

The new college try

Parents pay specialists to navigate application process

By Sherry Saavedra
STAFF WRITER

April 3, 2008

Private counselor Beth Pickett talked with Vista High School junior Jacob Rogers about the college application process last week. Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune When he wanted to go to college about 30 years ago, financial adviser Pete Rogers bummed \$30 from his parents and fired off an application to one school, Cal State San Bernardino.

Good luck using that approach these days.

In today's ultra-competitive climate, the father of three has turned to a booming industry of consultants selling advice to the college-bound, including making the application essay read like Hemingway or ridding students' speech of high school slang during the interview.

There are essay coaches and interview coaches. There are audition coaches for performing arts students. There are financial aid specialists, scholarship specialists and those who help athletes or students with disabilities.

Bills for consultants often reach into the thousands of dollars by the time acceptance and rejection letters roll in, but scores of jittery parents have no qualms about paying them.

“When I went to college, it was oh so casual,” said Rogers, who is paying \$125 an hour to send three children who attend Vista High School – two freshman and a junior – to a private counselor in Solana Beach who helps families through the application process. “But today without the proper guidance, you can be going down the wrong path with great intentions but end up failing your child.”

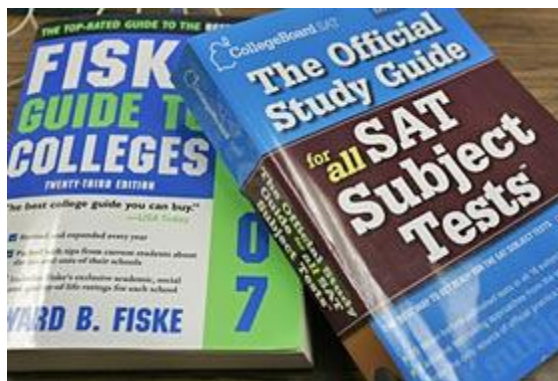
In a year when the number of high school graduates is at an all-time high and record numbers of applications are pouring into every California public university, Rogers wanted help. For example, San Diego State University received 61,663 undergraduate applications for 7,022 spots for fall 2008.

“It's been five years of pretty remarkable growth in this industry,” said Mark Sklarow, director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, which expanded from about 300 members in 2003 to 750 today. “More kids are going to college and people are looking for ways to distinguish themselves.”

In 2000, there were only a handful of such consultants in San Diego County. Today, dozens have



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Private college counselor Beth Pickett helped Vista High junior Jacob Rogers as his father, Pete (left), siblings, Alexandra and Zachary, and mother, Deborah, looked on.



NANCEE E. LEWIS / Union-Tribune
Some parents are paying specialists to navigate the avalanche of information about the college application process.

entered an industry that some admissions directors believe is fueled by misplaced fears about getting into college.

Peggy Wallace, a former corporate lawyer, has been coaching students on the college interview for three years through her Carlsbad-based business, Making Conversation LLC.

She teaches them about body language, finding personal stories that highlight their strengths, and ridding their speech of “valley girl” talk such as “like,” “whatever” and “you know.” She charges \$100 for the first hour and \$150 for every hour after.

One client, Dan Kolb, seemed like a sure thing: He's valedictorian at Santa Fe Christian in Solana Beach and boasts a 4.6 grade-point average with a schedule loaded with Advanced Placement classes.

But with so much at stake, Kolb didn't want to walk into the interview cold.

“I know I have a great résumé, but I wanted to make sure I was presenting myself in the most effective way,” he said.

Kolb said Wallace gave him the polish he needed in interviews with the University of Pennsylvania and Wheaton College in Illinois. He got into Wheaton.

Former high school English teacher and counselor Claire Tremaine is a La Mesa-based consultant who specializes in essays and charges \$150 an hour. She helps clients form topic ideas and avoid pitfalls, while doing as many edits as it takes to make their writing sparkle. But it must be the student's work, she said.

Students trying for top-tier schools often fill out applications with as many as 10 essays and short answers. “It's quite overwhelming for most 17-year-olds,” she said.

The consultant also runs a one-week class that covers all aspects of the application.

Kittric Lovel did both. The senior at Valhalla High School in El Cajon had to tackle 20 essay topics for 15 applications.

“It was insane,” Lovel said. “I was needing to get through it all in a short time and needed feedback from someone who knew what they were doing.”

Rancho Bernardo-based Kathleen Johnson of National College Funding Strategies has spent five years advising families on how to apply for financial aid and secure scholarships.

“High school counselors don't know this stuff anymore,” Johnson said. “It's gotten too complex.”

Johnson said even families with high incomes can benefit from her services.

“I met with a gentleman who made over \$300,000 a year, and I got him a lot of financial aid,” she said.

Johnson advises parents on strategies for scoring a better deal, such as negotiating with private schools for more aid and using offers from other schools as leverage.

Parents complain that high school counselors can't devote this kind of time to college counseling.

According to the American Counseling Association, high school counselors in California average 450 students each. Their many responsibilities range from registering students for classes to resolving day-to-day student issues.

Even so, admissions officers are wary.

Richard Shaw, dean of admission and financial aid at Stanford University, said advice provided by consultants can be helpful, but it is often available free on the Internet or from high schools. He said many consultants go into business without the training or experience to be good at what they do.

“I worry that there's an assumption on the part of families, driven to some extent by fear, that hiring a private consultant might result in a magical outcome,” Shaw said.

Anxiety about competitive admissions is driven by a small number of selective colleges and universities, creating a skewed impression that drives this industry, Shaw said.

Stuart Schmill, interim director of admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said private counseling can be problematic when students are coached to sign up for activities that don't interest them to enhance their résumés.

“Students who are getting help with their essay and polishing off all their materials for us – it's not going to have much of an effect,” Schmill said. However, some college administrators say counseling is usually a plus, whether it's from a high school program or a private consultant.

“There's many students out there who have done some outstanding things, but sometimes they can't put their information together in an outstanding way,” said Walter Robinson, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of California Berkeley.

Some parents say the services they received from private counselors were invaluable.

La Jolla parent Teresa Doyle spent \$2,400 on a consultant. Doyle's son is a senior at La Jolla High School with attention deficit disorder. He needed a college environment where he could succeed – a smaller, private institution with more one-on-one interaction with professors and support services.

“I didn't know where to begin,” Doyle said. “We're all familiar with the UCLAs, but what about the others?”

Doyle hired Joan Luber Jacobs, a Del Mar-based consultant with a specialty in learning disabilities and ADD, though she sees all types of students. The former Torrey Pines High School counselor and district psychologist charges \$500 for an initial consultation, with packages that top at \$2,700. She compiled a list of schools for Doyle, whose son was accepted to Pacific University in Oregon after lobbying from Luber Jacobs.

“Oh my gosh, her services were worth every cent,” Doyle said.