



The College Counselor Rock Star Diaries

They command enormous fees to insert themselves in your teenager's life, choosing classes, extracurriculars—even summer activities—all in the pursuit of creating the perfect college candidate. Good luck getting one to see you.

BY NICOLE LAPORTE

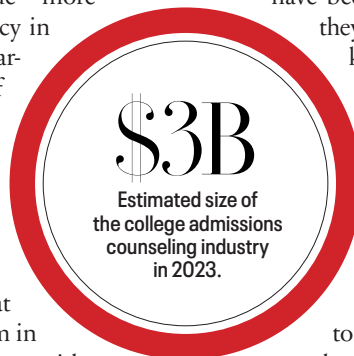
“**T**he Architect Behind Your Success,” blares the website for a company whose founder wrote a book on how to “crack the code” on elite college admissions. Another company states that it has helped more than 1,000 students “gain admission to the Ivy League—more than any other admissions consultancy in the world!” And then there’s the firm run by a 29-year-old founder and CEO who “has mastered the art of Ivy League admissions so you can, too.”

Welcome to the sensationalized world of independent college counseling, those private tutors-slash-coaches who guide students and families through the often frustrating and rejective (Yale’s acceptance rate dropped to 3.7 percent this year) college admissions process. A once niche profession that began quietly in the late 1990s, it gained momentum in the early aughts as admissions rates began to plummet with the growth of the Common App digital platform. Today it’s a \$3 billion industry rife with Gen Z founders, venture capital backing, fees of up to \$200,000, and breathless marketing that all but promises

acceptance letters from Harvard and Stanford.

Indeed, the image of the independent counselor has gone from villain—five years ago Varsity Blues mastermind Rick Singer became the unwanted poster child for the profession—to deity. Counselors have been the subject of fawning magazine profiles, where they’re presented as college admissions whisperers with the keys to unlocking USC and Yale. Some are influencers with social media followings. Many have publicists.

The sudden maturation of the business is a response to how surreally competitive college admissions at selective schools have become, and how families feel no shame in pulling out all the stops when applying. Even as demand has driven prices up by tens of thousands of dollars per year, parents who can make it work are more than willing to do so. For those who turn to private sports trainers, academic tutors, and even therapists, the thinking is, why not hire someone to help navigate a cutthroat landscape that is constantly in flux? Over the past few years there have been whiplash shifts in policies surrounding standardized testing (it’s coming back), ➤➤➤



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legacy preference (it's going), and affirmative action (it's gone). Confused and anxious families looking for a lifeline see one in independent counselors, who offer services that have become increasingly personalized and nuanced since the days when the primary goal of hiring outside help was to bump an ACT score up to 35 and maybe get some essay tips.

Joy Justus, a mother in Orange County, California, has no regrets about spending between \$30,000 and \$40,000 to help her son gain admittance to Boston University. "We were already paying \$40,000 a year for private school—it's ridiculous," Justus says. "But I'm sorry, a

Caucasian kid from a nice zip code that has a 4.3 or whatever... You know what? You don't get into college with that anymore.

"My husband and I both went to public schools and average universities. It turned out fine careerwise, but we didn't have the help we were able to give our son. We wanted to give him everything we possibly could."

But another mother, whose daughter was accepted early by the Uni-

versity of Chicago, doesn't think extra help is necessary if there is strong counselor support at the kid's school—in her case, a private one—combined with a driven and academically stellar student. "My child is very self-motivated and determined," this mother said. "If you have that kind of kid, you don't need anyone holding your hand."

Indeed, today's counselors are Henry Higgins-style life coaches who work with students to map out a high school plan, identify their "core superpower," and translate that into unique extracurricular projects that convey grit and "community impact" (another industry buzzword). By the time students are seniors in high school, they may be meeting with their independent counselors twice a week on Zoom, having forged a close connection with someone who has guided them through a high-pressure, high-stakes journey of self-discovery.

"I occupy some space between life coach, college advisor, therapist, and just emotional support human," says Eric Sherman, a former Columbia University admissions officer who is now a premier admissions counselor at IvyWise, a New York-based consultancy.

Great Expectations College Prep founder Jen Kaifesh works with kids as young as middle school age. She says, "When you start young, you build that relationship. The number of times we've talked about everything from schools and family to dating... I have drinks with them when they turn 21. I've attended weddings, baby showers. It's a big sister/big brother relationship when you do this right." Kaifesh says her company's revenue has increased tenfold since the Varsity Blues story broke and she appeared on network news talking about independent counselors.

For parents, trying to find the right counselor fit for themselves and their children, not to mention determining how much they're willing to pay and whether their kid even needs one (spoiler alert: All the independent counselors I spoke to for this article admitted that they are not necessary for everyone), can be as stressful as applying to college. Mark Sklarow, CEO emeritus of the Independent Educational

Consultants Association (IECA), offers levelheaded advice to anxious families. "Anyone who is spending their money on PR and promotion and all of that... It obviously means they're charging more to their customers—the kids. So they're pricing themselves out of the middle class. And I worry about that.

"When I talk to parents I ask them to look for someone who didn't jump into this field from an investment standpoint but who was a high school counselor, or they were somehow deeply involved in education. So you know that their commitment remains with the students."

Lindsay Tanne's essay on her Harvard application was about a cooking experiment gone wrong—specifically, a soufflé. She often brings it up with students she works with at her company, LogicPrep Education, a New York-based independent college consultancy she started with her boyfriend when they were both undergrads at Harvard in the early aughts. She was an English major; he was a musician and mathematician. After rounding up a bunch of other artistically minded tutors, the band of bohemian intellectuals would drive to Westchester County in a van to tutor high school kids in essay writing and standardized test prep.

Today LogicPrep has a team of 50 tutors and essay coaches who work with students around the world. But the company maintains a less cutthroat approach to helping kids get into college. "It's no coincidence that our head of college advising and our head of tutoring are both former therapists," Tanne says. "We really think holistically about supporting students and parents on this journey: taking the stress out of the household and helping every student be the best version of themselves, whatever that means for them.

"Our advisors know how to talk to parents and students in a way that meets with empathy."

Tanne's approach represents the more humane end of the college counseling spectrum, where the discussion doesn't begin with what Ivy a student wants to go to but with what school is the right

fit. Sessions typically begin in 9th or 10th grade ("I don't think your 11- or 12-year-old needs to be enrolled in our program"), and the idea is to get kids to be "more intentional and more proactive" in choices, such as what level math to take if they plan to go in a STEM direction. On the extracurricular front, students are encouraged to "go deeper and think about how they're going to have the maximum impact." The idea is to build up a personal narrative that is unique, compelling, and rigorous—though realistic about a student's capabilities—by the time they're seniors and filling out applications. The journey costs money. Tanne says packages range from the mid-twenty-thousands to the mid-thirty-thousands, depending on the experience level of the tutor.

As with therapists and life coaches, much of the service Tanne provides is a soft skill. Getting kids to open up to her and helping them find what makes them tick and, essentially, who they are. These discussions can become fraught when it's time to write essays, which colleges now use to understand a student's background and identity since the Supreme Court outlawed affirmative action. The shift has given more space for minorities and underrepresented groups to flesh out their stories, but white and Asian students often react with feelings of being too commonplace. "I think students bemoan

their lack of bad fate sometimes," Tanne says. "But I think everyone is interesting. It's really about tapping into what's special and interesting and cool about you, and it doesn't mean that something horrible has to have happened." Cue the talk on the soufflé.

Eric Sherman from IvyWise recalls a student who lamented that she was "just a girl who plays water polo." Then one day "it finally emerged. She was like, 'Oh, I finally finished this thing I was doing in my yard, and we watched *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* with my friends.'" When Sherman asked what she was talking about, she explained that she'd built an accessory dwelling unit in her back yard to create the female equivalent of a man cave.

"It was amazing, because when she started talking about it she lit up," Sherman says. "And then my question was why. Because colleges want to see the why behind the what. At one point the roof was leaking, and she had to find a solution for that. And she had to make a blueprint. There were all these skills involved. And she was doing it because she enjoyed it, not because anyone was telling her to do it. So it became great fuel for the essay. She wrote a personal statement on it."

Sherman says getting kids to peel back the layers to figure out what moves them "takes time. It takes time to engender trust for them to open up about some of their vulnerabilities and their interests that they think are not impressive—I'm using air quotes—but are absolutely the thing they should be talking about."

This intense level of coaxing and coaching is worrying to some college admissions officers. In 2024 Duke called out independent college counselors—and AI—in its explanation of why it is no longer assigning numerical grades to application essays. Duke's long-time admissions dean, Christoph Guttentag, has been forthright on the subject of independent counselors, who work separately from a high school's in-house counselors and are typically kept out of sight during the application process.

"It's complicated," Guttentag said on the podcast Hold Me Back. "I think there's a very wide range of independent consultants and independent counselors. I think the majority of them serve a need, a reasonable need of the people they work with. Having said that, there's no getting around the reality that

overwhelmingly the use of independent counselors is a luxury that is available to a small segment of the population that has the resources to pay extra for them.

"I think people need less help than they think," he went on. "I think the more involved independent counselors are, the greater the risk of them doing more harm than good. But I think they are one of the realities of college admissions as it's currently being practiced in the United States."

Indeed, Duke sends promotional content to organizations like IECA to share with their members, and it invites independent counselors to visit campus (though direct communication between admissions and independent counselors is not welcomed). Only a few schools, such as Georgetown, are holdouts on this front, having not yet

given in to the temptation of courting individuals with direct access to a population of wealthy college applicants.

Peter Van Buskirk, an independent counselor and the author of *Winning the College Admission Game*, admits that what he does is in many ways a luxury. "In all candor, very few students need an independent counselor," he says. "Most families hire them because they fear they'll miss out if they don't have one. People don't want to live their lives feeling that they haven't given their kids the best opportunities... The kids who need them the most are the ones who are the least likely to get them."

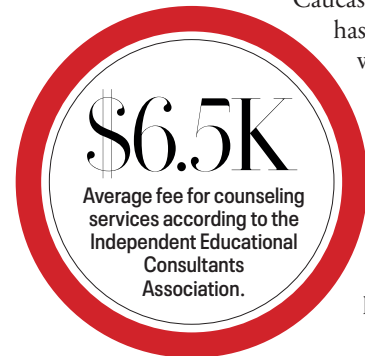
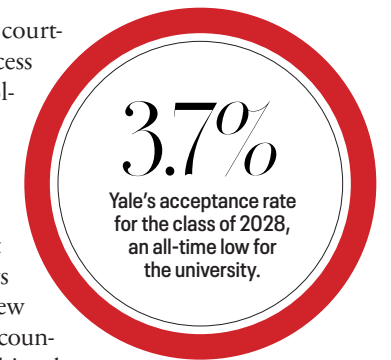
Part of the tension around independent counselors is that virtually anyone can set up shop. No licensing is required, and some counselors are simply Ivy League graduates who aced college admissions themselves. Since the Varsity Blues scandal, membership has risen in professional organizations like IECA and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (which vet members and set ethical standards), as counselors have sought to add a Good Housekeeping-style seal of approval to their résumés.

Some seek out a Certified Educational Planner (CEP) credential, which requires passing an exam and demonstrating experience in the field. Chris Teare, a CEP and member of IECA, as well as of the *Fiske Guide to Colleges* editorial advisory group and the Princeton Review National College Counselor Advisory Board, says these markers are important for parents to look for when shopping for a counselor, as is experience in either college admissions or high school counseling.

"When you're working with a child who's on the cusp of becoming an adult, that's a significant relationship," Teare says. "There are people in the independent consulting space who literally got started as a parent at the kitchen table. They helped get their own kids into college and decided they know how it works. They haven't worked with anybody else's kids, they haven't worked in an admissions office. They haven't worked in a school office. I get it, but they've got a long way to go to develop the more powerful sense of different colleges and different processes that are going to work for different kids."

Kat Cohen, who founded IvyWise in 1998, hires only counselors who have worked in admissions at top schools (Cohen herself read applications at Yale, where she received a PhD in Latin American literature). This expertise comes into play once an IvyWise student has completed an application and it's given to a "roundtable" of counselors, who apply their collective knowledge and offer feedback. A former MIT admissions officer could offer suggestions on an MIT application, for example, pointing out specific strengths or experiences the student should amplify.

"We read every student," Cohen says. "We recreate the admissions committee experience. So we get into smaller groups, a couple of times a week, and the students' work—all of their essays, their applications, their lists, their profiles—goes through multiple roundtables. You get this very comprehensive and textured [CONTINUED ON PAGE 127]



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COLLEGE COUNSELORS

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 99] expert feedback. That’s a totally different process from ‘I’m going to hire a tutor to help my kid write their essay, which we think is a mistake.’

This sort of concierge service doesn’t come cheap. Packages that include roundtable evaluations start at \$14,000 and can go as high as \$50,000 when a student works with the company for several years.

According to Sklarow, the average comprehensive fee for independent counseling is about \$6,500. But in Manhattan, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, the numbers creep closer to \$15,000 or \$20,000. Paying much beyond that he can’t justify. “Most people who are paying \$100,000 think they’re getting the secrets to opening the gates,” he says. “There are no secrets to opening the gates other than a kid who is very smart, works very hard, gets good grades, and is a good kid. You want to hire a consultant who’s going to say that the goal isn’t to get into an Ivy League school. The goal is, let’s find the best possible match for you—where you’re going to thrive, where your kid will be successful and joyful and all of that stuff that you hope parents really want for a teenager. Well, that’s not \$100,000.”

The new frontier of independent college consulting, which could be called the Red Bull approach, is epitomized by Jamie Beaton, the 30-year-old founder of Crimson Education, who will tell you that Crimson students earned 294 Ivy League acceptance letters last year. (The company has 800 tutors and works with 8,000 families around the world.) Another jaw-dropping number: Crimson has raised \$90 million in various funding rounds.

A former venture capitalist with degrees from Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, Beaton sees himself as a high-performance coach who starts working with students in middle school to reverse-engineer their high school trajectory through a barrage of subject tutors, essay coaches, and other mentors. “We take students, we train them intensively, they become better applicants, they get in. It’s almost shockingly simple,” Beaton tells me over the phone from

Heathrow Airport. He has just been at Eton College, giving a talk to students and counselors, and now he’s on his way to Boston to meet with clients. “I’ll swing by Harvard to attend my professor’s birthday party as well,” he says.

Beaton has never worked in college admissions, but believes his own experience as an intensely driven high school student in New Zealand who turned to personal coaching in every area of his life is a template that can be applied to others. His critics (who are also rivals) say his approach is misleadingly self-selective, as Beaton personally works with only 16 to 20 students a year—ones he admits are “quite academically inclined.” In other words, they might be able to get into Harvard on their own and, given Beaton’s price (up to \$200,000), they come from families sufficiently well off that admissions offices might see them as potential donors.

Beaton says that Crimson families paying those fees represent less than 10 percent of his business. Most pay about \$25,000 for a two-year program starting in high school. He also says that despite all the marketing (Crimson’s website blasts: “Is your child aiming for the Ivy League? Don’t leave their future to chance”), the company has “many students going to UC schools, heading off to Vanderbilt and U Chicago, Johns Hopkins, UC San Diego. The liberal arts colleges, such as Pomona.”

Philosophically, Beaton has no patience for the notion of fit in college admissions. “A lot of counselors use ‘fit’ as an excuse to encourage children to apply for schools that are less than their potential,” he says. “My mentality is, help students challenge themselves, make them grow, take harder academics, and then look at all the different options. But a lot of students are told too early that they can’t get into these top-tier schools or it’s not worth trying. And I think that does them a disservice.”

As for those who say that heavily conditioning 12-year-olds by meeting with them every week to work on executive-function skills, leadership, and communications is too much (“I’m sure it works for some kids, but it’s also a terrific way to hijack a childhood,” says Chris Teare), Beaton argues he’s working only with kids who want to be pushed. He says he also motivates students who may need it.

“Think about a typical high school student who is not engaged,” Beaton says. “They find school dull, they’re distracted on TikTok. They’re not finding much purpose in their day-to-day high school experience. Our students typically have a multiyear mission in mind. They’ve got a vision for the future.” T&C

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