

# Private college counselors expand their reach in South Florida

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**A**n increasingly complicated and expensive college admissions process has spawned a growing industry in South Florida: college advisers and ancillary admissions assistants, such as essay editors, application consultants and test prep specialists.

The burgeoning field, spurred by a dearth of college advice at many public high schools and intensive marketing by universities, offers one-on-one guidance to families who are confused about their high school student's many post-secondary options.

The advisers help with course selection, scholarships, resumes, essays, decisions on where to apply and tips on how to answer questions, all with the goal of making a teenager stand out amid the thousands of applications read by admissions officers.

Some parents and students say they feel overwhelmed by the abundance of choices their families have and exorbitant prices they may have to pay, as much as \$60,000 a year at some private universities.

"My job is to keep the stress down," said Jill Rickel, founding executive director of Academic Options, an educational consulting service in Weston. "I feel terrible for adolescents now. We put all this pressure on them when they're so young."

The number of South Florida consultants such as Rickel has doubled over the past five years, as measured by membership in the Independent Educational Consultants Association, a professional group that requires a minimum three years' experience, 150 college visits and an ethical pledge.

There were fewer than 20 Independent Educational Consultants Association members in South Florida five years ago, spokeswoman Sarah Brachman said; now there are 40. Across the country, there are about 8,000, compared with 2,500 five years ago.

Advisers can join other professional groups or none at all. Some offer their guidance as a side job, tutoring for the SAT or reading essays in the evenings, presenting parents with a range of packages and prices.

And the prices can be steep: Advice can cost as much as \$200 an hour, while packages that include help with high school course selection, decisions on where to apply, application and essay-writing guidance and other services can add up to \$8,000.

The rise of the private adviser comes at the same time many public high school guidance counselors are assigned hundreds of students more than their professional associations recommend. Florida's ratio of counselors to students has grown from 1:450 to 1:491 over the past five years, according to the Florida School Counselor Association. The

American School Counselor Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students.

This overload has pushed some parents, who have watched as average SAT scores at many schools have risen and costs have exploded, into the private sector.

"We're in an age where people with resources are not hesitant to help their children out in any way they can," said John Barnhill, Florida State University's assistant vice president for enrollment management. "Sometimes there's almost an expectation that you have to get outside help."

Barnhill said he has seen good work by private counselors but said the same guidance is often available from the school counselor or from college admissions officers. He said parents should make sure the private advisers don't take over the process, such as writing the essay for the student, or overstate their importance.

"You don't want to hear them say they have an inside track record to get in to certain schools," Barnhill said.

Mandee Adler, founder of International College Counselors, based in Hollywood, said many of her clients are South Florida families who have recently immigrated from other countries and are unfamiliar with the American college system.

Adler said she has found that high schools are able to help students through the college process despite their counselors' overload of students. Still, many families are seeking in-depth, personalized care as an edge against the competition and a process that has been transformed since they were co-eds decades ago.

The cost of college has skyrocketed since these parents graduated: 1,120 percent since 1978, according to Bloomberg news.

"It wasn't so stressful back then because parents weren't spending \$60,000," Adler said.

Hope Lesnik, of Weston, who graduated from the University of Florida in 1988, said she doesn't remember her parents helping her with her college applications. But she sought the help of a consultant as her daughters have applied over the past few years.

"The competition is so much more fierce now, and it starts as a freshman in high school," said Lesnik, mother of Ashley, 21, a University of Colorado senior, and Rachel, 18, a University of Michigan freshman.

She said she hired Academic Options in Weston to lower the stress level between herself and the kids as essay-writing and application deadlines were causing anxiety and arguments.

"I felt like the nagging mother at times," Lesnik said. "I was able to let go of the reins and focus on other types of parenting."

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