. "What worked for Mom and Dad may not work for the kids," says Mark Sklarow, executive director of the IECA. At the same time, many overworked high school guidance counselors can't give students the attention they need.

FAR AFIELD. But what, exactly, can an educational consultant do for you? The work usually starts in junior year, when students and parents realize that D-day is nearing. Students mostly meet with the counselors alone for an hour or so at a time, although the first, more lengthy consultation usually includes parents. Initially, these consultants spend the time getting to know the students, learning about their talents, grades, and what makes them tick. The consultant puts together a preliminary list of 20 to 30 likely schools for the student to research. The two then go through a process of paring down the choices until they get to a final selection, usually seven to nine colleges.

That list often includes schools the student hasn't heard of or wouldn't have considered without the counselor's input. Take Frank Ward of Raleigh, N.C. When he was a junior at

Needham B. Broughton High School, he assumed he would attend a school in the South that was strong in English and history. But, after a few sessions, his adviser, Ann Crandall Sloan, realized the outgoing Ward would do just fine if he branched out geographically. "She challenged me to take risks I wouldn't have attempted on my own," he says. So they assembled a list of eight schools, including Denison University in Granville, Ohio. Ward was accepted at seven of his choices--and wound up heading north to Ohio.

Consultants also advise students on filling out applications. They might spend several sessions hashing out essay themes and going over rough drafts. Then there's the matter of choosing extracurricular activities and courses likely to impress admissions officers. Beekman took an honors Spanish class after her counselor explained that colleges look more kindly on students who take challenging courses in their senior year. Donald Despertt took a summer enrichment program at Cornell University the summer before his senior year at Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School in Washington. "I knew we could use that as leverage," says Kpakpundu Ezeze, Despertt's consultant. Ezeze also advised him to take a full load of advanced placement courses. Despertt is now a Georgetown University freshman on a full scholarship.

College counselors take some pressure off Mom and Dad at a time when the relationship with their teenage offspring may be strained. As an impartial expert, the independent counselor often will get a better reception from kids than their parents would. Two years ago, Nicole Washington, then a junior at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, ignored her mother's pleas to look at colleges. But almost as soon as her adviser made the same suggestion, she started setting up visits.

**VOLUNTEERS.** As you'd expect, all this doesn't come cheap. Depending on the location, fees range from \$65 an hour to a retainer of \$2,500 or more. Students and counselors can spend up to 30 hours together over the course of their relationship. Indeed, most students who use such a service come from families with incomes in excess of \$75,000, says Patricia McDonough, an associate professor in the education department at the University of California at Los Angeles, who has conducted several studies of independent counselors.

Still, finding an affordable consultant is possible, especially in California and the Northeast, where many are based. Some, such as Ezeze, charge on a sliding scale from as little as \$100 a year, or volunteer at local libraries or with organizations serving underprivileged youth. (That's how Despertt hooked up with Ezeze.) Another option is to spend just two or three sessions with a counselor.

Independent counselors aren't licensed, so finding a good one can take work. Ultimately, even the best consultant can't get a D student into Harvard University or guarantee a perfect fit between student and school. When Susan Strickland looked at colleges five years ago, she thought she wanted a small school similar to her high school in Bloomfield Hills, Mich. The counselor she hired steered her to the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., which met her requirements. But after a few months on campus, Strickland realized she needed something bigger. Now, she's a senior at Brown University, due to graduate in December. College consultants can only do so much. The rest is up to the student.

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