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Online college admissions services growing

Private counseling for high school seniors proves too pricey for most families, while low-cost admissions help can be found on the web

By Dennis Carter, Assistant Editor

Primary Topic Channel: [Technologies](#)

With an average of one counselor for every 500 public high school students in the U.S., college applicants are often left without professional guidance--and so internet-based companies offering admissions advice are hoping to fill the advising void.

A wide range of web sites are aimed at helping high school seniors looking for an upper hand in the ultra-competitive college application process.

Go4College.com, for example, uses analytics that incorporate a student's GPA, SAT score, and a host of other factors to quantify the student's chances to win admittance at various schools. The site produces a percentage that shows how likely the student is to be accepted. Other web sites, such as Accepted.com, sell products such as "Submit a Stellar Application: 42 Terrific Tips."

iAdmissions.com, a California-based site launched in September, is straying from the automated advice model and bringing current and former applications officials to students whose families can't afford a high-priced personal advisor. Students pay between \$129 and \$399 for college counseling, depending on the level of application help they want--compared to thousands of dollars for a private counselor.

iAdmissions counselors include admissions officials from Harvard, Brown, and Stanford universities.

"Most public school counselors don't have the time and resources to do this kind of essay review," said iAdmissions counselor Jon Reider, the director of college counseling at San Francisco University High School and a former senior admissions officer at Stanford. "It's very hard to get this kind of advice. ... It takes some expertise, and it's not the same thing as being an English teacher and knowing [how to edit] a writing [assignment]."

Counseling officials said reading thousands of applications every year offers experience that well-meaning parents can't offer. A college application must grab an admission officer's attention with concise writing, the officials said, without coming off as boastful.

"You get essays that are quite relentlessly self promoting," said Andrea Van Niekerk, an iAdmissions counselor who worked as the associate director of admissions at Brown University for a decade. "It can come off as obnoxious and fairly off-putting. The reality is that some kids aren't good writers and some won't ever be good writers ... but they can be articulate and seem thoughtful."

Van Niekerk said admissions advice companies have had to establish an online presence in recent years as their target audience has become more reliant on the internet for everything from homework to social networking to shopping.

"You're dealing with a population that is wired for online work," she said. "This is how they do everything, through their computer. [Looking to the web] for admissions advice is just a logical step."

The proliferation of web-based advising coincides with a national jump in college applications and a decline in overall acceptance rates, according to the 2009 State of College Admissions report, released by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling in October.

The report, which used statistics from the Department of Education, showed that the average acceptance rate at four-year universities and colleges dropped from 71.3 percent in 2001 to 66.8 percent in 2007. This was partly owing to the 24-percent uptick in applicants during that six-year span, according to the report.

College enrollment reached an all-time high in 2006, and enrollment numbers are expected to continue to climb until 2017, according to the admissions study.

The report also measured the impact of the economic downturn on college applicants and their advisors. Nearly six out of 10 counselors surveyed said they had seen a steady increase in the number of high school juniors and seniors planning to apply to public universities instead of pricey private colleges. One-quarter of public schools counselors surveyed reported an increase in the number of students planning to delay college application for financial reasons.

While school districts nationwide trim operating budgets in the down economy, counseling departments have seen severe cuts in the past year, according to a study conducted by EdSource, a California-based nonprofit organization that focuses on public policy research and analysis.

The average student-to-counselor ratio is 500 to 1 nationwide, while California's ratio is closer to 1,000 to 1, according to EdSource research. Three out of 10 secondary schools have had their counseling budgets slashed in the past year.

Sarah Sutherland, a senior at Winchester High School in Winchester, Mass., submitted her college essay--which she sent to nine campuses this fall--to iAdmissions last month. A counselor worked with Sutherland online to make the essay less wordy without making the application impersonal.

An iAdmissions advisor "had me condense the essay and put all the emotion into it while eliminating the word count," said Sutherland, 17. "I felt like she helped me keep the tone while improving it. It strengthened it a lot, I think."

Completing mounds of application and financial aid paperwork and constructing and critiquing the perfect college essay, Sutherland said, was made easier with professional advice online.

"I had no idea what I was getting into," she said. "But I knew I could ... trust [iAdmissions], because it's made up of people who do this for a living."

Go4College.com doesn't offer help on essay writing. Instead, its online analysis helps students understand which colleges they should apply to. The site claims that it is 94-percent accurate, and co-founder and president Christine Schuldt said Go4College.com can serve as "a supplement" to any advising they get in high school. The site charges \$14.95 to generate a percentage chance for admittance to one college. Students can buy a six-college package for \$74.75, and a 20-college package for \$224.25.

"There are just too many variables [for students] to know how to weigh all of them," Schuldt said, referring to factors examined by admissions officers. "Students are not getting a lot of guidance. ... It is a reality check, but it's not meant to be negative. It's just meant to show them a range of colleges they should take a closer look at."

**Links:**

[iAdmissions](#)

[National Association for College Admissions Counseling study](#)

[Go4College.com](http://Go4College.com)

[EdSource](http://EdSource)

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