

A Note About Independent College Counselors

Some Castilleja families wonder if they should hire the services of an independent counselor. While we understand the external pressures of the college search process and are sympathetic to special needs that may arise for students, we believe that most Castilleja students do not need such services. The professional experiences and training of the Castilleja college counseling staff, combined with the support of the administration and faculty, ensure that our students are receiving personal, personalized, abundant, and accurate guidance tailored to the individual student throughout the college search process.

The Castilleja college counselor is the person who will write the recommendations that admission officers will read, not the independent counselor. Most colleges in this country will not accept recommendations from independent counselors and will not respond to phone calls or emails from an independent counselor about the candidate, a fact that has been underscored numerous times in our recent conversations with college admission officers and we knew to be the case when we were in college admissions. Time spent with an independent counselor is time the student doesn't have to meet with her Castilleja counselor, meaning less time for us to get to know your daughter well and for her to cultivate her relationship with us. It is also time your daughter doesn't have to study and earn good grades, or to participate in an activity she loves, or to spend more time with the family.

Parents might ask if their daughter would have that added "push" that might "make the difference" if she were to work with an independent counselor. The answer is, in short, "No." College admission offices can spot the highly polished, calculated hand of the coached application in a heartbeat, and when they do, any hoped-for "advantage" has been lost. The application that might otherwise have been a compelling one if written by the student herself can be relegated very quickly to the "waitlist" or even the "deny" pile. It is a fact that college admission offices see little benefit to, and indeed see more negatives associated with, working with an independent college counselor.

Colleges are looking for the student's authentic voice. They want to know, in the student's own words, what she cares about, what motivates her, what she thinks and believes, how she will engage on the campus, and so on. Overly coached applications obliterate the student's voice, leaving the application reader wondering who wrote the essays, who filled out the application, why/if this student is actually interested in their college and would enroll if admitted. It is never to an applicant's advantage to remove that voice, nor is it right to bring into question how an applicant was admitted to a given college: through her own voice and accomplishments or through the finesse of an outside advisor. Do not take away your daughter's success achieved through her own efforts.

Perhaps a bit of history might be helpful. The profession of independent counseling came into existence as the result of inadequate counseling resources at public high schools. There was a clear need for students and their families to find information about the college process outside the school. But some independent counselors soon learned there was money to be made in counseling the more affluent who could afford to pay large sums for personal attention. The profession further proliferated when it was realized that much could be gained by playing off parental guilt and social pressure: if one counselor is good, two must be better! "If I don't pay for an independent counselor, I am not supporting my child." "Our neighbors have hired a private counselor, so we're going to have to as well." "Everything I've heard in the news suggests our child won't get into college without the help of college coaching." "I don't know anything about the college search process; we need more help!" And so on.

To be perfectly candid, that extra attention, that individualized approach, that relationship with an experienced admission professional is what some of your tuition to Castilleja is paying for. We have two full-time college counselors plus academic and support staff dedicated to working with your daughter throughout the winter and spring of her junior year right through to graduation a year later. Compare Castilleja's 120:1 student-to-counselor ratio for grades 9-12 to the national average of 450:1 and a California average of nearly 850:1. (These numbers are as of 2008-2009; the national and California ratios are increasing as state budgets are being slashed and counseling offices are being severely reduced or eliminated.) For seniors only, this computes to 30:1 at Castilleja; 110:1 nationally; and 212:1 in California. The Castilleja college counseling staff provides focused, individual attention as well as small and large group sessions throughout the academic year for students and parents alike. Our staffing level allows us to meet 1:1 for an hour every week with every senior throughout the fall semester, if we need to, and still have time to meet with students in grades 9-11 as needed.

We can function in a way that independent counselors cannot: we have full access to school records, teachers, coaches; we are the source contacted when a college has a question about an applicant; we write the recommendations that most colleges require; we have deep knowledge of Castilleja, its students, and Castilleja's applicant history; we have the ears of college admission officers throughout the country; we engage in ongoing professional development that keeps us fresh and knowledgeable about the college admission landscape; and together we have more than 30 years of admission experience on the college side reading and evaluating thousands of applications. We are dedicated to supporting your daughter throughout her college search.

Reasons a family might consider employing an independent counselor include 1) a high student-to-counselor ratio (see above; definitely not the case at Castilleja), 2) the absence of college counselors and/or college search resources and programs in the school (see above; definitely not the case at Castilleja), 3) learning differences (we are well-versed in appropriate needs and programs at the college level for your daughter and how to represent her to her colleges in the admission process), 4) Division I and II athletic recruitment (we have worked with recruited athletes on the college side and the high school side and know NCAA rules, regulations, and timelines), or 5) severe organizational problems (either the student herself or the family in general). We will always keep your daughter informed about due dates, and we meet and communicate regularly and often with the students about upcoming major "deliverables" connected to the college process. But in keeping with our counseling philosophy regarding empowerment and developing decision-making skills, we will not "nag" or track down or complete work for any student. For a true procrastinator, and if the family dynamic doesn't lend itself to parents serving as the moderator, then working with an independent counselor might be a way to proceed, if the independent counselor understands that is the service you are purchasing.

What we don't want to happen is that your daughter gets caught in the middle of what she is told by her independent counselor and what she is told by her Castilleja college counselor, or to have the independent counselor package her essays and other responses in a way that her own voice is lost in the final submission, or for your daughter to have to keep it secret that she is working with an independent counselor. If you do employ an outside counselor, please let us know, and grant permission for us to communicate and work cooperatively with that person, in the best interest of your daughter. But before you sign a contract with someone outside Castilleja, please come talk with us, learn who we are, what our counseling philosophy is, and allow us to respond to your concerns. Employing an independent counselor will not hurt our feelings, nor will it cause us to work with your daughter any differently. In the end, what we all want is the best for your daughter.

College admission isn't a contest to be won or a consumer commodity to be bought; it is a process to be savored and through which your daughter will grow, if she is allowed to do this herself. As with all things at Castilleja, the college process is an educational journey for your daughter, one which, with the help of the Castilleja college counselors, will teach her how to research, make choices, come to know herself, develop life-long skills that will serve her well, and attain a well-deserved sense of pride and accomplishment when she is offered admission and selects where she will enroll in the fall. No college counselor can guarantee a desired outcome, but we can promise you that we will provide your daughter with the best information and attention possible.

Resources: National Association for College Admission Counseling, www.nacacnet.org
Independent Educational Consultants Association, www.iecaonline.com
Higher Education Consultants Association, <http://www.hecaonline.org>
American School Counselor Association, <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/>

July 2011