

How hiring a private “College Navigator” helps our family survive the high school years



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When our son Mark was in high school, we hired a college consultant — someone to help us navigate the complicated path to the right school. It worked. Mark just finished his third year at Rochester Institute of Technology, where he’s thriving. Now, we’re using the same counselor to help our high-school-junior daughter, Kelly, find the school that’s right for her.

College counselors aren’t just for the wealthy anymore. “More and more average families are using counselors. There’s a wide range of services, and prices can be affordable. If the goal is to have your child attend college and be happy and successful, a counselor is able to identify the best-fit colleges for your child and to do a lot of research you can’t possibly do,” says Ann Laurion of The College Navigator, the counselor who has been working with my family.

Not every student needs a college counselor. I have a nephew who had his heart set on Penn State early on, and had the grades to get accepted. He had visited the school many times and was sure it would be a good fit for him. His family agreed.

But Mark was considering schools throughout the Northeast. And Kelly is open to going almost anywhere in the U.S. With more than 3,000 colleges in the country, it would be nearly impossible to figure out which ones might be best academically, socially and financially.

“Everybody knows the name brand schools, but they are incredibly tough to get into,” Laurion says. “And just because a school is famous or expensive or you’ve heard of it doesn’t mean it’s a good fit for your child.”

What do college counselors do?

Counselors help students present their best selves, says Brooke Daly, president of the Higher Education Consultants Organization. “What have they accomplished and how can they present that in a compelling way?”

Finding a college takes a lot of energy, time and bandwidth. “If you feel overwhelmed and can’t handle another parenting duty, an independent educational consultant might be a good solution,” says Maruta Vitols, an independent college consultant with A+ College Consulting in Newton, Mass.

I think the most valuable service for my family is the list of reach, midrange and safety schools that Laurion thinks are a good fit academically, socially and financially.

“College counselors can help students discover opportunities they didn’t know existed,” Daly says. “They often do aptitude and personality assessments so kids can better understand what majors and careers might be good fits.”

Counselors create college lists after getting to know the student well. “Anyone can stick information into a computer program and get a list of colleges. That doesn’t mean they are a good fit for your child,” Laurion says. Counselors can blend their knowledge of schools with what they learn about your student to develop a personalized list.

For example, Laurion added some southern schools to Kelly’s list even though Kelly didn’t think she wanted to go south. With another winter behind her, though, the idea of college in a warmer climate is sounding appealing. On the other hand, Laurion understands that Kelly strongly prefers urban and suburban settings, so there aren’t any rural schools on her list.

Academics, social life and finances are all part of the mix

Academically, counselors will look at grades and test scores. They will also consider learning styles, and whether a student might do better in a smaller, more personalized college or a larger university.

Socially, counselors might ask your child where they stand politically, what kinds of friends they want, and how often they want to come home. The answers help find the places your child is most likely to thrive.

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ANN LAURION, THE COLLEGE NAVIGATOR

Counselors also encourage parents and students to talk openly about finances. "College is so outrageously expensive, and students need to know what families can and can't afford to pay," says Vitols. She recommends staying away from schools that are out of your price range. "There's nothing more heartbreaking than a kid falling in love with a school and then finding out their family can't afford to send them there," she says.

Outsourcing the nagging

There's also a benefit of working with college counselors that I felt was key — they take on a lot of the nagging that can lead to tension between parents and teenagers. Instead of me pestering my kids to meet deadlines, there's someone else doing it. In the last year or two before your child leaves home, it's nice to spend time together and keep the tension to a minimum.

"We can act as mediators. Basically we say the same thing [as parents] but coming from us, a teenager is often more open to receiving that suggestion," Vitols says.

Laurion agrees. "The consultant is not involved in whether the child came home late last night or if their room is kept clean. It's my job to assist with this process, and nothing else comes into play," she says. "Kids are trying to become more independent and they don't want to listen to their parents. When someone else comes in they are more likely to listen."

What else do they do?

College counselors also can:

- Get to know your student's preferences, personality and interests so they can help find schools that are a good fit.
- Review high school classes to be sure your student is taking the course load colleges want.
- Recommend prep materials for the SAT and ACT, remind your student of registration deadlines, and suggest when to send test scores to colleges.
- Help with essays.
- Help your student request the right letters of recommendation.
- Guide your student through the common app and any other application materials colleges require.
- Help prepare your student for admissions interviews.
- Guide families so students control the process, with parents assisting.
- Help you apply for financial aid and understand aid packages when you receive them.
- Coach students and families through disappointing news — a college [rejection](#) might be the first time a student worked really hard on something that didn't turn out the way they wanted.

When do most families start?

Counselors may start working with families as early as ninth grade, when they focus on helping parents plan for financial aid, making sure students are taking the right courses and maintaining good grades, and recommending and reviewing extracurricular activities.

“The rubber hits the road junior year,” Vitols says. “That’s when families start seriously thinking about the application process.”

Your child's school guidance counselor can also be a resource, and many independent counselors will work with your school counselor. But Vitols says the average school guidance counselor handles 482 students. That doesn't leave them a lot of time for individual attention.

Hiring a college counselor? Ask these questions

I found Laurion through word of mouth — my hair stylist had hired her to help her three children find colleges. That works, but you'll still want to make sure a counselor is a good fit for your family.

Interview a few people and make sure your child is part of the conversation. “You want the child comfortable with the consultant. It’s important that the child is involved in the process and wants to do this,” Laurion says.

- What’s your experience? Look for someone who has worked in college admissions. Ask about their training and background.
- What professional organizations do you belong to? Look for membership in the Independent Educational Consultants Organization, the Higher Education Consultants Organization, or the National Association for College Admission Counseling or one of its local branches. All hold members to high ethics standards.
- What services do you provide, and how does your process work?
- Do you offer help applying for financial aid?
- Can we see your contract?
- Is there a limit on interactions, emails or phone calls?
- Will my child work with one person or a team?
- Are the meetings in person, online or over the phone?
- Do you guarantee admission, certain SAT or ACT scores, or financial aid? (A “yes” answer is a sign of shady activity.)
- How much do you charge, and what’s included? Some counselors charge hourly rates while others offer packages. The industry average is \$150 per hour, according to Daly. And you might pay \$1,000 to \$7,000 or more for a package.

What if you can't afford it?

Some counselors use a sliding scale, and some professional organizations award funds to students in need. Some also volunteer in programs at high schools that help first-generation, at-risk or low-income students navigate the college application process

By Stephanie Thurrott