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Getting into a good School:
Does Your Kid Have What It Takes?

By Janice Rosenberg

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Applying to top U.S. colleges is a tedious process. Even though high schools provide college counseling, parents with high expectations and limited understanding of how the system works find the process to be quite daunting. Many are seeking additional help.

Harvard. Stanford. MIT. The names of top colleges often swirl through the dreams (and nightmares) of South Asian-American high school students.

"The first priority of an Indian family is always education," says Bev Taylor, president of The Ivy Coach, an independent college counseling service in Manhattan and Roslyn Heights, New York. "These parents are looking for their children to get into the most highly selective colleges that they can."

However, figuring out how to do that can be tough for both parents and students. Together they need to select appropriate schools, get a grip on the application process, agree on professional goals and make peace with the differences between South Asian and American cultures.

The Application Process

The process of applying to U.S. colleges can be daunting. Although public and private high schools provide college counseling, parents with high expectations and limited understanding of how the system works often turn to independent college counselors for additional help.

"The counselor at our son's school may have a few hundred students to work with, so he may not be able to give particular attention to each one," says Narendra Trivedi, of Anaheim Hills, Calif., whose son Nick (Nikunj), 17, is a senior this fall at Fairmont Preparatory Academy, a private school in Anaheim Hills. "The outside counselor we hired helped us understand what is required to get into a good college or university and choose the right career."

Most independent counselors charge between \$2,500 and \$3,800 for services that can begin as early as ninth grade. Consultants underscore their familiarity with numerous colleges and universities. For instance, Mark Corkery, president of National Planning for Education in Newport Beach, Calif., has

visited more than 500 campuses.

Consultants know the ins and outs of ever-changing admission plans, such as whether it's better to apply "early action" or in the general pool of applicants. They know how much importance colleges assign to various factors in their decision-making processes – GPA, SAT, outside activities, etc.

Consultants urge students to distinguish themselves from the large pool of South Asian-Americans, most of whom have excellent grades and test scores, and play musical instruments. Sports and other outside activities can make a difference, but some parents fear that participation will distract students from their studies.

"In one of the families I counseled, when a high school counselor suggested his son try out for the soccer team, the father said he wasn't going to let his son ruin his life playing sports," says Valerie Broughton, owner of College Connectors in Minneapolis.

Nevertheless students must find ways to stand out. Taylor, who says competition among Indian students – including best friends – is severe, advises clients to follow their passions. For instance, when a student who played the piano began composing music, she suggested he try to have some of his musical pieces published.

Additional Services

Go4College helps students determine their chances for admission to particular colleges and universities. The online service offers a money back guarantee to students who use it in their senior year.

"If we say you are 51-to-99 percent likely to get into a particular school and you don't, we'll refund your money," says company co-founder, Matthew S. Schuldt.

In July 2006, The Princeton Review launched Small Group Tutoring. The program allows groups of three students to receive help on schedules they choose and at prices similar to fees charged for Princeton's classroom-style programs.

"We started it because of customer demand, and incidentally that demand started with South Asian families in Queens," says Harriet Brand, Princeton's director of public relations. "We developed Small Group Tutoring for families who wanted their children to study with others of the same culture, language and educational ambitions, as well as for home-schooled students and other students who had things in common."

Reality Check

South Asian-American students who apply to Ivy League colleges are in many ways no different from other students applying to the Ivies, says Steven Roy Goodman, president of Top Colleges in Washington, D.C. Goodman recognizes there is often a disconnect between the desire for prestige and the ability of students to achieve that prestige.

"This is more pronounced in the Indian community and to a certain extent among Pakistanis," Goodman says. "There's [often] been exponential growth in terms of the wealth and prestige of a family in just one generation, and a tremendous expectation that an Ivy League college or a medical degree will follow."

Goodman says students and parents show an overwhelming interest in applying for combined BS/MD programs where undergraduate admission guarantees admission to an institution's medical school – assuming students maintain a specified GPA.

At top schools these programs are highly selective. To be admitted, Broughton says students need to be, "more than smart. The schools also are looking for a level of sophistication and maturity."

Many South Asian-American parents think their children's lives will be ruined if they don't get into one of the top 10 colleges, Broughton says. But Corkery points out, "Just because a university has a good reputation doesn't mean that it's the right one for you."

Whose Life Is This Anyway?

Unlike typical American teens, South Asian-American students don't get into conflicts with their parents over colleges and career goals, says Sonja Montiel, president of College Confidence in West Lake Village, Calif.

"The students have such a high level of discipline, respect and trust that when the parent says, 'These schools are right, this is the program he should be in,' the student agrees," Montiel says.

For instance, Nick Trivedi describes his parents as "... really liberal for Indian parents." However Trivedi adds, "my dad always wanted one kid to go to Stanford."

Trivedi admits he wasn't a big fan of Stanford. "I decided my chances of getting in are unlikely, but it's just a few essays, so I'll apply. Why not make my dad happy?"

As for professional goals, parents often have more to say than students, Taylor says. "When it comes down to it, it's really about what the child wants also, but the child wants what mommy and daddy want. He's been brought up feeling that way."

Ketki Warudkar, 17, a senior at Irvine High School in Irvine, Calif., has parents who work in what she calls, "hugely successful industries." Her father works in computer science and her mother in biomedical engineering.

"They encouraged me to follow those careers and I agreed because there's nothing different I see that I want to do," Warudkar says.

Besides where to go and what to study, South Asian-American students and their parents may face cultural challenges. For instance, the concept of co-ed bathrooms is abhorrent to the vast majority of South Asian families, Goodman says.

"Many of these families don't support the casual campus atmosphere at a lot of American colleges," he says. "But they are often put in a position in which their daughter is accepted to a selective university where the family supports the academics but doesn't embrace the social situation."

Girls are more sheltered than boys. Boys are allowed to move far away for school whereas girls are assumed to need a more protected environment, a less urban setting and family members or close family friends located nearby.

Sonia Kanjee, a 2006 graduate of Niles Township High School North in Skokie, Ill., chose the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, just two hours from home, over the University of Miami in Florida. Of Pakistani descent, she's the first in her immediate family to go to college.

"My parents were very uncomfortable with me applying out of state," Kanjee says. "They are still worried about bad habits I might pick up in college."

Janice Rosenberg is a freelance writer based in Chicago, IL

