

Magazine

The Price of Packaging

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Like skinny jeans or iPod nanos, the college consultant has become every high achieving student's must-have accessory. Over the past ten application seasons, the industry has emerged to meet the needs of students looking for help polishing their applications—and who are willing to pay to do so.

Ever the entrepreneurs, Harvard students have been quick to capitalize on the trend. Admissions companies, ranging from those catering to would-be transfers to others focusing solely on low-income students, have been created by current undergrads, recent graduates, and even a teaching fellow. The Harvard start-ups have attempted to think outside the box to create imaginative companies that stretch the limits of "college consulting" and work to provide new options for struggling students.

But are they thinking outside the box just to put prospective students in another one?

As the college consulting business on campus grows, undergraduate admissions entrepreneurs, professional consultants, and students are questioning the ethics underlying such practices. Are college students and recent grads really qualified to offer college admissions advice? Or, in their drive toward acceptance and strategic planning, are they forcing students into a pre-packaged mold? Worst of all, are college consulting companies creating a new inequality, allowing well-off students to get into top schools at the expense of those who aren't?

PICK ME, PICK ME!!!

William M. Polk, former headmaster of the Groton School, a boarding school in Massachusetts that traditionally sends a significant percent of students to Ivy League schools, saw the rise of the admissions industry first hand. Polk believes the high turnover rate among college admissions officers obscured previously straightforward admissions criteria.

"There were people reviewing applications who didn't really know the schools they were dealing with. They didn't really know how to read the transcripts," says Polk. This induced confusion about colleges' expectations and, when coupled with larger applicant pools and overworked guidance counselors, left students and parents bewildered about the application process, across the spectrum.

A new breed stepped in to fill the void. College consultants, many with admissions committee experience, claim to clarify it.

Keith A. Berman, a doctoral student who is researching the effect of the new SAT on elite college admissions at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, told the Columbia Spectator in April that a full 25 percent of applicants to selective schools seek help beyond their high school counselors.

Despite the increasing number of students who use these companies, their effectiveness is unclear. Sharon Merrow Cuseo, an upper school dean at Harvard-Westlake School, has been counseling for over thirteen years. She believes that students and parents tend to think that their consulting service was the crucial component in a successful application and that they then go on to relate this opinion to others. "It's kind of faulty logic because who knows—they probably would have gotten in anyway," says Cuseo. "A lot of the psychological process behind it is that they're misattributing their success."

Despite the lack of statistics, there is still a large market for consulting services. With a growing pool of consumers, college consultants are trying to carve niches for themselves by emphasizing different aspects of the business. Charlotte M. Klaar, director of College Consulting Services, sees herself as a coach who subtly guides her clients and leaves them with a solid list of schools to which they can apply. "I try to help

the student discover who they are,” says Klaar. “I try to get the parents to back off a little bit and let the child become comfortable doing research in the process.”

Amy Sack, founder of Admissions Accomplished, emphasizes two things: fit for college and relieving the stress. “We can help you make this very manageable,” says Sack; her website claims that her main objective is to make the application process as minimally painful as possible. And Sack claims an impressive success rate: 95 percent of her clients get into one of their top three schools.

Some Harvard students have attempted to succeed in the industry by creating companies that tackle the admissions game from a unique perspective. Teaching fellow Benjamin B. Bolger—currently TFinG Government 1206: “Contemporary Political Islam” and working on his doctorate at the Harvard Design School—sees his company, Bolger Strategic, as oriented more towards counseling than admissions. “Personal fulfillment is more important than some kind of academic bottom line,” says Bolger. “I might be more of a life coach than an admissions specialist.”

Other students are seeking to fill a niche. TransferAdmit, founded in 2006 by Anthony J. Inguaggiato III '07, claims to be the first consulting company focused solely on transfer admissions. Inguaggiato, a transfer from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and his colleagues have been through the process and consider themselves a valuable resource for potential transfer students.

Nicholas R. Green '07 and Vivek G. Ramaswamy '07, co-founders of the soon-to-be launched Ivy Insider college consulting company, share Inguaggiato's business philosophy. “Our value proposition is that the people who can help you best are the people who have been in your position,” says Ramaswamy. “They don't need formal training on education or psychology.”

CONSULTING WITH A HARVARD TWIST

But those with the professional training clearly think otherwise.

Nadine C. Warner of Admissions Consultants stresses that all of the company's employees have admissions experience; they've seen thousands of applications and know how to avoid the most common pitfalls. Without admissions experience, she's skeptical of the Harvard companies. “I worry that [their experience] is too specific to the individual experience as opposed to having admissions committee experience so that you know students across the board,” says Warner.

Klaar proudly asserts that members of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, the college consulting professional group, must go through a three-year examination process that includes an ethics component, and the association expects that members will spend at least 20 percent of their time at colleges and researching schools. The American Institute of Certified Educational Planners (AICEP) requires certified members to be full- or part-time college counselors, hold a master's degree, and take an examination.

But the Harvard start-ups insist that these concerns are inconsequential because they are not just doing pure consulting. “We're offering a big buddy network,” says Green of Ivy Insiders. Green believes his service functions as a kind of mentor to students in under-served regions such as the Midwest, which is usually overlooked by larger college consulting services.

Markus A. Besselle '07 of Transfer Admit believes he provides a unique perspective to his clients. As one of the few successful community college to Harvard transfers—from Vista Community College in Berkeley, Calif. in 2005—he feels he knows the position that transfers are in better than anyone else.

“It's very crucial and there is a huge need there,” says Besselle. “I was lost my first year of community college. The people who we're targeting are the people who really need it.”

GETTING A LEG UP, BUT FROM WHERE?

But who are the students who generally use college consulting companies? The statistics are unclear, but the traditional line of reasoning goes that college consultants help students who feel underserved by the college guidance counselors at their high schools.

“It's unusual to get a student who has a very, very active guidance counselor,” says Warner. “The guidance counselors are simply swamped.”

Guidance counselors tend to disagree, highlighting the tension that exists between the outside consultant and the high school guidance counselor. Most guidance counselors don't know if students are using an outside service unless the consultant or the student tells them.

"We don't really know—we don't have a way to track and we don't ask them," says Harvard-Westlake's Cuseo. "We always try to have students understand that there really shouldn't be a reason for them to go elsewhere."

Carey A. Socol, in her seventh year as a guidance counselor and college advisor at Hunter College High School, a public magnet school in New York City, says that consultants are being used by private school students rather than the public school students at her school.

"The kids I find who use the consulting companies are more the private schools who have the funds to use them," says Socol. "The real kids that need the help aren't going to find the consulting companies."

"I think the problem is there's a lot of disposable income in private school and that's where the bulk of the consulting money goes," says Cuseo. According to her, the consultants don't know the students, the teachers, or the way the high school works. This can actually hurt a student's application, she says, and can lead to obvious packaging.

FITTING IN THE BOX

This is perhaps the most common complaint leveled at consulting companies of all kinds. Critics claim that consultants force applicants to think strategically, and this usually means looking at what works—what scores, what extracurriculars, and what admissions essays are usually successful—and then plugging those things into every application.

One worry is that this kind of standardization will limit a student's ability to develop, fearful of choosing the supposedly wrong activities.

"Who are these people who are being packaged?" says Polk. "Do they end up feeling more confident in themselves? Or are they doing this in an outer directed way? The packaging will end. Does the person end up believing he or she is the package?"

Most consultants are quick to claim that they do not force applicants into a pre-set mold. "I never get a kid into college, it's the kid," says Klaar of College Consulting Services. "All I do is help the student remember what they've done. I don't package."

But all parties involved note that "bad" consultants do exist and that many of them are guilty of packaging students. "I think bad consultants do package. I'm against all other consultant companies except for my own," says Michele A. Hernandez-Bayliss, the founder of Hernandez College Consulting. She warns against using a uniform strategy for all of her clients. "I really try to make them better students."

The Harvard companies concur. TransferAdmit, Ivy Insiders, and Bolger Strategic all emphasize that since they've been in the situation themselves, their goal is to give advice and to empathize with students' problems. They don't focus on a specific admissions goal or strategy.

"We expect people will form friendships that will last," says Ramaswamy. "It's a lot less formalized than a consulting service." This informal aspect ensures that students will be able to shine through as individuals, stresses Ramaswamy, instead of coming out as perfectly molded applicants.

The biggest questions about packaging concern the personal essay. On its website, College Consulting Services offers to assist students by "brainstorming essay topics, selecting essay choices that focus on your interests and strengths, and providing an optional writing workshop to teach you how to write a killer essay." But all of the companies interviewed for this article insist that they would never write an essay for a student.

"We're not writing the essays for them," says Green. "Everyone should have the opportunity to present their case to the admissions office."

It all comes down to whether or not admissions offices can tell if an essay is the sole product of the

applicant. Director of Admissions Marlyn McGrath Lewis '70-'73 says that while applicants can use whatever help they want, Harvard attempts to make admissions decisions based solely on what the candidate has accomplished.

"People can develop specific strategies," she says, "and sometimes of course they can be helpful." But strategy becomes a problem when it misrepresents the applicant. "I suspect we may be fooled," says McGrath Lewis.

BUYING A SPOT?

For Nicholas B. Batter '08, a 2005 transfer from the University of California-Los Angeles, the consulting system itself is an outrage. Batter was upset by a post on the Harvard transfer e-mail list asking for applications to a student-run college consulting firm.

"It's a crime against students who need help the most," says Batter, who is also a Crimson cartoonist. "It's exactly 100 percent the opposite of what should be happening in our admissions process." Batter, who originally eschewed Harvard because the financial aid program wasn't generous enough, thinks that systems like these give a leg up to privileged students.

And Socol agrees. "I think it's kind of sad that others are turning around and doing this instead of making it a level playing field." She adds, "you hope schools like Harvard...would be able to see through the packaging."

Although consultants claim they're just relieving stress and helping students shine through a confusing application process, their services allow those who can pay an advantage over those who cannot. Using a consulting service can easily run into the thousands of dollars, though many consultants also do pro bono work. All maintain these costs don't change the fact that applicants must get themselves into college.

"If the kids get themselves in then why are you here?" questions Batter. "They're making it easier for someone who already has it easy. If they want to make it easier for someone who has a stressful process try finding someone who has to work because their mom is sick."

"I'm keenly aware of the social stratification that is involved," says Bolger, sharing the sentiments of all of the Harvard-run companies, which seem to be aware of the ethics and inequalities of the industry. All seem to target students that they feel are not getting a fair opportunity in the admissions process.

"Part of the reason we're going to the Midwest is we feel like on the East Coast there's plenty of companies offering admissions advice but...the students in the Midwest don't necessarily know or have access to these services," says Ramaswamy.

Besselle echoes the sentiment. He remains skeptical of Ivy-to-Ivy transfers but recognizes the need for counseling in the case of community college students. Yet despite their flexible rates, TransferAdmit still requires students to pay a fee, as does Ivy Insiders and Bolger Strategic.

"It should be free," concedes Besselle. "Everything costs something and you can't get something for nothing. The kid's not getting ripped off."

"I guess I'm a pragmatist when it comes to something like this," says Jue Wang '09, who has helped Green and Ramaswamy with Ivy Insiders. "This isn't a situation where you can really change anything whether or not you offer the service to people."

TAKING IT ONE STEP FURTHER

But is this enough? For Batter and others, more can be done.

"For every student that gets in the gate, one is left out," says Jeannie Asher Rosenthal '00, who founded Let's Get Ready (LGR), a non-profit organization that counsels lower-income students through SAT tutoring and college processes. "I don't think that what these companies are doing is wrong or immoral but the industry as a whole creates an externality that's troubling."

LGR specifically targets the students that all consultants say they look to aid—those who aren't being served by their guidance counselors and are missing any sort of advice on how to get into college. The

service helps students think about college through activities and role play, and considers it a victory when a student even applies.

For Rosenthal, the satisfaction of getting a student into a tier one school as opposed to a tier two school is substantial. But simply helping someone to get into college when they would not have otherwise gone changes their family and their hope for a better future.

“It’s really a choice about what your organization’s goals are and what your personal goals are. What do you want to accomplish in your life? What are your values? What’s important to you?”

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