

Private Educational Counselors, a New and Growing Resource

by Mark Sklarow

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A new and dramatic shift in how and where high school students and young adults receive post-secondary educational counseling has been quietly underway for the past decade, reaching a fast pace that is transforming counseling. This change has significant implications for career colleges drawing students from high school ranks, and those who wish to build that segment of their student body.

Independent educational consultants work as school, college, and career counselors separate from any institution. They are hired directly by families with the singular goal of "finding the best match" for their child. Unlike school-based counselors who solely concentrate on state colleges and who often feel measured based on the list of college placements published in their alumni magazine, independent educational consultants are judged on a more sensible standard. For them, it's about helping students recognize their career interests and deciding on an educational path that helps them reach their goal. Consultants recommend colleges, gap year programs, career training, and other options from coast-to-coast.

Independent counseling differs from school counseling in other ways, as well. In U.S. high schools, counselors now suffer under student ratios approaching 600 or 700 students. Post-secondary counseling often consists of an assembly program detailing the college application process and the offering of CDs and workbooks to guide that process. In contrast, educational consultants see on average 60 students a year and spend more than ten hours of face time with each student; enough time to complete career inventories and explore all post-secondary options. Most consultants discuss non-traditional options even with a family focused on traditional four-year colleges. The results are startling: While only 10 percent of high school advised students travel out of state for their post-secondary training, 70 percent of those working with educational consultants do so. Even more telling, 80 percent of students hiring a consultant go the route of private post-secondary schooling. It is worthy to note that the vast majority of these families have the financial resources to support whatever decision they make, without need of financial assistance.

This financial security, coupled with a solid counseling foundation, leads to dramatically higher retention rates at schools, colleges, and universities across the board.

The number and nature of such placements has undergone growth in size and diversity. Over the last five years the number of high school seniors working with a private counselor has doubled from under

60,000 to well over 120,000. IECA estimates that this number will double again over the next four to five years. What was a bi-coastal phenomenon is now spreading to the heartland.

As the number and diversity of students using such services has increased, consultants have sought to become better informed about career colleges. Culinary, computer, art and technical schools were among the first to grab consultant interest. IECA conferences now feature exhibitors, presenters, and sponsors from career colleges, and the Association includes career schools on planned tours. Yet some of the older consultants do not fully understand or appreciate how "trade schools" have themselves transformed in recent years. The need for further education among consultants is critical and the time is now, during this periods of growth and change.

Another trend we see among clients of educational consultants is the growing demand among young adults seeking adequate advice on career schooling. This category includes those leaving the military, those who left college due to a lack of success, and those for whom college was not the right choice and face dead-end jobs. Families based squarely in the middle and professional classes seek private consultants because they are unwilling to leave the future to chance. These families seek consulting advice for their young adult to ensure a career path is explored, designed, and initiated. These young people are ideally suited to seek high quality career training.

As counseling shifts from school-based to private one-on-one advice, exciting changes are happening. No one assumes the end point is the big state university. Exploring students' career options is not left to mirroring parents or 'falling into' a job. Independent educational consultants provide a thoughtful, systematic approach to examining students' career interests, appropriate educational paths, and knowledge of the broadest cross-section of educational options.

The pairing of educational consultants with the world of career colleges seems ideally suited for the changing nature of counseling, and more significantly for improving the appropriateness of student placements and student success.

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