



# INDEPENDENT COUNSEL

As selective schools become harder to get into, high schoolers and their parents turn to private college consultants for help

BY LINDA MORGAN

**GETTING INTO COLLEGE** these days can be difficult. Just look at the unprecedented 9 percent admit rate at Harvard University last spring. We're talking single digits, people. Not that your high schooler is necessarily targeting the Ivy League, but a close look at selective colleges reflects an unmistakable trend: admit rates are dropping, leaving perennially competitive universities even more competitive. According to the 2004 edition of the *Fiske Guide to Getting Into the Right College*, half the applicants for New York University's class of 1997 got in; only 33 percent of those vying for a spot in the

class of 2007 were accepted. At Stanford, the numbers plunged over those same 10 years from 22 to 13 percent; at Columbia University, 29 to 12 percent. These schools, among others, are receiving more applications for roughly the same number of slots. The Common Application, which allows students to apply to up to 300 schools using one form, is one reason for the increase in applicants, as is the growing popularity of applying online. Closer to home, UW's new "holistic" admission system may impact the number of applicants and acceptances to the school. Beginning next fall, along with academics, UW will consider intangibles such as leadership skills, activities and whether a student has overcome adversity.

The fallout from all of this? More than ever, parents and students are flocking to independent college consultants. "I don't even advertise, and I turn away clients," says consultant

Katherine Vaughan, owner of Seattle-based College Street Counseling. "That tells me how stressed out people are." Unlike high school counselors, who often can't spend one-on-one time with students, independent consultants work with students on an individual level to help them compete for one of these coveted spots.

David Montesano, an Occidental College grad and former strategy consultant, runs College Match, a three-year-old Seattle- and Bellevue-based company that helps college applicants market themselves by using a business approach that's data intensive and heavy on the buzz words. College Match tracks schools' quantitative data, such as admit rates, scores and geographic representation, to get a clearer picture of what kinds of students a college is looking for in a given year. Montesano uses what he calls "strategic matching" to align a student's needs with a college's needs—and to then persuade both that they need each other. Students promote themselves with "positioning" (Montesano-code for packaging the right essays, interviews, recommendations and extracurriculars), then present that picture-perfect compilation to colleges.

Sounds great, but you'd better be willing to throw down big bucks. At College Match, \$3,200 will buy your son or daughter 15 hours of services, generally beginning in the junior year. These services include essay assistance, college visit planning, interview prep, sports résumé development, applicant pool analysis and help developing talents and activities.

## COORDINATES

> College Match, 206.799.4986; [collegematchus.com](http://collegematchus.com)  
> College Street Counseling, 206.774.9859

Shelling out \$213.33 an hour for said services seems borderline ridiculous, but as Montesano points out, 95 percent of his clients end up at one of their top picks. A trend spotter, Montesano keeps track of what schools want. "Stanford wants artists and poets to balance out Silicon Valley. Harvard wants biotech people to compete with Stanford," he says. Every school is different and undergoes shifting needs each year. Montesano, with a keen eye on those needs, guides his clients accordingly.

While all that strategizing creates more work for the students, it's time well spent, says Seattle parent Tracy Read. Her son, Michael, worked with College Match and has already been accepted to seven schools.

Bruce Bailey, director of college counseling at Lakeside School in Seattle, points out there are numerous colleges that would be good fits for numerous students. "An applicant's record, not a college consultant, is what gets them into good schools," he contends. Bailey feels investing too much time prepping and packaging can detract from an already full-to-the-brim senior year. "The 'C' word can totally take over," says Bailey. "You can play into that, or realize that in the end, it's a little serendipitous."

That probably sounds quaint and Old World to high school students who view hyperplanning as an integral part of getting into college. **S**

**9%** THE ADMISSIONS RATE FOR HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S CLASS OF 2007 ←