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The Commercialization of the College Application Process and
the Rise of the For-Profit Educational Consultant

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Abstract

In the unregulated field of college counseling, elite, high-priced consultants have established a niche market. The popular media often speak of these consultants as being responsible for the state of frenzy currently associated with the college admissions process. While all counselors must be accountable for their actions and any engagement in compromised work practices, the root of the problem appears to be the commercialization of the process itself. In this paper, I address the following questions: *How has commercialization changed the field of college admissions? What is currently being done to regulate the domain and what further steps can be taken to promote Good Work in the field?*

I first explored the current state of commercialization by looking at the books and other printed materials aimed at high school students and their parents. Next, I examined the documentation from the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), and the Higher Educational Consultants Association (HECA), three organizations that have attempted to codify a set of rules for the domain of Independent Educational Consulting (IEC). I paid particular attention to the ethical codes of conduct used by each organization. Finally, I interviewed stakeholders in the college admissions process using an open-ended protocol. Their responses were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using emic coding.

Using the emergent themes in conjunction with the Good Work Framework, I drew conclusions about the state of for-profit counseling in America, including analysis of the stereotypes that exist about practitioners, the dangers inherent in compromised work by individual IECs, and the ways that professional organizations are trying to regulate the domain. I found that professional organizations encourage work that is ethical, engaged, and excellent. However, their authority does not extend to those who do not join these organizations. The lack of gatekeeping leaves potential clients vulnerable to IECs who do not adhere to the domain standards. Only by disseminating information about how to choose an ethical IEC will the field be able to reduce the number of practitioners who profit from compromised work. Increasing access to this information is imperative because unethical work casts a shadow over the entire field that leads to increased confusion, heightened frenzy, and continued inequity.

Background

The pursuit of American higher education has become a highly commercialized process fraught with anxiety for parents and teenagers alike. In the 21st century, “the admissions process is not simply the search for an institution at which to study; it is also the hunt for an impressive trophy” (Murphy & Fallows, 2003). Applying to college has become an all-consuming pursuit in which students attempt to “gain entry to a college that would put an acceptable decal on the back of the family SUV” (Fiske, 2008). The results of the commercialization process are easy to see in the popular media and continue to be felt by students around the world, but the origins of the change are more elusive. While the U.S. News & World Report’s Best Colleges issue and the onslaught of self-appointed admissions experts-for-hire are often cited as the cause of the current state of frenzy, I see these factors as the result of the consumerization of college education, not the root of the problem.

The level of frenzy seen in college admissions today is the direct result of what Lloyd Thacker (2005), Director of the Education Conservancy, defines as “the shifting role of the college president from educational visionary to CEO”. The spark that ignited the change was the college marketing that began in the 1970s. According to Edward Fiske (2008), former New York Times education editor and author of the Fiske guidebooks, “it was colleges and universities that, by adopting aggressive marketing techniques [...] first sent out the message that higher education was a consumer item” because they feared that the end of the baby boomer generation would mean a declining number of applicants and reduced revenue. Despite the subsequent surge of college

applicants due to a population increase, the marketing efforts intensified. He further explains,

Once college admissions has been redefined -- in consumerist rather than educational terms -- there was no way to control the escalation of marketing actions and reactions. Once out of the bottle, the notion of higher education as just another item to be sold and purchased took on a life of its own (Fiske, 2008, p. A112).

As the marketing efforts continued, more students began to apply for a finite number of spaces at prestigious colleges and universities. As a result, rates of admission to these flagship institutions declined while the level of parental confusion and teen angst reached new heights.

Desperate for answers and guidance, families initially turned to school college counselors for assistance in an increasingly complex process, but found that they could not always get adequate support in their high school. Lack of school-based support is not generally attributed to a lack of interest or desire to assist on the part of school counselors. Rather, high student-counselor ratios mean that a typical American secondary school student does not get sufficient help because counselors simply do not have the time that they need to work with students individually. College counseling is only one task among many currently assigned to school-based guidance counselors who still have to rely on the same limited time and resources to try to meet student needs.

This situation has continued to deteriorate due to the population increase and school funding cuts. Greene & Greene (2004) note that student-counselor ratios in public high schools have been steadily declining and now average 500:1 nationally and up to 1000:1 in California. Given these statistics, it is not surprising that one study showed that only 18% of high school students actually found their school counselors to be helpful in

exploring post-secondary educational options (Wimberley 2005). Additionally, as the college application process has become more complex and competitive, school guidance counselors have not been given extra resources to help their students. The net result of these understaffed guidance offices is that “college applicants are left on their own to navigate the often turbulent waters of this American rite of passage, the college choice process” (McDonough, 1994, p. 5).

Gradually families realized that other adult advocates could be important in helping students prepare for college (Wimberly, 2002). The way that students apply to college has changed so much in twenty years that even parents who went through the process themselves are faced with tasks that are foreign and disconnected from their own experience. With no other adult to help, private consultants began to “fill in some of the gap created by the lack of college counseling in high schools” (McDonough, 1994, p. 6). Entrepreneurial individuals recognized the need for assistance and saw the lucrative potential of providing support for confused and overwhelmed families. They have not only filled the gap but also created the niche market of Independent Educational Consulting (IEC). This field arose in order to help ease the level of anxiety experienced by students and their parents during the college admissions process.

According to Independent Educational Consultant Association (IECA) Board President Timothy B. Lee (2006), “Hiring an independent educational consultant can give families objective advice, access to reliable information, and the kind of individual attention necessary to make an informed decision”. While some counselors may advertise by promoting their acceptance rates to prestigious institutions as a mark of excellence, the overall field is more focused on helping students to find “best fit” schools,

not simply those with the greatest name recognition or cachet. Within the domain, counselors promote their ability to draw upon their broad base of knowledge to help students explore the range of options that are out there. Most practitioners measure quality by the effectiveness of a counselor in helping students apply to a range of schools. As Lee (2006) puts it, “Success is judged not by gaining admission, but by a successful experience wherever a student chooses to matriculate”. This message underscores the professional mantra that the goal is for a counselor to use his or her expertise to facilitate the process so that the student can get into schools based on merit and fit.

According to Fiske (2008), “Thousands of families turned to private consultants to help them build their résumés, write the perfect essay, and otherwise select and gain entry to [...] college”. The number of families seeking these services has grown dramatically in the past decade. In 2002, 6% of high schoolers hired help, up from only 1% in 1990 (Chatzky & Wilson, 2003). It is now estimated that at least “22% of all freshmen at private, four-year colleges this year have used [IECs]” (Tergesen, 2006). According to an October 2009 press release from the IECA, “For many years the myth has persisted that consultants are hired only by a tiny fraction of the population—at times reported to be under 5%—suggesting an elitist bent. The new survey provides evidence that this is not the case, that educational consultants are very much being employed in the mainstream and work with approximately 160,000 college applicants each year”. These statistics indicates that use of IECs is becoming more widespread in today’s admissions climate. Further, according to Jacques Steinberg (2009), “While initially clustered on the East and West Coasts, counselors are making inroads across the country”. Therefore, it is

clear that significant changes have taken place in the way students apply to college and IECs are becoming an integral part of the revised admissions process.

According to McDonough (1994), “Under the privatization of college access, trusted public servants (high school guidance counselors) are replaced by private entrepreneurs (independent educational consultants) who are driven by bottom-line financial considerations” (p. 22). It is this financial component that has caused some of the most significant criticism of the field of independent educational consulting. While the services offered by IECs, could be beneficial to all college-bound students, they are still not available to everyone. On average, counselors charge \$700 in more rural areas and \$3,200 in cosmopolitan cities for a sophomore-to-senior package” (Chatzky & Wilson, 2003, p. 144). It is the range of costs that “prompt[s] criticism that the students from families who can afford such services are the ones who already have all the advantages in getting into college” (Walsh, 1999, p. 14). According to Thomas H. Parker (2006), Dean of Admission and Financial Aid at Amherst College, “The fundamental irony in the role of independent college consultants is that those who need them the most cannot afford them”. Parker goes on to point out an “inverse relationship between cost and utility; that is, the more you pay, the more superfluous the services provided” (Parker, 2006). While many IECs do offer pro bono services each year, in addition to their regular client-base, only a small number of students are able to benefit from these services. Those who do not have help may remain confused and, some believe, actually end up further behind their peers.

To compound the issue of elitism in private college counseling, criticism exists over the fact that a small group of high-profile consultants have justified charging “as

much as a year's tuition, room, and board" (Tergesen, 2006) for counseling services. For example, Michele Hernandez, of Hernandez College Consulting, "charges up to \$36,000 per student for advice on everything from what courses to take to how to spend summers" (Tergesen, 2006)*. Hernandez has become notorious in the media for her unapologetic comments about her high prices, which has drawn added attention to this issue. She is quoted as saying, "It's annoying when people complain about the money, [...] I'm at the top of my field. Do people economize when they have a brain tumor and are looking for a neurosurgeon? If you want to go with someone cheaper, or chance it, don't hire me" (Steinberg, 2009). Hernandez has become "a divisive figure" (Berfield and Tergesen, 2007) in the field due to these comments. Further, the focus on cost has remained a dominant theme in media reports and has led to misconceptions about costs of IEC services as a whole.

Some critics believe that high-priced counselors create an additional level of frenzy in the process, implying that cost is directly related to a student's chances of success. Others claim that high-priced college counselors "trade on their positions to dazzle a gullible and often desperate public and collect outrageous fees" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 20) thereby undermining the credibility of other practitioners by casting a shadow of greed over the entire field. While it is impossible to know the long-term impact of the media attention given to counselors who charge high fees, it is clear that this topic has become a polarizing issue amongst stakeholders and has given rise to debates about ethics in the field. Additionally, this issue has become a symbol for the media concern about IECs run amok.

* While prices are not published online and Hernandez did not disclose this information during her written interview, subsequent estimates show her charging in excess of \$40,000 per student (Berfield and Tergesen, 2007).

Given the financial rewards that are possible, there is tremendous incentive to participate in this field. With no credentialing process, no official licensure requirement, and optional membership in professional organizations, “those who are tempted to practice compromised work may find an unexpectedly promising breeding ground” (Gardner & Shulman, 2005). Examples of compromised work that exist in the field have been heavily publicized and IECs have been the focus of a tremendous backlash focused on their capacities and motives. The countless examples of professionalism in the field simply do not make headlines but instances of questionable ethics or extreme pricing is fodder for media attention and even leads to ridicule of IECs in popular television sitcoms and cartoons.

In GoodWork terms, the ‘field’ of Independent Educational Consulting is far more developed than is the ‘domain’ with its underlying set of consensual values. Compromised work (Gardner & Shulman, 2005) is more likely in the absence of a mandated ethical framework as well as the lack of enforceable rules to regulate practitioners who operate outside of the domain. The prevalence of work that does not meet the Good Work standards is due to the fact that, “a domain needs to contain more than knowledge and skill to be recognized by the rest of society as a profession [...] there has to be an ethical dimension” (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001, p. 23). While most practitioners hold themselves to a high ethical standard, the field exists on “soil in which compromised work is likely to arise and thrive” (Gardner & Shulman, 2005).

Independent Educational Consulting is “a rapidly growing, largely unregulated field seeking to serve families bewildered by the admissions gauntlet at selective

colleges” (Steinberg, 2009). Since there are no prerequisites for entrance into the field, Tergesen (2006) explains that “anyone can set up shop -- such counselors’ ranks have doubled [...] in the past five years”. Further, since “practitioners aren’t required to have experience in college admissions or high school counseling” (Tergesen, 2006), anyone can claim to be a practitioner. In fact, “only 15% of IECs report having any previous college admissions experience” (McDonough, 1994, p. 13). As Chatzky and Wilson (2003) note, “Having gotten his or her own kid into a good school is not enough” (p. 144) to claim expertise. While that seems like a tongue-in-cheek reflection on the field, it is not actually uncommon for parents of recent high school graduates to be the newest IECs to hang a shingle and begin a home-based college counseling business.

In any unregulated field, there is room for dishonesty and manipulation. As University of Pennsylvania president Amy Guttmann explains, “there are snake oil salesmen in every field and many [IECs] are preying on vulnerable and anxious people” (Steinberg, 2009). Steinberg examined credentials for several of the country’s most prominent IECs and uncovered alarming discrepancies. While “the demand for ‘accountable’ information is present in every other part of society” (Murphy & Fallows, 2003), parents handing over tens of thousands of dollars for college consultants don’t have any power over the lack of accountability, which is dangerous because “it’s not uncommon for counselors to exaggerate their backgrounds” (Steinberg, 2009). Examples of inflated credentials and other acts of dishonesty have become all too plentiful in the field and it has become increasingly confusing to determine the actual credentials of IECs or to validate their claims. Further, media attention that is focused on these unethical

actions has undermined the field as a whole, casting doubts even over IECs who do hold themselves to a high standard of ethical practice.

Many educators and counselors recognize that the consumer culture surrounding college admissions has significantly altered the process. Lloyd Thacker (2005) asserts that the “commercialization of college admissions has created a crisis by undermining educational values.” He further notes that “billions of dollars have been made by industries involved in this transformation” (Thacker, 2005). In short, the lucrative market that has developed since the transition to a commercial model in higher education has fundamentally changed the way that students conceive of and approach college admissions. Further, the elite nature of the process undermines chances for qualified students whose families cannot afford IEC support. The market driven nature of admissions has changed the make-up of American colleges and universities and altered the way that we view this rite of passage for American teens. In *Admissions Officers Speak Out on Private Counselors* (2006), Dean Bishop, associate vice president for enrollment management at Creighton University, explains that, “somewhere in the past 20 years we have lost our way”.

Given the current situation, it is important to note that the professional organizations for school-based and independent counselors have taken an active role in trying to promote the Good Work standards of excellence, ethics, and engagement (Gardner, et al., 2001). In doing so, they have attempted to codify a set of rules for the domain and ensure professionalism. The Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) produces its own Standards of Excellence for their members (IECA,

2009), which includes an outline of best practices for each group of stakeholders.

According to this document:

For new consultants, the competencies begin to define standards of excellence that an IECA consultant strives to meet. [...] For experienced consultants, they can serve as a tool for self-assessment, as individuals think about areas they might identify for the ongoing professional development that separates IECA consultants from others.

The corresponding fifteen-page Statement of Principles of Good Practice (2009) from the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) similarly underscores the importance placed on excellent work within the domain.

Further, the standards for acceptance into NACAC and IECA highlight the importance of experience and expertise. For example, in order to become a Professional Member of IECA, the highest echelon of membership, an IEC has to have a master's degree in a related field, 3+ years of experience, a record of service to more than 50 students, a minimum of 50 campus visits, and 3 professional references. The Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA) promotes similar guidelines in their Standards and Ethics Statement (2009) that is modeled on that of NACAC, but their membership requirements are less stringent and ensure that a wider range of people working as IECs are covered by one of these important ethical contracts.

While it may seem that the situation has gone beyond the point of no return, there is still room for change. By continuing to promote professional standards for IECs and re-framing access to independent consulting, it would be possible to create a domain for practitioners that ensures that all IECs meet the standards of Good Work and support students in a way that is ethical, engaged, and excellent (Gardner, et al., 2001). There is, however, a balance of responsibility between the professional organizations to educate

and the potential customers to avail themselves of this information and use it in their selection of an IEC. It is the lack of communication between these two groups that has allowed some compromised workers to operate unchecked.

Methods

To obtain a picture of what is happening in the field, five groups of stakeholders were identified: Leaders in Professional Organizations, Partners in Certificate Programs, Deans of Admissions, Independent Counselors, and Scholars. Each of these groups plays a role in either the admissions process itself or in regulating or commenting on the work that is being done.

A total of 20 people were approached to participate. While 17 people initially responded, only 13 of these participants completed the interview process and have been included in my project. All but one of the respondents gave permission to use their identifying information. Each group of stakeholders received a set of questions tailored to the roll they play in the field (Appendices A – D). Consent was either received in person or via an online iPoll link

Representatives of three national organizations that promote professionalism and ethical practice were approached via their respective media and public relations offices. Mark Sklarow, Executive Director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), David Hawkins, Director of Public Policy and Research for the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), and Scott Hamilton, Member of the Board of Directors of the Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA) all agreed to participate in the research.

Initially, two professionals who work in college admissions offices were asked to participate. Angel Perez, Director of Admission at Pitzer College and Professor in the UCLA College Counseling Certificate Program, was interviewed on the telephone. He was selected because of his dual role as well as for his outspoken record on issues surrounding college admissions and a previous working relationship. Dr. William Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions at Harvard College was interviewed in person, in his office at Harvard University. He was selected because of his active pursuit of reforming admissions in order to promote equity and access and his role at this world-renowned institution. Three additional deans of admissions were approached to participate, but were unable to do so during the timing of the interviews, which were being conducted during the height of admissions reading season.

Several groups of Independent Counselors were approached about my project. The first group consisted of counselors who had been named in a New York Times article that appeared in the Education section on July 18, 2009. Steinberg's article, *Before college, costly advice just on getting in* profiled four elite college counselors who charge high prices for their counseling services. Contact information was obtained for three of the four individuals listed: Dr. Michele Hernandez, Dr. Katherine Cohen, and Shannon Duff. They were approached via e-mail and asked to participate. Shannon Duff, who was portrayed very negatively in the article, did not respond to the e-mail query. Dr. Hernandez, Director of Hernandez Consulting responded and agreed to participate via e-mail. Dr. Cohen, Director of Ivy Wise, also agreed to participate via e-mail after a preliminary telephone conversation.

Subsequently, Mark Sklarow of IECA, provided an additional list of six “highly ethical counselors” who charge rates that are more reflective of the national average. All of these individuals are current members of IECA and agreed to participate. However, only four completed the interview: Joan Koven of *Academic Access*, Jane Schropshire of *Schropshire Educational Consulting, LLC*, Robin Abedon of *Taking the Next Step*, and one individual who asked to remain anonymous.

Finally, an attempt was made to diversify the pool of Independent Counselors by approaching other individuals. One query was sent to a Harvard Graduate School of Education alumnus who runs a college counseling business and, despite initial agreement and enthusiasm over the project, she stopped returning e-mails and did not participate.

Two other stakeholders were interviewed and have been identified as scholars in my project. Lloyd Thacker, the director of The Education Conservancy and an outspoken advocate of ending the college rankings system participated in a telephone interview. Professor Dr. Richard Weissbourd of the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) was interviewed in-person, on the HGSE campus.

Using emic coding, the written interviews and transcripts were analyzed line-by-line and seven codes were identified: Media Bias, Pricing, Lack of Gatekeepers, Feeding the Frenzy, Core of Knowledge, Membership in Professional Organizations, and Good Work. Information from counselor websites, professional organization websites and publications, book titles, and college admissions guides were also considered during the coding process.

Findings:

Media Bias

Issues about media attention being paid to compromised work in the field of Independent Educational Consulting are common. Focus on this issue is frequently tied to the high-cost services of a small group of elite counselors. Some examples of recent titles are: NYT Education Magazine (Front Page): *Before college, costly advice on just getting in*, Businessweek: *What price college admissions? Parents spending tens of thousands to shape their kids' game plans*, and the Chronicle of Higher Education: *How college admissions came to be hawked in the marketplace*. In an e-mail, Mark Sklarow explained that, "98% of consultants charge under \$7000". Assuming that this information is accurate, only 2% of IECs charge the high prices that make the majority of headlines in national and international press.

Stakeholders acknowledged the role of the media in tarnishing or maligning the field. One counselor said, "I do think that the media often portrays [sic] IECs as people trying to take advantage of families by charging them huge fees". Joan Koven, who is actively engaged in pro bono work in Philadelphia, cites excessive fees as an element of unethical behavior in the profession. She explains, "Charging ridiculous fees does not help our profession keep out of the eye of the media in a negative way". Dean Fitzsimmons echoed her sentiment in his interview, explaining that, "what makes the press are some of the more spectacular situations where people are paying [high prices]. From what I can gather, many IECs make very little money [...] and do it more as a labor of love than for the money". While individuals within the field are aware of the sensational nature of these media claims, the general public is not. Therefore, the public

perception of IECs is highly mediated by news sources that focus on a small population of private counselors.

However, not all of the stakeholders voiced negative opinions of the media influence. Cohen acknowledged that, “some of the critiques are valid and some are sensational and unfair”. Since Cohen has been the recipient of some negative media attention in the past, some of it possibly “sensational and unfair”, this is a significant comment. Kentucky-based IEC, Jane Shropshire, indicated that conditions had improved, saying, “I do feel that some media representations lately have been fairer in conveying what the best of us do”. An unnamed IEC further explained that, “I have found that [media attention] does not negatively impact my clients’ perceptions of IECs and it is their opinion that I care about”. These responses indicate a wide range of viewpoints about the role of the media in representing the field and in shaping public opinion. Since the media have frequently been blamed for the negative view of IECs, it is important to recognize that half of my participants did not see media bias as a significant problem.

Cost

Since discussions of media bias were centered on pricing concerns, I examined the subject in greater depth. According to Lloyd Thacker, “for-profit has a place, but it must be kept in its place”. His comment echoes the concern that many have over the role of high costs associated with some IECs. Two of the counselors from Steinberg’s (2009) article, Katherine Cohen and Michele Hernandez, were questioned about their prices directly. Both had been featured in his article, which directly addressed the cost of their services. In written interviews, they were asked, “What do you want your critics to

know, especially those who focus on the high cost of services? Do you publish your prices online?” Hernandez revisited the theme of comparing IECs to medical specialists that appeared in Steinberg’s (2009) article. During her interview, she compared herself to a “super expensive cardiac surgeon”. She also explained that “I always fill up early, so a free market economy would tell you I’m not charging *enough* [emphasis mine]”. She is unapologetic about her pricing and well-known throughout the industry for this stance.

Hernandez is seen as a polarizing figure in the field. For many, she has become the symbol of high-cost college counseling and is frequently profiled in media articles focused on pricing. The individuals interviewed were all aware of the media attention that she has received. While none of the participants were asked about her directly, five individuals mentioned her by name in response to questions about ethics. Three additional participants referenced her or her work as an example of what is “wrong” or “unethical”. One stakeholder even cited her new affiliate program (Hernandez, 2010) as a sign of, “the corporatization of the teenage years”. It is important to note that some of these negative impressions may have been formed by the media coverage she has received.

IvyWise founder, Katherine Cohen, also charges high-prices for some of the services she offers, but appears not to be critiqued in the same way as Hernandez. Unprompted, four participants acknowledged the differences between these two IECs, with Cohen being shown in a much more favorable light. In Cohen’s written interview, she acknowledged the fact that “much of the criticism about IvyWise revolves around pricing” and explained how “the media will focus on one price – our highest – and only mention that price when, in fact, we offer a wide range of services and pro bono work”.

Cohen further explained that she tries “to make sure there is something for everyone” and to “create programs based on a family’s budget and needs”. She also says that, “one out of seven students [IvyWise counselors] work with is pro bono”. Taking Cohen at her word, these responses show that she is actively considering issues of equity and access in her attempts to address the needs of families from a wide-range of financial backgrounds and may account for the fact that people express more respect for her work than for other elite counselors.

Cohen also explained the reasoning behind her higher prices, saying that they “allow counselors to take on fewer students, to give unparalleled attention to each student, and to continue their ongoing professional development”. One stakeholder who was interviewed seconded her idea about the benefit of high prices, saying that they allowed those IECs to focus on a small client base and other professional development activities. Another acknowledged that it is “an individual decision for families” and that it is not a problem, “if people feel that they have gotten value”. Additional references were made to the idea that working with a counselor may allow a student to receive merit scholarships that would actually offset the high consulting fees.

Lack of Gatekeepers, or “The Wild West”

Another common concern of all stakeholders interviewed is the issue of the lack of regulation for people entering the field, which Dean Fitzsimmons described as “a little bit like the Wild West” in which IECA “is doing the best it can” to deal with the “set of cottage industries that have developed”. All but one participant talked about the absence of enforceable regulations preventing someone from assuming the title of IEC or College Counselor. Katherine Cohen described how “many people simply hang out a shingle

declaring that they are a college counselor”. Two other participants brought up the idea of unqualified individuals “hanging out a shingle” as one of the most problematic aspects of the field. Michele Hernandez mirrored these sentiments, pointing out that “many IECs are parents of students who got into top colleges and then they feel qualified”. Her complaint was echoed across the participant groups, including the IECA’s Mark Sklarow, who says that he has to distinguish between “serious professionals” and “those who just want to dabble”. He explains, “I hear from someone – almost weekly – who tells me some version of ‘I got my daughter into MIT, now I want to do that for other kids’”.

Lloyd Thacker believes that these types of counselors “feed off the frenzy deepened by status and prestige” and is concerned about the message that is being sent to students and families alike. These messages violate the ethical guidelines of the professional organizations, but the limitation is not enforceable. Counselors who participate in professional education and who are members of the professional organizations express significant concerns over the issue of what messages are being conveyed to students. Many believe these messages can tarnish the reputation of practitioners and can also encourage work that is neither excellent nor ethical.

Given the unregulated nature of the field, there is no way to stop people from labeling themselves as IECs. The lack of gatekeepers was discussed with many of the stakeholders who acknowledged that more information for parents is needed so that they can distinguish, as one IEC described, the “honest practitioners from the bad apples”. The professional organizations have attempted to make information available to parents and students so that they understand how to find a qualified professional to help with the admissions process. Sklarow states that it is a belief of IECA that “the more information

that gets into the hands of families, the better” and describes how they “make a great deal of information available, whether families hire one of our members or not”. A visit to the IECA website supports his statement. They have a link for parents and students with free downloads, including: *12 Questions to Ask Before Hiring an Educational Consultant*, *12 Warning Signs that a Consultant is Not Worth Hiring*, and *Do you Need an Independent Educational Consultant?* (IECA, 2010). These publications also highlight the importance of professional memberships, experience, and transparency in pricing and are available at no charge. By following these guidelines, families would have excellent resources to aid them in finding a qualified counselor and would be better able to protect themselves from being taken advantage of by unscrupulous practitioners.

Similarly, NACAC has several pages on its website that explain how to hire a consultant. These tips are found in the publicly accessible student resource section and describe what to look for in a counselor, including the recommendation that, “The ideal educational consultant will have a minimum of five years experience working in a high school as a college counselor or for a college or university as an admission officer” (NACAC, 2010). Further, the organization provides a list of ten questions to ask before hiring a counselor (NACAC, 2010) and other helpful advice for families looking for an IEC.

Both organizations also provide a link to use their online counselor database to locate NACAC or IECA members who have been vetted during the membership application process, thus assuring that they have met their standards. While these databases would be invaluable to families considering hiring an IEC, many remain

unaware of these resources. Unless students and their parents are given the details about where to access this information, would have no way of accessing these important facts.

Feeding the Frenzy

The IECA Principles of Good Practice state that, “Members do not contribute to heightening anxiety surrounding admission” (IECA, 2009). IECA Executive Director, Mark Sklarow, explains that private college counseling should “not be about ‘how to beat the odds’ or using secret methods to ‘get in’”. Similarly, Scott Hamilton explains that his organization, HECA, has concerns about counselors who “play on a family’s anxieties and student fears”. He explains that his organization teaches that the job of IECs “isn’t to feed anxiety, but to lessen it”. While it is possible to monitor members of the professional organizations to ensure that they do not increase the college admissions frenzy, there is no way to prevent this message from dominating the unregulated marketplace.

A look at the titles of top-selling college admissions guidebooks written by IECs shows that focus on the fears and insecurities of families is a tactic that sells. These titles include: *What you don’t know can keep you out of college: A top consultant explains the 13 fatal application mistakes and why character education is the key to college admissions* (Don Dunbar), *A is for admission: The insiders guide to getting into the ivy league and other top colleges* (Michele Hernandez), *The college hook: packaging yourself to win the college admissions game* (Pam Proctor), and *College Admission Trade Secrets: A top private college counselor reveals the secrets, lies, and tricks of the college admissions process* (Andrew Allen). These titles support the criticism voiced by Dr. Richard Weissbourd, a Harvard University professor. He expressed concern over the fact

that some IECs teach parents and students how to “game the system”. Further, he believes that some IECs “play into parents’ fears that other people know a lot more than they do” and cause them to act in a “reckless” manner.

It is important to note that there is no ‘secret’ to getting admitted to college and no single individual has proprietary information about the process. Colleges and universities are generally explicit about what they are looking for in applicants and an abundance of websites, brochures, and books exist that give the same core set of advice about how to navigate the system. However, by promoting the idea that there is a secret set of information, the level of frenzy increases and drives the market for IECs. It may also lead families to hire some extremely high-priced counselors who claim to give them an edge in the ‘admissions game’ Even though most IECs are not engaged in stoking the anxiety that surrounds the admissions process, all IECs benefit from the increased sense of fear that leads parents and students to look for private help.

Core of Knowledge

While there is no required core of knowledge for individuals entering the field of work, considerable efforts have been made to codify a set of information that can be shared by practitioners. William Fitzsimmons acknowledged that, “there is so much information out there that you could easily put something together that could be a very legitimate Master’s degree”. While no formal advanced degree is focused on the field today, three certificate programs do exist from schools in California. These programs are offered by distance or on campus at the University of San Diego, the University of California Davis, and the University of California Los Angeles

Within my participant group, two individuals had a secondary role working with one of the certification programs. Angel Perez, Director of Admissions at Pitzer College is also an instructor in the UCLA Extension College Counseling Certificate Program, an on-line program offering education to people around the world. He says that he finds his work “exciting” because he is able to “impart knowledge to people and to shape the ethical understanding of each group of people entering the profession”. He believes that having a body of knowledge will also help to “change the way people think about IECs”. Scott Hamilton, HECA Board Member and Independent Consultant, played a role in designing the curriculum for the UC Davis Extension College Admissions Counseling and Career Planning Certificate, an on-campus program offered in California. He explained, “it is important to have something to support guidance counselors who want more information and those who want to enter into the field”. Completing a certificate program is a gateway to several professional organizations, indicating the importance placed on the set of skills that is developed in these programs.

Additionally, two textbooks/manuals have been published for practitioners. *Fundamentals of college admission counseling: A textbook for graduate students and practicing counselors* was first published by NACAC in 2006 and is a staple of the UCLA Certificate Program. It addresses the topics of ethics, special populations, admissions process, and counselor resources. The College Board makes an informational binder available: *College counseling sourcebook: Strategies from experienced counselors (6th edition)*, which is aimed at school and independent counselors. According to the College Board’s website, “the College Counseling Sourcebook is your single source for everything you need to help students prepare for and succeed in college”. These

counselor resources help to create a core set of knowledge and resources that are available to all members of the field.

Professional Memberships

The majority of Independent Educational Consultants interviewed (5 out of 6) belonged to NACAC and IECA. Three people also belonged to HECA. In the pool of respondents, several IECs also belonged to 1 or more regional institutions and 2 had met the requirements to become Certified Educational Planners (CEP) and had joined that professional organization as well. Overall, IECs felt that their professional memberships were “extremely important” to their work. One unnamed participant felt that her professional memberships brought her “credibility”. Dr. Cohen explained that the benefits of being a member of professional organizations include:

assurance to clients that we follow the principles of good practice for both NACAC and IECA; constant professional development; networking opportunities with my colleagues on the counseling side as well as on the college side with admissions officers; opportunities to both attend and participate in conferences to keep my fingers on the pulse of the profession; camaraderie with others in my profession.

To Cohen and many other individuals, professional memberships are an important element of working as an IEC and legitimizing the field as a whole.

One respondent stated that she does not belong to any organizations, although she was previously a member of NACAC. She explained, “I don’t see a point of joining”. When David Hawkins was asked about this comment, without being told the name of the individual who made it, he wrote that, “I would go a step further than this counselor and suggest that *nobody* NEEDS to be a member of any professional organization. The key

decision that our members make is that they WANT to be in a professional organization”.

He explained his position by describing how:

the short history of independent counseling reveals that whereas the profession was once a seedy backwater with a reputation to match, the engagement of those professionals with associational contexts seems to have lifted them to a level of legitimacy that is only earned by a commitment to good business, educational, and moral practice.

Issues of morality and ethics arose around the topic of professional memberships.

NACAC’s Hawkins explained the motivations behind the decision to join an organization, describing how members “know that it benefits them to be associated with a body of professionals who clearly care about the moral direction of their profession”.

Furthering the idea of legitimacy, Mark Sklarow wrote that, “ANYONE can PROMISE that they work ethically. By joining an association, you say to the public: I’m being watched: if I violate those ethical guidelines, someone will step in and act... That’s how you know that I am honest, competent, and well qualified.”

All three professional organizations spoke about the issue of attempting to provide regulations for the field when they are the only groups tasked with doing so. Mark Sklarow explained that many people work as ‘educational consultants’ without joining the IECA and so, those individuals fall beyond our scope and we cannot act on them”. Both Sklarow and Hawkins described the procedures for investigating claims against members and the importance attached to enforcing the ethical guidelines of professional members. Hawkins details how NACAC can “censure an offending member and remove their voting rights; and, in rare cases [...] vote to terminate the membership”. The frustration is that, “only members of either of our organizations [NACAC and IECA] are subject to our rules”. Only being able to sanction active members creates a space where

people operating under the guise of an IEC can practice in a way that is not aligned with the domain. Sklarow details how he gets, “inquiries once a month on average” regarding counselors who are suspected of violating the standards of the profession. However, he describes, “at least half the time, the person being accused of wrong-doing is not a member and I urge the family to take their concern to the local Better Business Bureau of district attorney”. For members, there is an IECA Ethics Committee to investigate and interview the parties involved in questionable practices before making a decision.

The true conflict is that the individuals who are suspected to be most likely to engage in compromised work practices are the same individuals who are practicing outside of the jurisdiction of the professional organizations. Therefore, while the field as a whole suffers from the negative attention that these individuals attract to IECs, there is little to nothing that can be done from within the domain. While members of the professional organizations did report issues with ethical violations and confirmed that some individuals have been expelled from their ranks, there is no statistical information available to show how often this happens or how well this has maintained Good Work standards within the field. Further, since names of expelled individuals are not public record, it is not possible to follow up to determine if these IECs continued to work in the field after their expulsion or if sanctions influenced their subsequent business practices.

Excellence

Harvard Dean of Admissions, William Fitzsimmons, acknowledges that there can be a genuine need for some students to use IECs. He explains that, in some cases, the “use of an independent is highly appropriate”. These specific cases include first-generation college students whose families lack the experience and expertise in the

process, foreign students, students who are not an ideal fit with their high school counselor, or those who do not have access to a school counselor. His concern, like that of many stakeholders, is to see that the counseling services that these students receive are excellent and ethical. Ensuring quality service is a common belief that cuts across all of the stakeholders who were interviewed.

In the interviews with IECs, it was clear that they believe in the value of the work that they are doing and that they feel very strongly about maintaining professional standards. Jane Shropshire describes how rewarding it is to “see students’ confidence grow as they learn how to identify their strengths and look beyond superficial impressions of colleges”. When asked “To whom or what do you feel most responsible?” she responded that she feels most responsible to herself to “meet my own standard of providing excellent service that will help students and parents”. All other IECs echoed a sense of responsibility directly to students and their families and a belief in providing excellent service.

Cohen explains that there is an additional benefit to working with an IEC – ensuring that the student finds a school that is the “best fit”, an expression that is commonly used by IECs in my interviews and throughout the professional literature. Given the overwhelming number of responses and articles that mirror the focus on “best fit”, it is clear that helping students find a school that is an ideal match has evolved as an important consideration of many IECs. Indeed, it can be considered an internal measure of excellence.

In Cohen’s interview, she provided a salient example of how important the issue of fit is, explaining that, “in twelve years, only two students we worked with have ever

transferred from their original schools”. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the U.S. Department of Education, approximately 13% of students who attended high schools with rigorous academic standards transferred colleges at some point during their undergraduate studies (Horn & Kojaku, 2001). Cohen’s statement suggests that she has had a significant impact on helping students find a school that fit their needs and goals. Since Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that transferring during college has a negative impact on degree completion, reducing transfer rates can be seen as another element of excellence.

Discussion

There is no definitive count of the number of students who use IECs today. However, it is clear that the rapid expansion of the field represents a growing dependence on practitioners. It would be easy to dismiss the discussion of IECs as merely a problem of elite students, but families from other backgrounds employ IECs as well. Further, private counselors have helped to reshape the process and the expectations of the admissions offices, which means that their impact reaches far beyond their client base. The emergence of IECs has played a role in reframing the admissions process by enhancing the sense that there is secret information and that applying to college is a “game” to be played. Thus, all stakeholders are affected by role played by IECs, which means that the presence of compromised work has the potential to undermine the admissions process itself.

Compromised work exists because the field of Independent Educational Consulting is an aspiring profession with no effective mechanism in place to control

entry into the field. The field has a general body of knowledge, specialized training, authorized gatekeepers, and a code of ethics, which are all elements of a profession (Ting, H-175 Lecture, 03/01/2010). However, due to the absence of a licensure requirement, there is no way to ensure that all individuals who assume the title of IEC are actually engaged in practices that align with the domain. The Independent Education Consultants Association (IECA), The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), and Higher Education Consultants (HECA) have all worked hard to establish ethical guidelines for their members and to regulate the domain. Their efforts underscore the importance placed on professional standards. However, membership is voluntary and only those who meet the admissions requirements and sign the ethical statements of the organizations are actually obliged to behave in accordance to these principles. Countless other IECs can practice without ever making this pledge to uphold regulations and the professional organizations cannot act to curb their behavior because they fall outside of their sphere of influence. Further, anyone expelled for failing to uphold ethical standards may continue to practice as an IEC without potential clients knowing of these sanctions. This undermines the organization's ability to effectively stop compromised work practices.

Most important for my argument is the fact that the average American family is affected by the presence of IECs who are engaged in compromised work practices. The perception of IECs that results from negative media attention may lead some families to be leery of asking for help that they genuinely need. Since an aura of distrust has been created in the media, along with a sense of inflated prices, some students who would benefit from private counseling services may be deterred from seeking outside help. If

these families are not aware of the level of professional standards that exist in the field and the ways in which they can ensure that they find an ethical practitioner. This may impede their access to services that could be very valuable to them. Additionally, when families with little social capital or experience with the admissions process hear of the elite counselors, it is also possible that they may assume that working with one of these individuals is the only route to college admissions success. Thus, they are extremely vulnerable to being manipulated by less ethical IECs and agreeing to pay inflated prices because they have been convinced that doing so is the only path to higher education.

Since consumers may be unaware of the importance of professional associations and their bylaws, compromised work is left unchecked. The lack of regulatory power means that families have no way to screen potential consultants and few avenues of recourse if they are unsatisfied with the assistance that they receive. Equally helpless are IECs who strive for a high level of professionalism in the field and whose work is undermined by media attention that focuses on individuals who may not even be members of the community. While professional organizations are focused on promoting Good Work in the field, their range is limited to those who agree to abide by their ethical principles.

These issues speak to the need for educating the public in an attempt to overcome the stereotypes and the media attention given to IECs who are not engaged in Good Work. Attempts to regulate IECs have made a difference in the field and ethical standards have become widely disseminated, though it is not possible to determine the extent to which they are honored. In my view, the core of the problem is making this information available to the public. More needs to be done to teach potential consumers

about how to select an IEC and what to look for to ensure that they have found an ethical counselor. Without getting information into the hands of the future clients and without sanctions-with-teeth for those who blatantly violate standards, it is neither possible to ensure Good Work across the domain nor to protect unsuspecting students from IECs who do not exemplify the standards set by the field.

Validity/Limitations

Several limiting factors have contributed to results that may not be generalizable to the field as a whole. Most significant is the fact that 5 of the 6 IECs interviewed are current members of professional organizations. The 6th individual was a member in the past but left the organization for reasons that were not made clear during her interview. Given the small size of the sample and the difficulty of finding and getting in touch with people who operate without professional affiliations, I was not able to interview any non-members. Since these are the individuals who are not obligated to uphold the standards of the domain, I believe that their inclusion would have provided significant insight into what is going on outside of the professional organizations. Further, it would have been telling to also interview people who did not meet the qualifying standards or who were expelled from NACAC or IECA.

Another limiting factor is the lack of diverse perspective from deans of admissions. Given the time of the year, at the height of the admissions decision season, it was not possible to have many participants from the field. The two individuals I interviewed believe that IECs do serve a purpose and both exhibited a level of respect for the professional organizations and individual practitioners. Their opinion is not universal

in the higher education community and including the opposite perspective would create a more representative picture of this polarizing topic.

Finally, as an IEC, graduate of the UCLA College Counseling Certificate Program, and member of all three professional organizations cited in my paper, I do have a personal and professional stake in the discussion. It is only natural that my belief in the importance of professional memberships, as evidenced by my own participation, may have impacted the lens through which I interpreted these results.

Avenues for Future Research

My study could be expanded to include many other stakeholders in the college admissions process. One of the most important groups to incorporate into the discussion would be students who use elite counselors. Understanding their motivation and what they believe to be the benefits of working with high-priced IECs would shed light on this anomaly in the marketplace. Additionally, interviewing students and parents who, despite adequate resources, opt not to use an IEC could provide insight into how people make decisions about the planning process. Further, looking at quantitative data on who uses IECs, costs in different areas, and success rates, would create a more complete picture of the field.

Another important group to consider would be school counselors. In my experience tremendous animosity exists between in-school guidance counselors and private college counselors and the strained relationship should be evaluated. Since in-school counselors could provide advice and information about choosing ethical IECs, strengthening the relationship could go a long way towards reducing the flow of clients to unethical IECs.

Finally, talking to Deans of Admission who are opposed to the role that IECs play would provide a very different portrait of issues that have arisen in the field. I did not have access to these individuals for my study and including their voice would add another dimension to the picture of the tension that currently exists amongst stakeholders.

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Appendix A: Question Protocol for Deans/Directors of Admissions

- 1) How long have you worked in _____ Admissions office?
- 2) What do you find most enjoyable about your job?
- 3) What aspects of your job are the most challenging?
- 4) What are your thoughts about independent college counselors?
 - What services, if any, should they offer?
 - What services, if any, should they NOT offer?
 - What about the cost?
 - Should there be stricter regulations in the field?
- 5) Referring to NYT article (www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/education/19counselor.html):
 - What do you think of the portrayal of IECs in this article?
 - Do you feel that this depiction is accurate?
 - Do you have any concerns about the portrayal of admissions in the media?
- 6) Referring to list of books & websites:
 - Do you think that the college admissions process has become too commercialized?
 - If yes, why do you think this happened?
 - If no, why do you think the media reports on this topic?
- 7) What are the goals of your admissions office? Do IECs facilitate this goal? Hinder this goal?
- 8) Do you think IECs are necessary?
- 9) What are your thoughts about the costs associated with IECs?
- 10) What, if anything, do you wish parents knew about the college application process?
- 11) What, if anything, do you hope students learn during the college application process?
- 12) Bob Laird's idea about adding a question about IECs to the Common App – thoughts?
- 13) If you could change one thing about the process...
- 14) Would you consider working as an IEC after you leave your current position?
- 15) Would you consider hiring a (former/aspiring) IEC to work as part of your admissions team?
- 16) What do you see as the goals of the admissions process for:
 - Students?
 - Parents?
 - IECs?
 - Admissions Officers?
 - Colleges?

Appendix B: Question Protocol for Independent Educational Consultants (IECs)

- 1) How long have you been an Independent Educational Consultant (IEC)?
- 2) What led you to this profession?
- 3) What training/experience did you have in the field before starting your business? How has this helped you in your work as an IEC?
- 4) What professional organizations have you joined, if any?
- 5) How many students do you work with each year?
- 6) What do you find most rewarding about your job?
- 7) What are the biggest challenges?
- 8) Do you find that people have stereotypes about IECs from the popular media? If yes, how do you feel about this?
- 9) Do you have any critiques about the field of independent counseling?
- 10) What do you wish people knew about the work that you do? (Or, what do you feel are some common misconceptions about IECs?)
- 11) What do you think of stricter regulations for IECs? Do you have any suggestions?
- 12) What do you feel are the greatest benefits of working with a private counselor? (For the family? For the student? For the college?)
- 13) What do you see as the goals of the admissions process for: Students? Parents? IECs? Admissions Officers? Colleges?
- 14) How would you define an ethical IEC?
- 15) Have you seen any examples of unethical behavior in the profession?
- 16) In your work, to whom or what do you feel most responsible?

Modified List of Questions for IECs in the NYT Article:

- 1) How long have you been an Independent Educational Consultant (IEC)?
- 2) What led you to this profession?
- 3) What training/experience did you have in the field before opening your company? How has this helped you in your work as an IEC?
- 4) What professional organizations have you joined? What benefits are there to these memberships?
- 5) How many students do you work with each year?
- 6) What do you find most rewarding about your job?
- 7) What are your biggest challenges?
- 8) What critiques do you have of the field?
- 9) How do you feel about the backlash against IECs in the popular media? What do you feel is the cause of these strong opinions? Are any of the critiques valid?
- 10) What do you wish people knew about the work that you do? (Or, what do you feel are some common misconceptions about IECs?)
- 11) Do you think you were portrayed fairly in the NYT article (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/education/19counselor.html>)? Why or why not?
- 12) What do you think of stricter regulations for IECs? What would you suggest?

- 13) How would you feel about colleges adding a question on the application where students would indicate the name of any private counselors who helped with their applications?
- 14) What do you want your critics to know, especially those who focus on the cost of services? Do you publish your prices online?
- 15) What do you feel are the greatest benefits of working with a private counselor? For the family? For students? For the college?
- 16) What do you see as the goals of the admissions process for: Students? Parents? IECs? Admissions officers? Colleges?
- 17) In your work, to whom or what do you feel most responsible?
- 18) Is there anything else that you would like to share about the work that you do?

Appendix C: Question Protocol for Representatives of Professional Organizations

- 1) What organization do you work for?
- 2) What is your position?
- 3) What is the mission of your organization?
- 4) Why do you feel that membership in this organization is beneficial for counselors? Is there a benefit for other stakeholders in the process (families, students, colleges, etc.)?
- 5) What do you feel are the most important qualifications for membership? Why?
- 6) Do you believe that the field of independent counselors is well regulated? Why or why not?
- 7) What critiques do you have of the field? Do you think that an organization can improve any of these areas?
- 8) How do you feel about the backlash against IECs in the popular media? What do you feel is the cause of these strong opinions? Do you feel that any of the critiques are valid?
- 9) What do you think of stricter regulations for IECs? Do you have any suggestions?
- 10) Many critics of IECs point to the high prices charged by some consultants. What do you think of this?
- 11) What do you wish that families and students knew about professional organizations? (Do you think that it is possible to inform people about what to look for in a counselor to ensure that they are working with someone qualified to provide support?)
- 12) One IEC that I interviewed said that they did not believe that anyone who is already established in the profession “needs” to be a member of any professional organization. What do you think of this comment? What benefits do you feel individuals receive from membership in your organization that this IEC might be missing?
- 13) Does your organization have a protocol for revoking membership from anyone found to be in violation of the standards of practice you have set forth?
- 14) Do you ever receive complaints about any of the members in your organization? If so, how do you investigate and resolve these issues?
- 15) Do you feel that your organization helps to promote ethical practice? Why or why not?
- 16) Is there anything else you would like to share about your organization?

Appendix D: Question Protocol for Scholars

- 1) Do you think that there is a valid need for Independent Educational Consultants (IECs)?
- 2) Do you think that some IECs add to the frenzy surrounding college admissions? If so, how?
- 3) Do you think that IECs could play a role in diminishing the frenzy? If yes, how might they do this?
- 4) What responsibility do you think colleges and universities have for creating a niche for IECs to flourish, if any?
- 5) Do you think that the rise in high-priced IECs is correlated to other things that have changed in college admissions? If yes, are there specific changes that you can think of?