

College Consulting: A Transformed Profession

by Mark Sklarow, executive director



Last fall I offered a presentation with this title at the conference of the National Association for College Admission Counseling. As attendees filed in to the room, I realized that my plan—to speak about trends and changes in college admission and then how these trends have impacted consulting—was a disaster waiting to happen. After all, these admission deans and directors, school counselors, and independent consultants all knew more than me about changes in admission; they lived those changes every day.

I prepared for a mass exodus from the room before I would even get close to speaking about consulting.

In the end, no one walked out, and everyone heard something that surprised, interested, shocked, or challenged pre-conceived beliefs and myths. A number of university reps wanted to know why we, as an association, had not been more vocal about the changes to college consulting, and so this article was born. To make it readable, much of the information is presented in this Myth vs. Reality format. At the conclusion you will find my personal predictions for the future.

PART 1: HOW COLLEGE ADMISSION HAS CHANGED

MYTH: The availability of information on the Internet has made school-based counseling and educational consulting less important.

REALITY: False. Google “college admission” and you’ll get just under 5.8 million hits. Sure, information is out there but the sheer volume of information—good, bad and awful—overwhelms many students and families. All the evidence suggests that families are feeling increasingly overwhelmed and anxious and are seeking help of the high-touch, over high-tech variety.

MYTH: New technologies help students to both explore more college opportunities and file more applications with ease.

REALITY: True. Those in my generation remember the horror of individually typing college applications on their IBM Selectric. Today, a few keystrokes allow a student to file applications to a dozen colleges with ease. In addition, students can virtually tour a campus, take part in discussion groups, and post questions on a campus bulletin board. Evidence suggests that students are casting a wider net in their search because of the ease of discovery.

MYTH: Helicopter parents, always hovering overhead, have become the parental norm.

REALITY: False. We wish this were true. The new evidence is that the “Sherman Tank” parent has taken hold, rolling over their teen to take over the process and thus depriving their child of an important rite of passage.

MYTH: When all is said and done, power in the college application process is equally shared by colleges deciding who gets admitted and students deciding where they want to enroll.

REALITY: False. Power is strongly skewed in favor of colleges, thanks to proactive marketing designed to push up the number of applicants and sophisticated software programs that help admission offices target good prospects over those deemed less likely. Teens need good, knowledgeable, one-on-one counseling to help level the playing field.

MYTH: Numbers may fluctuate a bit from year-to-year, but basically the freshman class at most colleges varies little over time.

REALITY: False. Demographic trends are having a significant impact on college communities. Campuses are becoming more female and less Caucasian in trends that are going to continue. Most people hear that a handful of states will have “majority minority” populations in the near future, but the real figures one should look at are teenage population projections. In the year 2020 just 55% of teens nationwide will be white, 17% black, 7% Asian, and 20% Hispanic.

MYTH: High school counselors are overburdened and increasingly unable to effectively serve students seeking college advice.

REALITY: True. Nationally, the student per counselor ratio is nearly 600 to one. In our largest cities that figure grows to as much as 1,000 students for every counselor. While some school districts have dedicated college advisors with manageable caseloads, for many others, their 600 students include crisis intervention, personal counseling, and academic advising. It is a rare school district that allows counselors leave to take part in college visits, and those who do find themselves hopelessly behind when they return.

PART 2: HOW EDUCATIONAL CONSULTING HAS CHANGED

MYTH: Educational consultants are hired by wealthy families to give already privileged teens yet another advantage in gaining admission to top colleges.

REALITY: False, in oh, so many ways. The typical family hiring a consultant is a suburban, public school family earning between \$75,000 and \$100,000 a year. They are typically from the professional class. Most hire a consultant to help find a college where their child will grow, thrive, and succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

In fact, IECA and its member consultants first started talking about “college match” nearly 30 years ago and likely introduced the concept that is part of the common vernacular today. Our members have led the way toward emphasizing “fit” and success over “getting in.”

MYTH: The number of educational consultants has exploded.

REALITY: True, and false. The number of consultants in the country has doubled from about 2,000 to nearly 5,000 over the last five years. That is significant growth. But the number of “full-time, professional college consultants” for whom consulting is their principal occupation and source of income is probably closer to 1,500—a relatively small number for America’s population of 300 million.

MYTH: You can’t make a living as an educational consultant, OR ALTERNATELY:

MYTH: Consultants easily make six figures with many making a quarter of a million dollars a year.

REALITY: Both are false. In the early years most consultants were not supporting families from their income as a consultant, and most had incomes well below that of school-based counselors. Over the last decade this has begun to change, and the recent growth in consulting reflects the ability to make a living, with long hours and difficult work schedules. But don’t be fooled by news articles that focus on a small handful of consultants serving the rich. Due to high costs of touring campuses, running an office and more, the average consultant today makes a yearly income close to what a school-based counselor earns.

MYTH: College admission offices do not like working with educational consultants.

REALITY: False. The number of colleges who expressly do not work with consultants can be counted on two hands, and it’s a number that has been steadily shrinking. Most colleges have discovered that good consulting means a student who applies is, at a basic level, well-suited to the colleges, increasing retention and student success.

Today, nearly every college tour reaches out to IECA members, and some run campus visits exclusively for IECA members. Each year hundreds of colleges participate in IECA conferences and special

programs and in recent months many have identified an IECA contact on campus.

PART 3: WHAT LIES AHEAD FOR CONSULTING (IN MY HUMBLE OPINION)

[1] Continued growth in consulting as all signs indicate a growth pattern similar to how SAT prep grew a generation ago.

[2] Increased specialization: consulting for athletes and artists, students with learning disabilities and much more.

[3] Increased acceptance by colleges who will work more closely with highly ethical consultants, as new empirical evidence suggests students who matriculate after working with consultants are more likely to succeed and remain in the college where they first enroll. Already we see an increase in colleges calling IECA consultants to ask the million dollar question: “Tell me why you concluded that this student is a good match for us?”

[4] Increased diversity of delivery services. Watch for consulting to be offered in new and creative ways, as part of employee benefit packages, and even through contractual arrangements with school districts and municipalities.

[5] Even newer technologies that we can’t yet comprehend, but which will allow for easier communication between students and consultants, and between families and colleges.

[6] Expansion of consulting firms to three or four cooperative professionals, replacing the one-person office. Often with psychologists, career specialists, financial advisors, or others joining the practice.