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## College consultants match teen with school

By Angie Hood • Bankrate.com



### Highlights

- A college consultant is a neutral person who helps navigate the search.
- The cost can range from \$60 to \$300 an hour, depending on the location.
- A college planner starts by assessing the student's skills and goals.

Parents are hiring college consultants to pinpoint their student's strengths and navigate the process of choosing and applying to a school.

According to Mark Sklarow, executive director of the Fairfax, Va.-based not-for-profit Independent Educational Consultants Association, the typical family hiring a consultant is a suburban, public school family earning between \$75,000 and \$100,000 per year. Most hire a consultant to help find a college where their child will grow, thrive and succeed academically, socially and emotionally.

"Here's a figure that will shock you ... Of students who [start at a college](#) as a freshman, under half will graduate from that college," Sklarow says. "For many of those, they chose a school that was a bad match -- a laid-back student eaten alive by the competitiveness at Cornell or a straight-laced girl who can't make friends at Brown."

Sklarow says hiring a consultant can increase the odds of a good match. And parents avoid the year's worth of lost credits that don't transfer and the retaking of courses at the new school, which can add up and become costly.

When he was a high school junior, Hampton Frost, 25, of Huntsville, Ala., and his parents turned to educational consultant Rosalind Marie, of Marie Associates, also of Huntsville, Ala., for help in selecting a college for Frost. After consulting with Marie, he chose the University of Dallas.

"I chose a small private university ... Something I always found interesting is that students, especially in their first year, will question (whether) they chose the right university. However, due to the process we used with Ms. Marie, I had justified confidence in my decision," Frost says. "I went on to have a great four years there."

### What parents get from a consultant

Parent Sharon St. Pierre of Olney, Md., worked with Certified Educational Planner Charlotte Klaar of College Consultant Services of Brunswick and Rockville, Md. St. Pierre says the cost of utilizing a college consultant was worth it for the information, advice and guidance that they as parents and their student received.

St. Pierre's son Josh only applied to four universities, and she wanted him to submit the very best application and essays he could to increase his chances of being admitted and of receiving any merit [scholarships](#) available. In addition, she hoped it would possibly help get him into the colleges' honors programs.

"Going through the process for the very first time, we were overwhelmed and a bit misinformed initially," St. Pierre says. "Klaar took Josh's academics, extracurriculars and presented a personal plan for Josh that would provide him the best opportunity to get into the colleges he wanted. Charlotte was also able to work out a schedule for Josh to keep him on track and be a resource in terms of reviewing applications and essays."

Parent Nancy Beren of Houston found choosing a college was a very stressful time during her children's academic career, and she liked having a neutral person to assist in navigating the process. Beren's three children worked with counselor Judy Muir of Houston when each started 10th grade.

"The college planner is the child's advocate. Sometimes the parents want the kid to go one place, and the kid wants to go another place, to another state. A college counselor is hired as the advocate for the child, and what she is able to do is really get the kid on neutral territory and find out what the kid wants because ultimately it is the [kid's college experience](#)," Beren says.

### What a college consultant costs

There is a wide variation in the average costs of college consulting, according to Sklarow. Hourly fees range from \$60 in small communities to over \$300 in New York. Sometimes, the consulting is done as part of a package that includes several years of advice. Those range from \$700 to more than \$6,000, with the average being just above \$3,000.

"The \$60 will pay for one hour of advice. The packages that most consultants use may cover three years of advice and assistance in choosing high school classes, exploring summer opportunities, researching colleges, doing career exploration and

investigating learning styles," Sklarow says.

The variation of \$700 to \$6,000 is often a geographic difference. A family living in a small town in the Southeast will pay one-seventh of what a family pays in a New York suburb, Sklarow says.

### How the consulting process works

Alan Haas, president of Educational Futures in New Canaan, Conn., an hour north of New York, has 25 years of experience as a college consultant. This former high school principal says parents may have to spend money to save money.

"The objective is to make [the right match](#) so that the greater investment and the financial and educational future of the child are preserved," Haas says.

Haas says a family must determine if, by hiring a consultant, they can feel more confident that the educational needs are filled and the financial investment is sound.

"We offer an initial personal consultation. At the end of the session, if I do not feel we can be helpful or the investment is necessary, I inform them. A legitimate consultant is an educator first, and second of all a business person," Haas says.

Haas meets with the son or daughter and parents, for a two-hour discussion that costs \$600. Then he writes a detailed report that can be used as a road map, with advice for standardized tests, time management, use of leisure time, [summer-vacation options](#) and strategies for teacher recommendations. These options are what a student needs to take control of the process himself, Haas says.

"If I feel we could be helpful, the parents want to make the investment and the child wants to work with us, we then contract for our comprehensive college program. Ideally, we would like to begin the formal process early in the junior year, when it really starts to count. Our fee is currently \$7,000 to \$8,000 over two full years," he says.

Haas works in three phases with his students. The first phase is "assessment and recommendations," involving an online questionnaire and several self and career exercises. The purpose is to have the students think about two of the three fundamental questions of life: "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?"

This is the foundation for making the best choice of a college. "Our participation would be to guide them along the path from where they are now to where they want to be," Haas says.

Haas says together with the academic and testing records, writing samples and the initial interview, this information is evaluated and developed into a "future planning report," which contains the results of the assessment and a college search work sheet. The work sheet contains an initial list of 12 colleges and universities that Haas recommends for the student to research, although the list evolves during the search.

Phase 2, which normally takes place during the summer before the student's final year, includes Haas' version of preparation for the SAT which he says can cost thousands of dollars elsewhere. He also works with the student on development of model college applications and essays, with an eye toward completing this part of the process by the beginning of senior year.

During the fall of senior year, the final phase involves preparation of [college documentation](#) and the actual entrance applications.

"It is definitely a mentoring program, as we like to start as early as possible. That is why the fees are up there. We are involved in the decisions until they settle into college. It is an ongoing counseling product, not just placement," Haas says.

### Where to find a planner

To find a planner, you can start with the international directory of educational consultants, which has been compiled by the Independent Educational Consultants Association. In it, consultants are listed by region and specialty, so parents can find the right help for their needs.

You can receive a complimentary copy of the directory by calling the association at (703) 591-4850, or via e-mail at [Info@IECAonline.com](mailto:Info@IECAonline.com). You may also search its online directory at the association's [Web site](#) under the "Info for Parents & Students" section.

In addition to the directory, the association does periodic training to keep member consultants up to speed on changes in financial aid, scholarships and admission at U.S. colleges.

"The average member of our association has traveled to and evaluated between 150 and 200 colleges," Sklarow says. "They speak to college admission deans regularly to better understand what type of student succeeds (at their) college and what the college may be looking for in this cycle (of admissions)."

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