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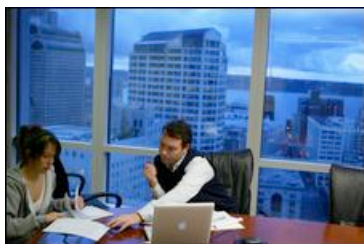
More students turn to consultants for help applying to college

By AMY ROLPH
P-I REPORTER

Just leave it to the experts.

The haircut, the brake job and the 1040 were long ago ceded to the pros by most people. And now families are turning to experts to help their teenagers score an acceptance letter from the right college at a time when institutions of higher education are getting choosier about whom they let in.

Private college consultants have been around for decades -- most notably in the eastern U.S. -- but their numbers and visibility have been growing locally as more families seek a steady hand to guide them through the labyrinth of college admissions.



zoom Joshua Trujillo / P-I
Roosevelt High School senior Miriam Robinson meets with admission strategist David Montesano at College Match on Monday.

Most consultants won't promise they can get a high school student into an Ivy League school, but they will help students keep track of deadlines, groom their extracurricular lineup and devise a list of schools that could be a good fit.

"Parents just want to know there's someone in their kid's corner, who is going to be focused on that particular child and be able to take some of the worry out of their minds," said Pauline Reiter, a Bellevue-based consultant who has been in the businesses almost 20 years.

Reiter has watched college entrance grow more competitive over recent years, most notably since the magazine U.S. News & World Report started ranking colleges according to their prestige -- a measure based partially on the school's selectivity. Last year, Stanford University admitted just 11 percent of applicants. This year, Princeton accepted fewer than 10 percent, and Whitman College in Walla Walla admitted fewer than half its applicants.

Suddenly, back-up schools aren't backups anymore. High school students are applying to twice as many schools, and anxiety levels seem to be at an all-time high.

That's why Kelly and Troy Thompson of North Bend brought in Kiersten Murphy to work with Tana, their 17-year-old daughter.

"I know my daughter is a little stressed, but having Kiersten on our team has made it much more pleasant," Kelly Thompson said.

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Murphy outlined a daily schedule of tasks for Tana so her parents "get to be the good guys," Thompson added.

Murphy is one of many consultants who subscribe to the belief that high school students should be exposed to less well-known schools that could end up being a better match than Harvard, Columbia, Yale or even the more accessible University of Washington.

"The only thing I can hope to promise is that they're going to find a lot of schools they're really going to like," Murphy said.

"But you do get the phone calls that say, 'My child has to go to a U.S. News & World Report top-20 school.' It's a process of education to explain to families that's not necessarily what makes a good school -- or a good fit for their child."

Emily King, a former Mount Si High School student, worked with Murphy her senior year because she wanted to find out what was out there beyond Washington State University, her parents' alma mater. But King said consultants haven't become so popular that everyone in her high school was using one.

"I was basically the only one I knew who had a consultant -- everyone was always asking me why I had one," she said.

In the end, King ended up going to WSU after all. But after exploring options in other states, she felt better about following her parents to Pullman, she said.

For most consultants, working with a student includes drafting a list of schools that could be a good fit for them, keeping track of deadlines, editing essays, planning rigorous junior and senior-year course loads, and helping with interviews and letters of recommendation.

Services do not -- they emphasize pointedly -- extend to writing a student's entrance essays or otherwise helping them cut corners.

An increasing number of consultants are joining professional organizations, which sometimes help to counter professional image problems that stem from news reports of consultants charging extravagant \$40,000 fees, not to mention allegations that private consultants put poor kids at even more of an unfair disadvantage.

Consultants in the Seattle area tend to charge several thousand dollars for their services, which most say ideally start in a student's junior year. Clients are often middle-class families, though some consultants take on clients for free who can't afford their fees.

Still, consultants have their skeptics who doubt many students need their help.

Bruce Bailey, head of counseling for Lakeside School, calls the test-prep companies and consultants who feed on the college admission process "the anxiety industry," and with good reason. He often deals with students and parents who turn to consultants after being inundated with reports of just how hard it is to get into a good school.

"We spend a lot of time trying to calm the anxiety industry," he said, but thinks that some consultants capitalize on it, and sometimes even purposely add anxiety to keep wealthy clients dependent.

"I'm always a little frustrated that the kids who really need help in this process aren't the ones who are getting the help," he said.

Ken Courtney, head counselor for Garfield High School, said he also tends to see affluent families tap private consultants, though he usually recommends them only to students who have special needs and want to find an accommodating college.

"But there are people who have money to access college counselors and really don't need to," he said. "But if it alleviates their stress, I

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say go for it."

From the perspective of university officials, consultants tend to leave fewer fingerprints on an application than an overbearing parent would, and they say hiring a professional probably wouldn't ever work against them.

"For the students who can afford it, it can't really hurt," said Bryan Jones, associate director of admissions at Seattle Pacific University. "The few that I have known who have used an independent counselor have certainly been more informed about the greater breadth of colleges, they seem to have their ducks in a row a lot sooner."

David Montesano, head of College Match in Seattle and Bellevue, said he does more than calm frazzled nerves. He says he helps students and their families recognize that colleges operate like businesses, and that you have to find a school that wants the qualities you have to offer.

That means a student whose resume is plastered with extracurricular activities that create a sense of community might be a good fit for a large school trying to combat a derogatory "supersize" image.

"Unfortunately, schools don't admit a person -- they're admitting an application," Montesano said. "Schools are selfish. They only want to satisfy their unmet needs."

Montesano likes to start working with students in their sophomore year of high school and says 93 percent of his clients were admitted to their first-choice college last year.

And at least one of his clients, 18-year-old Miriam Robinson, said she's learning to play the admission game in a way she never would have figured out on her own. Montesano is helping her learn to brag about her accomplishments a bit, Robinson said, especially when it comes to leadership.

"Seeing a college consultant has actually changed my point of view," said the Roosevelt High School senior who has been working with Montesano for just a few weeks. "David has talked a lot about how I have to actually know what the college wants to hear."

With most of her applications due just after the first of the new year, Robinson said she has some work to do if she's going to apply her newfound philosophy in time.

"I basically have to start all over," she said.

LOOKING FOR A COLLEGE CONSULTANT?

Here are a few professional organizations that feature member directories on their Web sites.

- The Higher Education Consultants Association requires members to have a four-year college degree, to have experience as a counselor or to be enrolled in a training program and to attend an orientation and subsequent conferences. On the Web: www.hecaonline.org
- The Independent Education Consultants Association requires members to have a master's degree or comparable experience, three years' experience as a counselor, to have advised at least 50 students as a counselor and to make at least 50 visits to college campuses. On the Web: www.educationalconsulting.org
- The National Association for College Admission Counseling requires independent members to adhere to a "Statement of Principles of Good Practice." On the Web: www.nacacnet.org Regional resources are available with the Pacific Northwest Association for College Admission Counseling. On the Web: www.pnacac.org

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- Some families are also turning to certified college financial planners to help manage the cost of college. The National Institute of Certified College Planners has a directory of certified planners on its Web site at www.niccp.com.
- Some professional organizations require or encourage members to take on clients for free every academic year. Low-income families should inquire with consultants about availability.

INSIDE












LISTEN UP: Consultants and counselors have advice on the college application process. **A15**

GETTING INTO COLLEGE TODAY

- Universities aren't necessarily looking for well-rounded students anymore; now they want a well-rounded student body, said consultant Lisa Buchwalter. So when it comes to extracurricular activities, students should find something they love and concentrate on doing that well.
- Sources tend to agree that admission staff members can usually spot an essay that's been heavily edited by an adult. The most successful essays reflect the things that are unique about a student, so it's best to let a student's natural voice come through.
- Don't know what high school teacher to ask for recommendations? A student should pick someone who will have something outstanding to say, who teaches a class in which the student became excited to learn and who is a good writer, counselor Pauline Reiter said.
- Reiter adds that students should think of applying for college as another subject they're studying. Watch deadlines, prepare for the standardized tests, and spend time thinking about what makes them stand out from their peers.
- New technologies have made the process easier for students, consultant Kiersten Murphy said. Now they can complete applications online, tour colleges via Web sites and talk with others through discussion groups and message boards. Parents helping their kids decide where to apply shouldn't be shy about using these tools.
- There is a wealth of information available to students that wasn't there when Mom and Dad applied, Murphy said. That includes books, Web sites, social networking sites, magazines and brochures.
- Students should combat competitiveness with a businesslike perspective on college admissions, consultant David Montesano said. Think about what a school wants and how you'll help them get that.
- The application game isn't played in the GPA and SAT score arena anymore, Montesano said. Now getting into a good school is about the extracurricular activities.
- Be careful about how many schools students apply to, Garfield High School counselor Ken Courtney said. Applying to 10 or 12 schools probably means you haven't done enough research -- you should be able to narrow it down. Most consultants advise applying to five to nine colleges.

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