

College competition drives admissions business

Students pay consultants for edge

BY BONNIE ESLINGER

Staff Writer

MENLO PARK — Although Monday was a school holiday, Sungoan Ji, 17, spent the afternoon getting help with an essay he hoped would ensure his college future.

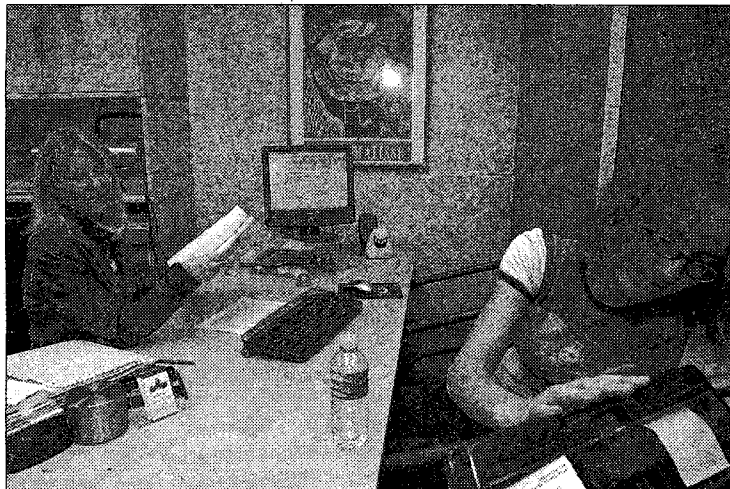
A senior at Monte Vista High School in Cupertino, Ji has a perfect grade-point average and an enviable score of 2200 on his SAT college admissions. He hopes to attend Yale, Brown or Princeton University next fall, but is concerned his application will not stand out to admissions counselors at those prestigious colleges.

To give him an edge, Ji has put his faith in Michelle Podbelsek, co-owner of College Counseling Associates in Menlo Park.

She convinced him to focus his essay on his experiences living in several different countries while growing up.

"It's also great to have someone who says 'your ideas are good, but we should change the style or tone or get rid of this word,'" Ji said.

For a flat fee of \$2950, Podbelsek, has also helped Ji choose potential



AKIM AGINSKY/SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

Michelle Podbelsek, left, helps Cythia Thickpenny send in her application online to Stanford.

colleges, fill out applications and prepare for college interviews. She currently has about 22 clients and estimates that, on average, she'll spend at least 25 hours with each before they graduate high school.

With the number of high school students in search of higher degrees is on the rise, the competition for a limited number of seats at well-regarded universities has driven hopeful applicants and their families to shell out thousands of dollars to college admissions consultants in hopes of improving their

advantage.

Last year at Stanford University, for example, approximately 20,000 students applied for about 2,400 freshmen spots.

Michael London, spokesman for College Coaches, a company with offices nationwide, including Palo Alto, said the best consultants usually have had some experience working in a college admissions office.

"If someone has sat at the other side of the desk and evaluated applications for a couple of years,

they'll know something," London said.

Burlingame lawyer Maureen McQuaid said she decided to launch her own college admissions consulting business last year after successfully coaching her two sons through the process. She now has about 25 clients at a rate of about \$125 an hour, but also does pro bono work helping students at San Francisco's Balboa High School.

She said admissions counselors used to tell students to choose three different types of schools, some that were slightly out of reach, some that a student had a 50/50 chance of getting into, and one "safety" school.

"We don't call them safety schools anymore," McQuaid said, "because it is getting more and more difficult to get into any school."

High school seniors are not the only ones sweating the college application process. One San Francisco twenty-something, who preferred not to be identified, said he wouldn't be at one of the country's top business schools — Wharton at the University of Pennsylvania — if it hadn't spent \$5,500 for the services of Los Angeles-based consultant Stacy Blackman.

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