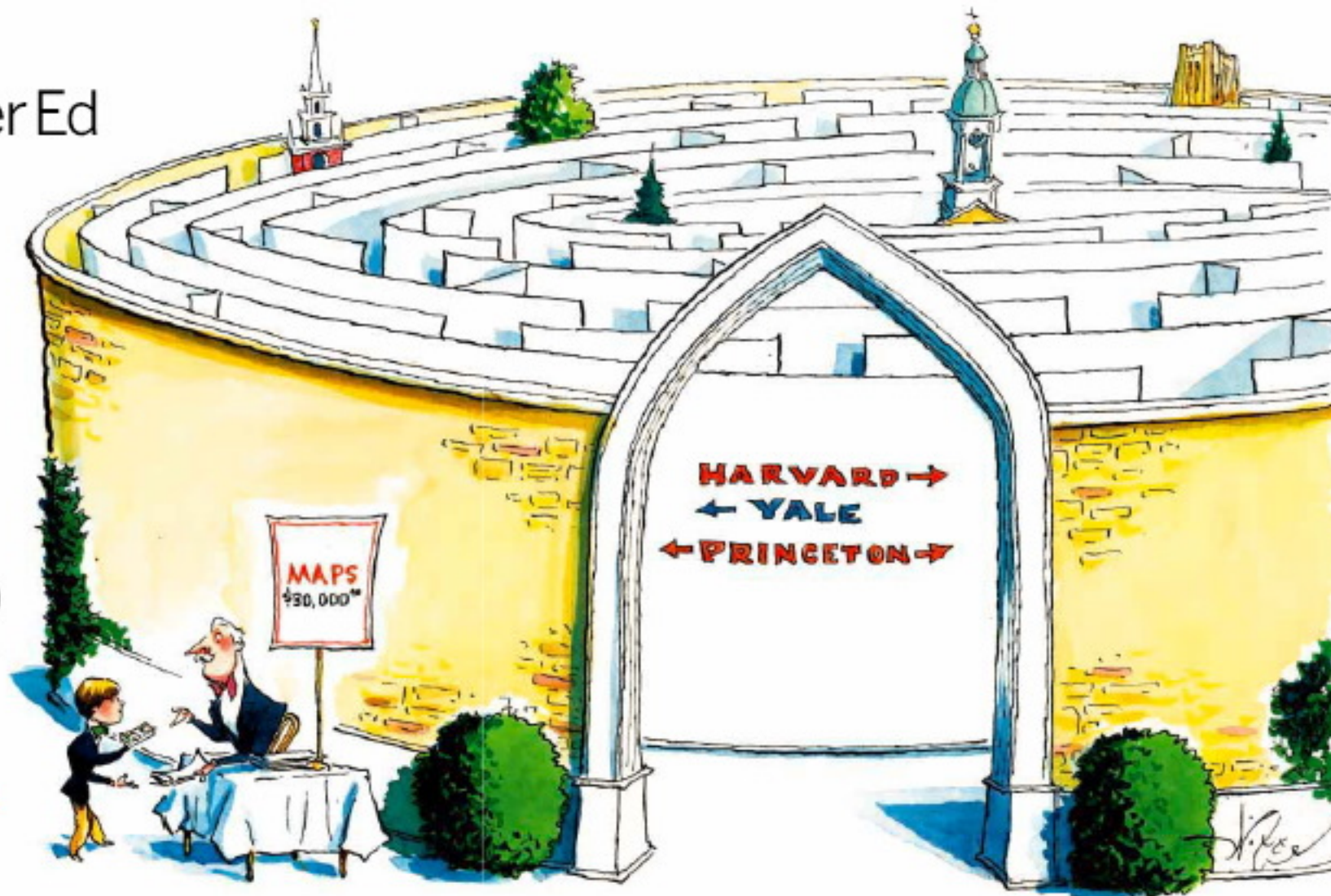


What Price College Admission?

Parents are spending tens of thousands on advisers to shape their kids' game plans. **BY ANNE TERGESEN**



EVEN VALEDICTORIANS ARE finding it hard to land spots at the nation's most selective colleges, so "Ben" wasn't about to take chances. Over the past four years, the New Jersey father of two has spent about \$30,000 for guidance from Michele Hernandez, a Lake Oswego (Ore.) college counselor who charges up to \$36,000 per student for advice on everything from what courses to take to how to spend summers. "We have regular kids who are pretty bright and nice and do a lot of activities," says Ben, who, like many interviewed for this article, requested anonymity. "We were looking to give our kids whatever advantages

we could." Both sons were accepted by their first-choice schools: small, private colleges that admit about 25% of applicants.

Despite the soaring cost of college, a growing number of families are paying as much as a year's tuition, room, and board on independent consultants such as Hernandez. They seek advice not just on completing applications but also on the raw material that goes into them—courses and extracurricular activities. That means bringing these advisers on board as early as eighth or ninth grade.

Although college admissions officers take a dim view of these unregulated advisers, the Independent Educational Consultants Assn., a nonprofit in Fairfax, Va., estimates that some 22% of the fresh-

men at private, four-year colleges this year have used them. Some advisers say they're turning away potential clients. Hernandez began offering four-day "application boot camps" for about \$8,000 last summer to accommodate overflow from her practice, which currently numbers 60 clients. "We're very selective about the students we work with," says Victoria Hsiao, a partner at IvySuccess in Garden City, N.Y., which charges up to \$28,500. The firm has about 100 clients right now and has served about 1,000 since opening nine years ago.

The guides say their goal is simply to find a good match for each student. But with the nation's most selective colleges receiving record numbers of applica-

tions, they say they must also help their clients stand out. High school students "often don't know what's typical and what's interesting about themselves," says Rachel Toor, a former admissions officer at Duke University who charges up to \$200 an hour. "I try to figure out what it is about them that's going to get an admissions officer to fall in love."

GOING DEEP

WHAT YOU GET DEPENDS on how close your child is to attending college. When a client signs on just before senior year, the focus is generally on the application process. Most counselors do not make calls to admissions officers on clients' behalf. But they urge students to express a strong interest themselves by, for example, contacting professors whose research is of interest and attending lectures. To prepare her 200-odd clients for interviews, Katherine Cohen, founder of New York's IvyWise, which charges up to \$30,000, videotapes practice sessions for those who need it. Advisers help students compile activity resumés and athletic videos to send to coaches. They also help brainstorm essay ideas and edit drafts. The goal: to get students to write in a compelling way about a revealing experience or aspect of their personalities. A Princeton University

student from a Western state says Hernandez urged him to explore "what home means to me and how heading east will never change the Western part of me."

Students whose parents hire consultants earlier receive guidance on much more. Some counselors say they steer students to unusual activities. IvySuccess encouraged a girl intent on Massachusetts Institute of Technology to enroll in beauty pageants, an activity that's not typical of the school's applicant pool. She was accepted.

Counselors also help students think of ways to demonstrate a serious commitment to their interests. Cohen, whose agency advises on admissions from preschool through grad school, suggests submitting history papers to *The Concord Review*, a journal that publishes high school authors. She has introduced clients interested in internships to contacts in film, art, publishing, and on Wall Street. "To get into a top

school, you have to show that you're different and that you've done some amazing things," Hernandez says, repeating a theory that most counselors espouse.

Advisers say they are also seeing demand from students with learning disabilities. "Anna" relied on Cohen in her final three years at a private school in California to help her choose a challenging mix of courses that left time for theater: Anna's credits include an off-



IVYWISÉ'S COHEN Her agency advises on admissions from preschool through grad school

Broadway play. Working partly at Cohen's offices the summer before senior year, she polished off her applications ahead of deadline. "I don't work well under pressure," says Anna, who plans to major in theater and music at Brown University.

Are the services worth it? Most advisers claim a high success rate in getting students into first-choice schools, but it's impossible to verify their data. Anyone can set up a shop—such counselors' ranks have doubled, to about 3,000, in the past five years—because the

What Advisers Say:

ACTIVITIES Do a few things in depth. If your school doesn't offer anything that excites you, start your own club. A teen golfer recently launched a program to introduce inner-city students to the sport.

EARLY ADMISSION If you have a top pick, apply early. It's often easier to get in that way.

APPLICATIONS Get them done over the summer. An adult can edit your essays for grammar, but the writing should be in your voice. Be specific in offering examples of your achievements. If you feel a school should know something more, such as why your grades dipped one year, explain it in an extra essay.

RECOMMENDATIONS Send letters that highlight your accomplishments to those who are writing your recommendations. That gives them specific material to draw on.

SUMMERS Forget the cross-country teen tour. Do something that relates to your interests. Ask a teacher to help you design an independent study plan or enroll in a language-immersion program.

TESTS Reading is the best preparation. Consultants provide a list of required reading, including magazines, such as *Scientific American*, that publish material similar to what's on the tests. Hire an SAT tutor.

field is unregulated, and practitioners aren't required to have experience in college admissions or high school counseling.

College admissions officers say such advice makes sense only for students at high schools that lack adequate guidance counseling. Some applicants "end up with a whiff of packaging that undercuts their candidacy," says Bruce Poch, Pomona College's dean of admissions. Many officials also worry that students are learning to put success above everything else. They point to Cohen client and Harvard University student Kaavya Viswanathan, who admitted plagiarizing portions of her novel about a high school student's obsessive pursuit of Harvard. Cohen had introduced Viswanathan to a literary agent. "I have a fear that this [sort of counseling] is undermining people's sincerity," says Tom Parker, dean of admissions at Amherst College.

Parents claim they get their money's worth. Sometimes, they say, a third party can motivate kids in ways a parent cannot. For example, Hernandez nixed one of Ben's son's summer camp plans. "She said: 'You've got to broaden your horizons,'" Ben recalls. The teen enrolled in a physics program at a university instead. "You never know whether you really need a counselor," he says. "All you know is you gave it your best shot." ■