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Independent College Counselor May be Answer to Placement Stress

By Nina McDonald

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Just reading through recent newspaper headlines is enough to make the parents of any high school senior have night sweats. According to current reports, even with a stratospheric GPA, a well-rounded roster of achievements, awards, sports trophies and hundreds of service hours—the chances of getting into the college of one’s choice are frighteningly slim. Make that almost impossible if the goal is an Ivy League school.

The pressure on college-bound teens to not only get into a school, but the right school, is enormous.

Adding to the stress is the fact that high school counselors are generally overwhelmed and unable to give the kind of personalized support that students need. The simple truth is that parents and students usually end up having to do most of the legwork themselves when it comes time to wade through the confusing application process. Parents and students oft times resort to an ill-informed and limited list of college choices based on location, tuition, name recognition or simply because the student’s friends are going to that particular school. Not always the best factors in the decision making process and the results can be far less than satisfying.

What’s a parent to do?

Relief is in sight. Having struggled through the admission process with her own daughter 13 years ago, Karien Bennett can relate to what parents are going through.

Bennett’s etiquette classes are will known amongst the moms of Coronado elementary school children. But what they may not realize is that her services extend well beyond grade school and adolescence. “I’ve always been involved with kids from youth to the older ones. I see my job as preparing kids to enter the adult world from toddler to teen. Teaching kids life skills. Everything that I do is really part of a total package,” Bennett explained.



When her daughter Elloise was getting ready to graduate as a salutatorian from Coronado High School in 1994 Bennett ended up having to do most of the research and help her daughter prep for university. “They were so busy, they just expected us to know what to do,” said Bennett of the counselors. “They put us in a room with lots of books about universities and scholarships and told us to have a look at what was available. It was overwhelming.”

Bennett, who had moved to the U.S. from South Africa just four years before, initially found herself at a complete loss. Applying herself to the task, she helped her daughter through the admissions process, and learned its intricacies along the way. As a result of her experience Bennett launched a business designed to help South African students find their perfect match in American colleges and university’s. Bennett’s company, IPSA (International Placement Services of America) has placed hundreds of South African students in top American schools over the last 10 years. Recognizing the need has grown here for her services, she is now making her skills and knowledge available to American teens and their parents.

Bennett’s daughter (now Elloise Allen) ended up attending the University of San Diego graduating magna cum laude. Allen, 31, is currently the vice principal of Torrey Pines High school and has witnessed first hand the frustrations and inadequacies of the high school counseling system.

“I provide the same services in the public sector as my mom does in the private. I oversee the college career center and the AP program at Torrey Pines. The current ratio of students to counselors is 450 to 1. But there are budget cuts in the plan and counselors fear the ratio will go back up to where it used to be; 650 to 1. The counselors simply do not have the time to get past the basic state requirements to graduate, never mind getting them into college,” said Allen.

In a recent article the San Diego Union Tribune reported that San Diego State University received 61,663 applications for 7,323 freshman spots. California schools will receive 504,800 undergraduate applications to the system's 23 campuses this year. Surpassing last year's record by 11 percent, many campuses are showing double-digit increases, including a 38 percent hike at Cal State Monterey Bay.

Allen cautions parents and students who think they can tackle the admissions process on their own. “People who think they are just going to rely on the internet to do their own research, are really missing the boat. Most people don’t know where to begin. High school counselors are some of the most educated people in the world, but they simply don’t have the time to create an individualized set up. So in this competitive world, the real advantage isn’t necessarily a high GPA, but investing in someone who can accurately assess and guide your child. Plus, there is nothing like the personal touch.”

Bennett offers parents an intensely personalized method of finding and applying for the best school for each student, doing whatever it takes to make sure the fit is perfect. In an

age of email and impersonal electronic communication, Bennett is a firm believer in lots of direct communication with her clients.

She interviews each student at length and asks them to complete a multiple section notebook about themselves including such information as basic likes and dislikes, pictures of friends, accomplishments, grades, and most important in Bennett's mind, a description of their dream job. "So many of my clients come to me saying they want to study a certain subject, but I always ask them to describe their dream job first to me. What do they really see themselves doing? First we do all the career opportunity research. Then we ask: what do I need to do in order to get this job? The key to successful placement is knowing yourself. They go through a process of self reflection with me," Bennett explained.

Her daughter added with a laugh, "When she first told me the name of her business, I couldn't believe it. I said to her, "Do you know that "ipsa" is Latin for "self" ? Her approach is correct though. Most students don't take career aptitude tests. They should be taking these tests early. Otherwise they will end up going to schools and pursuing degrees that are either unnecessary or that they end up hating. And they end up accruing an immense amount of debt along the way."

Starting the process of self discovery early is imperative according to Bennett. "They will be much happier in high school, enjoy it, stay motivated if they understand their strengths and weaknesses." She recommends that parents contact her while the student is in eighth grade, since it is important to pick the right high school classes in order to successfully pick the right college.

Allan adds, "As a 9th grader, you might get a sense of what you want to do. By 9th and 10th grade you should be looking at which universities you want to attend. You have to have a four year plan for high school. And that plan has to fit you. Not because your buddy is taking certain classes. There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle and most people don't know what they are. Or there are myths that people believe about what is necessary."

Bennett says she sees kids all the time who end up pressured to take certain courses either by parents or counselors, who erroneously think more is better. "Parents want kids to take all AP classes. Why? It's really not necessary for many children. And at the same time there is a lot of fear raised by the media. The parents have knee jerk reactions and getting kids to do more, more, more, instead of the right things, is not the way to go."

Allen added that she knows of some high school having suicide watches for over pressured seniors. "Kids are getting over 2300 on their SAT's and spending Christmas at SAT prep boot camps. It's ridiculous. If you look at every college and university that is available that are enough sports for every kid that wants to go."

She adds that colleges have informed principals that they would rather see someone who is committed to one thing. "They tell us this over and over. They would rather see a kid

who has dedicated their whole life to helping the poor in Mexico for instance. Or studying botany or has a huge interest in history. Colleges would much rather see someone who is really excited and focused on their passion, than someone who is some sort of Renaissance student, hyper-accomplished in every subject. Those kinds of kids are rare anyway, so why pressure your child to focus on a hundred different things when they are really only interested in a few? They tell us that putting together a freshman class is like composing a symphony orchestra; a wide variety of really good players on different instruments.”

An astute observer of human nature and a compassionate listener, Bennett says that even having lunch with the student is an important step in the process. There are more factors than just academics when considering which school to attend and one-on-one time reveals exactly what the student needs in order to be a success in college. “I’ve worked with so many kids; I know what questions to ask. I can tell a lot about them even by the way they eat and talk with me. How they interact socially. Things like this are important issues in determining whether or not they should live in a dorm, a sorority or off campus. Some kids will do better in a big school in a city, others need a rural setting.”

In line with her belief that proper etiquette is an essential life skill, Bennett spends time coaching each student on how to go through the interview process. “Projecting your voice and presenting yourself well is important. I tell them they must get up, shake hands, look them in the eye. [The interviewer] must never forget you.”

She adds that one of the things that parents should keep in mind is that the “big name” schools are not always the right fit. “I can place everyone in a college. Maybe not in the “top 20,” but they can be just as successful in other schools. There are colleges with huge endowments and great professors that specialize in specific fields that are a much better fit for what that particular student.”

Bennett relates the story of one of her clients, a graduate student, who was determined to study medicine at Johns Hopkins in New York. After some initial inquiries, Bennett discovered that the student’s wish would not be possible. “But when I questioned him further and asked him what he really wanted to study, I was able to find an even better match for him. He explained to me that his particular field of interest was the manufacture of bio-identical plant hormones. I did some research and found the leading professor in the field, Thomas Mabry at the University of Texas, Austin.”

When Bennett contacted her client, she delivered the disappointing news that he would not be attending Hopkins and then told him about the possibility of studying with Mabry. “He just about yelled through the phone, “Is this really possible?” He was so excited. It turned out that he had read all of Mabry’s textbooks on the subject and the thought hadn’t even entered his mind that it might be possible to study with this man.”

On the IPSA website is a letter of recommendation from Mabry, praising Bennett’s professionalism, care and dedication through the whole placement process.

Bennett's experience and thoroughness may yield some surprises for parents. For instance, if a parent thinks their child must go to a UC school in order to take advantage of in-state tuition, Bennett says they are unnecessarily limiting their options. "Certain schools will look at a student's academic achievement and testing scores and will waive out-of-state tuition. They will even give the student a scholarship. A lot of other schools in-state tuition is cheaper than California's in-state tuition."

Something else to keep in mind according to Bennett, is that not all high school students are suited for college. Bennett says that more money and time is wasted by parents who feel their kid must have a college education, when the child would actually be much happier and more productive elsewhere. "There are way too many kids going to college that don't need to. They should be in technical or vocational schools or even just take some time off and work first. What is crucial is to find a path that suits them."

Bennett holds her clients hand's every step of the way and encourages them to dream big. "When I hear, "this won't be possible," I say, "If you are going to go for it, then I will help to get you there. When you tell me about what you want to do, then that becomes my mission." Her daughter adds, "The bottom line is parents can take advantage of her experience and knowledge, or they can spend a year on the phone."

Parents can hire Bennett at any stage of the admissions process, but Bennett says the best results come if a parent calls her when the child is still in eighth grade. Her services include; help in determining a field of study, research into possible university's, help in the application process, finding/deciding on living arrangements, entrance exam requirements, test registration and finding prep materials. She will also help find scholarships, internships or assistantships and even arrange for someone to meet that student at the airport when they first arrive if necessary. No detail is too small according to Bennett. "I treat each one of my students as if they were my child.

Bennett's fees range from \$250 to \$2500 depending on the range of services requested. She is available for hourly consultation. Contact Bennett through her web site by email ipsa@ipsausa.com or by phone 619-435-6619.