

The Boston Globe

*Article is reproduced from the Boston Globe, Written By Beth Teitell,
Globe Staff, August 14, 2018 • <https://tinyurl.com/ya6f2ar5>*

What's the craziest thing about a \$16,000 college application boot camp: that it has a wait list, or its secret location?

Are you doing enough to get your kid into college? Are you sure? Have you hired a former CIA operative to scrub your kid's social media presence? Are Hollywood screenwriters helping zip the college essay? Do you have a Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center interventional radiologist positioning your high schooler for the medical school track?

Did your child just finish the four-day, \$16,000 Application Boot Camp at a Boston-area hotel — a program so hot that cofounder Michele Hernandez Bayliss wants the location kept secret? “We’ve literally had reporters and competitors trying to stalk” us, she e-mailed the Globe.

When it comes to college consultants, nothing is too extreme. With applications at elite colleges rising — and acceptance rates plummeting as a result — so many wealthy parents are so desperate for any edge it's as if satirist Sacha Baron Cohen is at work, trying to see what people will buy.

How about \$5,000 or more for a summer expert to help your teenager “find his passion” and “architect a plan” that includes brand-building volunteer, educational, or work opportunities? The goal is to build a summer resume that will look good on the college application.

“Parents come to us and say, ‘What is the one program that is going to get my child into the college they dream of?’” said Jill Tipograph, the founder of Everything Summer & Beyond. “But there's no ‘program.’ It's about [a student's] entire story.”

In the Boston area, the average consulting package — which includes a college list, essay and interview prep, and organizational tools and general advice — costs about \$4,800, according to Mark Sklarow, CEO of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, a trade group. But it's possible to spend \$80,000 or more for star consultants.

That's a lot of money. In some cases enough for an entire college education, when you consider that in the 2017-18 school year, the average published price for tuition and fees and room and board for in-state students at public four-year universities was \$20,770, according to the College Board, which administers the SAT.

But with parental panic mounting, the consultant business is booming. Membership in the consultants' association has doubled in five years, to nearly 2,000 members, Sklarow said, “and it will double again in four years.”

Some families start working with a consultant before the child hits ninth grade, with the goal of choosing every high school class and extra-curricular activity to impress some future admissions officer. But don't be stressed! Enjoy your childhood!

At the \$16,000 application boot camp, students worked on all essays including supplements, completed the Common App, learned interview techniques, created a list of their activities and awards, and developed an admissions strategy to maximize early acceptances. In September, the price is rising to \$18,000, but tuition includes a pre-boot camp personalized admissions report and consultation.

Who would spend this kind of money? Not most people, that's for sure. Regular folks can't afford it. They're relying on high school guidance counselors — many of them very well-qualified, albeit typically too busy with large workloads to give the level of individualized attention of a private consultant.

The other side of this college arms race is well-documented: Many students and their parents are going deep into debt to afford college.

And even some with the budget to afford the private consultants are outraged.

But here's the problem: In today's world, in which onetime "safety" schools have gotten competitive, anxiety is rampant, especially in wealthier families who see acceptance at a "name" school as a ticket to success. That's led to a crazy situation in which many who consider consultants overpriced are in fact hiring consultants.

"You don't want to be one of those people," said a Boston-area mother who spent \$4,000 on a coach to help her daughter find a musical theater program, "but at the end of the day, if everyone else is one of those people, you have to be one, too."

The woman, who asked that her name and town remain anonymous to protect her family's privacy, said her daughter's therapist told her she needed to "butt out" of the process, even though her daughter wasn't getting her applications done early enough to secure audition slots.

"I kept riding her and riding her," she said. "And I was right. The auditions filled up. But the therapist told me what I was doing wasn't helping."

Another mother who hired a consultant for her daughter, and also requested anonymity, said she feels guilty that she is able to afford what many families can't. "It makes me want to take a shower," she said.

With so many qualified kids applying to so many schools, the challenge for straight A students is to differentiate themselves from other straight A students, an opportunity — ideally, but not always — provided by the Common Application's essay.

"Sometimes kids try to do this huge, broad, sweeping essay, which kind of puts the reader to sleep," said Teddy Barnes, a cofounder of EssayDog, the firm preaching Hollywood techniques. "Say a student wants to write about the death of a parent or a pet," he said. "We're like 'don't do that, because out of 100 essays the reader goes through in a day, he or she may read ten essays about that. It's not that compelling.'"

The trick, he said, is to find the story within the story. "Maybe you met a long-lost uncle at the funeral and you learned all this interesting stuff."

A major gripe against consultants is that they're just one more way for the wealthy to buy their children a leg up.

But another complaint comes from the wealthy themselves: You can spend a lot of money for essentially nothing.

That's an assertion that Sklarow, the head of the trade association, disputes: Independent consultants can educate families about out-of-town schools they might not have considered, where they might have a better shot at acceptance and merit scholarship money, he said.

He also emphasized that the typical client hiring an independent educational consultant is not wealthy. The largest block are middle-class families.

As for the big question: Do consultants improve a student's odds of getting into a specific school? That's not even their role, Sklarow said in an e-mail.

"No one should hire a [consultant] because they think that person has the secrets to get admitted to Harvard. . . . We judge success in seeing if students are happy, satisfied, thriving, and engaged at the college they choose to attend.

"The fact that students working with a [consultant] are less likely to transfer and more likely to graduate in four years is our evidence of success."

Meanwhile, with the application season ramping up — and stress escalating in many families — a father who sent his twins to the \$16,000-per-student boot camp held in Boston said it was money well spent, and not just because he got a slight sibling discount or because it's good to have expert advice.

"We want to take the anxiety out of this for our children," he said. "And it takes us out of some of the drama of having to bug them."

The father, who works in the finance industry, asked to remain anonymous. "There are misconceptions that having someone help organize things is somehow giving a leg up," he said.

Beth Teitell can be reached at beth.teitell@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @BethTeitell.

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