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'90s FAMILY

In Search of a Perfect Match

Choosing a college can be daunting for students and parents. That's where consultants can help by sifting through information on more than 3,500 schools.

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His biggest regret is that he didn't go to a better college. Graduating at the top of his class with high Scholastic Assessment Test scores, he was wooed by Princeton and other Ivy League schools, but turned down all the offers. Instead, he went to college near his Orange County home while running a small computer business that he had started in high school.

"I just lost perspective," said the 34-year-old, who asked that his name not be used. "It's hard to know at 17 the impact the decisions you make will have on the rest of your life. I pay for that decision every day."

The right perspective is precisely what a handful of specialized education consultants are helping college-bound youths find.

Although the choice of a college can have lifelong repercussions, most people choose colleges for the wrong reasons, said Mark Skarlow, executive director and founder of the Independent Educational Consultants Assn., in Fairfax, Va. "People choose colleges because it's where their friends are going, because the school is close by, or because it's where their parents went."

But when you consider that more than half of all graduating students don't graduate from the college at which they began, you start to wonder if there isn't a better way to approach the selection process.

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Art Cohen, an attorney living in Seal Beach, figured there was. When his oldest child, Matt, began considering college options in the spring

of his junior year, Cohen sought the help of Beverly Hills educational consultant Toby Waldorf.

"Toby helped us sort out the possibilities and come up with a list," Cohen said. "The list included colleges Matt was likely to get in as well as those that were somewhat of a stretch. All matched his interests."

Waldorf worked with Matt to explore his interests and inclinations. She also helped him figure out that he wanted a school strong in math and science, medium to small in size, and preferably in a warm climate--though not necessarily in Southern California. Matt was accepted to several schools and has finished his freshman year at Pomona College.

Waldorf is now working with Cohen's daughter Emily, a junior at Wilson High School in Long Beach. "Her interests tend toward theater arts," Cohen said. "Toby has turned up all sorts of small schools across the country that we would never have found on our own."

"I'm a matchmaker," Waldorf said. "People don't realize there are more than 3,500 colleges in the country to choose from. Most people just look at a few colleges and ask, 'How do I get in?' I look at the student--his or her academic, social and vocational strengths and weaknesses--and ask which schools are best for that student."

Skarlow of IECA, a professional association for consultants, supports that approach. "The change in attitude we need the most is for people to stop fighting to get into what they feel is the best perceived college and to fight to find the best match for the student."

There's a college out there for everyone, said Menlo Park educational consultant Betsy Frederick. "For example, if a student has a 2.8 GPA and a low SAT, he can probably get into the University of Denver. But that is not something the school advertises. That's where talking to someone who knows colleges well can pay off."

Besides helping with that all-important selection process, educational consultants also work with parents and students to make recommendations regarding high school course selections, summer work and extracurricular activities; give timetables for test preparation classes and testing dates, and coach students on essay writing, college interviews and campus visits.

As Upland High School student Ann Kim said, the whole process is "very nerve-racking." For Kim, who has a 4.7 grade-point average and SAT scores in the 1,500s, getting accepted isn't the problem--picking from among the many schools that would have her is. So she asked Frederick to help her

make sense of her options.

"I'd used a lot of books and guides to colleges as references," Kim said, "but I wanted personal help from a professional."

Frederick, who has been advising students for 20 years, helped Kim narrow the field, polish her essays and apply to several schools ahead of schedule through early action programs. Last December, Kim, then a high school junior, received her acceptance to Yale. She can now focus on her next goal: Yale Law School.

"Not all students we work with are in Ann's league," Frederick said. "Most are more average, and all could benefit from assistance."

The sooner they seek that assistance, the better.

"So many students think they can start the first day of their senior year," Frederick said. "They're way too late."

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Skarlow tells high school students to start thinking about the possibilities in their freshman year and start the search in their sophomore year. "It's so easy to search now," he said. "With CD-ROM and computer on-line services, you can take virtual tours of colleges and get access to all sorts of information." Other resources students can make early and frequent use of are high school counselors and the library.

"During your research, ask yourself what size college you'd prefer. Do you want one close or far from home? Should it have a religious base? Should it be politically conservative or liberal? Urban or rural?" Skarlow said. "Then cast a wide net. Look at 30 to 40 colleges."

Finally, he advises students to have frank discussions with parents about finances. "Parents often tell their kids they can go wherever they want, then secretly hope they don't pick an out-of-state or private school. Parents need to be upfront and informed."

But no one should dismiss the idea of any school outright, Skarlow added. All sorts of financial aid programs, scholarships and grants exist, and colleges want out-of-state students to diversify their student bodies.

"It's easier to get into a New York school if you're from Nebraska than if you're from New York," he said. "Colleges bend over backward to attract students from out of the area."

If a student decides to use an independent educational consultant--who, incidentally, cannot accept money from schools--the consultant's credentials should be checked to be certain he or she has a college counseling background and training in the continuing education field. Stay away from anyone who offers to pull strings to get a student into a school.

Most consultants offer both an hourly rate and package plans, depending on the level of service a client wants. Thus, fees run anywhere from \$75 an hour for one or two brief meetings to several thousand dollars for a comprehensive package.

"You can expect to spend a lot on colleges over four years," Cohen said, "and you hope your child will get the most out of it. It makes sense to spend a little upfront to help the make the most of your investment."

Plan Early, Plan Well

One of the biggest reasons students don't get into the schools best suited for them, experts agree, is that they start the process too late. Here is a general timetable for students.

Sophomore Year

- * Talk to a high school or independent counselor about choosing the best courses for the balance of your high school years.
- * Begin researching schools and compiling a list based on characteristics that appeal to you.

Junior Year

- * Take the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test in October.
- * Make a list of 30 to 40 schools and send for information, including copies of old applications and majors offered.
- * Decide who you will ask to write letters of recommendation.
- * Start thinking about your essays.
- * Take SAT-I in May, SAT-II in June.
- * Take vocational and aptitude tests to find out what sort of career

you might be interested in and what course of study might best suit that career choice.

* If you choose a course of study, compare college curricula.

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