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Paid counselors help families with college admissions ordeal

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When it came time for her kids to apply to college, Marla Green knew she was going to need some help.

She'd heard horror stories about straight-A, super-involved students not getting into the schools they wanted. She knew high school counselors were stretched so thin, they didn't have time to give her the attention she wanted.

So, like a growing number of parents, she turned to an independent college counselor, a person who, for a fee, could walk her family through the college admissions ordeal, who would recommend colleges, set deadlines and, perhaps most important, serve as a buffer between parent and child.

"This process, it's nuts," said Green, an Agoura Hills mother of two, "and it's harder every year."

Nationwide, the number of independent college counselors is growing as families face increasingly competitive college admissions. The Independent Educational Consultants Association, a group that represents private counselors, has 450 members, up 50 percent in the past two years. Just last year, the association received 1,400 applications for membership.

"This is certainly a field that has taken off," Executive Director Mark Sklarow said. The trend is also reflected in the growing number of people taking classes through UCLA Extension, hoping to get into the college counseling business. Since the program went online in 1998, it has grown from 127 students to about 700 today. Roughly half the students come from outside California.

So why are so many families turning to experts to do a job they once handled themselves, with some help from their kids' high school counselors?

These days, high school counselors, responsible for at least 600 students, simply don't have the time to walk a teen through all the particulars of college admissions: applications, essays, recommendations, transcripts and campus tours.

On top of that, parents believe they don't have the expertise or time to negotiate what they see as a far more complicated, and competitive, process than they remember from their own high school days.

Finally, they see the money they spend on a college counselor -- up to \$3,000 -- as a good investment. If they're going to pay for four years of college, they say, they want to make sure their kids are in a place where they're going to thrive.

"Obviously, it's costly, but in relation to that decision it's a small amount of money to invest," said

Robert Murray, whose daughter and son have both worked with Pat Croner at College Match in Westlake Village. "Is there any bigger investment we can make in a child than education?"

Locally, independent college counselors say business is booming.

Croner started College Match in 1991 with about 20 students. Now she has more than 80.

Her colleague Sonja Montiel, who launched College Confidence three years ago with 19 students, now has 35.

"The majority of parents who come to me want time," Croner said. "They want to talk; they want their child to have someone besides themselves to give encouragement and, in some cases, discouragement."

The services Croner offers are typical, though her prices are on the low end -- \$350 for an initial session and \$200 a session after that.

In the initial session, Croner gets to know students, asking about their grades, test scores, extracurricular activities and hobbies. They discuss what they're looking for in colleges, about location, weather, social environment, religion and cost. They talk about possible majors.

When parents interrupt, trying to answer the questions themselves, she politely reminds them that she's talking to the students, who are, after all, the ones going to college.

Then Croner comes up with a list of about 30 potential schools that she wants the students to research. She also gives them questions to consider: how they would describe themselves, why colleges should choose them, what they consider success.

For parents, she provides information on financial aid and test preparation programs.

Later, after students have narrowed down their lists of potential schools, she provides a timeline -- including application and financial aid deadlines -- and more hand-holding if families need it.

Of course, parents and students can do all this work on their own, and most still do. Dorothy Hatfield, a Thousand Oaks mom, has helped two of her children through college applications. She's read the sometimes mind-boggling information, marched through the campus tours, talked through the final decisions, and she's glad she did, even though she describes it as "not an easy process."

"It's part of being a parent," Hatfield said. "I want to be involved with my kids."

On the other hand, families who have hired counselors say they're a buffer between parents and their children during what can be an intense, stressful time.

One key advantage: Counselors might say the exact same thing the parent has said, but the student is more willing to hear the message from someone other than her mother.

"She's my mom, and we clash occasionally," said Dana Green, an Agoura High School graduate who plans to go to Syracuse University in the fall. "You'd rather hear it from someone else who's not in your family. I guess you don't process it until someone else says it."

Students also say they appreciate that the counselors get to know them and that they're familiar enough with colleges nationwide to figure out a good match.

Kaitlin Wan, 17, who will be a senior at Ventura High School, went with her dad to Montiel at College Confidence, knowing only that she wanted to major in psychology and some day work with kids. Now she has her heart set on the University of San Francisco.

"When I went to Sonja, I had no idea what college I wanted to go to, no idea where to start looking," Wan said. "When we walked out of that first session, I said, 'Dad, this is exactly what we needed.'"