

The Ethics of Private College Advisors

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As acceptance rates to highly selective colleges have decreased, more students are turning to private college advisors to provide a competitive advantage to their applications. According to a TIME.com article, fewer than 100 people worked as full-time educational consultants 30 years ago. Now there are over 8,000 such consultants, demonstrating a tremendous increase in demand for these services. These counselors provide assistance evaluating a student's strengths and interests, recommending courses and activities, helping to craft a personal narrative, and editing college essays. Is it ethical to hire private college advisors to help students in the college application process?

In principle, there is nothing unethical about employing a college counselor. These counselors provide valuable support in academic and personal development. They might help students brainstorm interests, suggest unique academic or extracurricular opportunities and resources, and encourage students to expand and deepen their academic pursuits. In addition, counselors can serve as an objective third party, helping to alleviate tension between students and their parents when differences in opinion arise. Moreover, students from a background of privilege commonly take advantage of expensive resources such as tutors, summer programs, league sports, and arts programs; hiring a college advisor can be viewed as a similar expenditure. It's reasonable for a family to hire a professional to help navigate an inherently stressful process.

However, critics of hiring personal college counselors point to the inequity it generates in the college application process. Financially disadvantaged students might already have weaker applications due to time-consuming responsibilities at home and/or work that prohibit adequate time for studying or extracurricular activities, not to mention the inability to afford many enrichment opportunities. Exclusion from the privilege of advice from a private counselor is yet another way that students without financial privilege are disadvantaged when applying to schools. Moreover, use of a private college counselor paradoxically may be harmful to students. Hiring an overly prescriptive counselor can undermine a student's self sufficiency in discovering and developing their own interests. This skill will serve students well when they must decide on a college major, career path, or other important life decisions.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it ethical for families with the means to hire college advisors to do so?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working with a private counselor?
3. Are we morally required to make the college application process equally accessible to all students?
4. If you wanted to run a pro bono college counseling service, what approach to counseling should you require from your counselors?