



College admission frenzy corrupt, too

Article by William H. Caskey

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FOLLOW THE MONEY. That was the advice given by Deep Throat to Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein during their Watergate investigation.

Sadly, the same mantra applies to today's booming, billion-dollar college-admission industry. As you read this, seniors are anxiously anticipating admission decisions while a new round of juniors is entering the fray, feeding an insatiable cadre of test-prep companies, tutors and private consultants. Combine this with the mushrooming hysteria surrounding college admission and the outcome is anything but good.

The simple fact is that consumer frenzy + perpetual cash + no oversight = deceit, scams and shams.

Take the recent example of a senior admissions official at the University of Pennsylvania's MBA program who simultaneously ran an admission-consulting side business, thereby advising clients whom she might also evaluate in her admission capacity at Penn. She shut down her Web site, but the damage was done. Yet another black mark was recorded in an industry in which growing numbers of admission consultants build their financial portfolios on the backs of anxious families. In fact, the situation is so alarming that the National Association of College Admission Counseling made the unprecedented decision to investigate conflict of interest in the profession.

Last fall BusinessWeek profiled a consultant who charges families \$40,000 to assist them with the college-admission process. She also runs a four-day "boot camp" that costs attendees \$12,500. According to BusinessWeek, she earned nearly \$1 million last year. On the Internet, one has only to surf the Web to uncover countless admission-related Web sites promising stunning results. Hire them and your child's odds of entering the Ivy League will skyrocket. They effortlessly convert hope into cash.

So, how big is the college-admission-consulting business? According to the Independent Educational Consultants Association, the number of independent counselors has grown from 1,200 to 4,000 over the last decade and the percentage of students using consultants has swelled from 1 to 6 percent. It is an education-industry supernova.

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Because college-admission consulting is unregulated, many individual and Internet-based consultants have little or no experience. Anyone can and, consequently, does hang out a shingle. Some of these individuals claim incredible and unverifiable success rates at “the most selective colleges” and their Web sites are purposefully vague about their backgrounds.

An admission consultant myself, I find that it is clear that families increasingly view this industry with suspicion. They read the steady stream of reports chronicling greed and moral compromise. However, the emotion surrounding the admission process drives them forward, somehow dislodging their normally reliable consumer common sense.

Many families with whom I first meet never ask about my background in admissions. They only want to confirm that I can get their kids into “good” colleges and to know how “successful” my students have been in the past. In a world of shysters and swindlers, they are “ripe” for a con job.

Like any good high-school counselor, an experienced admission consultant reduces anxiety by providing families with the guidance and timetables necessary to complete this process both wisely and effectively. Nonetheless, as our numbers grow, so do the numbers of ethically compromised consultants. The consequence is that we are becoming the snake oil industry of the 21st Century.

I view the world of college admissions with mixed emotions. Most admission professionals are committed to a principled process. At the same time, colleges do a poor job of making the process transparent to families. The result is that families see it as a bewildering board game to be won. And growing numbers of consultants nurture this impression, building their million-dollar businesses.

Consumer frenzy draws predatory opportunists to the college-admission industry like mosquitoes to a summer cookout. Sadly, it is a ! common s tory in today’s world. Just look at today’s subprime-mortgage meltdown.

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