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Educational Consulting: A Focus for the Profession

Response: “Educational Consulting: Justification to Partnership” Mark H. Sklarow on page 69



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From 1989: STEVEN R. ANTONOFF is an educational consultant at Antonoff Associates, Inc., in Denver, CO. He holds a B.S. from Colorado State University and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Denver. He would like to acknowledge the contribution of his colleague, Marie A. Friedemann, in the preparation of this article.

The role of the educational consultant in the college admission scene warrants discussion and analysis. Although several recent national and local ACAC meetings have included discussions of the role's parameters, the writing in professional journals is quite limited. Boothroyd, Chapman, and Kaufman (1987) presented the results of a survey about consultants, and recently Tyson (1988) provided observations about the consultant intertwined with thoughts about a single-application system. The popular press, in contrast, has covered the field with some regularity.

In the context of expanding the professional dialogue, I decided to write this article. I include some personal reflections and general perceptions about educational consulting which may present the field in a different light.

Let me begin with my motivations for entering the field. I served for 11 years on the administrative staff of the University of Denver. Moving from dean of student life to dean of admission and financial aid, I coordinated a restructuring of the admission office in the mid-1970s. I loved my work and was stimulated by it.

At one point, I had visions of continuing to advance through the ladder in university administration. But as the years progressed, I found myself spending less time with students. My days were spent with co-workers in the admission office, faculty members, and other administrators. Although I tried to schedule myself so that I could meet with students as often as possible, it became more difficult to do so given the expanse of responsibilities that required my time.

Thus, the foundation of my choice to enter the profession of educational consulting was laid. I saw the field as one in which I could make a contribution. If, in fact, I had an ability to interact positively with young people along with the requisite admission expertise, I believed I would have a chance of being successful in this new profession. Aware of the risk involved, I resigned from my collegiate responsibilities and opened a consulting office in Denver.

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I began seeing students professionally only when I felt comfortable with my own level of college knowledge and professional imperatives. The first few years were filled with learning. I traveled to dozens of colleges to talk to students, admission people, and faculty members. My relationship with college admission personnel was, and continues to be, open, trusting, and positive. Over the years, my practice has grown and I feel that I am making a small but significant contribution to the lives of the young people with whom I am in contact.

I see my mission as assisting a young person in making an appropriate college choice. I will not accept a client who views me as a ticket to college admission. Families who elect to work with me choose someone who will assist them in working through the important learning steps involved in college planning. I am not paid for college acceptances; I am paid for my expertise in collegiate admission matters. I continue to visit dozens of colleges each year in my quest to stay on top of the ever-changing higher education scene. Over the years, I have played much more of a role in identifying and discussing with families new and often unknown colleges than in attempting to sway an admission decision.

For that reason, I telephone college admission deans only rarely and only if the circumstances suggest that such contact will be in the student's best interests. Yes, I develop relationships with admission personnel, and I value those relationships. But I am fully aware that a student's admission to and success in college is based on his or her own talents and abilities, not on the strength of my interaction with an admission colleague. Hence, I am repulsed by those who suggest that my role is to "network" in order to get someone admitted or, as horrifically, to serve as a source of students for unfilled beds on less competitive college campuses. My role is that of a matchmaker, purely yet significantly.

The expertise of the consultant is being sought by increasing numbers of families nationwide. Consultants are sought because there is a body of information about colleges that requires a full-time effort to be understood thoroughly, and that information is perceived as worthwhile in the marketplace. Such a body of information is the centerpiece for any profession. At least the families for whom I work are choosing to enter a professional arrangement with a consultant for the right reasons.

What do I mean by the "right" reasons? I work with families who want the perspective that I am able to offer. They want to know the results of my travels and what students are saying about their

collegiate institutions. I work with those who do not want someone to do all the work for them. I am explicit in stating that my services are not the pathway to admission to a selective college. My clients expect to receive facts, another perspective, and guidance. More specifically, I am not the author of my students' essays, I do not fill out applications, and I do not sit for hours strategizing how Johnny or Betsy will be able to pry his or her way in the college of choice. I find all of those approaches repugnant.

The anxiety that is sometimes present in families of teenagers who are exploring colleges is not caused by or exacerbated by educational consultants. Nor did the educational consultant either create the body of college information or manufacture the need for it. Families are grappling with the new rules of college admission, how to deal with the many coaches available, how to react to new collegiate marketing strategies, the role of cost and financial aid in college selection, and how to identify the appropriate role of an undergraduate education in the broad scheme of life.

I am as unnerved as anyone by families who see a prestigious undergraduate education as the ticket to a successful future or as a launching pad for lucrative jobs in society. Educational consultants, I dare say, have done more to calm the waters than make waves.

The previous paragraph also has implications for the role of the educational consultant in relation to counselors in public and private secondary schools. Generally, I do not see families or students who want my help because of dissatisfaction with their school counselor. Of course, there are a few who complain, but no doubt, no more than those who find my style unacceptable. Most of the students I see are satisfied with their counselors. What they want varies with each family. Some want additional time to deal with special needs, whereas others want a second opinion. Still others are aware of and value the rapport I have built with other families.

One core issue raised is that of quality of the service; in particular, the issue of the time devoted to each student by counselors. Some have maintained that the consultant "hand holds" and that his or her service therefore runs counter to the educational goals of self-sufficiency and initiative. Most damning of all, this perspective suggests that consultant services are antithetical to the growth potential of a young person. Careful exploration of this issue puts it in a different perspective.

What is good counseling and what is hand holding? Are two hours of counseling "good" and five hours "hand holding?" Are 10

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hours definitely "hand holding?" If a student is left alone, will he or she develop better decision-making strategies? I argue that the amount of time spent with each student is not the critical variable in learning self sufficiency. My sustained contact with each student is essential to doing my job well. I can supplement grades, teacher comments, and testing data with interviews with students and parents, writing sample reviews and other, salient fact-finding methods.

Despite the proliferation of information, there are many students in my practice who are simply uninformed and ill-informed about such topics as career options, goals, and the purposes of undergraduate years and college adjustments. Our time allows me to teach this information.

Essential to this discussion is the extent to which a college decision is considered central rather than peripheral to the development of a young person. If the decision and the process involved in making it are viewed as inconsequential, then the consultant, or perhaps any professional counselor or admission officer, must be considered as making much ado about nothing. If we maintain that the college decision is devoid of choice and options and can simply be reduced to a list of dates and tasks to be accomplished, then any discussion of distinctive features among colleges and their appropriateness for a given student must be viewed as hand holding at best and superfluous at its worst.

My work convinces me, however, that the college choice is neither incidental nor inconsequential. The professional literature suggests that the college decision represents the most important decision a young person makes; as important, this decision comes at a time when the student has had little experience in making important decisions.

Effective college counseling, regardless of the setting or amount of time devoted, teaches students the skills and curriculum that contribute to thoughtful, appropriate decisions. And effective teaching, regardless of the subject matter, engages the student; it provides opportunities to test hypotheses, and explore and clarify choices and their consequences.

At its best, good teaching guides and supports the student's own discoveries, decisions, and skill development. The professional joy I feel in my work comes not when I do the student's work—it comes when students can bring their own insight and self-discovery to bear on a decision. My reward comes when a student indicates that a particular setting feels right or when the student feels ready to make a new start.

In nearly 20 years in education—both in college admission and in educational consulting—I have done what some may refer to as hand holding. I am not ashamed to admit it. And, I dare say, counselors at all levels, whether employed privately or publicly, on occasion have done the same thing. There are always a few students whose unique set of circumstances dictate more direct intervention in the process. But I have never consciously betrayed the ethics of my profession and have never exceeded the bounds of fair play. My sometime overzealousness has resulted from an honest concern for my students.

And then one hears the argument that consultants are paid to “get the student in” at all costs. As stated above, I do not see my role in that way. I am paid by a family for advice, for time, for knowledge, and for a realistic assessment of strengths and weaknesses. Am I, as an educational consultant, more of an advocate than the counselor at a prestigious private school at which college placement lists are shown to parents of future enrollees?

I do not believe that either role implies advocacy—particularly if advocacy is defined as an exaggerated presentation of a student in the interest of getting the student admitted. Both the counselor at the private school and the educational consultant are looking to find appropriate matches for each young person without a stated or implied “guarantee” of admission. The idea of “packaging” belongs in department store gift wrapping counters, not in a discussion of consulting.

Is there something inherently wrong with taking a fee to perform these functions? Is there somewhere written an axiom that says that taking a fee suggests a host of hidden meanings and devious techniques? No, I say, loudly and fervently. There is always a charge for expertise.

In our field, families can elect to use the counseling center at their high school, and their taxes or their tuition help support that service. Or, families may elect to purchase and use a wide variety of guidebooks and handbooks to help them through this process. (It is interesting that choice exists in another, similar educational area. Many schools and school districts employ psychologists and other mental health professionals. Yet some families elect to seek the services of a professional outside the school.)

But, the argument goes, economically disadvantaged and minority students have no choice about the college counseling service they use. Usually, the argument suggests that the consultant serves white, rich parents and students and follows with some exposition about the inherent “wrongness” of this clientele. Is it not true that some public and private schools serve the same clientele? Furthermore, and more to the point, educational consultants have a record of concern for expanding their client base. Like many consultants, I make scholarships available each year to expand access to my counseling.

Having said this, I want to add that I am still grappling with all the issues involved in pro bono services, and the topic is ripe for further discourse. But it is my position that, as a profession, educational consultants have no more responsibility for helping less financially able or minority students than those colleagues working in public or private schools or in colleges. However, like professionals in other fields, each of us must make a personal decision about the extent to which our knowledge and time are made available in the marketplace. I know I have more work to do in actively seeking underrepresented students.

Affiliate Achiever

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Who is your role model and why?

My mentor/role model is Keith White. He is a class act from beginning to end—a wealth of knowledge—he could take a complex idea and break it down into manageable parts. He always had time to talk, no matter how busy he was. He was able to put things in perspective and really kept me going. He also was a great champion for students!

Another myth is that consultants are somehow in “fat city” as a result of fees charged for our consulting services. Although my practice has grown by leaps and bounds, even after eight years, my consulting earnings pale in comparison with salaries offered to me if I left and took a job in other spheres of education. Of course, income potential in noneducation careers would be even higher.

I am not complaining, just being truthful. But I love what I do and, at this point in my life, would not trade jobs with anyone. I am willing to meet that extra time with students or parents who are having a particularly difficult time with the college choice process. I am willing to make that extra trip to a campus to find out what’s new so that I can more adequately present them to a client. I am willing to see a student without cost if I can offer him or her a new direction in considering colleges to which to apply. Good consulting is highly labor intensive, although it is sometimes a labor of love.

I want to put my point of view about fees and earnings into perspective; however, I do not condemn those who are financially successful as a result of a consulting practice. They have earned it. Success comes from hard work, and such individuals have earned the rewards they are finally achieving. Consultants are successful because the knowledge and the time they offer their clients has resulted in their attracting more clients. To them, I say hooray, keep up the good work. Plugging along, doing the best job I can will enable me to join them some day.

Colleges, educators, future students, and society can benefit from the growth of the educational consulting profession. The educational marketplace is large enough to allow the growth of this profession without disrupting traditional counseling in the schools. In fact, the overall effect probably will be more time for more students in all of our offices. We will be better able to assist students if all of us—school counselors, admission officers, and consultants—can share information and interact with trust and openness.

Consultants can expand the dialogue about important educational issues we face. Consultants can, and do, contribute by writing books and articles, contributing to panels at national conferences, conducting workshops, and working to clarify and even improve the transition from school to college. The extent to which the educational consultant can be accepted as a professional colleague is a measure of the self-confidence, pride, and honor we have in our profession—and in ourselves. Ultimately, I hope we also will benefit from the resultant professional growth and competence.

The operational procedures and prerogatives of educational consultants working in the collegiate admission scene are still

evolving. We will continue to improve over the years. We are still developing our philosophy of practice, our outreach strategies, and our place in the world of education.

(I might add that the role of the educational consultant in the secondary admission world is well established and recognized. Additionally, those with specializations in such areas as summer programs, schools abroad, college transfer, graduate schools, or learning disabilities have a clearer mission.)

We have much more to do to continue the dialogue with school counselors that will sustain a harmonious working relationship.

Like counselors in public and private schools and college admission officers, there are surely both good and bad educational consultants. Some have operational practices with which I disagree. Some operate outside the professional standards set by organizations such as the National Association of College Admission Counselors or the Independent Educational Consultants Association, two organizations that I find vital to both my work and my professional relationships.

I am still learning and growing as a knowledgeable counselor. But I see potential both within myself and within the field of educational consulting. There is potential within my profession to contribute to helping young people realize their dreams.

I hope that the field will expand on strategies that will lessen the tension some families feel as the college years approach. I hope that we can do an even better job of teaching self-knowledge that will lead to carefully articulated college choices and future successes. More than anything, I hope we can teach, by example, the values of helping someone reach his or her growth potential.

Affiliate Achiever

George Lynes, *Retired*
New Jersey ACAC Past President

Any advice for newbies?

Three things: 1) Become a great writer; it will benefit you in writing recommendations and helping students with their essays;

2) Love kids... and be patient with their parents;

3) Have a firm belief in the value of a college education in these times when costs are high and specialization is encouraged.