The Role of Independent Educational Consultants in the College Application Process

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This work is dedicated to Mom, Dad, and Marci,
And to Nana and Popper (Ruth and Louis Shulman), of blessed memory.

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ABSTRACT

The Role of Independent Educational Consultants in the College Application Process

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the
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By Jill M. Smith

This dissertation focuses on the growing role of private, for-profit Independent Educational Consultants (IECs) in the college application process. Over the past two decades, an “admission industrial complex” of commercial enterprises designed to help students strategize about admissions and give them information about colleges has arisen. Some components of the complex, such as test preparation coaches and IECs, can also be categorized as forms of “shadow education,” or private educational opportunities that exist outside of schools and largely benefit economically advantaged students. Use of such services features prominently in the intensive parenting strategies of upper middle class parents. This dissertation answers questions about whether IECs contribute to social stratification or mobility. To look at the influence of IECs on a micro level, a close focus is trained on interactions, tensions, and expectations that exist within familial and IEC-client relationships. Particular attention is paid to how families make the
decision to hire an IEC, how they go about the selection process, and the reasons for why they are satisfied IEC with services. Data were gleaned from interviews with IECs based in eastern Massachusetts, IEC clients (including parents and students), interviews at a privately-funded organization that provides college counseling and mentorship to disadvantaged students, and observations at a conference of the Independent Educational Consultants Association. Data analysis was informed by an inductive “grounded theory” approach. Results show that clients highlight IECs’ role as mediator, matchmaker, and personal assistant and downplay the role of IECs in using “connections” and “secret strategies” to facilitate admission as popularized in the mass media. While it does not seem like IECs play much of a role in the social mobility of the typical affluent IEC student, an examination of the IEC industry does highlight many of the ways in which socioeconomic advantage functions in the college admissions arena and may extend this privilege into adulthood and maybe even into the next generation. The IEC industry is only one contributing factor to the reproduction of privilege for affluent youths, but it appears that the impact on mobility could be more significant for disadvantaged students who receive pro bono IEC services.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

During my senior year of high school, in 1993, I had a classmate who had dreamt since kindergarten of going to Harvard. A bright and “Type-A” individual, Brent\(^1\) climbed his way to Editor-in-Chief of the school newspaper, National Merit Finalist, and class salutatorian. (He claimed that a “B” in gym class had unfairly lost him the title of valedictorian.) Having known each other literally since infancy, his mother confided to mine that Brent was “working with someone” on his college applications. At the time, I had never heard of such a thing and could not really imagine what such an arrangement would entail. If there were other students in my class who were getting outside help with their applications, I was not aware of it.

Fast forward to 2007 and my cousin is applying to college. From conversations with him and his parents, it sounds like many of his friends from school – a suburban New York public high school not dissimilar to my own alma mater – as well as various family friends and friends from camp and other places are all “working with someone” and that the topic is openly discussed in their social networks. I started to wonder about this trend that seemed to have sprouted in the intervening years between my cousin’s high school experience and my own. While my cousin wasn’t at the top of his graduating class, he was an honor student with a respectable list of extra-curricular activities, and I wasn’t sure that he needed assistance in

\(^1\) I will refer to all individuals by pseudonyms.
gaining admission to the types of schools where he was applying. Furthermore, I wondered why people like my aunt and uncle, who had college diplomas – and even advanced professional degrees – felt the need to purchase assistance with a process that they had been through themselves. And when my cousin’s parents came to me for a second opinion about his application essay and I found lots of room for improvement, I wondered about the proficiency and qualifications of their particular Independent Educational Consultant (IEC), and of IECs, in general.

Around this time, I had started to see stories in popular newspapers and magazines that described outrageously expensive Independent Educational Consultants such as Michele Hernandez, who was said to charge upwards of $40,000 to counsel students on the college application process. According to one article, Hernandez had left her job as an admissions officer at Dartmouth out of frustration “that school administrations wouldn't tell parents the formula and scale used to decide which students would and would not be admitted,” thereby implying that only an IEC knows the “secret formula” to gain admission (Galante 2012). The idea that IECs are privy to proprietary information is disseminated through articles with titles like “Dirty Secrets of College Coaches” that claim to reveal that while “there’s no Batphone that connects college counselors directly to the Yale admissions office... counselors can pull off certain tricks” (Kingsbury 2010). Another article about students seeking IECs said, “But what many of these prospective students really want from an adviser is someone with influence, a guide who can grease the wheels at the admissions office. Does this mythical figure exist?” (Kingsbury 2010). This project is, at least in part, my quest to find an answer to that very question.
What is an IEC?

Beginning with a small representation in 1950s New England, Independent Educational Consultants have emerged as people who counsel students on matters pertaining to educational choice. They may specialize in helping students to choose an appropriate private school, special education program, or college/university, and to navigate the admissions process. In this dissertation, I focus on the growing role of private, for-profit IECs in the college admissions process.

IECs belong to a category of private educational opportunities that exist outside of schools and largely benefits advantaged students, which is called “shadow education” (Stevenson and Baker 1992). Consultants may work independently or with an IEC firm and many of them are former school-based counselors or college admissions officers (Gose 2006). In this dissertation, I examine the role that IECs play in the college admissions process and how it varies in accordance with the socioeconomic level of the clients served. I am particularly interested in investigating what role, if any, IECs might play in the social reproduction of the existing class order or in social mobility by looking at the IECs traditionally used by affluent clientele as compared to the smaller and newer group of socioeconomically disadvantaged students who utilize IEC services. In order to provide some context, I first trace their emergence as a new category of professional.

The duties of an IEC may include helping students to choose appropriate schools to which they can apply, offering specialized knowledge and assistance, organizing and managing the admissions process, alleviating anxiety about the process, and “cooling out” students’ unrealistic expectations (McDonough, Korn, and Yamasaki 1997). IECs often start working with students in their junior year of high school, but many begin even earlier. They may meet
with a student for five hours or more,\textsuperscript{2} to talk about career interests, assemble lists of prospective schools, review application essays, and help fill out financial aid forms, if appropriate. Some IECs also offer academic tutoring for schoolwork or standardized tests.

**Research Questions**

Coming into the study, I had a lot of questions related to the association between college admissions and social stratification and the ways in which IECs might mediate the relationship:

Do IECs contribute to social reproduction or social mobility, and if so, how? How do IECs view the college admissions “game” in terms of equality of opportunity? And, what do IECs see as their role, if any, in social reproduction and/or social mobility?

I imagined that IECs would mostly serve to help students from upper middle class families maintain their membership in the class of their birth. In the end, I did find this to be true, but not in any straightforward way of assisting youth to gain admittance to elite colleges. Rather than design a study that could empirically test the causal impact of IECs on social stratification, however, I wanted to look at the influence of IECs on a micro-level. I knew that this would require me to focus closely on interactions, tensions, and expectations that exist within familial and IEC-client relationships. My questions about IEC roles and clients’ motivations, expectations, and satisfaction reflect this orientation. This dissertation will answer questions about how families make the decision to hire an IEC, how they go about the selection process, and the reasons for why families are satisfied with the roles played by the IEC. Some of these questions include:

\textsuperscript{2} I read of one IEC who has been known to meet with her clients as many as forty times before the student enrolls in college (Hill, 1997).
What kinds of roles do families expect IECs to play and are those expectations consistent with that which IECs purport to do for their clients? Are the services performed by IECs different from that which the media suggest? How can the role of the IEC in the college application process illuminate some interesting themes related to upper middle class family dynamics? How do interactions with expert systems (the IEC in this case) shape, contest, or legitimize the expectations and aspirations of student and families? Why are families satisfied with IEC services? And finally, where do IECs and families believe that the IEC edge comes from?

I also wanted my research to determine the value of the IEC to affluent students and their families, and how it might differ from the IEC’s value to more disadvantaged youth. I initially suspected that the impact of IECs on social stratification would have something to do with their playing a major role in the production and transformation of students’ different forms of capital (social, cultural, etc.) and had some questions that reflected this assumption. However, as I moved forward with my interviews, I found that capital development is not central to the role of the IEC (apart from working with some pro bono work cases). Instead, I discovered that the typical affluent student-client already possesses the requisite forms of capital needed to play the admissions game and that they and their parents most benefit from IECs’ roles as mediator, matchmaker, and personal assistant.

I asked all of the IECs in my sample questions about whether they do pro bono work, knowing that this would help to bring issues of economic inequality to the fore. Such questions were designed to elicit data on whether there are any democratizing trends in the IEC industry in terms of making IEC services accessible to a broader population, whether the use of IECs by disadvantaged youth help to provide them with resources needed for upward mobility, and if
IECs alter or orient their roles according to the socioeconomic status and social class/cultural background of their clients.

**Motivations**

On a personal level, one of the most basic things that led me toward the study of the role of the IEC in the college application process was a desire to explain the mania educated and affluent students and parents exhibit about applying to college. That the phenomenon of the IEC exists at the intersection of three sociological subfields – sociology of education, stratification and mobility, and cultural sociology – made the topic all the more appealing to me as a sociologist.

That a profession exists to offer supplemental assistance with the college application process to students who can afford it strikes at the heart of some of our society’s most commonly held beliefs. Look, for instance, at our culture’s dominant ideology of the American Dream – the idea that with hard work and determination, anybody can achieve prosperity, regardless of one’s social background. In its current iteration, this notion usually has as its core the idea that “education” is the key to upward mobility. Indeed, as our society becomes increasingly post-industrial and service-oriented, it is hard to find jobs that aren’t at the bottom of the pay scale that don’t require a college degree.

Tied to this belief in the American Dream is the idea that we live in a meritocracy. Oftentimes, people interpret their educational attainment as a sign that they deserve their level of success, be it power, status, wealth, etc., because it helps them to believe that it is the result of their own talent and skill (Liu 2011b). The idea that extra assistance with the college application process can be purchased would seem to fly in the face of our belief that we live in a meritocratic
society. Interestingly, as Liu points out, when Michael Young first coined the term “meritocracy” in 1958, it had a negative connotation, in that he was referring to a social system that develops based on intelligence testing and educational attainment. He saw it as a concept that legitimized structural hierarchies and served as justification for inequality. Indeed, a couple of decades later, Daniel Bell (1973) suggested that higher education would become a “defensive necessity,” as colleges and universities would become the “gatekeepers” of class position and access to them determines the future stratification of society (Liu 2011b).

Questions about economic stratification have gained increased salience in contemporary America, as income inequality has risen and the middle class has shrunk – processes that were already in play before the recession hit in 2008 (Reardon and Bischoff 2011). According to contemporary scholarship about the American economy, such as Jacob Hacker’s *Great Risk Shift* (2008), middle and even upper-middle class, educated Americans are facing more economic risks than ever before. In this economic milieu, do some affluent parents see IEC services as a form of “insurance policy” to guarantee that their child(ren) are able to maintain their social and economic advantage into adulthood (Gose 2006)?

Due to the expense of IEC services, I knew that most of the parents and students in my sample would likely be categorized as upper middle class, based on economic position and other socioeconomic indicators, and that I would need to seek out scholarship that could shed some light on this strata of society.

Alvin Gouldner’s (1979) “New Class” is a wealthy group that is typically more educated than the traditional “old-money” elite. Members of this bourgeoisie are characterized by professionalism (from which they gain authority) and the belief that “autonomy is said to be grounded in the specialized knowledge or cultural capital transmitted by the educational system”
Brooks, in Grusky:299). This “cultural bourgeoisie” values knowledge and “knowledgability” – often times in the form of institutionalized cultural capital, which comes in the form of educational credentials – and “seeks to control everything” (Brooks, in Grusky, 302). As we will later see, Gouldner’s concept is still relevant today, in that many of the parents in my study participate in a form of intensive parenting that involves using their financial and cultural resources to help mitigate perceived threats to their children’s success.

In a similar vein, the IEC-hiring elite can also be described in terms of David Brooks’ (2000) “bobos” (short for “bourgeois bohemia”) – an “educated class” that has cobbled itself into a “hybrid” that is a little bit “hippie,” a little bit “stockbroker.” The bobos, who tend to be Baby Boomers, came of age at a time when colleges were becoming more accessible to those who had talent, as opposed to those who merely came from old money. Like Gouldner’s New Class, they seek to exercise their power, albeit through subtle tactics.

Members of Gouldner’s “new class” and Brooks’ “bobos” are typically ambitious professionals who have more money than time – just like the group that makes up the bulk of the IEC’s clientele (Entrepreneur, 2009). Indeed, According to Mark H. Sklarow, the executive director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, “[IEC services] used to be the province of the wealthy, it’s now become the province of the professional class” (Gose 2006). This is a group of people who believe that a college degree is necessary – and has the resources to help their children apply for and pay for it.

Examining Privilege

For all sociologists know about education, few have focused on economically advantaged students, for a variety of reasons. I imagine that many sociologists share my initial belief that it
is frivolous to focus on a subject that appears to have relevance to such a small and advantaged segment of American society. After all, concern about the disadvantaged and the social problems that they experience is what drew many of us to sociology.

Peggy McIntosh (2012) advocates the conduct of “privilege studies” that focus on members of dominant groups. She says that while our country’s dominant ideology, media, and institutions deny that privilege exists, it is incumbent upon all citizens to be able to “see privilege,” in that it is the “up-side of discrimination” (p. 196). According to Marcia Hill (1996), because middle and upper middle class values, like “white values,” maintain a central position in American culture, there is a need to draw those assumptions into the light and “articulate them from other class vantage points” (p. 4).

That there is little research out there on the education of privileged students or on how practices, institutions, and structures give educational advantages to influential groups is perhaps not surprising. Sociologists tend to “study down” (to examine those on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum) or “across” (to examine their middle class peers), rather than “study up” (to examine those in the upper middle and upper classes) (Aguiar and Schneider 2012). After all, sociologists and other social scientists are understandably concerned about social problems and their victims and with those who share their class position. Some valuable exceptions can be found in Adam Howard and Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez’s (2010) anthology, *Educating Elites: Class Privilege and Educational Advantage* and Seamus Khan’s *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School* (2012). Just as Khan’s prep school students come to see their privilege as the result of hard work, we will see that many IEC clients come to view their success in the college admissions game as a well-deserved
A recent work in the sociology of education that provides an in-depth exploration of the ways in which privileged families purchase educational opportunities for their children is Mitchell L. Stevens’ (2007) Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites. One aspect of his work that is particularly relevant to my project is the way in which he shows how admissions processes at elite colleges influence the values, behaviors, and talents that upper-middle and upper class families seek to cultivate in their children. Central to Stevens’ argument is that children from advantaged families are “groomed” from early childhood, to ensure that they will be attractive college applicants for selective schools. In this context, the use of IECs is just one of many grooming tools.

In the forward to Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2010:vii), Lois Weis writes about the need to pay attention to ways in which educational institutions serve the privileged, as well as the ways in which privileged groups work “on their own behalf to create and maintain distinction.” She reminds us that the privileged work to maintain their position at the same time that some new opportunities have opened up to those who have been historically disadvantaged.

According to Bob Laird, former director of undergraduate admissions at Berkeley, the hiring of IECs by the affluent exacerbates the already rapidly increasing gap between rich and poor in this country by increasing the advantages of the privileged in college admissions (“Admissions Officers Speak Out on Private Counselors,” 2006). Says Thomas H. Parker, dean of admission and financial aid at Amherst College of IECs, “those who need them the most cannot afford them, while those who can most easily afford them need them least” (ibid). As discussed earlier, most IECs work with affluent families, most of which send their children to
“good” high schools, whether public or private. That some school districts have begun to contract with IEC firms indicates the opportunity to bring more equity to the college admissions process. However, wealthier schools, which are more likely to have well-funded counseling services, are also more likely to do this (Cavanaugh 2004).

Social Structure

Like many sociologists, I often find myself frustrated with the inability of most Americans to “see” social structure. One angle that drew me to study the IEC is that it is an especially good case for showing a personal and individual solution to problems that arise at the institutional and social structural levels. Higher education has become expensive and complex and the college application process has become a fraught experience that carries an array of concerns and expectations for different groups of people and has led even the most well-educated among us to believe that neither they nor traditional institutional mechanisms are capable of navigating its depths.

I began to consider the possibility that IEC services could be seen as a microcosm of college admissions as it relates to social stratification, especially with regard to its gross inequalities and potential as an avenue for upward mobility. With all of these considerations in mind, I finally began to see that the role of the IEC in the college application process could be worthy of in-depth sociological examination.

Methods
I utilized qualitative research methods for this study. Between September 2010 and April 2012, I conducted structured formal interviews with 25 IECs based in eastern Massachusetts and 27 IEC clients (including 20 parents and 7 students), most of whom were clients of my IEC interviewees. In addition to formal interviews with IECs, I also conducted two interviews and one group interview at The Bottom Line, a privately-funded organization that provides college counseling and mentorship to disadvantaged students in Boston and New York City. I supplemented my interview data with observations at a conference of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, the largest professional organization for IECs. (For more details about my methodology, please refer to the Appendix.)

**Dissertation Roadmap**

In Chapter 2, I provide context for when, how, and why IECs emerged on the college admissions scene, situate the IEC industry in relation to the central questions and debates that make up the subfield of sociology of education, offer background information on the form and scope of the profession, and consider IECs in relation to other people and groups that help students get into college and make up the “admissions industry.” I will then turn to the relationship between education and social stratification, with an emphasis on out-of-school institutions that mediate educational mobility for youth, including the IEC. Next, I will give some background on the structure and growth of the IEC profession and the demographics of IEC distribution and usage. Finally, I will show how my work builds on the limited scholarly work available on the subject of the IEC and I will argue that the IEC industry can be seen as a form of “shadow education” that largely benefits advantaged students.
In Chapter 3, I look at how families make the decision to hire an IEC, their motivations for doing so, and the IEC selection process. I discuss three metaphors that emerged from my interviews and are illustrative of what I see as the primary roles that families are looking for IECs to play – that of mediator, matchmaker, and personal assistant – and illuminate a few areas in which parents are willing to “outsource” some of their parental duties. I then turn to the ways in which these metaphorical roles highlight some of the ways in which the motivations for hiring IEC services appear to be different – or at least more diverse – than the media hype and common wisdom may suggest. Finally, I explore how IECs enact these roles in interaction with parents and students as they work to fulfill clients’ expectations.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the question of why parents and students are generally satisfied with the services rendered by IECs. Indeed, all of the families in my sample said that, overall, they were satisfied and would consider hiring an IEC for subsequent siblings, and most would recommend to other parents that they hire IECs – even in cases where their children did not get into their first-choice schools. I will demonstrate that despite IEC clients’ strong desire for positive outcomes in the admissions process, when they speak about the “edge” that comes from working with an IEC, what they are mostly talking about is the process; the IEC industry is about helping people (oftentimes parents, more so than students) feel better about themselves and deal with the uncertainty produced by the field of higher education, as well as manage their familial relationships. As we will see, the IEC meets the needs of a certain type of anxiety-driven intensive parenting style. I will also argue that the “edge” that clients believe that they have gotten from the process of working with an IEC is not, as is commonly believed, primarily attributable to any “secret” strategies, “packaging” of applicants, or “pulling of strings.”
In Chapter 5, I will begin by examining how pro bono work is tied to IECs’ conception of professionalism and their perceived barriers to engaging in this work. I will then look at how the ways in which IECs make contact with and work for pro bono clients differ from how things typically play out with their “full-pay” clients. I use the case of IECs and pro bono work as a vantage point from which to view the ways in which the dominant American ideology deals with the concepts of disadvantage, deservedness, middle class strain, economic inequality, and meritocracy. Ultimately, I will argue that the ways in which the parents, students, and IECs in my sample talk about inequality as it relates to college advising, in particular, and the college application process, in general, is consistent with a dominant American ideology that views the struggle for upward social mobility as a contest fought by individuals and looks to individualistic – rather than structural – solutions for those who wish to maintain or attain high social status.

**Conclusion**

I came into this study with a sense of righteous indignation that was based on my assumptions about the role of IEC in reproducing privilege. By end, I had gained the perspective to see the IEC industry as just a small piece of a much larger whole. Upper middle class children enter the college application process with advantages garnered over the course of a lifetime and enter a competition where the rule book was written by members of their own social class.

In case you were curious about where Brent is now, I can tell you that he graduated from Harvard and went on to work long hours on Wall Street, before breaking-out with a college buddy to start their own financial firm. He recently enrolled his oldest daughter in the kindergarten of an elite independent school and, according to his mother, he makes sure to invest time and money in the activities and fundraisers of the Harvard Alumni Association, to help
ensure that his children eventually receive the benefits of being “legacies.” In this way, whether the IEC played a role in his earning a spot at Harvard, or not, his children are likely to benefit from his opportunity. Knowing Brent as I do, though, I have a feeling that Brent would have made it to Harvard, with or without “help.”
Chapter 2 - Background

Andrea sits across the table from me in the classroom where her mother teaches kindergarten and tells me about how she believes that without the assistance of Walter, her IEC, “I just would have been very confused about how to sell myself – it sounds horrible, but it’s true – it’s a capitalist thing.” When our conversation turns to whether her IEC has any “connections” at the schools where she is applying – and whether she thinks that he has used any of them – she answers affirmatively,

I think he’s been in the business a long time and he’s always traveling and, like, I don’t think – my mom was like really shocked by that part [about using connections]– because she was like “I can’t believe it!” – And I was less shocked. I was like, “yes, Genna [her mother’s first name], that’s why we paid him, because we know he’s a professional in this industry and it is part of it. It’s not just about reading my essays. It’s about helping me get my foot in that admissions door.” So yeah, he had some friends.

I then asked, “You knew from other people who worked with IECs that sometimes they have connections?” to which she answered:

Yes. And I just also assumed it. I mean, maybe I’m a little cynical, but it’s kind of a cynical process in that you pay someone to get your kid kind of into college. So I think I kind of assumed that Walter knows people. [Interviewer: I remember your mom was surprised by that]. She’s very naïve. [Laughs]

You may not be surprised to hear that Andrea was one of my most memorable interviewees, for a variety of reasons. In addition to her effusive personality, she was unique because unlike the other students in my sample, whose decisions to work with IECs were largely
influenced by their parents, Andrea came up with the idea to work with an IEC by herself and went about researching potential IECs in a similarly independent manner. After spending a couple of years attending an expensive boarding school, where she heard her peers talk about working with IECs, she returned to the diverse public high school of a small city outside of Boston, where she is pretty sure that she is the only student who is working with an IEC. Andrea is also unique amongst my interviewees in that she highlights the benefits of working with an IEC in the most cynical terms and most pointedly refers to issues surrounding privilege and inequality.

In this chapter, I provide background information about the birth of the IEC, contextualize them within the subfield of sociology of education, and offer background information on the form and scope of the profession. I then outline the history of college admissions in the United States and place IECs in relation to other people and groups that make up the “admissions industry.” I will then discuss the relationship between education and social stratification, with an emphasis on extra-curricular institutions with potential to influence educational mobility for youth, including the IEC. Next, I will discuss the structure of the IEC profession and describe the range of IEC distribution and usage. After that, I will show how my work builds on the limited scholarly work available on the subject of the IEC. Finally, I will conclude that the IEC industry can be seen as a form of “shadow education” that largely benefits advantaged students.

The Landscape of American Higher Education

In order to contextualize the phenomenon of the IEC, it is necessary to start with a brief history of admissions in American higher education, followed by an overview of what the
admissions landscape looks like today in terms of who applies to college and the types of schools that students attend.

**History of college admissions**

From 1700 to the early 1800s, American higher education was mostly dominated by Harvard’s admissions policies, which required that entering students be proficient in Latin and Greek, come from desirable backgrounds, and be of acceptable character. Beginning in the 19th century, private academies formed to prepare students for a more “practical” education and colleges began to require background in a wider range of academic subjects as a condition for acceptance. Colleges also became more insistent that admitted students have completed four years of high school before entry.

The mid-19th century saw the emergence of many public state universities, which opened the opportunity for a college education to a wider swath of the American public. In particular, many of these new institutions were supported by the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Acts of 1862 and 1890, with the intention of serving the needs of an industrializing society by offering a more “practical” education, in addition to the more traditional academic subjects. Alternatively, many state universities were founded as “normal schools,” designed to train students to become school teachers. At this point in time, colleges lacked agreement as to which academic subjects should be required for admission, and at what level. This led to problems for high schools, which were no longer sure as to how to best prepare students for college admissions. Eventually, secondary schools and colleges engaged in cooperative efforts to develop greater uniformity in college admissions. In 1926, the College Board instituted the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as a means

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3 This brief history of college admissions is largely based on Beale (1970 and 2012).
of making the college admissions process more objective. In the first half of the 20th century, as the number of high school graduates applying to college increased, standardized tests provided a more efficient and economical way for colleges to process massive piles of applications (Beale, 2012).

In the 1930s and ‘40s, there was a move to accept students based more on ability than on particular subjects studied. After World War II, colleges and universities saw an increase and diversification (in terms of socioeconomic background) of applicants and new students, as a result of the G.I. Bill. By the mid-1940s, college entrance requirements were fairly uniform and were largely based on high school academic coursework, grades, and class rank. In the 1950s, the results of standardized exams sponsored by regional or national associations were added to this list. By the 1960s, the SAT was the pre-eminent national standardized test. Also, in the 1960s, there was a growing interest in taking environmental and non-intellective factors into account in the selection process. College admissions officers began to emphasize the importance of students’ personal characteristics, such as character, emotional stability, and leadership ability (Beale 1970).

As increasing numbers of minority students began applying to college in the 1960s, standardized tests were criticized as being discriminatory against certain groups. This led to a movement to employ race as a factor to be considered in college admissions. By 2000, race-based affirmative action faced widespread criticism and colleges – especially public universities – began to look for race-neutral ways to diversify their student bodies and provide greater equity in admissions.
College admissions today

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of students who attend post-secondary educational institutions, such as colleges and universities. (See tables below.) Undergraduate enrollment generally increased during the 1970s, but dipped from 10.8 million to 10.6 million between 1983 and 1985 (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). From 1985 to 1992, undergraduate enrollment increased each year, rising 18 percent before stabilizing between 1992 and 1998 (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Undergraduate enrollment rose 37 percent between 2000 and 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics 2012).

While the number of high school graduates is said to have peaked in 2008 at 3.3 million and is predicted to continue to decline through 2014-15, the number of students enrolled in college is expected to continue to increase until at least 2020, largely due to increasing enrollment among older, “non-traditional” students (Clinedinst, Hurley, and Hawkins 2011). In fall 2012, a record 21.6 million students were expected to attend American colleges and universities, an increase of about 6.2 million since fall 2000 (Hussar and Bailey 2013). 66 percent of students who graduated high school in 2012 were enrolled in college (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013). It is worth noting, however, that many of these students will not graduate from college (National Center for Education Statistics 2012).

Undergraduate enrollment has also become more diverse in recent decades. The percentage of American college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Black has been increasing. From 1976 to 2010, the percentage of Hispanic students out of the total of American college students rose from 3 percent to 13 percent, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2 percent to 6 percent, and the percentage of Black students rose

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4 Approximately 58 percent of first-time, full-time students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at a 4-year institution in fall 2004 completed a bachelor's degree at that institution within 6 years.
from 9 percent to 14 percent. During the same period, the percentage of White students fell from 83 percent to 61 percent (Hussar and Bailey 2013).

Every year since 1997, between 64 and 78 percent of colleges reported receiving more applications than they did the prior year (Jaschik 2012). In recent years, applicants apply to many more schools on average than they did in the past (Clinedinst et al.), partly due to the rise of the Common Application, which allows students to apply to several schools with a single application (Hoover 2010). The percentage of students who submit three or more applications a year has been rising, from 67 percent in 2010 to 79 percent in 2011 and the percentage of students who apply to seven or more colleges has also been going up, reaching 29 percent in 2011, up from 25 percent in 2010 (Jaschik 2012).

Table 1: Increase in Enrollment in Degree-granting Institutions (National Center for Education Statistics 2012)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Percentage Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990-2000</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2010</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Percentage of 18-to-24-year-olds Enrolled in College (National Center for Education Statistics 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percent Enrolled in College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increasingly competitive college admissions?

Despite the hyped-up national discourse on higher education, which focuses on the competitive nature of college admissions, the vast majority of colleges aren’t very competitive. According to higher education organization CollegeData, out of approximately 2,000 accredited
four-year colleges, only about 55 colleges routinely admit fewer than 30% of applicants (Driscoll 2013). Indeed, over the last decade, there has been only a modest overall increase in selectivity, with a modest decline in acceptance rates moving from 70% to 63% Jaschik (2012). However, if one takes a longer view, it is evident that 90 percent of colleges are less selective today than they were in the 1950s and ’60s; since 1955, the number of high school graduates has grown by 131 percent while the number of college spots has risen by 297 percent (Hoxby 2009).

What is true, is that selective colleges have become more selective – and that there are more schools that fit this classification. The number of colleges that would be classified as "most competitive" or "highly competitive" (as classified using the Barron’s guide system) has risen from 146 in 1994 to 193 in 2006 (Carnevale and Strohl 2010). The question of selectivity isn’t a concern, however, for the approximately 43 percent of the students who graduated from high school in 2011 and are enrolled in community colleges (Higher Education Research and Development Institute 2011).

In addition to demographic changes and changes in applicant behavior, the increase in competitiveness in certain strata of higher education can be attributed, in large part, to behaviors of the educational institutions themselves. Despite the overall increase in submitted applications, colleges have experienced declining yields since the early 2000s. (The yield is the percentage of accepted students who enroll at the institution.) Also, with the economic downturn of 2008, the gap between private and public schools’ yield rates have increased, with private rates dropping more (Jaschik 2012). This has led institutions of higher learning to hire enrollment management experts who recommend that they engage in marketing and branding campaigns. In other words, colleges are now commercialized and entrepreneurial and follow the laws of industry (Liu 2011). The entrepreneurial admissions sector also includes commercial enterprises aimed at students
who want to increase their success in the admissions process as well as efforts to give more information about colleges to the general public. These activities result in the “commodification” of applicants, by treating them as objects to be obtained by colleges, and the “commodification of college knowledge,” as information becomes something to be bought and sold (McDonough, Ventresca, and Outkalt 2000). The entrepreneurial educational arena involves the interplay of large corporations, the media, individual actors, and social class. It a worthwhile subject of study, due to its potential to exacerbate inequity in higher education and thus, social and economic inequality, in general.

At the same time, it has become harder, in some ways, for college applicants to figure out what will make them most successful as applicants. Although the importance of grades in college preparatory classes has remained at the top of the list of the most important deciding factors for college admissions for the past twenty years, over the past ten years, there has been a decline in the significance colleges place on high school rank and interviews (Jaschik 2012). More recently, colleges have begun to look for ways to evaluate applicants in a more comprehensive and holistic manner, as opposed to some of the more narrow and quantitative methods of the past (Beale 2012). For example, over the last decade, a few colleges have designed “noncognitive” assessments to measure traits such as leadership and persistence (or “grit”) that can’t be measured by content-based tests (Hoover 2013). While a functionalist would argue that colleges make determinations of merit in order to select students who possess the most potential for success, a conflict theorist might argue that changes in the metrics of merit serve the needs of the dominant groups in society (Karabel 2005).
IECs at the Nexus of Education and Stratification

The role of IECs in the college admissions process fits squarely within the sociology of education literature that explores the relationships between education and social stratification and mobility (Turner 1960, Blau and Duncan 1967, Jencks et al. 1972). The financial returns of a college education are higher than ever (Hill, Hoffman, and Rex 2005) and the rate of return is highest for disadvantaged students (Brand and Xie 2010). According to a study conducted by the Independent Educational Consultants Association (2012), students working with IECs are four times more likely to attend private, non-profit colleges than those who do not work with IECs; that is, 67% of those who work with IECs will attend private, non-profit colleges, as compared to a rate of 16% among all students. According to the IECA, this difference hasn’t really changed much over recent years, despite the market crash of 2008. According to the same study, those working with an IEC are also three times more likely to attend college out-of-state than their peers; 63% of all students who work with an IEC do so, as compared to 20% of all students. My study will suggest that this is not a consequence of working with an IEC, however.

These statistics have relevance in this context because returns on investment in a college education are not equal. The first step to attaining the higher earning potential offered by a college degree is to actually graduate. The most selective schools have an 88 percent graduation rate (over 6 years) compared to 35 percent at non-competitive schools (Owen and Sawhill 2013). According to the same study, those who attended the most selective private colleges have a lifetime earnings premium of over $620,000, while the premium for those who attended a minimally selective private institution is only one-third as much.

If a college degree (especially from a more elite school) is crucial for upward mobility, then it is important to note some statistics that point to disadvantaged students being less represented at private and selective colleges. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be
discouraged from applying because of the high cost of expensive institutions or because of lack of academic preparation, or lack of encouragement to apply. At the most selective colleges and universities in the country (in 2006), 70 percent of the undergraduate students come from the wealthiest quarter of U.S. families, while just 14 percent come from the poorest half (The Century Foundation 2013). One of the ways in which this advantage amongst the privileged is propagated is through preferential admissions standards being applied to “legacy” candidates. Even though legacies make up a minority of students at most colleges, having legacy status can significantly improve one’s chances of admission. A recent study of the impact of legacy status on admissions decisions at thirty highly selective colleges and universities estimates that the odds of admission are multiplied by a factor 3.13 due to legacy status (Hurwitz 2012). Finally, some colleges that are reluctant to admit students who have great financial need will show preferences in admission to students who have more financial resources, and even many of the schools that claim to admit on a “need-blind” basis are unable to provide enough aid to fill in for students’ demonstrated need (Kantrowitz 2011).

**Social Reproduction Theory**

A good deal of work on the connection between education and stratification is in the vein of social reproduction theory, which tries to illuminate the specific mechanisms and processes that contribute to the intergenerational transmission of social inequality (MacLeod 2009). The identification of constraining barriers to mobility is of great interest to social reproduction theorists. In the sociology of education, social reproduction theorists argue that the educational system perpetuates inequalities, rather than provides equal opportunity. Social reproduction theories of interest to sociologists of education can typically be divided into those that emphasize the role of schools and those that place greater emphasis on students’ background and what
happens in the home. My study extends beyond these baseline frameworks, by examining how other resources mediate and alter those intergenerational frameworks. For example, my work on IECs and the role that they can play for the disadvantaged provides an interesting example of a market-based activity that may, in some cases, provide added opportunity for students with otherwise slim chances for upward mobility.

**Schooling and Social Reproduction**

One classic example of social reproduction theory in education is that of Bowles and Gintis’ (1976) “correspondence principle,” where schools are seen as preparing students to fill social roles and positions that are similar to those played by the preceding generation. According to this view, the social relations of the school parallel those of the workplace. This view is commonly associated with Marxists, who see these connections as particularly invidious in the capitalist economic order. The correspondence principle maintains that schools transmit *attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions*, as well as academic and/or vocational skills. These types of knowledge, which may not be explicitly taught, are commonly referred to as the “hidden curriculum,” a phrase first coined by Philip W. Jackson in 1968. Cookson and Persell’s (1985) *Preparing for Power: America’s Elite Boarding Schools* is a classic example of a work in this vein, as it emphasizes the ways in which such schools nurture forms of social and cultural capital that will bestow advantage in the rarified social and work worlds that their (mostly) affluent students will encounter after graduation. Social capital, here, refers to benefits and resources that one derives from one’s social relationships and networks, while cultural capital refers to information, cultural “know-how,” and behaviors that are valued by those in high status groups (Bourdieu 1986).
There is much debate in the sociology of education literature about the strength of “school effects.” One definition of school effects is “the associations between school structural features (e.g., school sector) and resources (e.g., pupil-teacher ratio) and student achievement, while controlling for important student background characteristics (e.g., student socioeconomic status [SES])” (Konstantopoulos 2006). In relation to this debate, a lot of work on education and stratification has focused on the results that money and other resources (or lack thereof) possessed by individuals or communities contribute to the quality of schools (Condron and Roscigno 2003, Burtless 1996, Kozol 1991). Much of this work focuses on how public schools in wealthier neighborhoods have a higher tax base to draw upon and more influential parents who make sure that funds are going directly to the particular schools (within the district) that their children attend. Other work, such as Cookson and Persell’s (1985) on private college preparatory schools, looks at ways in which wealthy parents buy advantages for their children by sending them to private schools that serve as “feeders” to high status colleges. My work diverges from the work described above, in that I look at money spent outside of traditional schooling in the hopes of raising educational achievement and attainment.

In the US, in comparison to other industrialized nations, it can be argued that a decentralized system of public schooling, “looser” (and later) course tracking, the ability to “buy” your way into quality public schools by moving to affluent neighborhoods, and a plethora of private schooling options, give parents of high socioeconomic status more opportunities to influence the trajectories of their own children. Even so, upper middle class parents continue to fret about their children’s chances for success, and sending their children to schools filled with competitive and high-achieving students may compound these anxieties.
Interestingly, there is some evidence supporting the existence of a “frog-pond” model of elite college admission which implies that attending a high school with many resources could actually hurt students’ chances of enrolling in selective colleges because high-achieving students at competitive high schools are penalized because their test scores and GPAs are “worth less” than they would be at less competitive schools (Attewell 2001). Although this theory has been complicated by more recent research (Espenshade 2005), the idea that one has to work harder to shine amidst a sea of strivers has surely crossed the mind of many parents and students who are affiliated with top high schools. My work suggests that a good IEC can help mitigate some of these anxieties by encouraging students to consider schools that fall outside the narrow range of “name brand” schools – largely in the Northeast and California – that their peers tend to consider.

The majority of students in my sample go to some of the most highly regarded schools (public and private) in the country, but I would argue that the benefits absorbed from their time spent outside of school, whether in the form of family life or “enriching” activities, make school effects less salient for the typical affluent IEC student client.

**Home as locus of social reproduction**

Deterministic mobility models explain how occupational outcomes are determined in large part by parents’ education and occupation. According to status attainment theory, the acquisition of status is affected by educational attainment as well as ascribed factors such as family income. One achieves status through inheriting one’s parents’ status, one’s own efforts and abilities, and often, circumstances beyond one’s control. When discussing the field of education, status attainment theory assumes that the social status of parents affects the educational level achieved by their children, which in turn affects their occupational and social
status. Thus, level of schooling attained serves to moderate the degree of intergenerational transmission of social status (Blau and Duncan 1967; Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan 1972).

Parents play a crucial role in the admissions process for many upper middle class students, through providing assistance with the admissions process, and more generally, by influencing the high educational and occupational aspirations of their children. They are also typically the ones who drive the decision to hire an IEC and pay for the services. In this way, parents attempt to compensate for any leveling process within the schools by seeking an advantage that isn’t available to all.

The hiring of IECs by affluent parents can also be seen as an extension of Annette Lareau’s “concerted cultivation,” an intensive, hands-on parenting approach especially common among upper middle class parents (Lareau 2003). As we can see, more affluent parents provide both the informal preparation captured by the concept of cultural capital as well as more substantive preparation. The IEC industry can be considered one of many strategies available to privileged parents to enhance the educational capital of their children by investing and exchanging various forms of capital. McDonough (1994) offers the utilization of IEC services as an example of how some college applicants are mobilizing their economic capital in an effort to enhance their cultural capital and thereby maximize their socioeconomic advantages.

The parents in my sample who hired IECs have been concerned about their children’s academic success since long before their children entered high school. Perhaps they know intuitively what sociologists have found – that achievement during the middle school years, and even earlier, predicts achievement in high school and long-term performance over the life course (Alexander and Cook 1982; Chen and Kaplan 2003) and that the prestige of the colleges that students attend is largely solidified by the time students enter high school (Moller, Stearns,
Potochnick, and Southworth 2010). Much of this phenomenon is likely explained by cultural capital transmitted by parents and others outside of school.

One of the reasons why it can be hard to disentangle schools effects from “family” or “home” effects is because families can prepare their children to better take advantage of what a high school offers. A study of a cohort of students who entered college in the mid-2000s suggests that programmatic and non-programmatic resources found in high schools influence postsecondary destinations and mediate the effect of family socioeconomic status on choices among 4-year colleges (Klugman 2012). Programmatic resources are certain types of courses (such as Advanced Placement courses) or extra-curricular activities that allow students to gain “marks of distinction” that will make them more desirable college applicants. This can be seen in Shamus Khan’s (2011) work on how elite private schools give their students an advantage in the admissions process. While not all students can be at the top of the class, elite schools have the resources to let their students develop interests and skills that will put them at the top of their class at something even if it is not academics, while allowing students from a homogenous background to appear diverse and interesting.

It means a lot to the families in my sample that their children go to a “good” college. Interestingly, social scientists usually just look about the benefits of a college degree, without making distinctions between different types of schools (in terms of prestige). Joseph A. Soares (in Gaztambide-Fernández 2010) writes about the effects of parents’ college tier (within a hierarchy of prestige) on their offspring’s educational attainments. Just looking at years of educational attainment and credentials will underestimate the effects of stratification within higher education. He says that due to unequal institutional effects, the privileges associated with a family’s socioeconomic status appear to be passed along through the stratification of higher
education into seven distinct tiers with different social class compositions and occupational destinations. The top tiers draw overwhelmingly from the top income groups and their graduates accumulate a lifetime income premium worth more than one million dollars over bottom-tier graduates. However, we do not yet know how much intergenerational privilege is transmitted via college tiers. He says that we need to think about what types of colleges parents attended – or risk underestimating elite educational reproduction.

Soares’ ideas make sense within the context of Raftery and Hout’s (1993) theory of “maximally maintained inequality,” which holds that the privileged classes are better positioned to take advantage of new opportunities and that it is only when a level of attainment is saturated for the privileged group that members of the less privileged classes have the opportunity to catch up. The lower classes can never truly catch up, because by the time that they have attained what used to be de rigeur for the dominant class, the elites have raised the bar and have begun to aim higher. The existence of differentiated levels of institutions, in this case, promotes the reproduction of inequality.

Despite the selectivity of college to-be-attended largely being set by the time a student is in 8th grade, Moller et al. (2010) found some nuances in the model. Among high socioeconomic status (SES) students, lower achievers can enhance the prestige of the colleges they will attend by moving up the achievement distribution during high school. However, even if their gains are well above average, the prestige of the colleges they are predicted to attend will not surpass students who enter high school at the top or middle of the eighth-grade achievement distribution. These findings are similar for low-SES students. In contrast, the effects of achievement for middle-SES students are largely solidified by high school. Among upper SES kids, the highest achieving students in the eighth grade enter high school with a substantial advantage that they
generally maintain during high school. On the other hand, middle-achieving students slightly enhance their prospects for college by moving up the achievement distribution, but low-achieving students who attend college immediately following high school can substantially increase the selectivity of the colleges they attend by augmenting their positions in the math and reading achievement distribution. For middle SES children, their position in the eighth-grade achievement distribution predicts college selectivity, but movement in the achievement distribution during high school does not significantly alter where they will go to college. For the lowest SES students, eighth-grade achievement position and movement in the achievement distribution during high school have an equal influence on the selectivity of the colleges they will attend. There are actually benefits for students on the two ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, in that while the effects of achievement for middle-SES students are largely solidified by high school, low-SES students may move up the achievement distribution to attend more selective colleges.

Out-of-school institutions that mediate educational mobility for youth

Parents of all social classes want to see their children succeed in school, of course, and the following sections will situate IECs as one among many types of services parents use outside of schools to try to help their children get ahead educationally.

Resources for disadvantaged youth

Work has been done by sociologists, scholars of education, and others, on methods that different groups of people use to help gain access to places in higher education. Much of this work has focused on college-preparation programs that provide academic enrichment for disadvantaged youth. The use of IEC services by disadvantaged youth is but one of a broader class of mechanisms that have the potential to mediate educational mobility. In other words,
there are other options out there for disadvantaged students who want to increase the chances that they will be prepared to apply to college and be ready to handle the challenges of college life. Some examples include summer programs (Smith 2008), charter schools (Renzulli and Roscigno 2001), mentoring (Nakkula and Harris 2010), and after-school programs (Gottfredsen 2010).

The Bottom Line, a Boston and New York organization, offers free-of-charge college advising to disadvantaged high school students. A major difference between the Bottom Line and traditional IEC services is that in most cases, a student’s relationship with an IEC ends when s/he enrolls in college, while this program places a high premium on continuing to provide support to students throughout their college career.

**Resources for advantaged students**

The IEC industry is just one of several avenues to college access that are utilized by an upper middle class population. Other avenues might include tutoring for the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) or high school courses, summer enrichment programs for the “gifted” (Frost 2005) as well as providing the financial and parental support needed to pursue the kinds of extra-curricular activities (Levey 2010) that will mold a child into the type of “well-rounded” student that American colleges so covet. Recent articles in the popular media describe parents who spend well over 10,000 dollars on college preparation that may include “good-will missions” to far-away places, summer college courses in foreign countries or at high-status American universities, as well as tutoring, private college counseling, and extensive college visits (Wang 2007; Tugend 2009).

According to one report, the standardized test preparation industry alone generates more than one billion dollars annually (NACAC 2008). According to another source, the standardized
test preparation industry, dominated by Kaplan and Princeton Review, is worth $2.3 billion dollars (Wang 2007). About 25% of high school seniors who had taken college admissions exams such as the ACT and SAT had participated either in private test tutoring or a commercial test preparation course (Briggs 2009). Research shows that students who receive test preparation coaching for the SAT can see substantial gains in their test scores (FairTest 2013). Oftentimes, admissions and financial aid decisions put significant weight on standardized test scores, thereby putting students who lack the financial resources to gain access to test preparation services at a disadvantage. Test preparation is offered by some, but not all, public schools. Compounding the problem is that students from lower income families often attend schools where guidance counseling is minimal, making it difficult for them to learn about test preparation resources – even low-cost or free ones. Powers and Rock (1999) and Briggs (2001) found that coached SAT-takers came from more affluent families than uncoached candidates.

In an article comparing the field of private tutoring in South Korea to that in America, Jaekyung Lee (2007) speaks of the dual and conflicting ways in which private tutoring tends to be regarded in the United States. On one hand, tutoring can be seen as a remediation tool that can prop up the limited educational opportunities available to disadvantaged students. On the other hand, many high achieving (and largely affluent) students utilize private tutoring for enrichment and college preparation. Lee says that in these cases, tutoring might be seen as a threat to an idea of equality of opportunity that is often associated with the institution of public schooling.

A similar concern is brought out in Gary Stager’s (2008) article on educational enrichment programs. The programs that he speaks of are “pull-out” programs where selected students are taken out of their regular classrooms for a certain amount of time each week.
Students in such programs often have the opportunity to do project-based work and go on fieldtrips. He jokes that “enrichment is Latin for ‘children of rich parents who complain.’’” He says the parents of affluent students, in particular, like to see their children as “unique” individuals who need to have their talents nurtured. One of his main problems with such enrichment programs is that he believes that all children could benefit from these types of educational opportunities. Indeed, Reis and Renzulli (2010) cite many examples of research which has shown that although educational enrichment experiences are not offered in many urban schools, when they are, improvement in achievement levels is seen among the general student body, while underachievement is reduced.

We know that the achievement gap between children of the higher and lower classes widens over the summer and that the effects are cumulative across childhood (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson 2004). Even though the majority of middle and upper class parents do not send their children to academic summer programs like The Johns Hopkins’ Center for Academically Talented Youth (CTY), environmental factors protect their children from this learning loss. That is, “regular” summer camps, family vacations and daytrips, visits to libraries, etc., provide enrichment that is not afforded to many working and lower class children (Afterschool Alliance 2010).

“Shadow Education”

According to sociologist of education James Rosenbaum, the IEC industry can be seen as one of several “private market responses to challenges poorly handled by public sector” (Rosenbaum, personal communication). In the education field, he puts IECs in the same category as charter schools, for profit colleges, and prep schools. He refers to his own work on for-profit colleges, After Admission (2006), where private Associate’s degree-granting
institutions have better degree completion rates than their public, community college counterparts.

Rosenbaum also places IECs within the broader category of “shadow education,” which can be defined as “educational activities, such as tutoring and extra classes, occurring outside of the formal channels of an educational system that are “designed to improve a student’s chance of successfully moving through the allocation process” (Stevenson and Baker 1992:1640). Indeed, educational researchers and scholars outside of sociology have started to recognize and study the ways in which affluent parents allocate resources to pay for extra-curricular or supplemental educational services or programs aimed at college admissions, such as standardized test coaching and private tutoring (Powers and Rock 1999; Beatty and Linn 1999; Briggs 2001 and 2002; Zwick 2007).

IBIS World, a market research organization, categorizes test preparation, tutoring, and educational consulting as examples of “parental outsourcing” (Culbert 2010). Some other “parental duties” included in this 56 billion dollar industry are sports coaching, child daycare, and family daycare (for the elderly and infirm). Exam preparation and tutoring make up a 6.2% segment of the market revenue, while educational consultants account for an additional 2.1 percent industry revenue. From 2010 to 2013, the educational consulting sector is expected to grow 5.8%, while the exam preparation and tutoring sector is expected to grow 2.1%.

The term “admission industrial complex” has been coined to refer to an assortment of commercial enterprises to help students strategize about admissions and give them information about colleges, but it also includes colleges’ efforts to increase their application numbers and maximize their yields. McDonough (1994) called non-school based admission services “admissions management.” She says that the college choice process has become
professionalized as we rely, as a society, on out-placement specialists, where for a certain group of students, college choice is highly rationalized and managed and not about soul-searching or individual independent research. She claims that as “college knowledge” has been reified as a commodity, college applicants are transformed into a commodity for colleges. Bishop (2009) found that journalists writing about college applicants tend to describe students as if they were a commodity to be collected by the colleges.

**Enter, the IEC**

The IEC field is a growing industry that began with a slow start in the 1970s. The industry saw an especially high rate of growth between 1996 and 2006, an interval during which membership in the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) tripled (Cohen 2006). The industry as a whole grew by a dramatic 300 percent from the early 2000s to 2006 (Caskey 2006). Membership in the Independent Educational Consultants Association has been growing at 20 percent annually, according to the group’s director, Mark Sklarow (Jasiewicz 2010). IECA membership tripled again between 2005 and 2012, even in the depressed post-2008 economic climate (IECA 2012). There are 4,000 to 5,000 private educational consultants in the United States focused on college admissions, according to Mark Sklarow, executive director of the IECA, and the number has doubled in the last five years (Bick 2008). According to the IECA (2012), in 2005, there were an estimated 1,300 to 1,500 IECs working in the United States (including non-IECA members) and another 4000 to 5000 who were “dabbling” in the field, while in 2012, the numbers had increased to 4,000 to 5,000 IECs nationally, 1,000 internationally, and another 10,000 to 15,000 “dabblers.”
In addition to an increase in numbers, the IEC field has seen increased specialization over the past few years. In 2005, most IECs were generalists, in that an IEC was likely to do school (K-12 independent school) advising, learning disabilities, and college advising. These days, an IEC is more likely to specialize in one of these areas. College advising is the area that has seen a marked increase since. College advisors, as a segment of the IEC population has also seen increased specialization, as more IECs emerge who claim to be experts on financial aid, artists, and athletes. The years between 2005 and 2012 have seen a 15 to 20% growth in the number of IECs who claim to specialize in financial aid advising, at least among the IECA membership (Sklarow 2012). This growth can most likely be attributed to a lagging economy and the increasing cost of education.

Several reasons have been proposed by scholars (McDonough 1994; Liu 2011) – and by the IECs in my sample – for the vast overall growth of the IEC industry in recent years, including changing student demographics, more aggressive college recruitment tactics, reduced college counseling resources in many public secondary schools, increased privatization of formally public goods, economic uncertainty, and increased access to representations of the intense competition for college placement in various and new forms of media.

IECs are now a significant segment of the educational marketplace. The IECA believes that for the first time, it can estimate the economic impact of the IEC profession as a whole. Domestically, four hundred million consumer dollars are spent annually on IECs, as compared to only a third of this a decade ago (IECA, 2012).

According to the IECA (Sklarow, 2012), IECs have risen to the top of the list of people who have the most influence over students’ decisions about the application process. For the first time, educational consultants have shown up at #5, having never been on the list before. For
forty years, school counselors were at the top of the list of influencers, but this year, for the first time, school counselors don’t even show up in the top ten. Interest in purchasing personalized attention makes sense in light of a National Association for College Admissions Counseling survey which shows that the national average for the K-12 public school student-to-counselor ratio in 2009-2010 is 459 students per counselor (NACAC 2012). Perhaps surprisingly, the average ratio is 250-to-one at private schools Kingsbury 2010).

IEC as Profession

Professional organizations

There are three major professional organizations that serve the interests of IECs: the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), the Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA), and the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC). The Independent Educational Consultants Association, the largest organization of private counselors and its major professional association, founded in 1976, has 847 members who participate in a range of general educational consulting, including advising families on choosing and applying to independent schools, finding services for students with learning and behavioral challenges, and college counseling.

The majority of HECA’s members, as with the IECA, focuses on college counseling. It was founded about ten years ago by an IEC who had an active practice, but did not have a Master’s degree, as required by the IECA (Rynearson, personal communication, 2010). Joan Rynearson, the current president of HECA, laid out the following analysis of HECA’s relationship with IECA:

Our underlying philosophies have always been different. We welcome people who are new to the profession so that we can (1) teach them the
standards and ethics that should guide their practices and (2) provide ongoing professional support through our website/private listserv and through our annual conferences.

Interestingly, when you analyze our 550 members, 74% of them have masters' degrees and higher, so they are choosing HECA for other reasons - often financial. We are a volunteer-run organization (with the exception of our webmaster) and our annual dues are $150, compared to IECA's $600. Folks also talk about the inclusive family feel of HECA. While we began in the West, our members now span the nation. Another interesting fact - 30% of our members ALSO belong to IECA. [personal communication, 11/9/2010]

A third group, the National Association for College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), serves a broader world of “counseling and enrollment professionals,” which includes college admissions officers, but does maintain its own database of member IECs.

Many IECs are self-employed or work for IEC firms that are not associated with any of the occupation’s professional organizations. During my interviews with IECs, I always asked about whether the respondent had any affiliation with professional associations centered on college counseling. I would then ask about whether they thought that there was a real difference between those who are affiliated and those who aren’t. For the most part, IECs (whether affiliated or unaffiliated) recognized that the professional organizations are useful for providing resources and opportunities for professional development, but there wasn’t a unified sense that one must belong in order to be a good IEC. Many recognized that the membership fees could be a deterrent to some IECs – especially those with smaller practices. Some non-members do take advantage of opportunities offered by the organizations, though. For example, the IECA sponsors the American Institute of Certified Educational Planners (AICEP), which awards Certified Educational Consultant (CEP) status “to recognize those consultants and counselors
within and outside of the [IECA] association who have achieved the highest level of competence and to raise the standards of the entire profession” (AICEP website, my emphasis).  

Demographics

IECs are found predominantly in large US cities, affluent suburbs, near prestigious colleges and universities, and in some international locations. According to a survey distributed by McDonough, Korn, and Yamasaki (1994) to IECs recruited from the membership lists of NACAC and the IECA, regional admissions associations, word-of-mouth referrals, and snowball techniques, and completed by 157 IECs, almost a third of IECs were located in New York State, while approximately 27% were in New England. The states with the highest numbers of IECs were New York, California, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. The IEC industry was then catching on in other parts of the country (Hill, 1997), a trend which continues through the present day, as it starts to become more visible in areas other than the east and west coasts (Steinberg, 2009). The industry itself was born in New England and the region is still a bulwark of the industry (IECA 2012). When I was searching for my sample of private IECs, using the online directories of the IECA, HECA, and NACAC for Massachusetts-based counselors who do college advising, I found that Massachusetts IECs represented about 10% of the IECs listed as working in the United States.

In 1997, according to a study of a sample of first-time, full-time college students, only 2.7% used IECs (McDonough 1997). In 2002, 6% of high-schoolers hired IECs – a remarkable increase from only 1% in 1990 (Chatzky and Wilson 2003). It is now estimated that at least 22% of all freshmen at private, four-year colleges this year have used IECs (Redding 2010).

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5 At the time when I was conducting my research, I was not aware of the AICEP and so I did not sample from them.
According to a recent study by Lipman Hearne, a marketing and communications firm, 26 percent of high-achieving students (defined as those with scores above 1150 on the 1600-scale SAT or an ACT composite score of 25 or higher) now hire a private consultant in their college-application process (Jasiewicz 2010). According to a 2009 IECA press release, “For many years the myth has persisted that consultants are hired only by a tiny fraction of the population—at times reported to be under 5%—suggesting an elitist bent. The new survey [conducted by Lipman Hearne] provides evidence that this is not the case, that educational consultants are very much being employed in the mainstream and work with approximately 160,000 college applicants each year” (IECA 2009).

Also contrary to popular belief, students who utilize IECs are not typically inadequate students; rather, they tend to have above average grades and SAT scores. Both parents of IEC users have higher rates of graduate degrees than do the parents of non-IEC users (Gose 2006). The top six background characteristics predicting IEC use are parental income, living in California, father’s occupation of lawyer or doctor, living in New Jersey, and mother’s educational level. However, it appears that family’s socioeconomic status as measured by parental income was the most powerful predictor of IEC use (McDonough 1997), although it is possible that this may no longer apply today. The average family income of IECA members’ clients was $75,000 to $150,000 in 2007 (Financial Advisor 2009).

Perhaps not surprisingly, IEC services are usually very expensive. On the lower end, some counselors offer “bare bones” packages for about $600 dollars. According to one estimate, packages average $3,200, with an average range of $750-7,500 (Entrepreneur 2009). In 2009, the “going national rate” was about $185 an hour, with a range of between $75-300 an hour (Steinberg, 2009). Average price for comprehensive service plans for college offered by IECA
members rose from $2,940 in 2005 to $4,035 in 2012. Prices vary by region, with New England IECA members charging about 17% above the national average. (The average IECA member in New England charges about $5000.\textsuperscript{6}) IECA members’ fee rates for college advising have been increasing at about double to three times the rate of inflation (IECA 2012).

Comprehensive (or “package”) plans, as opposed to hourly fees or a la carte “menu” plans, are the most commonly offered format offered by IECs, but the percentage of IECs offering comprehensive plans has have fallen a bit since 2005, while other types of plans have seen a slight increase. This is most likely a result of the economic downturn. At the same time, comprehensive plans have gone up in price, while hourly rates have remained static. Despite the recession, the vast majority of IECs have survived the economic downturn with business that is either the same or better than it was two years ago (IECA 2012).

**Turning a scholarly eye on the IEC**

Despite the growing influence of IECs in the college admissions arena, a glance at library catalogs and conference programs would give the impression that scholars in the fields of sociology and education studies have been relatively unaware of IECs, and those who have focused on them have discussed IECs as just one of many items in the admissions landscape (McDonough 1994, 1997). The one article that does focus exclusively on the IEC centers on the IEC as a profession and a move towards its standardization (Redding 2010).

Most of the “literature” on IECs can be found in mass media. In the popular press, the first article on the subject of IECs that I found came from a 1984 issue of *Newsweek* (Williams,

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\textsuperscript{6} Local IECs often mention that the New York market is much more expensive than Boston’s. In one particularly shocking case, a NY IEC was charging $28,000 for her services (Worth 2000).
Bruno, and Monroe). The number of articles on IECs remained low until the late 1990’s. National Public Radio and newspapers such as the *New York Times*, along with papers aimed at those who work in higher education, such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, have given the IEC business what might be seen as a surprising amount of coverage, considering the dearth of scholarly work on the field (Steinberg 2009, Bick 2008). Much of this coverage appears to be sensationalistic, with a focus on portraying IECs as greedy predators who exploit affluent and anxious parents (Worth 2000, Caskey 2006). A content analysis of US newspaper coverage of the college application process indicated that “panic” and “the hunt” are two of the four most popular media “frames” of the topic (Bishop 2012).

There are only three published studies on IECs. McDonough, Korn, and Yamasaki look at who IECs and IEC users are and begins to examine the impact that this private college counseling, or, what they call the “privatization of college choice assistance” (1997:300), has on college admissions and equity considerations. They also look at recent changes in college admissions that have precipitated the growth of the IEC industry. McDonough et al. offer a Bourdieuian field analysis of the college admissions process and the role of IECs in it. Their work is based on two surveys, one of IECs and another of college students who used IEC services during the admissions process.

My work builds off of McDonough et al.’s in a few ways. While their work is based on survey questions, mine is based on intensive interviews and observation. I believe that there are insights that these methods can get at that cannot be discerned through survey research. My qualitative approach allows me to get at the “how’s” and “why’s” of the processes and mechanisms at work – at a couple of different levels. At one level, it allows me to explore families’ motivations for hiring IECs and IECs’ motivations for providing these services and to
contribute to the literature on the sociology of the family. On another level, it allows me to examine the connections between education and stratification/mobility, or, “the mechanisms through which observed macro-level phenomena are produced and reproduced at the lived level on a daily basis” (Weis viii, in Rubén and Gaztambide-Fernández 2010). I believe that my approach offers insight into questions that McDonough et al. brought up, but did not begin to answer, about why people hire IECs, the importance of IECs in the admissions process, the relationship of IECs and their work to college admissions committees, and their potential influence on the ways in which the field of college admissions is structured.

The work of Alexis Brooke Redding (2010), on the other hand, centers around two questions. First, how has commercialization changed the field of college admissions? And second, what can be done to regulate the domain and promote “GoodWork”? At the end of her report, she mentions a couple of potential avenues for future investigation. While her work involved interviews with IECs, college admissions officers, and administrators, she suggests that research be done on other stakeholders, such as students, parents, and families and their motivations – an area which happens to be where my interests lie and a direction in which my inquiries led.

Conclusion

Now that we have seen how IECs arose in the historical college admissions landscape, it should be clear that the IEC industry has a place in discussions of the relationship between

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7 “The GoodWork® Project,” based at Harvard and Stanford’s Project Zero, focused on the professions, is “is a large scale effort to identify individuals and institutions that exemplify good work—work that is excellent in quality, socially responsible, and meaningful to its practitioners—and to determine how best to increase the incidence of good work in our society.” www.goodworkproject.org
educational attainment and social stratification and mobility, especially within the context of social reproduction theory. In an environment in which families have been led to believe that college admissions are more competitive than ever before, IECs have arisen as part of an “admission industrial complex” and as a form of “shadow education” utilized by families who wish to maintain or improve their child’s social status, in this generation and beyond. The results of my study lead me to believe that IECs are just one contributing factor to the reproduction of privilege, amidst a constellation of school and home effects.

In the next chapter, however, we will see that motivations for hiring an IEC go beyond issues of social mobility and how these expectations are manifested in three metaphors that are illustrative of what I see as the primary role that families are looking for IECs to play.
Chapter 3 - The Search for an IEC: Motivations and Metaphorical Roles

Introduction

I’m sitting in a remodeled farm-style kitchen in a charming old home on a verdant street in a prosperous Boston suburb. Today I am speaking with Sandy, a trim woman in yoga pants with subtly greying hair. She’s telling me about how she, a former corporate consultant, and her husband, an attorney, were “so overwhelmed” by the prospect of guiding their daughter through the college admissions process that they decided to hire Jane, an independent educational consultant recommended by someone who she worked with on a PTA fundraising committee. It turns out that the IEC’s son is also in her younger son’s grade at school. Both she and her husband are extremely relieved that they now have someone who can serve as a “buffer” between their moody teenaged daughter and her anxious parents. Furthermore, having found a “sounding-board” in Jane, Sandy now finds it easier to avoid getting into stressful conversations about the “college process” with other parents in town.

This chapter explores how families like Sandy’s make the decision to hire the services of an IEC, how they go about the IEC selection process, and their motivations for doing so. I will then discuss three metaphors that emerge from my interviews that are illustrative of what I see as the primary role that families are looking for IECs to play - that of mediator, matchmaker, and personal assistant. These metaphors illuminate a few areas in which parents are willing to “outsource” some of their parental duties. The centrality of these metaphorical roles also points to some of the ways in which the motivations for hiring IEC services appear to be different – or
at least more diverse – than media hype and common wisdom may suggest. Finally, I will explore how IECs enact these roles in interaction with parents and students as they work to fulfill clients’ expectations.

**Scholarly Context**

Understanding how and why people use IECs is important because, as one of several avenues to college access that are utilized by a mostly upper-middle class population, exploring this industry contributes to our knowledge of the positive correlation between socioeconomic status and educational achievement. Furthermore, when viewed as an example of a component of “concerted cultivation,” families’ use of IECs illuminates central aspects of upper-middle class family dynamics. “Concerted cultivation” is an intensive, hands-on parenting approach especially common among upper-middle class parents (Lareau 2003). In this style of parenting, the parent actively works with the child to develop his/her talents and skills. Children raised by these means grow accustomed to participating in adult-led activities, while at the same time gaining experience with contesting and negotiating with adults. In this way, they develop confidence that may manifest as a sense of entitlement. Examples of experiences and services that parents may procure in the service of concerted cultivation include visits to museums and theatrical productions, dance and music lessons, sports camps, private academic tutoring, “teen tour” group travel experiences, and, as described here, the IEC. IEC services differ from these other practices, however, in that the focus is less on developing talents and more on helping students to communicate to colleges that they are desirable commodities.

A lot of scholarly work on education and stratification has focused on the results that money and other resources (or lack thereof) possessed by individuals or communities contribute
to the quality of public schools (Condron and Roscigno 2003; Burtless 1996; Kozol 1991). Other work, such as Cookson and Persell’s (1985) on private college preparatory schools, looks at ways in which wealthy parents buy advantages for their children by sending them to private schools that serve as “feeders’ to high status colleges. My work diverges from the work described above, in that I look at money spent *outside* of traditional schooling in the hopes of raising educational achievement and attainment. These educational activities outside of formal schooling may be referred to as “shadow education” (Buchmann, Condron, and Roscigno 2010) and include private academic tutoring, summer enrichment programs, and test preparation.

The IEC industry is just one of several avenues to college access that are utilized by a mostly upper-middle class population. A recent work in the sociology of education that does provide an in-depth exploration of the ways in which privileged families purchase out-of-school educational opportunities for their children is Mitchell L. Stevens’ (2007) *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*. Most relevant to my work is his delineation of how admissions processes at elite colleges influence the values, behaviors, and talents that upper-middle and upper class families seek to cultivate in their children. Central to Stevens’ argument is that children from advantaged families are “groomed” from early childhood to ensure that they will be attractive college applicants for selective schools. This grooming happens in a variety of ways, including exposure to sophisticated vocabulary and conversations in the home, access to quality schools, and parental encouragement and support for participation in extra-curricular activities, summer camps and programs, and tutoring and private lessons.

Researchers have started to recognize and study the ways in which affluent parents allocate resources to pay for extra-curricular or supplemental educational services or programs aimed at college admissions, such as standardized test coaching and private tutoring, and
summer enrichment programs for the “gifted” (Powers and Rock 1999, Beatty and Linn 1999, Frost 2005). Levey Friedman (2013) discusses the financial and parental support needed to pursue the kinds of extra-curricular activities that will mold a child into the type of “well-rounded” student that American colleges so covet. Recent articles in the popular press describe parents who spend well over 10,000 dollars on college preparation that may include “good-will missions” to far-away places, summer college courses in foreign countries or at high-status American universities, as well as tutoring, private college counseling, and extensive college visits (Wang 2007; Tugend 2009).

**Planting the seed**

Typically, it is the parent who gets the idea to hire an IEC and does the footwork to find the right one. In my sample of parents and students, I only found one instance where the child came up with the idea and did the background research. IECs also told me that it is rare for a student to make the first contact with a counselor. Part of the reason for this may be because in the families who fall into the demographic most highly represented in the IEC clientele, parents are often more anxious about the college application process than their child(ren). Said one IEC, “Every once in a while, you’ll get kind of an anxious kid, but really, I think it is the parents that are more freaked out than the students as a rule.”

Another reason could be that these parents usually begin to think about the college application process long before their children do and they are used to hearing anxious chatter surrounding college admissions long before the topic appears on their children’s radar. The social pressure surrounding the college application process in upper middle class communities
cannot be overstated. Here, one student mentioned her high school’s “pretty heated culture” surrounding college admissions:

My experience was that my school was insane about it [laughs]…..I guess it’s a pretty good school and so people are very competitive and I think the school sort of always wants to talk about how you know how well it’s doing relevant to other schools and so they play up where their students go to college and then you have the pressure coming from the school and from your parents, and then from you yourself, that you know I have to go to a good school – so it’s not just about whether everyone’s even going to go to college, it’s just like this assumed thing, and it’s like how good of a school can you get into.

In the more affluent towns, the frenzied discourse surrounding college admissions often includes talk of IECs, and sometimes, the idea to hire one is seeded well before parents have a child at the high school level. One parent told me that a particular IEC was recommended to her by a friend when both of her children were still in elementary school. Another parent remembered being told about her IEC by a teacher back when her child was still in middle school:

When my older son was in 7th grade, his math teacher said to me: “Andrea, you need to make sure that when he gets to college age, you need to hire Sheryl because she needs to help you find him a good college.”….So, she planted that idea because both of my kids were in public school and she was his public school math teacher and she felt like already she decided that it wasn’t going to be enough, what the public school had to offer to help him do as well as maybe he could.

By the time a child in an affluent public high school reaches sophomore or junior year, the family may be familiar with the names of several IECs, mostly through parents’ social connections. The role of social capital is very important here, because many IECs do not advertise their services and parents tend to value first-hand reviews from people in their social circles. Sometimes, the IECs themselves live in the community. One parent, for example, spoke of how her IEC “has been a friend of mine forever.” Another parent chose an IEC who had a
child in her son’s grade in his school. Most often, parents get the idea to hire an IEC from family and friends who have used them. Said one parent:

The way people get college counselors is by talking to other parents. That’s how it’s done around here, and you know, I’ve seen it. A family that is very – let’s say “motivated,” rather than “pushy,” – that wants their child to go to Harvard or Yale, would be likely to ask a parent of a child who was at a prestigious school.

Other times, IECs will come to local high schools to give informational talks about the college application process to parents and students. Although they are doing a service for the community, it is also a good way for them to gain publicity and potential clients.

Teenagers themselves sometimes absorb the idea of hiring an IEC, both from these presentations and, in the more affluent high schools, from conversation among their peers. One father described such a situation as being “mostly scuttlebutt amongst the kids, it was a lot of peer pressure.” The parents, in these cases, however, have also typically been exposed to similar talk amongst their peers. In contrast, one student in my sample who attended a large socio-economically mixed urban school said that she never heard discussion of IEC amongst her peers and that her parents were not aware of the existence of IECs. This student, who first heard of IECs during a brief stint at a boarding school, was also the only student in my sample to seek out an IEC through her own initiative, without parental instigation.

Some students in public schools with large upper-middle class populations get the idea to hire an IEC from their guidance counselor. For this student, it was a combination of talk amongst peers and her guidance counselor’s advice:

I remember like I think it was the beginning of my senior year and everyone was sort of getting started with their essays and talking – I mean, everyone’s just like gossiping about this stuff and I remember hearing about things, and I was like “Oh my God! – I don’t know what I have to do for that,” and then I was just sort of overwhelmed and I went to my
guidance counselor again and I asked if she knew of someone who could sort of help me with all this stuff and I think she referred me to Jane, and then I don’t know, we just went from there.

Choosing an IEC

Once families start the search for an IEC, it isn’t unusual for them to speak with several before settling on one. Said one parent, “I know of other college counselors other than the ones I’ve used and I think it is all about the match between the family and the kid and the counselor.”

When parents described the process of calling around and interviewing different prospects, it became evident to me that oftentimes, it is the IEC’s personality which helps “seal the deal.” Both parents and students spoke of feeling as if they “clicked” – or didn’t click – with prospective IECs.

Sometimes, in addition to a personality clash, there is something else about an IEC's approach that leads a family to not choose a particular IEC. As one parent said of the IEC who they didn’t end up hiring:

   Well, we met with him, and it was definitely a different experience. Walter was more low-key. This guy was much more hard core and to tell you the honest truth, it was this funny thing where my daughter felt anxious after the meeting and so did we [laughs].

Families also need to decide between IECs who charge by the hour and offer more targeted services, versus those who offer full-service packages and take a more holistic approach. As one parent spoke of an IEC that she rejected,

   She’s kind of a very full-service, but I didn’t need that. You know, like, she has the kid come in once a week and work on their essay there and it was very hands-on. My son was very self-motivated, didn’t need someone standing over him.
Along with the fear of high pressure and over-involvement, I sometimes heard from parents who feared that the wrong IEC might be too aggressive:

I would say about Jane, which was something that I selected and really appreciated was she’s low-key. So, I think a more neurotic parent would not in any way be satisfied with Jane. For me, she was perfect. She could still push my daughter, remind her of deadlines, you know, send the emails that said “have you written your thank you note to that teacher who wrote a recommendation for you?” She was very good about that sort of thing, but it was – she wasn’t pushy, and she wasn’t crazy about the process and I really liked that and I think my daughter also benefited from that.

While some of the fear of aggressiveness can be chalked up to personality differences, in some cases, it pointed to parental fears that an IEC might suppress their child’s individuality or “voice” from coming across in the application (especially in the essay) or even engage in unethical behavior:

My understanding is there were lots of levels of college counselors that you can engage and Walter was very appealing to us because he wasn’t a million dollars, he wasn’t very invasive, he was more a guiding sort of person, as opposed to someone who was going to, you know, write her essay, which was not what we wanted or needed.

One parent, who originally had been reluctant to hire an IEC, spoke of how she was convinced to hire a particular person because how of her commitment to ethics came through when she gave an informational talk about college admissions arranged by the Parent Teacher Organization at her daughter’s high school:

Jane presented and her first comment to the group of parents, which was informational, not a solicitation, obviously, was to remember that the process needs to be ethical and that to remember that your children are the ones who are applying – not you – and that it’s important to upfront talk to your kids about this and that was so appealing to me because – I, we, we certainly had the means and we certainly had friends who were using counselors, but I wasn’t really sure how I thought about it and whether it was necessary and Jane immediately appealed to me with this sort of upfront, let’s talk about keeping the process ethical.
Beyond personality and approach, there are other more specific reasons that families choose to work with a particular IEC, one of the biggest being that of needing someone to help a child who has special needs. There are IECs who specialize in working with students who have learning or behavioral challenges. Some of them work solely in those areas, while some “regular” IECs also have it as a sideline of specialization. Or, students could be looking for the opportunity to engage in specific extra-curricular activities in college. One parent told me about a counseling program that helps athletic kids who want to play sports in college, by helping them to create a “sports resume” and videos of their performance on the field as well as teaching them how to approach campus coaches for interviews. She says it helps students get scholarships.

The topic of cost as a factor in choosing one IEC over another rarely came up in my interviews with families, although there seems to be a slowly growing population of IECs who claim to have expertise in helping students who need to apply for financial aid. In my research, I came across two IECs who try to market themselves based on that expertise. Only two of my IECs mentioned that one factor in parents choosing them was because they wanted to get help finding financial aid – and they were the two unusual IECs in my sample who pride themselves on knowing a lot about financial aid. One of those two IECs said that “people that call me are typically wondering how I can help them understand the financial ramifications and still have their students go to a really great academic option.”

Why do they think they need help?

Overwhelmed Parents

Knowing that almost all of the parents in my sample had a college degree, if not an advanced or professional degree, I wondered why more of them didn’t feel confident in helping
their own children through the process. Only one parent in my sample said that she felt like she knew a lot about the college application process that her child would face because she and her husband had gone to college and law school. I suspected that their quest to get extra help had to go beyond the sheer lack of time available for parents who were “consumed” by their professional lives, as at least one IEC put it.

IECs and parents spoke about how the admissions game has become more competitive due to demographic changes, marketing by schools, and media hype – especially the *US News and World Reports* rankings. Said one IEC of her clients’ largely well-educated and upper middle class parents:

Oh, these are very affluent – most of them are very affluent, but they really all – they read *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* – both of which are selling papers to middle class people by preying on their biggest fear. It isn’t crime in the streets, it’s not kidnapping theirs kids – it’s “Will my kid get into college?” And every article in *The New York Times* will make your phone ring….No, they are educated, but they know that the process has changed, and that is the other thing – that the process is a game now – it’s a racket – and they want to know how – they know that colleges game it and they want to know how to game it.

Parents often used the word “overwhelmed” to describe how they felt about helping their child with the application process. A parent might speak of how “it is such an overwhelming process,” or how “it’s overwhelming how much you don’t know or how much you feel you don’t know.”

Most of the parents said they felt like they needed help because they believe that the college application experience has changed a lot since they were applying to college. They also believe that they need help because the application process is more complicated than it used to be. For one thing, many of these children have a greater range of college options to consider than their parents, some of whom were not as well-off in their youth. They also know that in
addition to good grades and high test scores, students need to show evidence of non-academic talents and participation in extra-curricular activities. Said one parent,

I also feel like now there’s a way bigger emphasis on all these extra-curricular activities you’re supposed to write down, like, that you have to have been volunteering for 10 years beforehand and showing commitment to all these extra-curricular things. So not that that didn’t exist, but I think it feels more intense.

Families also feel like they need the help because the stakes have been raised as college has become much more expensive. Some feel added pressure from the belief that today’s youth may not do as well financially as their parents and that where a student attends college can impact their success. In addition, the application process itself has become much more expensive. The average college application fee is around forty dollars and students apply to many more schools than they did in the past, partly due to the rise of the Common Application, which allows students to apply to several schools with a single application. Money also comes into play because people visit more schools and hire tutors for academics and testing.

Parents talked about how there was less parental involvement in the college application process in their day. Said one mother,

Oh, my God! It is night and day. I mean I literally did everything myself. I took the SAT’s, I did my applications – my parents had nothing to do with it literally [laughs]. I applied to two schools – I got into both, and I went and I didn’t even come and see the schools, so, it was just such a different thing. I graduated in 1980 so that was quite a while ago, but it was just – there’s no comparison – it’s become so ridiculous, truly.

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8 A few words on the Common Application: Although the Common Application itself is free, many participating colleges do charge application fees. Also, while it is true that the popularity of the Common Application has somewhat streamlined the application process, participating colleges often require supplementary materials, such as additional essays.
Among IECs, parents, and students, there was a general recognition that the “landscape” of colleges and college admissions has changed, in terms of selectivity and the culture of schools. Said one student:

A lot of times, when you’re talking to parents, they’re obviously – they’re nonprofessionals in the field, and so they know – what they know is a combination of what the scene looked like when they were applying to schools and we had, you know, one of those giant books with a page on every school in the country and so it was like a combination of what they knew from when they were looking at schools and what they read in that book – and you know what they had maybe heard from other families.

Finally, some IECs and at least a couple of parents and students in my sample mentioned being or having immigrant parents who had been educated outside of the United States and needing extra help to understand our higher education system. This makes sense, given both the national and local context; the proportion of working-age immigrants in the United States who have a bachelor’s degree has risen significantly over the past 30 years, and now exceeds the share without a high school diploma – a trend which is even more pronounced in a “high-skill immigrant destination,” such as the Boston metropolitan region (De Jong, Graefe, Hall, and Singer 2011). These well-educated parents want their children to attain high levels of education, but are flummoxed by differences between our higher education system and its admissions practices and that which they experienced themselves.

**Beyond guidance counselors**

The majority of students who use IECs attend well-regarded public schools, so it was interesting to see how again and again, their parents believed that they needed to supplement their in-school guidance counseling. Families had the perception that students cannot get enough time and personalized attention from their guidance counselor. IECs recognized and validated
this feeling, especially those who had formerly worked as school guidance counselors. One former guidance counselor said,

> Probably one of the main reasons [parents hire us] is they feel that the counselors in the kids’ schools are overwhelmed. They just have a bigger case load; they can’t give the kind of individualized attention to the whole process, which is in fact so, because I was in that setting. You know, they don’t do interview skills, they don’t do help with the application, help with the essay, etc. etc. They just can’t. So that’s the main reason.

One of the things that IECs can do for students that most guidance counselors can’t do is visit lots of schools to pick up on the “character” of the schools and their student bodies in particular. As one IEC said, “So, we’ll see, you know, 50 to 100 [campuses] a year. When you’re [a guidance counselor] at a school, you’re lucky if you can see 10.” Really knowing a college from personal visits allows for IECs to give more personalized advice.

One common complaint about guidance counselors’ lack of individualized attention focused on their use of Naviance, a computer program that allows guidance counselors to look at a student’s odds of getting into a particular college by comparing his/her “stats” – SAT’s, GPA, etc. – with those of other students from their high school who have gained admission in recent years. IECs balk at the idea of making college list recommendations solely based on Naviance, however, because the program cannot take into account less tangible factors that may play a role in whether a student will be granted admission. IECs (and parents who are savvy about college admissions) know that such intangibles exist and have worth on the admissions market.

Another common complaint from parents and students was that ambitious college-bound students are the least of the guidance counselors’ worries. As one parent with daughters attending a well-regarded public high school said:

> Now maybe they concentrated on the kids they thought they – it was really like a triage – where they didn’t need to help some – and some were
beyond repair – so they put their efforts where it could – where they felt it could do the most good.

Not only were students troubled that they could not have enough personalized attention from their school counselors, but many parents were also bothered that they could not have enough contact with the counselors. As one parent said, “They might have worked with my son, but I did not think that they would be giving me enough information to help him…” Working with a guidance counselor is frustrating to many of these parents who want to be involved in every step of the process. Families who work with IECs are paying for some degree of “handholding” – both for themselves and their children – something that is just not possible for most guidance counselors to provide.

I had a few students in my sample who did not attend high-status and high-powered schools and these students and parents spoke of how the guidance counselors in their schools were even more overwhelmed with the sheer numbers of students they were assigned, many of whom were not college-bound and needed other types of services. They also spoke of how guidance counselors in these less prestigious schools were often unfamiliar with a wide range of options beyond local and state schools. Said one student who was in the unique position of being one of the only students in her school to hire an IEC, “there like wasn’t a whole lot of support for [applying to] the types of [non-state] schools that I wanted to apply to.”

There were also cases where families believed that the school counselors were “selling them short.” Said one parent of her daughter’s guidance counselor, “Frankly, in an early meeting, the counselor had talked to us about some schools that we thought were kind of low-like, not aiming well and so that was a particular concern.” This was not only an attitude held by parents of public school students. Said the parent of a student who attended a small independent school, “the reputation of some of the college counselors there was that sometimes they would
sell kids short a little… So [the school counselor] knew that we were kind of just doing it to you know, get somebody else’s opinion.”

The majority of students who work with IECs live in affluent neighborhoods and attend “good” public schools, but oftentimes their families do not think that their schools offer sufficient college advising. Some affluent parents who send their kids to public school see hiring IECs as a way of giving their children a little bit of what they would have gotten from a private school. They may say that while they couldn’t or wouldn’t pay for years of private school, they do see hiring an IEC as a good investment that they can handle financially. As one parent said of her and her husband’s decision to hire an IEC,

We both chose public schools for a lot of different reasons, but partially because to pay for private school all the way through would have been exorbitant, but what we did realize was that there would be things that we would have to supplement. And also that we would have – we would take some of the money – obviously we didn’t have the money to send them to private school, but, but some of the extra money that we might have, to supplement not just educational goals, but music and sports and balanced activities that would… so I kind of chalked it up to that, that one of the weaknesses that we needed to pay for was that.

One student spoke of how working with an IEC put him on the same level as students who went to either independent schools or public schools with better guidance counseling:

I think, like, a lot of the kids that are applying to, like, schools that I was looking at also go to private high schools, or like schools with a better guidance department that can provide them with similar services to what [the IECs] gave me. So, I think it’s sort of, like, it just helped me get on a similar level to like the other kids that were applying.

Another parent, whose older child had gone to a private school, told the IEC that worked with her younger son (who was in public school) that she expected her to give him something close to the guidance her older son has received from his school – “We said we just want that
same experience.” Here, a mother spoke of IEC services as one of many ways that she and her husband would “supplement” her children’s public school education:

> We would take some of the money – obviously we didn’t have the money to send them to private school, but some of the extra money that we might have, to supplement not just educational goals, but music and sports and balanced activities…

**Outsourced Parenting**

More than one parent described the IEC’s role as being something like that of a parent. Said one mother of her IEC’s work, “It’s like being a parent and keeping them on schedule!” Deciding to hire an IEC is one of many ways parents seek advantage for their children. An observer may understand it as an attempt to outsource some parental responsibilities, while at the same time parents see it as part of their responsibility as a parent to hire help. In the following quote, we can see how a parent makes distinctions between the tasks that she sees as her and her husband’s responsibility versus those that belong to the IEC.

> In both cases, as with our son, we never even saw his essay. We had absolutely nothing to do with it and that worked really well for us, so what we could do with him was talk about the colleges and the pros/cons of different schools and focus on the positives and going forward, rather than – we didn’t even think about the application process because that was something that – that was his responsibility and he had somebody that was helping him and so we didn’t have to think about it and I wanted that.

Outsourcing is a term that originated in the corporate world to describe the act of paying others to do tasks out of house, which allows for corporations to benefit from a flexible workforce that they don’t have a long-term commitment to. According to Sandholtz (2004), in the business world, this allows corporations to focus their internal efforts on areas of perceived strength. In one study, test preparation, tutoring, and educational consulting are categorized by market researchers as examples of “parental outsourcing” (*BusinessWire* 2010). Some other “parental duties” included in this 56 billion dollar realm are sports coaching, child daycare, and
family daycare (for the elderly and infirm). The hiring of IECs and their role in children’s transition to higher education can be seen as an example of parental outsourcing.

In *The Outsourced Self*, Hochschild (2012) discusses the ways in which affluent people pay others to fill their personal needs. Many of the cases that she describes require the purchaser to engage in “emotional work” in order to reconcile themselves to transactions that arouse in them feelings of guilt over delegating parental and domestic tasks to those outside the family. Hochschild was the first to define the term “emotional labor,” which is the “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild 1983:7). She distinguishes this from “emotion work” (also called “emotion management”) which refers to “these same acts done in a private context,” such as among family or friends (Hochschild 1979). Here, a particular type of emotion work comes into play; “emotional regulation” refers to modifying how one experiences and expresses one’s own emotions (Gross, 1989). Different types of outsourcing appears to have different emotional implications.

A major difference between, say, hiring a nanny as compared to an IEC, is that the latter does not entail as much emotional regulation on the part of the parent. If anything, it is often the IEC who exerts a lot of emotional labor in trying to calm their clients down. I only came across one parent who expressed concern about outsourcing her parental role regarding college admissions. She said, “I also was thinking to myself, ‘Well, is this kind of abdicating my responsibility and sort of wanting to get out of a tense situation?’”

Perhaps it is not surprising that these parents are not, on the whole, ill at ease with the idea of outsourcing help with college applications. After all, they live in an “expert culture” where it is normal to hire experts and professionals. According to Allen and Feldman (2000), “Western society has become increasingly dependent on professional disciplines and institutions.
that are associated with specialized knowledge and competencies. These competencies have been highly codified, lending great authority to the role and culture of the expert (p. 128).” Expert cultures are characterized by behavior that is motivated primarily by self-interest, accomplishment, and power and promote and reinforce “achievement, risk-taking, stamina, intense focus, quick decision making, and personal accountability.” (Atchison and Bujak 2001: 73).

Parents view the IEC as a professional who has expert “inside” knowledge of schools and process. Said one IEC, “Well, you know, I think partly parents are used to contracting out help for whatever comes up.” Said another IEC:

So, I think initially, you know parents approach this with the perspective of “I want an edge, I want to know as much as I possibly can, I know that I need an expert in this field, just like I need an expert to get myself fit, just like I need an expert to do my taxes.” It’s an age of experts.

This was echoed by students. Here, a student explained why he wanted help from an IEC. He said he was looking for

An insider knowledge of the coll – of the system. Like a really deep understanding of how the system works, an encyclopedic knowledge of different colleges, and their various strengths and weaknesses, knowing what looks good and what doesn’t [on the application].

What we have here is a situation where hiring an expert – an IEC – is seen as part of being a good and responsible parent. Parents talked about living in communities where there is an “expectation” that if you can afford it, you’ll hire an IEC. Said one IEC, “I think the parents feel because of their academic background, their financial resources – that they feel it’s an obligation on their part to give their child every opportunity to be in the best school possible for them.”
Some parents spoke of how the discourse surrounding college admissions in their communities contributes to a sense that their worth as parents is tied to the status of the schools where their children gain admission. A mother vigorously agreed when her husband said the following:

‘There’s also something that I felt here – that how your kid approached this and what the ultimate outcome was – very much was part of the parents’ ego as well as the kid’s ego. Like the "my kid got into Princeton" sort of thing….It’s a validation that you’ve been successful and raised your kids well.

One thing that I found interesting was how self-reflexive some of the parents were about their reactions to social pressure surrounding the competitive nature of college admissions in their communities. Said one parent,

The whole competitive thing – I think I personally definitely got caught up in it, but then also disgusted all at the same time….And it was like this is crazy – this is crazy – you know? And so that’s what I mean, sort of lurching from like sort of “ok, we have to play the game, we’ve got to do this, but this is disgusting, all at the same time.”

Metaphorical Roles of the IEC

As I will discuss in more detail later, the main things that parents and students want help from IECs with are the college list, the application essay(s), maintaining family relationships, and time management. From parents’ and students’ narratives about their needs and expectations and IECs’ descriptions of their occupation, I found that the IEC position could be characterized by three major roles: mediator, matchmaker, and personal assistant.

The following metaphors relate to the types of tasks that parents are comfortable with outsourcing. The identification of these roles shows that the IECs in my sample and their clients
are on the same page as to what they expect from IECs and helps to answer questions about families’ motives for hiring and selecting IECs, and how IECs relate to social status.

As we will see, IECs, parents, and students use variations on the words “mediate” and “mediator” and explicitly use the language of mediation in their narratives. In anthropological terms, I would then classify the mediator role as “emic,” or deriving from within the culture of the families. The matchmaker and personal assistant metaphors, on the other hand, my own appraisal of the situation, would be classified as “etic” – an analysis made as an outside observer. As we will see, the roles that the IECs believe that they play are in synch with what their clients expect of them and their narratives share a common language.

IEC as Mediator

The way that IECs and families described the decision to hire an IEC brought out the idea of IEC as “mediator” between parent and child – and occasionally, between parents. Mediation can be defined as “third-party assistance to two or more disputing parties who are trying to reach agreement” (Pruitt and Kressel 1985:1). Another definition (Kessler 1979:195), “Mediation is a short-term (one to three sessions), structured, decision-making process,” places less emphasis on the presence of conflict. In any case, mediators do three main things: provide structure, focus on issues and facts, and facilitate transactions (Cohen 2009). Sometimes, there are contradictory expectations of mediators – for example, attention to practical details versus attention to emotions (Cohen 2009). In the case of the IEC, this is evident, for example, in the ways in which IECs work to soothe clients’ anxieties while helping them to process information that will help them attain or maintain realistic expectations.

Although the main role of the mediator is to facilitate the solving of disputes, I should note that the parents and children in my sample did not characterize their parent-child
relationships as unusually difficult or problematic. Rather, they offered sketches of what would probably be considered by most Americans as “textbook case” family tensions common to any home in which adolescents are present, mostly stemming from teenagers’ conflicting need for both independence and guidance. Perhaps this parent best summed up what I heard in many interviews when she said, “I didn’t want to deal with my kids alone.” As another parent put it, “As a parent, your credibility is 0, so, or minus-1, maybe [laughs]. So, um, that’s another reason I think it helps to have someone.” This was echoed by an IEC: “I guess sometimes they [parents] also feel the pulling away and the independence and that even when their advice and ideas are good, it’s gonna fall on deaf ears, so it’s looking for somebody to mediate.” Said one IEC, “The students’ biggest concerns are really [whispers] to get the parents off of them and to take leadership of the process if they can.”

Said another IEC:

They [parents] have been told oftentimes by their peers – parent peers – that the process is brutal and to save their relationship with their child, they should use an independent consultant. Because the independent consultant can oftentimes be a mediator, or, it’s easier for a teenager to hear from someone other than their mother and father, “do x, y, and z.” So oftentimes, they’ll hire us quote unquote to save their relationship with their child.

Many parents said similar things, for example:

The biggest thing we thought was that – and this is not to say that our daughter won’t listen to us – but, we thought that someone that wasn’t one of her parents saying certain things would be listened to better than if we said it, and number 2, we understood from other people, and this appealed to us, that getting her to do certain things in terms of deadlines and timelines for writing essays and turning certain things in – again, she would feel more accountable to another entity than us.

And from a student’s perspective:
Like, from the beginning, Walter was like, he said to my mom, to have it like “Amy is my client and I primarily work for her.” And my mom was like “that’s totally fine.” And so, I really liked that too. Because I think I’m really like someone that like doesn’t do well when my mom and dad try to like you know [tell me what to do]… I’m like “NOOO!”

Here, an IEC describes the process of assuring a child that he is going to serve as a third party between him as his parents:

I also tell them this is not about mom, it’s not about dad, it’s not about me, this is totally about you and I’m a student advocate and you get more votes in this than your parents. Even though they are paying the bill, I’m going to listen to everything you tell me that you’re looking for in the next step of your education. ….. But I do listen to your parents in terms of dollars that they have to spend, geography, and I also listen to them because sometimes they tell me things that you as a student don’t think are important and turn out to be very important and might be something we want to talk about.

There were cases where families wanted an IEC to serve as mediator between parents. As one IEC said, “The process is a difficult process for everybody. It’s more difficult if you’re divorced or separated.” Anne, a mother who is divorced from her daughter’s father, said:

Um, honestly, if it was just up to me, I might not have done it [hired an IEC]. My ex-husband was really hot on this and it seemed, actually, easier and less painful to spend a few thousand dollars [laughing] – I know that sounds terrible – but to spend the money and have someone who could kind of be independent and intercede if that was necessary and so, that’s mostly why I went with him and said to us, you know, like I think over half of the people who work with him are divorced. Um, and I think he was a nice buffer in some ways?

Parents needn’t be divorced or separated in order to need mediation, however. When I asked one mother where she got the idea to hire an IEC, she told a story about how when her son wrote the first draft for his application essay, he gave it to both parents to look at, but one parent thought it was great and the other thought it was terrible. She said, “So we realized that the two of us really couldn’t help him because we are two different personalities…..We said, ‘we need a
third party. We need somebody who can tell us what we’re doing.’ And that was what Julia did for us.”

Given that parents often don’t want to talk about college admissions with other parents due to social pressure and students sometimes don’t want to deal with their parents, it makes sense to see IECs as many times playing the role of a specific kind of mediator – the family therapist. One IEC said, “A lot of times, I believe that this is really Therapy 101, not only for the students but for the parents.” Said another IEC, “When I got involved in this, I thought I was really getting involved in college advising and college counseling, I found out that a lot of times I’m really in crisis management [laughs]” Said another IEC:

You know, it’s kind of – there’s college [admissions advice] and there’s counseling – and there’s a lot of counseling. And some of the kids have needs – they have attentional issues, learning issues, emotional issues.

One IEC at the IECA conference explained that meeting with students alone – without their parents – is necessary in this “affluent, hyper-competitive environment where students sometimes don’t feel comfortable using the tissues in front of parents.”

I heard IECs be described as “sounding boards” several times by parents and students. Said one student,

So I think the biggest comparison was having that additional advantage of an additional contact to really just bounce ideas off of and bounce thoughts off of [my emphasis]. You know, well, what about this school? How about this thing early? What about this? And so I thought that was definitely a big benefit that I have a feeling does not exist to the same level with a school counselor.

Here’s an example of a parent using the phrase:

[The IEC] was just incredibly helpful all around. I mean, she was wonderful with my son. She was wonderful – she was a good sounding board for me, you know, when I was anxious about things.
Notice that this parent spoke of how helpful IECs were in assuaging her own anxiety. Time and again, what came out in interviews with IECs, parents, and students, is that the parents seem more anxious about the application process than their children. Sometimes, it is hard to tell whether the perceived need for an IEC stemmed from the parents’ anxiety or children’s (or both), especially when one seems to feed off of the other. As one parent said,

[The college process was] high stress. And I think that for us, the reason that it was – or for her – the reason that it was high stress was she was as worried about us as she was about herself. I mean she was very worried about us.

Here, another parent described the causation as going in the opposite direction:

Well, certainly, anxiety and more transferred anxiety – I mean, feeling my child’s anxiety. I really just wanted a place that they would be happy at, but of course you can’t just throw that on them - they’re kids. You can’t just say “well, let them pick and let them be happy” and you have to help them in the decision.

One student said of having an IEC:

I think he was helpful because they were in contact a lot. I think they kind of had a continuous email chain kind of going on for the whole fall. And so I think it was nice for her to have someone to kind of just bounce her thoughts off of and talk to and I think he was fairly reassuring throughout the whole process, which was also helpful, saying “he’s a very good candidate –he’s done the best he could and we’ll see what happens.” So I think it was nice to have him there kind of as the reinforcement role.

I heard a few students say that their mothers, in particular, were very anxious. Said one student, “My dad doesn’t even think about college. But my mother was very anxious, yes.” Of course, it is hard to tell whether it is true that mothers are truly more anxious than fathers about these things. It could just be the case that mothers tend to be more expressive about their anxiety in front of their children. While I did not get to observe families interact “in their natural habitat” I did see that mothers were more likely than fathers to be proactive in the decision to hire an IEC and that IECs usually referred mothers, rather than fathers, to me for interviews,
which is perhaps indicative of a closer relationship (or at least more frequent interactions) between mothers and IECs.

**IEC as Matchmaker**

Matchmaking involves an impartial intermediary who makes some judgments about the presumed compatibility of the interested parties based on the information presented (Hollander 2004). I argue that the role of the IEC becomes largely that of a matchmaker who introduces parents and students to an assortment of “eligible bachelors,” or appropriate schools. I should clarify that by matchmaker, I am not referring to the sort of matchmaker who sets up arranged marriages by making suggestions to parents without expecting input from their children. Rather, I am making the comparison to someone who helps singles figure out what they want and then helps introduce them to possible viable candidates.

My decision to compare an “unromantic” industry like college advising to matchmaking is not entirely unique. Take, for example, Finlay and Coverdill’s (2002) *Headhunters: Matchmaking in the Labor Market*, in which they discuss a different type of matchmaker, one that helps make matches between corporations and employees. They see the headhunter as helping all sides to manage expectations as well as serving as a buffer to help maintain valuable relationships, thus reminding us of how playing matchmaker may entail elements of the mediator role. Indeed, just as children whose work with matchmakers occurs under their parents’ auspices may encounter some conflict when parents’ and children’s desires do not align, one parent said of the valuable role her IEC played in maintaining her relationship with her child, “If we’re still hugging at the end, then it is all worth it.”

In a similar vein, when Sin (2008) discusses the potential role of intermediaries, he includes matchmakers as an example. Comparing them to other “research brokers” or
“knowledge brokers,” he writes, “Matchmaking is closely related to the cross-pollination role. In the first role, consultancies are carriers of knowledge that transfer their ‘pollen’ to recipients. As matchmakers, they help bring producers and users (or other stakeholders) together” 93. He is not talking about marriage or relationship matchmakers, but consultants involved in policy, etc. Pless (2001) does something similar when he writes that what is needed in academia today is something akin to a *shadchin* (Yiddish for matchmaker) to help academics, who are typically isolated in their departmental silos, to find collaborators.

Appelbaum’s (1995) depiction of the role of professional matchmakers (*pro nakodo*) in arranged marriages in Japan also seems to share some elements with that of the IEC. In the process leading up to an arranged marriage the actors are very concerned with identifying the proper category of individuals one should marry. This is reminiscent of the IECs’ quest to understand the capabilities and needs of students and their subsequent attempts to help them draw up an appropriate “college list.” I could also compare Japanese parents’ belief that all people should marry to IEC parent beliefs that all children should go off to college. Japanese matchmakers’ clients feel social pressure to marry; IEC clients feel social pressure to go to a “good” college. Like the IEC, the *pro nakado* expects to get paid, but is also serving in a caring role that involves coaching and handholding. *Nakodo*, like IECs, are people with many connections and are typically sought after rather than self-advertised.

Peres, Meisels, and Frank’s (1980) discussion of *shadchanim* (matchmakers) in contemporary Israeli Jewish society also points to some similarities with the role of the IEC. Like Japanese *pro nakado, shadchanim* – and IECs – serve a predominantly affluent clientele. Like the *nakodo* and the IEC, *shadchanim* know which are reasonable demands and aspirations. Unlike IECs, though, *shadchanim* get paid *after* making the match. (Clients pay IECs either up-
front or throughout the process.) Perhaps this difference exists because it is easier to predict the likelihood that a student will get into college – and to control more of the influential variables – than it is to determine whether a matchmaker will be able to find someone a match). People may be more willing to pay upfront for a service when chances a successful outcome are greater.

The comparison with matchmakers works best when we are considering matchmakers in cultures that value romantic compatibility, rather than those who emphasize making strategic matches based on economic status, etc. Families who hire IECs tend to view young adulthood as a discovery stage in life, in which picking a college is an early stage. As Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray (2011) note, upper middle class parents don’t usually expect their children to pursue particular courses of study or career paths through their college education, but they do expect them to use the opportunity as a chance to determine and explore their interests (p. 283). Earlier, I spoke of how most of the students who work with IECs do not face many restrictions in their college search, apart from concerns about selectivity and the feasibility of gaining admission to a particular institution. This sense of having wide-open possibilities is often experienced alongside a “romantic” conception that the goal of the college search is to find the “perfect” school for the student – the perfect “fit.” The IEC, then, can be compared to a “matchmaker” who helps clients clarify what they are looking for in a (romantic/spousal) partner and then assists them in meeting an appropriate candidate.

Romantic notions of fit and match come up over and over again in interviews with IECs, parents, and students. Here, a parent is speaking about how both she and her daughter’s IEC were on the same page in this respect:

We were synergistic about this is really about finding the fit for Carolyn. I mean I could imagine there might be people other than me that are like “you’re a coach that gets people into Ivy League schools and that’s what we’re about here,” but that wasn’t our values and it wasn’t hers. I think
there was an immediate like this is really about finding for Carolyn – there’s great schools at all levels and that was her pitch, so I think that she kept us all calm, like you know, she could get in here, she could get in here, it’s going to be fine.

The key word that comes up again and again in these quotes, and in my interviews in general, is the idea of “fit.” Fit is a term that refers to the match between the student and the school. A good fit is a school where a student can be comfortable and successful. As one IEC said, “They’re coming here for our expertise in knowing the schools, walking the campuses, having friends on staff, and meeting their student and then saying oh, this is a good match, because we’re really about fit.”

Here, a parent talks about how their IEC tried to guide her child into finding the right fit:

I think he was also really good about being able to talk about um – I’m trying to think about how to say this – like the differences between different geographic locations. So, she had Texas and like one in Virginia, I think it was Virginia Tech or something, which has design which we didn’t go look at but basically he was talking about a couple of schools and saying you know, think about your most conservative friend at Brookline, that’s going to be the norm there. They’re going to be liberal [laughs]! And I think that’s really helpful to her. So he seemed, you know, I – he did instill a lot of confidence that he understood what happened at all these schools.

Campus visits for student and parents are highly encouraged by IECs because they are considered crucial for finding the right fit. As one IEC put it,

The fit piece is really important to me because when I walk a campus, I’m looking at kids and how they’re interacting. Are they alone? Do they say hello? Are these in groups? Are they groups of guys or girls or both? What are they wearing? I think I bring that to it. The knowledge of more schools beyond what families know. I would say the biggest gap we usually have to cross is parents who know colleges the way they were when they applied to college, 20-plus years ago, and that’s not the reputation of the college today [laughs]. So that’s a huge gap that we kind of have to jump across.

Here we can see a parent confirming this notion:
Fit, really. Where she would be happiest and when you go to visit the places, you get a feeling for that and um you know, you can read about things, and there’s so much information out there now with the internet and all the different websites about this but something about when you go to a place and you get sort of the vibe of what the place is about and what you feel the place is about, I think that’s really helpful. It’s hard to do. It’s hard to visit a lot of places, but I do think it’s really helpful to get that feeling of the fit.

With the search for the perfect “fit” as a primary goal, the role of the IEC becomes largely that of a matchmaker who introduces parents and students to an assortment of “eligible bachelors,” or appropriate schools. Hollander (2004), says that matchmaking involves an impartial intermediary who makes some judgments about the presumed compatibility of the interested parties based on the information presented.

This idea is expressed here by an IEC who says,

It’s hard because people think that our role is to match them to a college and some people come in here expecting that I will tell them “ok you’re going to go here.” That doesn’t happen. I don’t let it happen because I don’t believe in that, because I believe that this is a counseling moment that I use for the kids and once they realize they’re in charge. That usually happens [laughs] believe it or not, in the fall of the senior year, somewhere in the fall.

This is a more romantic view than that taken by parents and students who are more worried about college as preparation for job/career. The largely upper middle class families who work with IECs are usually like those described by Holmstrom et al (2011), in that the parents usually allow their students to keep their academic concentration and career goals flexible as they think about the college selection process. This less pragmatic view allows for these students and parents to talk about having emotional reactions/attachments to certain schools, being “in love” with a school. One parent spoke of her daughter having a “real heart connection” with a prospective school. Said one student on the idea to apply to Vassar early decision,
It was the best thing. I fell in love with it – I fell in love with Vassar and it was the only place I wanted to go and I remember like two weeks before I got in, just saying like if I don’t get in, I don’t know what other schools that I want to go to, because it’s the only one that I want to go to, so getting in was the best [laughs].

Here, a mother described how her daughter’s IEC listened to what the child wanted and then was about to make a reasonable suggestion because she knew the character of a school:

Very much so. Yes, she listened, she did. Yeah. I can give you an example. My daughter was worried about the social scene because she’s a pretty serious student and she’s social, but this is a girl who really hasn’t gone to parties during high school, has a small group of friends, is very careful and very mature, and she was worried, a bit, about the college scene. So, Jane, for example, when my daughter mentioned Dartmouth as a place, said immediately, “Greek system very strong, a reputation for being somewhat male-dominated,” and I thought she gave her very good advice in that regard and listened to her and responded to that question and concern.

As one parent said, in addition to learning from her IEC about which schools would have the best services for her son who has learning disabilities, she learned about

…also sort of the character of the schools, you know, what type of school is it? Especially if you can’t really visit all of them. Um, it really is helpful to have someone tell you what sort of personality the school is. It helps you figure out if your child will be happy there.

Sometimes, the way that IECs and families worked together to find the “perfect” school seemed like the process of working with a matchmaker.

Yeah, I think for the most of the part, we weren’t necessarily discussing feasibility issues; it was more of what I actually wanted in a school. You know, I went to a couple of schools at the beginning and you know, based on my comments to him about what I liked and what I didn’t like, he said “well, you know, based on what you said, you might want to think again about some different schools, because if you liked this part, then you’d probably like these other schools. Or, if you didn’t like this, then you probably won’t like these schools that you have on your list.” So, those were kind of some of the biggest changes that we were talking about.
As will be discussed in more depth in a later chapter, IECs may refuse to take on clients who they don’t feel they can work with within their personal style. I found IECs who were not willing to work with families who did not accept their being in a matchmaker role. For example, this IEC said that he is often reluctant to work long-distance with people in Asia because

    My mission statement would suggest it is not to place kids in specific schools that are requested but is indeed to make a match … and we find that they tend not to be as open to match-making as “we want our child to go to HYP [Harvard, Yale, and Princeton].

It is not unusual for IECs to have conflict with a child’s parents when they want to engage in the matchmaker role:

    I always go back to a comment a kid made to me once a number of years ago saying, “my mother just says she wants the best for me” and the girl looked at me and said “I know what she means by the best I think and that’s unfortunate, because I’m not going to get into the best college, but for me I want to get into…” So, it’s semantics here.

Another IEC described a similar case:

    So they mention that we don’t care where he really goes to college, we just want to find the right schools for him or her and then it turns out to be about name brand. That’s a hidden agenda. They don’t really care—they want to find the right schools—but only if it’s a name—but then I find out that we’re really talking about name brand and then that’s not a good fit. Sometimes I’ve had to fire myself a couple of times from clients.

At first glance, my decision to compare the IECs role and his/her client relationships to people who work in the “love industry” may appear strange, but this section has shown that the roles played by matchmakers in various cultures and contexts points to some similarities with those of the IEC.

**IEC as Personal Assistant**

As mentioned earlier, hiring an IEC to help one’s child may be considered an example of parental outsourcing. Articles in the popular press allude to a trend toward affluent parents
hiring people to handle elements of parenting that are seen as time-consuming or unsavory. An example would be that of the professional potty-trainer who is hired to do the (literal) dirty work of teaching a toddler to use the toilet. Rachel Sherman (2010), looks at personal concierge services – services that replace personal, family, and household labor. These services largely fall under the broad categories of “general errands” and “house management” – tasks often associated with women.

In particular, the type of parenting that is most likely to be outsourced is that which is typically associated with mothers, as opposed to fathers. While fathers, if present, may have just as much interest in their children’s college prospects, it appears from my interviews that it is usually the mother who takes on the task of “nagging” the child to keep up with the admissions process and is generally the one who expresses more anxiety about the situation and is the one to reach out to potential IECs. This makes sense in the context of what Hochschild (2003) has said about how it tends to fall on women to keep up with the “administrative” functions of the home – remembering birthdays and anniversaries, scheduling doctors’ appointments, carpool rotations, etc., as part of the “second shift,” the unpaid labor that women often do at home, outside of her paid employment. The burden of the second shift is more likely to fall on women due to ingrained ideologies about gender roles and because women tend to make less money than men and are more likely to be employed part-time. It therefore makes sense that mother’s work is more likely to be outsourced than father’s work, especially as part of a “gender strategy” – “a plan of action through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the cultural notions of gender at play” (Hochschild, 2003:15).

In Marxist terms, the work of the IEC can be considered an example of the commodification of previously unpaid labor. “Commodification is the process by which goods
or services formerly outside a market enter a market, acquire exchange value, and are subsequently produced for profit (Nelson and Barley 2007:623). According to Hochschild (2005), “Over the last 15 years the USA and the UK (though my research focuses on the USA) have witnessed an acceleration of a long-term trend – the commercialization of what is defined and redefined as intimate life.” The growth of the IEC industry can be seen as an example of this trend, which she claims has gained its strongest foothold among the upper middle class.

Before practitioners of new occupations can attempt to establish limited jurisdictions using institutional supports, they must acquire a “cultural mandate” (Nelsen & Barley, 1997:620). This entails that “members of the culture must acknowledge an activity as a form of work,” meaning that it is seen as “worthy of remuneration” (Nelsen & Barley, 1997, 619). Also, it can’t be something that people think is a duty for someone (in the family, for example) to perform. Upper middle class parents (who make up the majority of IEC clientele) usually see helping their child along the path to college as part of their parental duties (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray, 2011), but they usually don’t see hiring someone to help with this process as shirking their responsibility, perhaps due to their integration into the “expert culture.” In the following section, we will look at some of the tasks for which families are seeking personal assistance.

What do families want help with?

“Infinite” choices and the college list

In speaking with IECs, parents, and students, the same few reasons for hiring an IEC came up over and over again, but I would say a feeling of being overwhelmed by what families perceived as having an “infinite” choice of colleges and universities was often a big motivating factor in the search for an IEC. This aligns with the work of Hossler, Schmit and Vesper (1999)
who conducted one of the most focused and in-depth studies on the college choice process as a whole, with a significant portion devoted to the search. Using both qualitative and quantitative data on high school students in Indiana, the authors found that students from higher income families tended to consider more options between their sophomore and senior years, rather than narrow their choices.

A big part of the feeling of being overwhelmed may stem from the fact that most parents in my sample did not typically put any limits on where their children could apply, since their decisions are not bounded by as many practical considerations as their less economically advantaged peers. While two-thirds of parents say they are very likely or somewhat likely to restrict the colleges to which their children apply, based on tuition (Jaschik 2013b), none of the parents in my sample said that this was a consideration when deciding where to apply. Said one parent,

We told her she could go anywhere and finances were not an issue, and that we were open to anywhere, but my husband did say we would prefer if she stayed within a four hour driving radius, because we would love to be able to visit her easily or have her visit us easily. She listened. [laughs]

Families frequently believed that they needed more help in narrowing down their options than parents or guidance counselors could provide. They all wanted help with forming the “college list” – the list of schools to which a student applies. Said one IEC on the matter of narrowing down choices, “You need somebody to be there to be the heavy and say, ‘OK, we’ve got to cut this list down,’ and you don’t, as a parent, want to be that person, right?”

One student spoke of this sense of feeling overwhelmed by options:

I think just that prospect of like infinite choices really scared me. And I think [the IEC] did a really good job of narrowing down the collegiate world into, like, 40 schools for me – 40 schools that I’d never even heard of and would never even think to look at. So it still felt like a big world.
One way that IECs help the students narrow down their choices is by helping them figure out which range of schools they should apply to – “likelies” (the schools formerly known as “safeties”\(^9\)) and “reaches,” etc. As one parent said,

> We knew the idea of [applying to] a big mass of schools and then you have some safeties and some reaches, but not really how to go about doing that – or even how to decide what schools were right for which kid.

Sometimes, families with students who are looking for colleges with very specific programs or majors realize that an IEC may be helpful in their quest. For example, one student interviewee wanted a school that offered both interior design and a particular foreign language. Although none of the students in my sample worked with her, I am aware of at least one IEC in the Boston area who focuses on working with students who are serious about pursuing a field of study in the arts.

On the other end of the spectrum is the student who doesn’t know what he or she wants from a college. All of the students who work with IECs believe that they should go to college. After all, for students from their socioeconomic background, that next step is a given. However, there are still those who are not sure what they want from the college experience. Parents, like the one below, hope an IEC can help with that:

> He also – and this was the other thing that maybe helped having a counselor – he wasn’t that evolved in the thought process. He wanted to go to college, but he wanted to go to college because that’s what he was supposed to do and that’s what his friends were doing, rather than... I wanted him to take a gap year, actually, and my second one is taking a gap year. I think [working with an IEC] is really helpful for my kind of kids, actually.

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\(^9\) Some IECs don’t like the “safety” label for a couple of reasons: first, it sounds like a guarantee that a student will get in, and second, the term has come to have the derogatory connotation that it refers to a school that someone would only want to attend as a last resort. (IECs only want students to apply to schools that they would be happy to attend.)
Through these examples, it is evident that the IECs’ roles as matchmaker and mediator express themselves during the task of helping the student to develop the all-important college list. S/he helps the student to clarify his/her needs and desires and after an assessment of his potential, introduces him to plausible “matches.” The mediator role is also important at this juncture, in a variety of ways. For example, parents’ reluctance to set any limits on where students can apply may lead students to feel overwhelmed by the process of developing the college list; the IEC will first help narrow the field of schools that are worth exploring through in-depth research, which may include campus visits, and then tailor the final list down to a manageable set of “reaches,” “targets,” and “likelies.” Or, for another example, parents often have a less realistic idea of where their child can gain admission than does their child; the IEC may need to step in to help the parent understand why certain options are viable, while others are not.

The Essay(s)

There are plenty of families that don’t want help with the college list. One of the biggest things that people want help with is the dreaded application essays. While most people want help with both the list and the essay, there are those who come in with an idea of where they want to apply and mainly want help with the essay. Parents and students are worried about students’ writing abilities. Regarding the importance of getting help with the essays, some other parents said:

The essays were clearly an issue in that we were nervous about topic selection and robustness of the response, because she tends to be a you know, pretty – I mean she’s actually a reasonable writer, she did well in school that way, but we didn’t feel like she was you know really going to be able to represent herself and we liked the idea of a third party who didn’t really know her very well critiquing it, because we know her more and we could read into it so it was really essays that were a big piece.
Here, in the IECs assistance with the essays, the role of mediator is once again clear. This issue of objectivity is tied to perceived need for a mediator between parent and child. As one IEC put it, “Well, there are plenty of people out there who would probably think of themselves as decent researchers and they can invest and stuff, but this is your kid and you have no objectivity.”

This can also be seen from a student’s perspective:

Because I guess just I mean, my parents are sort of used to reading my writing and stuff, and it was nice to have an outside perspective from someone who didn’t know me, to be reading something that was – especially like the big college essay, because – my parents – I mean, it was about my life and so my parents probably knew what I was talking about, even if it didn’t really make sense, because they sort of knew the history, and for someone who wasn’t I guess a part of my life originally to sort of read that essay and tell me if it made sense to her and to you know, and to talk to me about, you know, about what I was trying to say in the essay and I think just sort of the outside perspective was really helpful for me.

In my interviews, however, it was obvious that students were happy that they had a third person to mediate regarding essays. The heavy level of involvement of some parents in the essays can be seen in this next quote where it is interesting that the parent spoke in terms of her writing skills and not her son’s.

I hired her specifically to help with the essays and the application process. And to also make sure just how complicated the whole process is now and my son being the first and me being a newbie, that I didn’t miss something that I should have known, that I should have done. So, a little bit of handholding, but mostly to work with the essays, because I don’t feel comfortable with my writing skills or proofing skills.

The essay also provides an important outlet for the IECs matchmaking skills. After all, the essay plays a major role in the student’s attempt to “court” a school. One might consider the personal statement as a personals ad! IECs, whether through past experience working in college
admissions offices or from their many connections with people who work there, are aware of what colleges would like to see in students’ essays, in terms of form and content.

From what IECs told me and what their clients learned from the IEC, it appears to me that application essays, like personals ads, are for showing (an appealing version of) your inner self. Bishop (2009) noted a “dating service theme” that emerged from his content analysis of articles on college admissions in the US. He gave the example of a newspaper article which said “Every application should have a consistent message. Emphasize a distinctive persona (17).” Indeed, interviewees spoke of how students’ essays should express their “personality” and “reflect” who they are – their “essences” or who they “are on the inside.” This is supposed to help the student sell him/herself to the college as a good “fit.” One IEC said,

As someone working on a college campus with a lot of admissions folks, I stress to them that the purpose of the essay really is to get a feel for what kind of person you are as a human being, as a student, and whether or not your ethos fits their ethos.

We see the same thing from a student’s perspective, when she spoke of how useful her IEC was in assisting her with her essays,

So, Walter was really great because I think I realized in the process that it’s not about making it so the college gets you, it’s about making it that it seems like in your life, or what you’ve done or who you are, kind of already reflects the college.

While much of the talk surrounding the essay involved self-expression and revealing one’s inner self, conversation sometimes took a more explicit self-promotional turn. Here, an IEC explains that the essay needs a “hook”:

The other thing is to be able to see – this is not a marketing term – if a student has a “hook,” what it is about them that could make that admissions person scratch their head and say, “Maybe we should look at them more carefully” – and so I help the student try to see what those would be.
This can also be seen when a student said that without the IECs help on her essays, “I feel like I just would have been very confused about how to sell myself – it sounds horrible, but it’s true – it’s a capitalist thing.”

**Time Management**

One parent, who colorfully described the challenge of keeping her child on task concerning the handling of details and meeting application deadlines as “bloody painful,” expressed a sentiment common to the IECs, students, and parents in my sample. As one IEC put it,

Another thing that parents have a difficult time with their own kids about deadlines and managing the process and I help them do that. The kids are very – I’m gonna say less apt – but they don’t at all – you know – their feeling is, I have this relationship with E. they’re never – they don’t speak to me the way they do with their parents.

IECs mentioned their role in the time management piece over and over again. They also spoke of how there is added pressure these days because of the push for students to apply early decision (as a strategic move) and because high schools want students to get their application materials in early, sometimes by October. Said one IEC,

In the old days, I think we really thought about college as seniors, and these guys are doing all their visits, all their interviews, if they’re athletes, all their overnights and official visits, as juniors, because there is no time senior year.

Sometimes, the students themselves recognize poor time management as a weakness in themselves. This student, whose mother was worried about this aspect of her nature, did not disagree:

She knows I’m not the most organized of people, so I think that she was a little bit worried that I wouldn’t be able to get my stuff together in time – that I would have a little bit of trouble getting my stuff for college – not so much the essay-writing portion, like the content portion, but just like
getting organized and keeping myself on track and being able to organize my thoughts.

When it comes to assisting her client with time management, in addition to showing her role as mediator, the IEC serves as a personal assistant to the student, reminding him of deadlines, helping the student to come up with appropriate topics, giving essays close readings, and suggesting revisions.

**Mitigating stress of parent-child relationships**

When IECs, parents, and students talk about the need for help with time-management, they are really pointing to one of the primary reasons why families seek help from IECs: mitigating the stress of parent-child relationships. In this realm, the IECs role as mediator shines through. Says one IEC

Actually the most common reason [for families to hire an IEC] is preserving their relationship with their child. [laughs] because I think it’s difficult for parents to manage the stress of getting their child through the process, getting the essays written, first, figuring out which colleges are appropriate, second, filling out the application, getting the essays written, you know, and maintaining a dialog with their child because you know it’s just a difficult age, I think it’s a difficult time for the student, it’s a very transitional time and there’s a lot of stress involved with that and it’s a difficult time for the parent also because it’s a big transition for the family.

A consistent theme that came across in interviews was that the need for mediation said one parent – who happens to be the parent of the one student in my sample who decided on her own that she needed an IEC and took it upon herself to do the research –

I think her biggest fear is that she would find it very overwhelming and that it would be more complicated than it would have to be and that I would – I would further complicate the process [laughs]. So, I think that she wanted someone to help her make it feel manageable. I also felt that the idea was appealing to me once she presented to me because I realized that she’s a different type of person and that sometimes taking the parent out can neutralize something in a very positive way.

According to one student:
My parents have never really been those kind of people who were like “are you doing your homework?” you know, because they just sort of trusted that we would do it. But the whole college application process can be really overwhelming and you kind of need somebody to ride you and set deadlines and stuff.... I think to sort of be accountable to someone outside of that, that had deadlines, so that I had to show up to that meeting with something done, was a big help, too, I think, in just sort of giving me the drive to get all of that work done.

Over and over it seemed as if a big part of the parents’ motivation for hiring an IEC was to have someone else play the role of the “bad cop” whose job it is to push their kids to meet deadlines. As one parent said, “We nicknamed Sheryl the ‘hired nag.’ So, but it’s easier coming from someone else than from a parent.” In fact, the word “nag” comes up over and over again in my interviews in relation to this very idea. For example, when asked for the biggest reason for why she thinks parents hire her, one IEC said,

I’d say mostly to take the stress out of the process. I think the parents know that they’re gonna be potentially butting heads over you know the logistics of the process, getting stuff done, and you know, in some ways, I can be the nag. But I explain to people, I’m happy to do that, but I don’t have any power – I can’t take the car keys away, I can’t ground them.

The hired nag/bad cop role can be seen as part and parcel of both the mediator and personal assistant roles. In this case, the personal assistance is being provided to the parents as opposed to the student.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I assumed that most families want to use an IEC because they want help getting students into the highest-status school possible. While I did hear occasional stories from IECs about families where parents (not usually students) are in this mindset and have expectations of IECs that they cannot or refuse to live up to as far as what they can do for a kid, most of the IECs in my sample try to disabuse these potential clients about their delusions
from the outset, and may even refuse to work with families who seem intractable. Perhaps surprisingly, once I started my fieldwork, I didn’t hear much about parents or students who expected counselors to pull strings or do magic tricks to help kids get in. I was surprised to see that what parents were really looking for was a mediator or matchmaker or personal assistant. I also came to see that these are the roles that IECs seem to most embrace.

As we have seen, parents and students may have a variety of personal reasons for seeking the help of an IEC – typically, help with the “college list,” guidance on the essays, and facilitating time management. However, many of these smaller tasks can be collected under the primary roles of mediator, matchmaker, and personal assistant. They are, one, looking for someone to take the pressure off of their relationship with their child by performing the role of mediator and “hired nag,” and two, for someone to help them find the right match or “fit.”

Students who use IECs are most often raised using parenting techniques that Annette Lareau (2003) would call “concerted cultivation.” They, for the most, part don’t need to be “packaged” or shaped into good college applicants by IECs, as they have likely been groomed to take this path since childhood. Stager, in his 2008 article on educational enrichment programs, jokes that “enrichment is Latin for ‘children of rich parents who complain.’” The concerted cultivation method often goes along with a parenting style that is non-authoritarian and promotes a companionable relationship between parents and children. Many of these parents feel uncomfortable with the need to “nag” or set limits. They figure that they can hire an IEC to do the “dirty work.” The popularity of IECs among these parents highlights a kind of parental paradox where anxiety over college translates into a desire to micro-manage that co-exists with a fear of exerting undue control over the direction of children’s life paths.
I found that most often, families approach the college application process with the romantic notion that they will find the “perfect” school for *their child*, specifically. It is possible that the IECs who help students aim entirely for particular high status schools are not located in the greater Boston area. IECs and newspaper and magazine articles allude to high-power IECs in the New York City metropolitan area that market themselves by including the word “Ivy” in their company name, for example.

The expanded use of IECs, particularly among the upper middle class, should be seen within a broader social context of economic uncertainty in which even those Americans with comfortable lifestyles fear that their children will not be able to attain or maintain the socioeconomic levels of their parents. That these kinds of anxieties are not explicitly apparent in the data from my interviews, could perhaps be attributed to upper middle class mores that do not allow for much public discussion of personal finances and that Americans, in general, do not talk much about social class. However, IEC clients belong to a social class that has a learned comfort with seeking assistance with personal issues to professionals and other experts. We might also interpret metaphorical role characteristics that I describe as signals of deeper insecurities tied to broader economic factors, in that they are using the resources and help-seeking habits of their social class in an attempt to ensure the futures of an emerging generation of young adults that is at risk of not maintaining their socioeconomic position of origin.

College admissions, with its traditional central position in the ideology of the American dream, breeds insecurity and feelings of being overwhelmed, even in many of its most “successful” adults. The hiring of IECs can be seen as part of a trend toward what Hacker (2008) calls the “privatization of risk,” in that it is an example of people hiring professionals to do a job that is provided for free by the public schools. The case of the IEC thus illuminates an
intersection between economic forces and family dynamics. As Hochschild wrote, “In practice, family and economy are entangled and co-dependent, but they are cast as separate in this cultural discourse, continually ‘ricocheting’ off one another (Hochschild 2003: 42).”
Chapter 4 – On Edge and Seeking an Edge

In a cozy coffee shop in an inner suburb of Boston, I am interviewing Ashleigh, whose daughter is currently working on her college applications with the guidance of an IEC. Ashleigh is telling me about how her daughter had wanted to quit taking Spanish classes after her junior year, but changed her mind after Walter, her IEC, recommended that she continue, so as to show “the colleges” her dedication to that area of study. We are interrupted by a slightly agitated man who apologizes for eavesdropping on our conversation and begins to rant about the prospect that one day he might be expected to get his preteen daughter professional help for the SAT’s or encourage her to do activities “just because of college admissions.” He goes on about how his college education cost his parents only 1200 dollars – at which point he laughs somewhat bitterly. He says that he has been thinking about “whether I have to start pushing [his daughter] to do things that she’s not” interested in in order to “to pad her resume at age 12.” He calls it a “heartbreaking dilemma” and Ashleigh expresses agreement. He goes on to say that he had summer jobs and surfed during his youth. Ashleigh, who seems much less put-off by his intrusion than I, responds kindly, “And you turned out ok, that’s what you have to remember, right?” He nods, and before making his way for the exit, concludes, “Don’t pull any punches when you write your report.”

In this chapter, I discuss the question of why parents and students are generally satisfied with the services rendered by IECs. Indeed, all of the families in my sample said that, overall, they were satisfied and would consider hiring an IEC for subsequent siblings, and most would
recommend to other parents that they hire IECs – even in cases where their children did not get into their first-choice schools. As we will see, the IEC meets the needs of a certain type of anxiety-driven intensive parenting style. I will demonstrate that despite IEC clients’ strong desire for positive outcomes in the admissions process, when they speak about the “edge” that comes from working with an IEC, what they are mostly talking about is the benefits of the process; the IEC industry is about helping people (oftentimes parents, more so than students) feel better about themselves and deal with the uncertainty produced by the field of higher education, as well as manage their familial relationships. I will argue that the “edge,” as perceived by the families in my sample, is not, as is commonly believed, primarily attributable to any “secret” strategies, “packaging” of applicants, or “pulling of strings.”

I will begin the chapter with a discussion of a type of parenting that has arisen in response to certain types of uncertainty and the social pressure surrounding college admissions that is experienced by these families. I will then counter some commonly believed “myths” about what IECs do for their clients, followed by an exploration of the areas where IECs seemed to make the most impact and the ways in which families believed that the relationship had given students an “edge.” I will also address the ways in which IECs manage their own risk of professional failure and how these methods help to ensure that families are happy with the services that are rendered. In the end, we will see that despite isolated moments of resistance, the families in my sample value the IEC services that they have received and continue to see the expense as an “investment” because it satisfies the needs of a specific parenting style and family dynamic.
Risk Society

In the late 20th century, the concept of living in a “society at risk” rose to prominence. Ulrich Beck (1992) spoke of the late industrial world as a “risk society,” a world awash in a range of potential perils, from the environmental to the social. According to Beck, individualization has taken effect, meaning that we no longer live our lives in accordance with fate; rather, the idea of risk is bound up with that of controlling the future. Especially relevant to my work, is what Beck says about how the social class schema is not stable and social positions are at risk. Indeed, American upper middle class parents typically believe that parents should do what they can to help maximize their children’s life chances by encouraging educational achievement and attainment, and in recent years, they’ve faced growing concerns about their children’s ability to maintain their place in the social order in an increasingly competitive job market (Holmstrom, Karp, and Gray 2011).

Anthony Giddens (1999) said that a risk society is a society in which there is a lot of technology that most of us don’t entirely understand. These technological advances make possible a wide variety of outcomes. We may rely on scientists and other experts, but we don’t take their opinions blindly and without skepticism. This breakdown of traditional authority, which can be extended to a rejection of other forms of authority beyond the scientific (i.e. religious, governmental) is tied to the idea of the “end of tradition.” He says that there is an expansion of choice in a risk society, but it is not evenly distributed by class and income. The middle classes and those who can afford it tend not to rely on state welfare, but rather take a more active approach to managing risk. Giddens sees a link between risk and responsibility: Risk can only exist when you have choices. Responsibility also presumes that decisions have consequences. As we will see, the parents in my sample feel that it is their responsibility to help their children navigate the college application process – and some see it as their responsibility to
hire an IEC. This can be seen as part of wider phenomenon in which parents see it as their responsibility to help their children navigate the entire education process, as well as the transition to adulthood.

The hiring of IECs can be seen as part of a trend toward what Jacob Hacker (2006) calls the “privatization of risk,” or “The Great Risk Shift.” Central to this idea is that in contemporary America, middle and even upper-middle class educated individuals are facing more economic risks than ever before. The case of the IEC is an example of people hiring professionals to do a job that is provided for free by the public schools, which are facing budget cuts and have had to scale back on many services. Some parents see IEC services as a form of “insurance policy” to guarantee that their child has every advantage. Although it may seem counter-intuitive, some say that the poor economy and the high cost of a college education have actually contributed to the growth of the IEC industry, as a wider swath of the population finds that it needs help navigating the financial aid application process. The case of the IEC thus illuminates an intersection between economic forces and family dynamics. In a similar vein, Arlie Hochschild (2003) wrote, “In practice, family and economy are entangled and co-dependent, but they are cast as separate in this cultural discourse, continually ‘ricoeheting’ off one another” (p. 42).

In The Culture of Fear (2009), Barry Glassner says that Americans, as a whole, are afraid of “unlikely dangers.” This fear is reinforced through scare tactics that include misdirection, presenting victims as experts, and treating isolated incidents as trends. He says that some of this can be attributed to premillennial tensions which have historically resulted in collective irrationality at the turn of a new millennium. He also blames the media and marketing for contributing to this growing anxiety. Many of these perceived risks are tied to parents’ fears for their children’s safety and well-being.
“Paranoid parenting”

In *The Mommy Myth* (2004), Susan Douglas writes about how the 1980s saw a rise in anxiety about child safety that increased in tandem with a rise in the number of mothers entering the workforce. Cuts to social programs and a backlash against feminism (in the form of a push for “family values”) reinforced fears about children’s safety and were exacerbated by the sensationalism of media panics. At the same time, women’s magazines represented motherhood as a “career” that could only be practiced properly by middle and upper middle class women deploying professional level skills. Relatedly, Judith Warner, in *Perfect Madness* (2005), says that working mothers feared that they couldn’t sufficiently handle their children’s early educational needs. This resulted in the sale of lots of educational tools aimed at babies and young children.

Frank Furedi (2002) writes of an “ethos of paranoid parenting” in American and British culture in which parents, who are already inordinately concerned for their children’s safety, feel their confidence in their parental capabilities slipping as relentless professionals seek to “transform routine aspects of parenting into major scientific or ideological issues” (16). According to Furedi, this “professionalization of parenting” (184), which arose around the early 1990’s, led to an intensification of paranoid parenting: “Since parenting has been transformed from an intimate relationship that depends on emotion and warmth into a skill involving technical expertise, the role of the expert assumes a special significance” (18). Furedi claimed that paranoid parenting was spurred on by a campaign to make parents believe that they needed the help of parenting professionals. (It is interesting to note that the IEC industry experienced its first wave of major growth at that time.) Furedi believes that this professionalization and politicization of parenting is really a “form of collective displacement” (199) of misplaced
anxiety directed at children that comes from adult problems such as a devaluing of adulthood and adult identity, loss of parental authority, weakening of adult solidarity, fragmentation of family and community, and uncertainty about morals.

Sharon Hays (1996) says that mothers of all classes have gotten involved with “intensive mothering,” a situation in which they put all of their energies into their children. (This can be seen in contrast to Lareau [2003] who attributed a more intensive parenting style to the middle classes and above.) This parenting style is associated with an ideology that holds the mother primarily responsible for child rearing and prescribes that it be accomplished in a child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive manner. This could be seen in my interview sample where mothers were typically the ones to take the initiative in hiring IECs and watching over the application process, even though the majority of the families and included a father and a mother.

Margaret Nelson (2010) compares the parenting style of what she calls the “professional middle-class” with those of the middle and working classes. According to Nelson, the former practices what she calls “parenting out of control” while the others follow “parenting with limits.” She says that the professional middle class parenting style is based on the assumption that a child will be dependent for a long duration and that there is no clear launching point into adulthood for a grown child. This form of non-authoritative parenting emphasizes responsiveness to children’s needs and desires, a belief in children’s boundless potential, and ambitious goals. Such parents have a commitment to raising “passionate” individuals who know how to find work/fun balance. This is in contrast to parents outside of the professional middle class, who assume that higher education will prepare students for life on their own and are more concerned with their children attaining skills that will ensure self-sufficiency, rather than passion
or fun; they’re less interested in intimacy and engagement and more interested in respect for authority. Unlike the former set of parents, the latter doesn’t feel the need to be involved in every decision of their kids’ lives; they welcome short-cuts and face fewer internal contradictions about parenting.

Nelson believes that professional middle class parents’ anxieties about college acceptance are connected to a situation in which there is increasing economic inequality (and perhaps shrinking options for elite status), an idea echoed by Holmstrom et al (2011). These parents want their kids to be able to compete, but they are also worried that they have overindulged, overscheduled, and over-pressured their kids, and so that is why they hover. In the next section, we will take a look at a milieu in which these forms of “paranoid parenting” can flourish.

Social Pressure

The social pressure surrounding the college application process in upper middle class communities cannot be overstated. Here, one student described her high school’s “pretty heated culture” surrounding college admissions:

My experience was that my school was insane about it [laughs]…..I guess it’s a pretty good school and so people are very competitive and I think the school sort of always wants to talk about how, you know, how well it’s doing relevant to other schools, and so they play up where their students go to college – and then you have the pressure coming from the school and from your parents, and then from you, yourself, that, you know, I have to go to a good school – so it’s not just about whether everyone’s even going to go to college – it’s just like this assumed thing – and it’s, like, how good of a school can you get into.

One parent spoke of how getting an IEC for her son helped him to feel less anxious about his ability to keep up with the competition:

I think that [having an IEC] relieved some anxiety for him, because he was feeling like, “Oh, you know, my friends have people, but I don’t have
people – and they’re going to have a step up on me. By having a “person,” nobody was having a step up.

A few parents spoke of how they liked dealing with IECs because it made them less likely to talk to other parents in the community about the admissions process. Some parents even described other parents as “lunatics.” Said one mother,

This is a very crazy community in terms of, like, you know, most kids of people who live here go to the public schools, so you have a very high pressured – and I really didn’t want to feel – I wanted to stay out of that crazy pressure. I wanted to sort of stay focused on what was best for him. I really didn’t want to get – you know, basically I never – I basically set a rule of thumb and I never went to a college meeting [at her child’s school] – I tried to avoid them like the plague, because it just made me anxious and it made me – I felt like I really needed to stay focused on what was best for him.

One student suggested that IECs themselves might play a part in contributing to the high pressure culture surrounding college admissions at her school:

So, if you were really freaking out [about college admissions], then you went and got a college counselor, like I did. And I mean, I don’t know what to call it. It wasn’t, not, like, a status symbol, but it was a way of showing, like, that you were doing everything possible, I guess, if that makes sense. So I guess it maybe adds a little bit more competition – “Oh, she has a college counselor helping her out!” – or something like that.

Here, a similar sentiment is reflected by a parent who said of the decision to hire an IEC:

So, I feel like maybe we jumped into participating [by hiring an IEC] in something that I might describe as a bit of lunacy, although having said that, I actually totally think that working with her helped us contain the lunacy and actually was hugely helpful to us, not being as nutty as we could have been.

I find it interesting that more than one parent used forms of the word “lunacy” to describe the culture surrounding college admissions in their social circles. Lunacy, by definition, implies intermittent periods of “craziness” punctuated by moments of clarity. This does seem to describe
the attitudes of the majority of parents in my sample; despite getting caught-up in the frenzy, they have moments where they wonder if it is really worth getting so worked-up over.

What we see here is an example of an industry with what looks like, at first glance, the paradoxical potential to serve the contradictory functions of ameliorating and intensifying a stressful situation. However, it we retrain our perspective from the level of the personal to the social, the paradox fades in that IECs can be seen as ameliorating a personally stressful situation, while contributing to the social problem of viewing college admissions as extra-dramatic.

Connections

A common assumption about IECs is that they “pull strings” to help their clients gain admission. However, my research leads me to believe that the actual situation is more nuanced. I found that the IECs in my sample, as a group, were not in agreement on the subject of if, or when, IECs should make contact with admissions officers on behalf of their clients; Most of them would only make contact under limited circumstances, on behalf of certain types of students, and/or at particular types of school. Some IEC’s spoke of how colleges don’t want to speak to “hired guns.”

It is true that IECs generally do have a lot of connections on various campuses. In my sample, about a third of IECs used to work in college admissions offices at some point. Even those who have never worked in admissions have connections in admissions offices that they work to cultivate. Several of the IECs in my sample have a background in school counseling at independent schools, which means that they have lots of connections with college admissions officers from that experience. Furthermore, IECs visit a lot of schools and go to conferences attended by college representatives. According to the IECA website, “An IECA consultant
spends 20% of his or her time on the road, meeting with students on campus admissions officers, touring campuses, and exploring the campus environment.” Some admission offices even invite IECs to visit campus for the weekend and treat them to special campus tours, presentations, and meals.

Sometimes, the visiting goes in the other direction: One IEC spoke of admissions counselors coming to her office or attending her workshops. Another said that admissions officers come to his office to interview prospective students, but he admitted that this is not common practice among IECs.

IECs in my sample seemed to make the decision to use their connections on a situation-specific or case-by-case basis. Most often, the IECs in my sample said that they only call admissions officers when they have “logistical questions” about the application and they don’t mention the student by name. Others will call on a waitlisted student’s behalf.

Some IECs will let a school know if it is a client’s first choice. One mentioned that as part of a “self-promotional campaign” – “self” referring to the client – she may contact the admissions officers at his or her favorite two or three schools to make a direct recommendation. This is seen as most effective, however, for less selective schools or for students who the schools fear they might lose to another school. As one IEC said,

> If I know that in my opinion it’s really a good fit for the student, or, if I feel and the student, it’s their first choice and they’ll go if they get in and I feel that the college would really want them, I’ll let the admissions person know if I know. And again, if it’s no, I’ll just say, “I know John Doe, it’s his first choice, you know, I think he’s a great kid, great student, whatever...”

Some IECs, such as this one, will use connections to find out a student’s chances of admission:
In terms of the college process and the admissions counselors, we have friends in lots of places, so if I needed to call Middlebury and say “can you give me a hot, warm, cold on this candidate, someone would give me a hot, warm, cold on the candidate.

Just as the IECs’ use of contacts is situational, IECs will often limit the number or types of students that they will use their connections for. As one IEC said, without specifying the type of student that she would do this for,

This is not something I promote up front – because I don’t want to go there – with occasional students, you know, I’ve been in the field a long time and I know a lot of people, and you know if I am working with ten students a year, I might do this with one or two students, where for whatever reason I might talk with a colleague and either explain a circumstance or promote a student. But it doesn’t happen with every student.

Some IECs see it as part of their job to talk to admissions officers about students who have a tarnished record. For example, they may explain to admissions officers that a student didn’t do well one year in school because s/he had a health issue or family crisis that had a negative effect on grades. An IEC explains,

One of my other jobs may then be to call the admissions folk at a particular school the kid is interested in and just explain, so this is the kind of thing that my student’s been dealing with, so what would you recommend that they include or not include or whatever to explain that as part of their application.

An IEC may also speak to an admissions officer if a student’s record might not be quite good enough for a particular school, or if s/he appears to be a “late bloomer.” One IEC said,

And occasionally I have called… This girl that applied to Syracuse didn’t fit their profile but she had a lot of pluses and I had been there to visit, so I just supported her application. That’s not something I do for every family. Uh-uh. [Interviewer: What is something that would help you make the decision to do something like that?] Um, that I needed information or that there was a factor that could be over-looked, that I just wanted to call to their attention, right?
Another IEC mentioned that he would call for international student clients because it may be necessary to help admissions officers interpret their records:

The only time I’ll often do that is when they’re international students....so I’ll kind of fill [the admissions officers] in, especially on the curriculum abroad because it’s so hard with international kids to translate and decipher their record. And they just can’t come [visit campus] from wherever they are.

Typically, each IEC will talk to some colleges, but not to others. Some will only call if they have a real connection at a school; in other words, they won’t “cold call.” In general, the relationship between IECs and admissions offices varies depending on the school’s level of selectivity. IECs often say that there is a negative relationship between institutional selectivity and admissions officers’ willingness to engage with IECs. One IEC went so far as to say that it is “taboo” to call the more selective schools. The assumption is that expensive, but less selective, private schools are concerned about filling their freshman class (perhaps due to competition from public institutions in a depressed economy) so they want to encourage IECs to steer students their way. One IEC said,

The lower end love to talk to you – especially if you have a dependable student who has money – they assume that a student who is working with an IEC has money.

However, when pressed, most of the IECs were unable to draw a clear line between those that they could talk to and those that were out of bounds. As one IEC said,

“I will say that the second, third, fourth tiers of colleges all will talk. It’s that upper echelon [that won’t talk to IECs].” Another IEC spoke of being able to talk to schools outside of what she calls the “snob zone” of the northeast and selective schools. She said,

Once I get outside of the northeast, we have some phenomenal relationships with admissions counselors from California, or from South Carolina, or from Florida that actually they will come here and meet students and do interviews at our offices.
Author and IEC Lynn O’Shaughnessy’s (2012) blog describes an experience she had during the annual conference of the Higher Education Consultants Association in New Jersey:

I decided to tag along on the group’s college tour that took the consultants to a half-dozen campuses. What I found predictable is that the most elite schools were the least hospitable to the consultants. Princeton and Columbia universities [sic] told the organizers that the group of more than 100 consultants could go on the regular tour and no one from the admission office would meet with them....In contrast, other schools on the trip pulled out all the stops. Stevens Institute of Technology treated the group to a lovely dinner at the campus with a stunning view of the New York City skyline. Rider University and Fordham University also hosted lovely events for the consultants and they all provided presentations of their programs.”

IECs who were reluctant to speak to admissions officers on behalf of students sometimes said that this was the responsibility of school counselors. As one IEC said,

No, I believe that it’s the high school guidance counselor [who should contact admissions officers] – whether it’s private or public – they have the relationships with [students], they have all of the data and history of the child in front of them, I don’t think colleges want to talk to a paid consultant.

Sometimes, this reticence stems from a fear of overstepping their bounds with school counselors, especially when dealing students who attend high schools where school counselors are known for talking to admissions offices, which is more likely to be the case at high-powered public and independent schools. Having contacts at a school and mobilizing them is something that independent schools, in particular, are known for (Stevens 2007). A parent of one of the rare students in my sample to attend an independent school said that their IEC does not contact colleges on her son’s behalf – “I think that’s more something that the school – our schools do.”

This is related to what I said earlier about how the hiring of IECs can sometimes serve as an example of how public school families are hoping to get some of the advantages of a prep school education for their kids through the use of IECs.
Many IECs mentioned that a big way that their role in college admissions is different from that played in K-12 independent school admissions is that they don’t tend to contact admissions officers to advocate for specific students. Although, one IEC said that once you get beyond the more selective schools and the Northeast region, colleges are more receptive, so “it’s more like the private school relationships.” One student mentioned this as part of what she says in her contract that she will not do:

I don’t call colleges – I don’t contact colleges on their behalf to advocate for them because that would be inappropriate. And some people needed to hear that because I used to work at a private school where that was something we always did.

It was not unusual for IECs in my sample to help students establish campus connections by introducing students to informative and/or influential people to speak with on their campus visits. As one IEC said,

If I have a student that’s going in for an interview, I may introduce them to the admissions people just to let them know that my student is coming and these are the kinds of people that they might like to meet with when they come. It’s so they just have a heads-up…

Or, as another IEC said,

We visit – my colleagues and I visit schools and so if a student comes in and I’ve just been to Washington College and it looks like the perfect school – the perfect match—and they might come down for a visit, I might call beforehand and say they are going to make a long trip would you just make sure they have a nice visit, that type of thing.

IECs sometimes stressed to families the importance of trying to make their own connections on campuses. For example, in a case where a student’s acceptance was deferred (waitlisted), according to a parent, the IEC’s suggestion to a student was

for him to write a letter stating you know that if he was accepted, he would accept that, knowing that they’re looking at their acceptance rate. And then he also wanted him to ask the guidance department if they had any connections with that school – I shouldn’t say connections – relationships
– with the school and they did at the school and they called on his behalf to say that he would definitely go if accepted, but the school didn’t feel comfortable with doing that.

One parent mentioned that her IEC told her child to do little things like reminding students to write thank-you notes to interviewers or going to see college representatives who visit their high school. A couple of parents described IECs encouraging athletically-inclined children to speak with coaches at prospective schools. Said one IEC,

> It’s very much behind the scenes. We might say “here’s who you might write” or a boy this morning was writing a college coach – “can you take a look at this?” And I’ll say, “don’t forget to remind them you’ve got a 790 in math or you’re 6 foot 3.”

Most of the parents and students in my sample believed, rightly or wrongly, that IECs either did not have contact with admissions officers at the schools where their kids were applying or, if they did, that they only used them to find out more about the school and what it was looking for. As one parent said,

> I certainly never got the impression that she was in any way communicating with any admissions office in relation to anything to do with us. I definitely knew from listening to her talk was that part of what she does is visit all these schools at which point I presume she does her best to talk to people…. but I didn’t get the impression necessarily that she was specifically at the schools we were going to at the timeframe at which we were applying.

In one case, the student knew that his IEC had connections as an alumnus of his top choice school, but he was pretty sure that the IEC did not exploit them on his behalf. In most cases, even if students knew that their IEC had connections, they were unsure as to whether they had used them. Said one student,

> Um, I don’t think he did [have connections]. I remember when I was going to look at Emerson, he said that he had a friend who I think was one of the deans, and he was like if you go, let me know and maybe I can set up a meeting with you, but I never ended up visiting, but I don’t think, I don’t have the impression that he talked to anyone at Vassar.
One parent-child team in my sample was unusual in that they both (in separate interviews) expressed that they were sure that their IEC connections played a big role in the process. The mother said,

Well, I know he’s not making calls saying, you know, “Put a gold star, she should be accepted!” But I think that there’s still a little bit of a network among people in the business and so if all things are equal and she’s affiliated with someone and that the admissions counselor’s affiliated, then that just might tip the scale in her favor. I also think that if he has inside information about the school, he might know kind of things that those admissions counselors would hope to see.

Said her child about her IEC’s many connections at different schools, including some where she applied:

And I think he’s been in the business a long time and he’s always traveling and like, I don’t think – my mom was like really shocked by [his connections] – because she was like “I can’t believe it!” – and I was less shocked. I was like, yes, [mother’s first name], that’s why we paid him, because we know he’s a professional in this industry and it is part of it. It’s not just about reading my essays. It’s about helping me get my foot in that admissions door. So yeah, he had some friends.

The following parent also started out not knowing that IECs might use contacts, but eventually wizened up and became one of the only parents in my sample who thought that a big part of the IEC “edge” comes from connections:

[Before hiring an IEC] I never thought that he actually like did outreach with admissions counselor, I thought it was just about him working with the student and giving the student any inside information that he knew about different schools, but when I went to the very last meeting, I saw him say – you know, I was just kind of sitting there towards the end and he was like, “oh, yeah, yeah, I’ll give her a call and remind her about your application,” and I was like, “oh, does he actually call on behalf of my daughter?!?” [laughs] Yeah. But I wasn’t aware of that at the beginning of the process and he doesn’t put that down on his things.

In another rare case where the parent was sure that her IEC had contact at schools her child applied to, I asked if her IEC ever has any contact with admissions officers –
He totally does. He totally does. It’s great…..Like, there was a school that she was actually going [to apply] early [decision] to and she changed her mind, but he called them up and asked them what their statistics were and he talked to somebody there and said, “I have someone who is really interested in coming here,” and, um, then he would write another note and say, “oh, I met with the admissions person at so and so college the other day and I mentioned that I had someone who wants to go there,” and so it was totally terrific.

More than one IEC in my sample stated in his/her contract that the IEC cannot be expected to call schools on students’ behalf – although this is different from saying that they will never do it. However, IECs rarely mentioned parents or students pushing them to do this sort of thing. As one IEC said, “But it’s been a rare occasion where a parent has appealed to me and said ‘can’t you make a call on [our] behalf?’”

An IEC described how she might not be the IEC for a family if they expect her to utilize lots of connections:

If they’re trying to get, like, “oh do you have a lot of connections with admissions offices?” - like that is how their kid gets in, they’re not going to hear that from me and they are going to hear a lot more about the match and I know I have sat here and lost clients…

According to IECA president, Mark Sklarow, an increasing number of college representatives have told him that they wish IECs called more (2011). I imagine that this trend will increase as it becomes harder for families to pay for college and private colleges become increasingly worried about filling their freshman classes.

Ethical considerations are often at the root of IECs’ decisions about whether to utilize their connections at colleges and universities. Said one IEC, “I never mention a student’s name directly [to admissions officers]. I never lobby on behalf of a student because I personally think that’s not ethical.” One mentioned contacting admissions officers on behalf of an applicant as being a “violation” of her relationship with admissions officers and others spoke of “ethical”
issues with using them. Another IEC tried to distinguish herself and the rest of her firm from other IECs who “exploit” their connections:

Philosophically, we’ve chosen not to lead with our relationships. There are people that do what we do that literally call up their friends at wherever [school] and say “these are my five kids I’m working with” – you know – “I want you to take them.” We don’t do things that way.

As we know, the IEC industry is not regulated, but those who belong to the occupation’s professional organizations are subject to their ethics codes. Overall all, what I saw in my interviews aligned pretty closely with what has been said by the president of the IECA, Mark Sklarow: “An IEC should not call to promote or sell a student. She should only call to clarify info or to discuss why she thinks the institution is a good match for the student” (2011).

“They come ‘pre-packaged’”

One way of thinking of the application process is to think of it as a process of self-construction. While symbolic interactionists would say that we are constantly constructing our identities through our interactions with others (Cooley 1902) others have suggested that for many adolescents, the construction of a “paper self” through the college application is their first conscious attempt at self-construction (Patterson 2007).

Patricia McDonough (1994) described the social construction of a new type of person, the “college applicant,” who sees a need for professional help from IECs, which she calls a “new breed of image consultants.” On the contrary, I did not encounter much talk in my interviews about IECs encouraging students to engage in bald self-promotion. Mostly, IECs, parents, and students said that IECs just made a point of reminding students to make a list of their activities and skills and helped them decide which ones to highlight. If IECs can be likened to
matchmakers, then it could be said that the IECs in my sample seemed to encourage clients to represent themselves to potential suitors in a positive, yet honest, manner.

Before beginning my research, I had heard so much about how IECs try to “package” students by helping to shape their academic and extracurricular careers. Indeed, the idea that college applicants should “package” themselves to appeal to admissions officers emerged as one of the top four “frames” in a content analysis of US coverage of the college application process (Bishop 2009). However, I have found that these parents and kids are already aware of the characteristics of a good college applicant, so it is not like the IEC really needs to “package” the kids or change them, in most cases. In Chapters 1 and 3, I wrote about Annette Lareau’s concept of concerted cultivation, a parenting style that she attributed to the middle and upper middle class parents in her study, and which is characterized by parental attempts to encourage the development of certain types of skills and talents in their children. As one IEC put it, “Here the parents are doing a lot of the packaging. The kids come pre-packaged.”

IECs are sensitive to criticisms about packaging. As one IEC said to a room full of IECs at an IECA conference, “I know that in this room, ‘marketing,’ ‘branding,’ ‘packaging’ are naughty, evil, bad words.” She continued, “Packaging is not stuffing the kid into a pre-existing box, rather, it is finding out what makes that child unique and special” and helping him/her to express this potential to admissions, so that they are aware of what the student can contribute to campus life. While most IECs denied that they package students, one said

I think there are a lot that are too packaged. I mean, to me, the good application or the good consultant, if you will, allows the student voice to come forward just like a coach would give tips to a tennis player or a golfer.

Most IECs begin to work with families during the student’s junior year of high school, although IECs’ opinions vary in terms of which stage of schooling is the best time to start
working with students. I was interested to find that IECs generally seemed to want to start working with students as late as junior year. However, by that point, students are finished with half of their high school experience, and their path for the remainder is mostly paved. One IEC told me she finds that she is starting to see kids earlier because “the panic gets worse every year.” Said another IEC, “In an ideal situation, I’d meet with a student once as a freshman and maybe once or twice as a sophomore, just to set the stage for what’s coming. That may be picking classes or summer activities.”

I did have one IEC who strongly believes in starting early. He asked me:

> You know when the college admissions process starts? [I respond with pre-K.] No, it starts at the end of 8th grade! That’s when the colleges start looking [at students’ records]. Some colleges are only going to look at your freshman, sophomore, junior grades – Places like Yale are never going to look at your senior grades. So it’s a lot easier to create history than it is to record it.

The students in my sample did not really need advice on which high school courses or classes to take or about how to be a good interviewee. For the most part, these children have been doing things like participating in extra-curricular activities, taking private music or art lessons, and having “enriching” summer camp experiences throughout their entire lives. Children raised with concerted cultivation also learn how to negotiate with adults and otherwise interact with them on a higher level than their working-class peers. This skill comes in handy when it is time for campus visits and admissions interviews.

**Advice: Coursework**

Overall, parents and students used words like “supported” and “reinforced” to describe the input that IECs made regarding students’ activities and classes. Students and parents spoke of how course schedules were, for the most part, settled by the time they began working with an IEC. This is particularly true in regards to students who attend schools that engage in “tracking.”
As one student said, “I was fairly set on a track and on a set of courses [when I started working with an IEC] and he pretty much said, this is solid, just keep going and do as well as you can in them.” Most of the students in my sample already had a history of taking at least some honors courses prior to working with IECs. Take this student, for example, and her depiction of her IEC’s input:

No, like he definitely pushed hard classes – he was happy that I was in all AP’s – he was happy that I joined the Science Club. Um, but I think, you know, he recognized that I had enough to back me up and I think I did, too. So he didn’t really push that.”

I did encounter a case where an IEC suggested that a student take Precalculus instead of terminating her math education and the aforementioned case where an IEC recommended that student continue into her 4th year of foreign language study. However, in both cases, the students may have come to the same conclusions if they had spoken to a savvy guidance counselor or called a few admissions officer to ask for input.

**Advice: Activities**

Most of the students in my sample already had a full plate of extra-curricular activities and were what one of my IECs would call “pretty invested.” Some of them were already positioned to take on leadership roles in their activities during their senior year, and a couple had even founded school-based organizations such as environmental clubs or student publications. The following student’s response to my question about whether his IEC pushed him to do more activities is typical:

I don’t think he made too many suggestions. By the time we started working with him, I was kind of set into a handful of activities and, you know, was kind of already working my way up. I think he definitely said that it would be worthwhile to kind of continue the activities through the top and make sure that you get to the kind of leadership levels. He definitely suggested continuing with them, but I don’t think that there were any times when he said well, you should really add you know a sport
or you should really add a community service. For the most part, it was just kind of a “keep going, keep working.”

Although I did not come up with a single instance of an IEC who encouraged students to join lots of new activities, there is a common perception that this is something that IECs regularly do. One parent said that one thing she liked about her IEC is that He did not bug her about [participating in more activities]. He did not say, “Now you have to get home at 10 o’clock and find something else to do!,” which I think a lot of these other people [IECs] – that’s what I was hearing….Like, where’s the other 10 things you are going to write down [on the application]? I felt like he was so supportive to not make her into somebody she wasn’t.

I only had one case of two students (brothers) in my sample who were not “invested” in school activities, so the IEC did make some substantial recommendations. Said the parent of those students:

Yes, she always talked to them about what they are interested in – and if they are interested in that then they might want to think about doing x, y, and z. If they’re interested in writing, are you interested doing a sport – she definitely – they didn’t always do what she recommended [laughs]. They were aware that they needed to resume-build a little bit. So yeah, they did community service and I think that behind that was knowing that there were things like that.

An IEC may offer some advice on how to highlight the activities on the application. A mother describes her IEC’s advice:

Certain things, [my son] had lower on the common app, and she was like, “No, no – you should really highlight that. Even though spring track is last season, well, you’re the captain of the spring track team, so you should put that higher up.” And, he had gotten a couple of awards, like the leadership award and stuff like that, and that, too, he kind of hid, and she said, “No, no, no, you’ve got to promote yourself and put those higher.” She definitely said, you know, “Emphasize that and maybe de-emphasize that” – that kind of stuff.

Oftentimes, the only remaining space for IECs to make suggestions is for program, jobs, or internships for the summer. Said one IEC at the IECA conference, “A student who leverages
summers has 8-10 months’ advantage on the student who doesn’t – that’s an extra academic year in which to differentiate yourself.” However, for every story of an IEC encouraging a student to attend an “enriching” summer program, I can think of another one of a student who had already attended such a program or had plans to attend one before making contact with an IEC. For example, in one case, a student had already taken a local architecture program during the summer between sophomore and junior year, and for the summer after her junior year, her IEC recommended one in interior design that serves as something of a “feeder program” for the host school’s undergraduate program.

**Advice: Interviews**

Most of the students and their parents in my sample did not believe that there was a need for a lot of preparation by counselors for interviews. A couple of families claimed that interview coaching was helpful, but many decided to opt out of that piece of the advising package, if offered. In my conversations with IECs, parents, and students, and in sessions at the IECA conference, there was little emphasis on interview preparation, though. Parents often said that their children were “comfortable” speaking with adults. Some parents suggested that IECs had helped set up interviews because they knew that their “well-spoken” kids would make a good impression. Some IECs even offered advice on what to wear. I did pick up this one tidbit of advice about the college interview at the IECA conference, in which an IEC said, “Counsel your kids to answer questions about what you are reading with something other than Harry Potter or Hunger Games.” It is possible, however, that the lack of interest in interview prepping is also because of the widespread impression amongst IECs, parents, and students that interviews don’t matter much for admissions.
IEC Impact on the Student

Executive Functioning

I must admit that I had never heard the term “executive functioning” until I started hanging out with IECs. When they use this term, they are referring to the regulation of cognitive processes such as planning, memory, attention, and problem-solving. Most children experience an increase in executive functioning capabilities during adolescence. IECs see themselves as capable of helping teenagers develop in this area. A common thread that ran throughout interviews with was that IECs are invaluable for making sure that adolescents’ applications were completed in an organized and timely fashion. This idea can be seen in this parent’s comments:

We paid her on a per hour basis and we just felt like you know, yes, it’s expensive per hour, but the amount of focus that she could get Catherine to do in an hour there would have taken us 10 or 12 hours, and so it was worth paying somebody else to do it.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) believed that education as an institution is structured to as to help prepare the majority of students to slip into social positions that are similar to those of their parents. So, they would not be surprised that IECs and the mostly upper middle class parents in my sample wanted students to develop a trait that contains the word “executive.” This idea is evident in the words of a parent who extrapolated that her IEC was teaching her daughter valuable time management skills that she would later need in the “business world”:

So she was very businesslike in the sense of she gave Chelsea deadlines and in return said I’ll get back to you in 48 hours or 72 hours. And I thought that was great because it showed Chelsea, like in the business world, if it’s due at 10 AM, it’s due at 10 AM, so that she has her full 48 hours before your 10 AM meeting two days later, and I thought that for Chelsea that worked great.

Some thought that IECs were most helpful with making the decision to apply early decision and then meeting the deadline. Early decision/early action is often used as a strategic tool because early applicants are admitted at a higher rate than regular ones. Researchers have
determined that the benefit of applying early is similar to a one hundred point boost on the SAT and that when controlling for high school, individual, and institutional characteristics, receiving private college counseling was the strongest predictor of enrolling due to early admissions. (Park and Eagan 2011). One of the arguments against schools having early decision is that it discriminates against lower and middle income kids, because they have to accept a school that admits them early decision and can’t make a decision based on what kind of financial aid that school or another school might offer them. This situation with the IECs supports that argument, in that families that can afford to hire IECs can get the support they need to ensure that applicants are ready to apply early decision and take advantage of the higher rates of acceptance that early applicants enjoy.

**Self-discovery**

In Chapter 1, I offered the metaphor of IEC as therapist. Furedi (2002) described the phenomenon of paranoid parenting as existing within the context of a “therapeutic ethos” (p. 83). In this light, it is not surprising to see parents seeking advice from “experts” with a therapeutic orientation. One parent described the college application process as a “developmental growth thing” and saw her IEC as offering guidance on that journey. Here, another parent said that an IEC offered invaluable assistance to her daughter as she made the transition to adulthood:

> It’s just such a big step these days [applying to college] and has such an effect on your child. I mean, the transition to adulthood has become so difficult because of our complicated world that I just think this is such a crucial step and it really is that entrée into the adult world and if it is not a good experience, it just makes it so much harder for years to come and if it is a good experience, it’s such a great base to continue on. So, you know, I just felt like if we could all afford it it’s worth it.

I’m sure that many IECs would agree with the counselor who listed knowing “that there’s been some growth and some self-awareness [in the student client]” as one of the top satisfactions
of her job. (Although, as Bishop determined from his study of the way that college applicants are represented in the media, “Even self-awareness is something to be collected, packaged, and displayed” [2009:6]).

Some IECs use personality tests and other psychological tools to help students figure out who they are and what they want. An IEC who spoke at the IECA conference that I attended said that she has kids get to know themselves through a personality assessment program called “Do What You Are,” so that they can better talk about themselves on their applications. “It’s almost like you’re a fortune teller,” she commented, because you can learn a lot about a kid really quickly from using this method.

Parents, students, and IECs consistently perceived the “college process” as a journey fraught with great peril and described IECs as individuals who helped them maintain their sanity along the way. Many of them imagined that families who did not use IEC services had put their well-being at risk, as can be seen here in this parent’s tale of some friends who did not use an IEC:

[My daughter] has two friends or acquaintances, or whatever, who are both, you know, very good students and neither of them worked with somebody as far as I know, and the end – you know, just getting their stuff in – both families just said that they practically all had a collective nervous breakdown…..I’m thinking about these two families who both their kids are really good students and I know they’ll end up at good schools and they did not go through any of this, but…. I know both the kids are now in therapy – I know that it’s not only because of these, but one now has an eating disorder. I mean, so the interesting question is, might they be in therapy, anyway? Or, did this contribute to this – pushing them all over the edge?

Taken on its own, at face value, a comment such as this one appears alarming and far-fetched. She is claiming, after all, that some kids end up with eating disorders and in therapy, in large part, because their parents did not hire college counselors to work with them, while
recognizing that they will probably end up at “good” schools, in the end. I think this speaks to the way in which the college search has been blown out of proportion in some families and communities.

Self-empowerment

One of the most common criticisms of intensive parenting styles is that they result in overly-dependent children. I found that IECs, parents, and students praised IECs for helping students to become more self-empowered and confident. Here, a parent spoke of how Emily, her daughter’s IEC, was able to “sort of get me backing off and get [daughter] sort of feeling empowered and that sort of give.” A student spoke of some ways in which her IEC helped build her self-esteem:

And it wasn’t a confidence in, like, I’m going to write about myself arrogantly, but it was the confidence of knowing how to write appropriately for college, for like this kind of essay – and just that feeling of – I don’t know – that it endowed my writing with just like a certain quality of I feel like… of earnestness and eagerness and readiness for college almost – because I was like “I can do this!”

Self-actualization

One of the reasons that parents and kids are satisfied with IEC services is because they believe that working with an IEC helps the child reach his or her potential. As one parent said, “A student has a given potential; with a private guidance counselor, you come closer to reaching that potential.” A student raved about how her IEC saw a lot of potential in her and recommended that she apply to selective schools:

I think the best thing about Walter is that I feel like he read what kind of student I was and what my potential was and I think he knew that, not like – that sounds so manipulative – but if spun the right way, but it is about you know, if presented correctly, the potential that I am going to have and have shown, that I would be qualified [for admission at many selective schools].
One criticism of intensive parenting styles is that it creates kids who all believe that they are “winners,” this was contradicted by an IEC who said, “I think the biggest challenge is getting the student on board to recognize her/his potential to recognize what he/she can do.” One parent said he would be especially likely to recommend hiring an IEC

If I heard a parent talking in a certain way that I thought they were maybe underestimating a kid – because I feel like we were underestimating our kid – and Jane helped us see that and so I think if I heard that, I would say well maybe you should consider using a counselor you might be surprised.

However, in my sample, I did not encounter parents or students who appeared to be underestimating their potential as college applicants. If anything, IECs complained about the challenge of dealing with families who wanted to aim higher than was realistic.

**Uniqueness**

As you can see, a focus on the child as an individual or “self” is a thread running through this section. Indeed, a common theme that came up in interviews with parents is the idea that their children are unique individuals. This is tied to the belief that a large part of the IEC’s role is to help the family find the perfect “fit” for their unique child. One parent explained that she hired an IEC because “I wanted to make sure I had considered all the possibilities that might be unique to my child.” Along with these ideas about the value of individuality, comes an expectation that the IEC should help students to bring out their uniqueness. Sometimes, parents expressed concern about whether their children could stand out amongst peers applying to the same types of schools. Here, a mother expressed this concern:

My older son looked great on paper – like in terms of grades and test scores, but you know, but so do 70 other kids. There’s a lot of smart kids out there, you know, which is great, but so how do you make you sing?
Some parents even expressed concern that the process of working with an IEC might dull their child’s uniqueness in the eyes of admissions officers. I hadn’t really thought about this aspect until one insightful parent suggested that I ask parents and students the following question about working with an IEC:

Was it too generic a process? Did you end up following the rules and putting together a profile that’s excellent, but maybe doesn’t in any way distinguish that particular child from all the other kids who are using independent counselors?....I do think there is a bit of a risk, particularly with kids who have all the basic qualifications so that they’re admissible to many of these schools, there is that potential – as opposed to maybe a kid who isn’t quite as polished – or hasn’t been quite as polished by other people – maybe they come out looking a little bit more interesting.

Or, as another parent said,

I think you do need to be very careful that that person does not neuter your child’s voice, because if I’ve learned one thing from this process is that the admissions officers are completely overwhelmed. They have thousands of students who look exactly the same, and so if you can do anything to help your child look slightly different or have a personality that they can seize on, that that’s quite important, so – I threw that out.

Although the essay is one of the parts of the application where students have the opportunity to show their uniqueness, it is also a place where there is a risk that an IEC can mute or alter a student’s voice. Said one IEC, “So, I love that process of bringing out the students’ voice, but I totally agree with you that that’s the danger that you’re going to get kind of a packaged, you know, cookie-cutter essay.” Although none of the people in my sample thought that their IEC was too heavy-handed in the essay, some, like this parent, intimated that they knew of other IECs who are:

And I also felt like you know, I know people, for example, one of my daughter’s friends who went with this Louis [another IEC], and they offer a very intense writing, um, you know, polishing.

Or, as one mother said of the role played by an IEC in her daughter’s essays,
You know, he edited some of them, not all of them. And he doesn’t write stuff [for the student] and that was sort of the understanding that’s what we kind of knew going in – that that wasn’t going to be what he does. I do feel like other people really, really help you write them and I think that’s fine. I didn’t get to read any of Lauren’s essays – except for one – I saw one and you could definitely tell no one was helping her write that [laughs]. At admissions, they are not going to worry that someone was writing her essay for her. [laughs]

IEC Impact on the Family

Managing emotions

Parents and students believe that the process was less stressful than it would have been had they done it without outside help. More than one parent told me that they believed that hiring an IEC was worth it for the “peace of mind.” It is interesting to note that sometimes, when parents spoke about the role of IECs in helping to manage emotions, it wasn’t clear whether they were talking about their child’s emotions or their own. As one mother said,

I think I used it more for me. I didn’t use it for David. I know my personality and I used it so that I felt like she had a handle on it, because I knew that I would be stressed out over it. So that there was someone – I didn’t feel like it was all on me. So, I don’t know how much of a difference it made for him, but it was worth it for me.

Some students claimed that they were more “laid-back” about the process than their parents:

I managed to stay relatively level-headed through most of it – I mean that’s generally just how I am. I don’t get terribly worked up about most things….I would say the most nervous was definitely my mom out of the family. I was definitely a little calmer.

Oftentimes, students and parents said that the mother was the family member who was most anxious during the application process. A mother who describes herself as a “Nervous Nellie,” explained,
Um, I would say *I’m* the problem. [laughs] He stays calm – yeah he’s calm, but probably not involved enough. He’s kind of neutral. He doesn’t really add a whole lot, but doesn’t hurt the process, but *I* definitely stress out my son [laughs] and [IEC] Jessica is very calm.

A few students and mothers described the father/husband as not as involved or invested. However, it could be a matter of mothers tending, on average, to be more expressive of their emotions than fathers. (In my own family, for example, my father has been known to indirectly express his concern for me by telling me that my mother is worried about me, when in fact, he is the concerned party.) In any case, it seems that mothers tend to be more involved with the IEC process and they are usually the ones that the IEC refers me to for interviews.

Parents, especially, spoke about the reassurance that came from receiving personalized attention from IECs. As one parent said, “I guess it just made you feel like you were getting individualized attention and I think that always makes you feel good.” This idea was often coupled with statements about how IECs are “there for you all the time.” One student, playing into the personal assistant metaphor discussed in Chapter 1, likened the IEC to a “butler.” Said another student, with perhaps a bit of exaggeration, “Yeah, I think it’s like really comforting knowing that they’re – they make it very apparent that they’re there for you 24 hours a day and that you can call them and they’re totally there.” One of the most widely appreciated aspects of this availability is that it almost always includes summers – something that even counselors at independent schools usually do not offer.

Most of the students and parents want help with handling uncertainty. One student said, “They make a big point of saying it is true that applying to school is not a science – you can’t like meet a list of criteria and know that you’re going to get in and that it’s really a gamble and not to take that personally in way.” Other times, IECs could help mitigate student stress that comes from too much parental pressure. As one parent said about her IEC, “She was very
calming, whereas I was on the other side going ‘I don’t think you’re [going about things the right way]…’” The IEC as mediator theme came through clearly as interviewees commonly described the IECs as a “neutral” third party that could mitigate tensions between student and parent(s) or between parents.

Although the theme of IEC as mediator and soother of uncomfortable emotions came out most strongly in my interviews, there were a few cases where parents and students mentioned that working with IECs engendered both feelings of comfort and stress at different points during the process. For example, one parent described her daughter’s IEC as a “tyrant” who “made” her daughter write multiple drafts of each essay. She also said that her daughter would sometimes refuse to answer the IEC’s calls because she was “afraid” to deal with her. Another parent said of her son’s IEC, “if the kid is not doing what he is supposed to do, she’ll bug them and then she’ll bug you…..which you need, but I sometimes just wanted to say, ‘Oh shut up and leave me alone!’ [laughs]” One student said that she felt pressure to “fudge” that she had researched some of the colleges that her IEC recommended, because she did not have time to go through his extensive list of suggestions.

**Managing Expectations**

As was discussed in the first chapter, families value the ways in which IECs help them – parents, especially – manage emotions and mediate family dynamics. In this chapter, we will see how IECs also help clients manage expectations again (especially those of parents) and encourage students to apply to a set of schools that include a few where the student is likely to get in – and feel good about attending. IECs find that when they are upfront about realistic expectations, it helps to eliminate some of the potential for disappointment at the end of the
process. As the president of the IECA likes to say to his colleagues, “under promise and over deliver” (Sklarow 2012).

IECs spoke a lot about parental expectations and of how they are often more unrealistic than those of the students. Several IECs said something along the lines of what one counselor told me:

We call it managing expectations. We do it all the time, and typically it’s more managing the parents, because the kids, just because the kids go to high school and they see the kids the years ahead of them [and] begin to understand what’s possible and what isn’t and they see their very smart friends the year ahead of them who didn’t get into this school or that school, so it’s often the parents who are less well-educated about that.

Some IECs say that this unrealistic stance is common because most parents do not have an accurate sense of how competitive the contemporary admissions arena has become in the years since they applied to college. Others say it is because parents have trouble making subjective judgments of their own children.

The advent of Naviance, software used by guidance counselors that shows the acceptance history of students within a particular high school at a specific college or university using the historical average GPAs and test scores from the high school, has, as one IEC said, “has changed the world” because now parents have more data at their disposal and can come to a more objective understanding of their child’s chances for admission, based on GPA and test scores, at least. As one parent said of her experience with being shown Naviance by her IEC,

I think that really helps you realize: ok, that’s a reach school, that’s a 50/50 school. And it gives us parents – and you know, we’re all very proud of our kids and think they’re super – but it kind of brings you to earth, saying ok, yeah, they’re super, but this is really their range – not this.

IECs can also help manage parents’ and students’ expectations by making sure to introduce families to less well-known schools outside of the limited list of high status schools
that many of them initially consider. One parent spoke of how she and her daughter were initially unsure as to whether they had chosen the right IEC because he was recommending schools that they had never heard of instead of the “name brand” schools that appealed to them:

He sort of said well, you know, consider this college I called St. Mary’s-of-WhatSit, because I never heard of it. You know, consider these places, consider those places. So, you know, looking back, I feel that he did his job well in that regard. He didn’t just say ok, you know, yes to Vassar’s and the whatever of the worlds, you know, [instead of] only consider the brand…

In the end, the mother and her daughter convinced him that she should apply to more selective schools, but it was a good thing that the IEC made the student include some less selective and less well-known schools because she did not get into any of the ones that they originally wanted.

After working to align a family’s expectations regarding admissions with his/her own, IECs then try to make sure that the student only applies to schools that s/he “loves” and would be happy to attend. One parent explained how the IEC convinced her and her daughter that, “You should love each school [that you apply to], they should all be your favorites ….and so whatever school she gets into, there’s something about that school that would make it a favorite of hers.”

The “Edge”

I asked IECs, parents, and students if they believed that working with an IEC gives students an edge in the college admissions competition. When I asked the question, I offered a caveat that they should answer the question in terms of however they define “edge.” The interviewees, however, generally began to answer the question without asking for any clarification as to the term’s meaning.
I found that they do believe that they had “an edge” – but not for the reasons that I originally would have expected. That is, the edge that they described was not usually defined in terms of gaining admission to particular schools. Most spoke about how they attribute the edge to getting help with organization, time management, essays, and composition of an appropriate college list. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, it was rare to hear about strategic “magic tricks” or pulling of strings in admissions offices.

IECs spoke about how there are common misperceptions out there about how IECs give students an edge in the admissions process. An example of this would be the claim that IECs fill out the applications and write the essays for the students. As one IEC said,

I mean where people think about the edge, I think they think that we really have a heavy hand in the essay, we’ve got tips and tricks about what to do and what’s going to make the process you know, so…. it’s not that kind of edge.

IECs typically said that if an edge from working with an IEC exists, it is because their clients do a “good” and timely job on their application, have someone to help them narrow down their choices to a manageable and prudent (or, as one IEC called it, “balanced”) college list, and know what schools are looking for in the applications. As one IEC said, “Their applications are more – are likely to be more thoughtful, more timely, and submitted with a greater understanding of what colleges and universities are looking for.” Or, as one parent responded when I asked if she thought that her child got an edge,

Well, totally, in the sense that – not that I mean that anybody knew she was working with a counselor and that had an influence, but I think that it’s absolutely the case that the set of schools that she took seriously would not have been the set of schools that we would have focused on without a counselor.

While IECs sometimes made claims about how they are experts, at the same time, IECs and parents spoke of how a student might be able to get the same good results if they had
someone else, whether it was a dedicated and capable parent or guidance counselor to help them through the process. One IEC said of the edge her students have, “I think that they have more information, or they can have more information and I think information is power, but I don’t think it’s an edge you can only get from working with a counselor.” One father said that he thought that using an IEC gives students something of an edge, if only because students cannot usually get enough time from their “overworked” guidance counselors.

When describing the benefits of working with an IEC, parents mostly spoke of how working with an IEC made the process “easier and clearer” and helped their children to be more “focused.” In many cases, the edge boiled down helping increase the student’s comfort level with the college process and in making it more efficient. They also spoke of how the IEC gave an edge by providing reassurance to both student and parents. When I asked one parent if hiring an IEC gave her daughter an edge, he said:

I think it gives them – I don’t know if it gives them an edge in terms of getting into a particular school. Certainly, if their essay is better, then it would be that’s definitely beneficial, but I definitely think it gives them a more relaxing year, because I think it helps them to be kind of thoughtful and organized around the process instead of scrambling and I think it gives them an edge in that way, but I don’t think it necessarily gives them an edge as far as whether they are going to get in or not.

As with the IECs and parents, students’ discussion of the edge gained from working with an IEC was about being a “better applicant,” not about the IEC having some special influence in the admissions office. A student joked, “I mean, I don’t think that he really could, like, persuade the admissions officers [laughs] or pull any magical strings.” One student did say something about how her IEC had “said some things to some people,” but even she said that she thought the main edge she got from her IEC was from the help with her essay and drawing up the school list.
It is also possible that a family might have certain misguided ideas at the beginning of their work with an IEC, but they will later be disabused. Said an IEC,

So, I think initially, you know, parents approach this with the perspective of “I want an edge, I want to know as much as I possibly can, I know that I need an expert in this field, just like I need an expert to get myself fit, just like I need an expert to do my taxes.” It’s an age of experts. And I think they leave the process – at least my process – realizing that there was much more that was brought to the table.

Recognizing all the intangibles that families gain from working with an IEC, one counselor concluded, “They come in wanting the edge, but “And I think they leave the process – at least my process – realizing that there was much more that was brought to the table.”

A Good Investment

Many parents who hire IECs expect that they will pay full-price for their children’s college educations, so they want to make sure that they end up paying that sky-high tuition to the “perfect” or “right” school. Because most of them expect to receive little or no financial aid, the cost of hiring an IEC appears reasonable when compared to projected expenses for tuition, room and board, etc. So, even those who described paying for an IEC as a “sacrifice” or a “strain” went ahead with it and said that they would do it again. Said one mother,

I think in the long-run, [the cost of hiring an IEC is] nothing compared to what the [college expense] experience is going to be and cost and so this seemed like not the issue to worry about. We’re going to be spending [laughs] a zillion dollars over the next 12 years on all of our kids and this is not the place to scrimp, is what we thought. We scrimp in plenty of places, but, you know what I mean?

Sometimes parents made the calculation based on how many children they have. More than one said that having just one child weighed heavily in the decision to invest resources in an IEC. Some of the students in my sample mentioned that as the eldest sibling in their family, their
parents felt like they needed guidance through the process; perhaps some of them won’t hire help for subsequent siblings?

There are others who purposely choose to work with IECs who have experience with financial aid, in the hopes that they will get returns on the money they invest in an IEC via grants and/or loans. In fact, the percentage of IECA members who claim to specialize in financial aid advising has increased 15 to 20% from 2005 to 2012 (Sklarow 2012), as college becomes more expensive and more families have been hit by the recession. In my sample, I only had two IECs who considered themselves to be experts on the financial side of things.

Although most of the families in my sample did not refer to the outcome of the process – the place(s) where the student was granted admission[^10] – as part of the narrative about their satisfaction with working with an IEC – one mother who said that she probably wouldn’t have been satisfied with her decision to hire an IEC if her daughter had ended up attending the flagship campus of the state’s university system: “UMass Amherst is not a bad school, by the way, by any means. I just mean that like we probably could have gotten there on our own or something.”

As was discussed in an earlier chapter, many upper middle class parents see their children’s success in college admissions as a reflection of their merit as parents and hiring an IEC can be seen in this context. For Holmstrom and Karp, upper middle class parents believe that paying for college is not only an investment in their children’s financial futures in terms of helping them to secure a high standard of living, but they also expect “symbolic” returns in the form of cultural and identity capital (Côté 1996, in Holmstrom et al 2011) – their children’s occupational and emotional success bolsters their identity as “good parents” (p. 267).

[^10]: Granted, many of my interviewees had not yet reached the end of the process at the time of interview.
Push-back

Furedi (2002) said that parents who are part of this culture of paranoid parenting lack confidence in their authority as parents as a result of being bombarded with relentless parenting advice from “experts.” However, considering the time, money, and faith that the families in my sample invested in IECs, I found ample evidence of push-back and resistance to IECs’ expert knowledge. To begin with, many IECs in my sample gave examples of families who refused to listen to their advice about which schools would be realistic to apply to. Earlier, we also saw the IECs will sometimes refuse to take on clients if they show signs of not being willing to accept their advice.

Some parents in my sample spoke about how they would not necessarily take all of the advice given by IECs and many parents described their children as being quite self-determined. As one parent said of her daughter’s interactions with her IEC, “I mean, as a parent, I do think it was pretty clear that you were not going to change her, I mean, she was so clearly what she was.” Another parent said that if her child did not like the advice given by the IEC then, “I think she still would have done what she wanted to do.”

Most of the parents in my sample believed that their kids were already carrying a heavy load of academic coursework and extracurricular activities. Although the IECs in my sample didn’t seem to push aggressively for changes in coursework or activities, some parents knew that IECs had a reputation for being that way and were on guard in case they encountered this behavior. As one parent said,

We went over all of her activities and her course selection and basically Jane sort of sanctioned it and said yes this looks good….Had she counseled me otherwise, I’m not sure I would have taken that advice, it’s not my approach….. I think the primary thing I was looking for from my college counselor was guidance through the process, knowledge, you know, particularly in terms of identifying schools, and good fits. It wasn’t
so much how to tailor my daughter’s résumé to the college admissions officers’ desires.

Here, a parent talked about how she and her daughter did not take the IEC’s advice when he recommended more challenging courses:

Yeah, well, he suggested AP [Advanced Placement] [laughs]. Yeah, you know, he’s you know, he’s kind of got a certain mentality. She is not like that and my feeling was, she had an A-minus average in all honors with doing sports – she knew what she wanted – you don’t have to have an A-plus average to go into interior design. And I think she’s very pragmatic, so she did not want to take the history AP and I said fine, don’t. [laughs].

Another area where families sometimes clashed with IECs was over the types of schools that should be on the student’s college list. In some cases, IECs thought that students were aiming at schools where their chances of admission were too slim, for example. As one parent explained,

Walter kept initially pushing places like [from the book] The 50 Colleges that Change Lives and my daughter wasn’t very interested [laughs]. She kept wanting to go back to the sort of brand name schools, so it was this funny thing where I would say early on, Walter was sort of I think pushing a sort of tier and I sort of said to him, you know, whether or not she’ll get in, you need to understand she’s ambitious and she wants this next tier up. I really did have to say that.

At least one parent decided not to go with an IEC who she saw as being too pushy:

The interesting thing is that other person that we met with was very much into resume-building and everything else to the point that you just thought “oh my God!” you know, this is… but Walter was much more low-key about it.

Despite moments of resistance, overall, it appears that parents and students mostly value IECs for their expert knowledge. In my sample of students, I only found one real example of push-back against an IEC’s advice – the one I discussed earlier about the student who wanted to apply to more prestigious schools (and to one of them early), but the IEC did not think that it would be worth it for her to apply. Resistance amongst parents was only a little more
widespread. For example, a couple of parents looked to other friends or family for second opinions on their children’s essays, after the IEC signed-off on them. Also, three parents disagreed with the types of schools that the IECs were recommending – there was the one parent who wanted more prestigious schools on the list, and a couple who wanted liberal arts schools rather than the more specialized types of schools being recommended (e.g., engineering or design school).

It is interesting that there are several examples of respondents talking about how “some other” IEC does things wrong, or that it is another family that has problems. (See, for example, the aforementioned quotes from parents who believed that “other” IECs were taking too much control over students’ essays or the child may have ended up with an eating disorder, in part, because her family did not hire an IEC to help her deal with the stress of the college application process). I would imagine that after all of the time and money that families have invested in choosing and working with the right IEC, they would want to reassure themselves that they had made the right decision. For a family to disagree with an IEC and to resist his/her suggestions must be uncomfortable because it puts their decision to work with an IEC (or a particular) IEC into question.

How IECs manage their own risk

While the hiring of IECs by families can be seen as an attempt to deal with what they perceive as a situation fraught with risk and uncertainty, IECs have their own methods for managing their own risk of professional failure. (As to what constitutes professional failure, most often, when IECs in my sample were asked to tell me about an “unsuccessful” experience with a client, they described a situation in which a family refused to take seriously his/her claims
about which schools were plausible possibilities and then either failed to gain admission anywhere or to any that student felt positive about attending. As one IEC put it,

> It’s all about the subtle management of aspirations. A successful outcome here is incumbent upon the successful management of aspirations, because if I haven’t managed those aspirations, then they’ve applied to 8 places that are stretches and [if] they don’t get in anywhere, then they’ve wasted their money with me.

In part, the high levels of satisfaction among IEC clients can be attributed to efforts made by IECs at the front-end of the process, even before the family and the IEC enter into a formal partnership. In Chapter 3, we looked at ways in which families decide that they have found the right IEC to work with. As was discussed, the IEC plays a role similar to that of a match-maker, where the match is between a student and a college, rather than between two potential halves of a couple. However, for the system to work, there also needs be a good match between IEC and client. Here, we will look at how IECs determine that they will be capable of working with a particular family. From the get-go, IECs will refuse to work with potential clients who seem too difficult to please. This is particularly true of IECs who have a fully-established practice. They try to maximize their chances of success by avoiding working with certain clients. IECs typically offer a free introductory meeting or phone call, oftentimes just with the parent, in which they can explain their services and fee structure. The IEC will try to discern “red flags,” and if they become apparent, may suggest that the family seek help elsewhere.

One common red flag is the parent who is not willing to let the IEC play the role of matchmaker. That is, rather than consider the IECs opinion about potential schools, the parent (and possibly the student) has a limited number of acceptable schools in mind already. Usually, these schools are “reaches” for the student and admittance is quite uncertain. For example, a couple of IECs mentioned being reluctant to work with certain international parents who were
either only interested a limited group of high-prestige schools or did not understand that just because they could afford to pay for a college does not mean that the student will get in.

Another commonly mentioned red flag is the parent who seems to expect the IEC to do things that are neither ethical, nor part of the contract, such as writing students’ essays, contacting admissions officers to advocate on a student’s behalf, or guaranteeing admission to college, in general, or to a particular school. Most of the IECs in my sample have families sign a contract in which they have delineated the specific services that they offer, but they also usually spend some time at the first meeting explaining about things that they cannot be expected to do. While some communicate the limits of their services implicitly, by virtue of what they omit from the services listed in the contract, others explicitly state – either in the contract, or verbally – that which they will not do.

Conclusions

As Mark Sklarow, IECA’s executive director (Kingsbury 2010) has said, “Private counselors don’t really know any secrets, they don’t have any pull at colleges, and they’re not going to write your kids’ essay.” Despite the reputation that IECs have for being able to pull strings and confer “secret” strategies that can get students into colleges, I only heard one story about an IEC suggesting a truly wacky strategy – the IEC told a student to go to the campus bookstore, take a picture of herself wearing a college sweatshirt and send it to the admissions office! In this case, the student decided not to try it. Her parents were split as to whether it was a good idea.

The uncertainties of our times have produced a form of intensive parenting – some would call it “paranoid parenting” – among affluent parents who feel internal and social pressure to
ensure that their children attain certain educational and occupational goals. As a result of this parenting style, which emphasizes the cultivation of children’s unique talents and personalities, there isn’t that much need for IECs to package most of these students or re-make them into good college applicants – they have been groomed for years for this moment. The resulting edge that they acknowledge from working with IECs is often about the ways in which they help them to manage their emotions and tackle the college process with efficiency, while offering personalized attention that keeps the focus on their children as unique individuals, although I doubt that their satisfaction would be complete if they didn’t also emerge from the application process with positive results.
Chapter 5 - Coaches and Players on an Un-level Playing Field

Introduction

I step off the Boston commuter train and am greeted by a timeless New England scene: a grassy town square anchored by a tall white church and dotted with venerable oaks that must have stood sentry for at least 200 years. I wend my way down Main Street, past a gourmet cheese shop and an old-fashioned Ma and Pa hardware store and enter a red brick office building overlooking the square. I’m welcomed by Marjorie, an IEC who appears to be in her fifties. After my first set of questions about her career and the services she offers to her clients, I ask if she does any pro bono or reduced-fee work for clients who can’t afford her regular fees. She assures me that she does do some pro bono work, usually for a few individuals who are mostly referred to her by full-pay clients. Most recently, a wealthy philanthropist asked if she could pay Marjorie to work with her social secretary’s daughter for a few hours and Marjorie said that she would do it without expecting payment. She surmises that she is rarely approached directly by less affluent people in need of her services for two reasons: First, because she does not advertise, and second, her location. She explains, “I’m situated in Cheltenham, Jill, which is a pretty, you know, well-to-do area… So, I think if I were closer to Boston... I mean, I’m surrounded on all ends by, you know, fairly well resourced people – you know what I’m saying? I mean, all of the towns surrounding Cheltenham – for the most part, people are doing ok.

The IEC industry, while still only a relatively small piece of the college admissions landscape, reflects many themes that play out in the wider college admissions arena. It is a
microcosm of college admissions as it relates to social stratification. In this chapter, I use the pro bono work done by IECs like Marjorie as a starting-point from which to explore issues of social mobility and social reproduction in American higher education.

In this chapter, I will begin by examining how pro bono work is tied to IECs’ conceptions of professionalism and their perceived barriers to engaging in this work. I will then look at the ways in which IECs make contact with and work for pro bono clients differ from how things typically play out with their “full-pay” clients. Next, I will use the case of IECs and pro bono work as a vantage point from which to view the ways in which the dominant American ideology deals with the concepts of disadvantage, deservedness, middle class strain, economic inequality, and meritocracy. Ultimately, I will argue that the ways in which the parents, students, and IECs in my sample talk about inequality as it relates to college advising, in particular, and the college application process, in general, is consistent with a dominant American ideology which views the struggle for upward social mobility as a contest fought by individuals and looks to individualistic – rather than structural – solutions for those who wish to maintain or attain high social status.

**IECs and Pro Bono Work**

IEC services are typically priced with an upper middle class clientele in mind, but many IECs provide pro bono or reduced fee services for less economically advantaged college applicants who could not otherwise afford to pay for outside help with the college application process. I use the term “pro bono work” as a catch-all phrase referring to work that IECs perform on a free or reduced fee basis and other community service that they provide, usually in
the form of giving presentations to community groups or volunteering their time to organizations that work with disadvantaged youth.

All of my IEC interviewees expressed favorable attitudes toward the idea of pro bono work and set aside at least some time to work with less advantaged students. Time commitments represented a wide range, from one consultant who sets aside 25% of her time, to others who only work with one or two “special cases” per year. On average, most of my respondents claimed that about 10% of their workload consists of pro bono work and estimated that most of their peers make a similar commitment.

Pro Bono and Professionalism

Most of my respondents are affiliated with professional groups, which tend to encourage (but not mandate) members to do various forms of pro bono work. The Independent Educational Consultants Association, the largest and oldest IEC professional organization, established and continues to be aligned with a foundation that donates about $100,000 a year to organizations that provide college counseling or support to organizations serving the educational needs of low-income families (Berger 2013, Gose 2006). Their commitment to “services for all students” is one of the “10 Important Ways IECA Members Are Unlike Other Independent Educational Consultants”11:

Although independent educational consultants are hired by families with the ability to pay for their services, IECA members are different in two ways: First, over 90% of our members do significant pro bono work, either individually or through charitable community or national organizations. In addition, IECA’s Foundation has served over 700,000 students in the last fifteen years and has contributed over half a million dollars in direct support and free programming to help school-based counselors and parents better meet the needs of all students.

On its “Frequently Asked Questions About Higher Education Consultants” webpage, the Higher Education Consultants Association, another professional group, posts the following:

Our family has limited finances. Does that mean we can’t get help from a college admissions consultant?

Many members of the Higher Education Consultants Association offer sliding fee scales to families who have limited financial means. Some HECA members waive their fees entirely for students from low income families. Other HECA members are active volunteers in local schools and non-profit organizations that assist students with college planning and college applications. Do not assume that your family’s financial situation means you can’t get help from a college admissions consultant!

Additionally, in its “Standards and Ethics” document it states that HECA members should “be encouraged to actively engage in pro bono work and to volunteer in education-related professional and community organization. HECA claims that pro bono or reduced fees cases make up around 5% of the caseload of their typical counselor (Gose 2006).

Many IECs in my sample were unsure about how to estimate their peers’ intentions regarding pro bono work. Said one IEC of her peers’ pro bono work, “Most of them do it for marketing [purposes].” I assume that by using the word “marketing,” she is cynically insinuating that IECs who engage in community service are primarily motivated by the hope that attention generated by these activities will attract more paying clients and represent their occupation in a positive light.

Interestingly, the UCLA Graduate Certificate in College Counseling program requires that candidates do some pro bono work as part of their training. Some of my IEC respondents reported starting their businesses by doing more pro bono work in the early years of their career. One of my IECs referred to her early “non-paying, practice clients” who came from her own community as her “guinea pigs.”

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12 http://www.hecaonline.org/standards_and_ethics
It is interesting to compare the place of pro bono work in the IEC industry to that of larger and more universally recognized professions. In the legal profession, many states set a minimum number of pro bono service-hours that applicants must engage in before they can be admitted to the bar association. In New York, for example, the completion of 50 hours of pro bono services is necessary for admission to the state’s bar (Cooper 2012). While this means that many new lawyers engage in this work, overall, only 10-20% of American attorneys practice pro bono, and fewer than 10% accept pro bono referrals (Dreyer 2009). As Dreyer explains, pro bono work in the legal profession is done on a “cultural” (voluntary) basis and is viewed by practitioners as “charity,” although it has benefits for the profession as a whole, in that it serves to enhance marketing, training, recruitment, and retention rates.

The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code does not give specific guidelines for providing pro bono services, but the APA “General Principle D” states that “Psychologists recognize that fairness and justice entitle all persons to access and benefit from the contributions of psychology and to equal quality in the processes, procedures, and services being conducted by psychologists” (Treloar 2010, citing APA 2002, p. 1062). To fulfill this responsibility and help those who cannot afford treatment, psychologists may offer sliding fee scales, offer pro bono services, create barter arrangements, or allow clients to accrue debt. Psychologists recognize, however, that ethical concerns may arise from making these accommodations, and it is easy to see how some of these may also pertain to the IEC-client relationship. First, many practitioners see the fee as essential because it serves to create a relationship-defining boundary, distinguishing the psychologist-client relationship from that of a friendship. Second, professionals have argued that receiving free treatment undermines
psychological services because it can lead the client to feel inadequate, and devalue or decrease commitment to treatment.

The pro bono work done by IECs and members of other professions is related to corporate philanthropy, where a corporation voluntarily donates a portion of its resources to a societal cause. In addition to altruism, corporations usually have strategic goals for their good works, which may include increased visibility, enhanced corporate image, and deflecting negative images (Ricks and Williams 2005). According to Ricks and Williams, when these actions benefit all key players (executives, shareholders, customers, etc.), corporations are more likely to continue with them, even if philanthropy is typically one of the first things to get cut during an economic downturn.

Although much of the literature tends to offer a pretty cynical perspective, in that it highlights some of the potential financial motivations for doing this work, I don’t really get the impression that this is representative of the IECs in my sample. After all, for better or worse, they don’t advertise these services, and they don’t publicize the work that they do with individual students. As one IEC who gives talks to employees at a corporation said, “I’m not really interested in getting your employees as clients. If that happens, great, but that’s not going to be my approach.” I can’t imagine that they drum up all that much business when they give talks in schools, libraries and other public places, nor do I think that this is their major motivation. When they speak in affluent settings, they face competition from a slew of IECs serving the same community, and when they speak to less advantaged populations, they are unlikely to draw-in new full-pay clients.
Barriers to taking on pro bono work

To be fair, IECs need to make a living, like everyone else. When some IECs spoke of the limits of their pro bono work, they were eager to point out that they do not make as much money from their paying-clients as the public would imagine and that they have prohibitive overhead in the form of office rents (for those who do not work out of their own home) and accrue significant travel expenses because they are expected to visit so many colleges and universities throughout the year.

One IEC, who works in her family’s business and is particularly enthusiastic about pro bono work, said “I literally would be straight pro bono [if I could afford it] – everyone – that anyone could bring to me – I’d be a non-profit tomorrow… Because truly those are the kids I love to work with and are the students who maybe wouldn’t be going to college if someone did not guide them this way.”

Another IEC says that his group spends a “moderately significant amount” of time on pro bono work, but tried to keep it under the radar. He says of the amount of pro bono work done by people in his firm, it is “hard to say because frankly, off the record, we don’t report it because we’re supposed to submit the taxes and have records, so a lot of it is just kind of quiet and each person has their own blend.”

Some claimed that they had intentions to increase their pro bono work as their practices grew bigger and more established. Another IEC who was raising children said that she would like to increase her pro bono work when her own children are admitted to college and out of the house. For example, one IEC said,

I was asked about two years ago to do completely pro bono college counseling on an ongoing basis for some of the students there and I just couldn’t do it. It was just going to be too time-consuming. I think as the firm grows and more staff is added we’ll be able to do that as we have
more bodies and we can dedicate more time, but for now, most of the pro
bono work is presentations, workshops, public speaking, giving free
resources to those groups, not charging anything.

Sometimes, it can be hard to measure and make comparisons between the pro bono or
community service contributions of different IECs because the work can take so many different
forms. For example, one IEC might work fairly intensively with a handful of students, while
another mainly conducts free workshops to large audiences in the public schools. The one-on-
one IEC-client relationship is likely to be of a longer and more intense nature, but speaking at
community forums allows the IEC to disseminate information to greater numbers and offers
exposure to additional potential clients (both pro bono and full-pay). It is also possible that by
offering and publicizing their pro bono services, IECs are sending a message that (like legal and
mental health services), their work is necessary and important.

**Making Contact: “They wouldn’t know how to find me.”**

Most IECs do not advertise their services – and they certainly do not publicize the fact
that they will do some work on a pro bono or reduced fee basis. Most of the IECs that I
interviewed do not actively seek out students who will not be full-pay. The disadvantaged
students who receive help from IECs are usually referred either by affluent employers who have
had contact with IECs – often because they have hired them to work with their own children – or
by teachers, college admissions officers, guidance counselors, or people who work for social
service agencies or other non-profits.

In an earlier chapter, we saw the importance of social capital and social networks in the
dissemination of information about IEC services. The subject of college admissions is standard
conversational fodder at cocktail parties and community events in the well-to-do Boston suburbs
in which many potential IEC clients live. Parents in these circles often decide on which IEC to
hire based on conversations with neighbors, fellow PTA members, and others in their social network. Or, high school students will tell their parents about particular IECs that their classmates have recommended. Most disadvantaged students do not live in neighborhoods and attend schools where these conversations are the norm. How do they even know that such services exist, let alone which IEC to hire? From my interviews, it appears that most lower-income students also find IECs through word-of-mouth, but the communication network looks quite different.

Oftentimes, full-pay clients refer the parents of their service employees (housekeeper, babysitter, etc.) to IECs. Said one IEC,

Well, my small cross-section of the people we’ve done pro bono work with, they would fit into the category – they would be referred to us by maybe another client for whom they work. I’m thinking of a young man who was the son of a gardener of another client whom we worked with. I’m thinking of the young woman whose mother worked in, I don’t know, somebody’s office. We did some volunteer work for a couple of [programs for disadvantaged students] and helped out with their – I actually just did a pro bono thing for a kid from Mexico who was running away from the drug cartel and police or military activities that are going on, had very little money, needed a big-time scholarship.

Or, from another IEC,

Generally [I find pro bono clients] through reference from a current client. “We’re the host family to this Metco\footnote{Metco is a state-sponsored program that allows select Massachusetts children in certain cities to attend public schools in more affluent communities.} student…” or “my daughter has a friend in the city who is extraordinarily bright and she’s getting no help at all,” uh, that’s usually, it, it’s usually reference. And the guidance counselor at the local high school also called me once to say that this student was going to need more assistance than the school could provide, would I be willing to be helpful?

Most IECs guessed that a large part of the reason that they were not approached with requests for pro bono work was because they do not advertise their services. Said one IEC, “all
of our advertising is word-of-mouth. So, people who know my dad [the head of the IEC firm] literally say ‘I’ve got a great kid, can you help them?’” When one IEC was telling me about how she got connected with a particular pro bono client she said, “Well, again, that was mostly personal. ‘Cause they wouldn’t find me. I don’t advertise.”

That the social networks by which full-pay families and pro bono students learn about IEC services look different isn’t all that surprising given what is known about the tendency of people to socialize and network along class lines. Lareau (1987) found that the dissemination of information among parents about their children’s school experiences varied along class-lines. Middle and upper middle class parents primarily socialized with other parents who were part of their largely economically homogenous school community, while working class parents mostly socialized with local relatives and had family, not school, as their nexus. This meant that middle and upper middle class parents knew more about what was going on with their children’s schooling and could share information about things like available supplemental educational resources. Similarly, Roschelle (1997) found that African American, Chicano and Puerto Rican families have less extensive kinship or social networks than non-Hispanic white families. She also found that socio-economic status was also a determining factor in the amount of social and family networking that took place; higher socio-economic status was associated with a greater likelihood of participation in both kin and non-kin networks.

As was said earlier, many IECs take the stance of waiting to be approached with pro bono requests. This attitude is reflected in the words of one IEC who said that he is “committed” to doing pro bono or pro bono work but it “doesn’t come up very often.” For example, one IEC said that she has given some talks about in her community about the college application process and that she would be willing to do it at local high schools, but she has not been approached.
Something similar was said by another IEC: “I don’t get approached by too many people. I think it is in part because of where I am located.”

Indeed, it was not unusual for IECs to tell me that the lack of disadvantaged students reaching out to them for help was largely a function of being located in affluent suburbs. In a similar vein, one IEC said that it didn’t occur to her at first that if she was charging typical IEC rates that she would only be working with advantaged students. She says that because of where she lives, she is mostly surrounded by well-off people, but that she sometimes gets pro bono clients through her husband who coaches sports in the community, because he knows who gets fee waivers to join the team:

I didn’t initially think through, well, if you do this you are charging people, so therefore, most of your clients are going to be people of means, which you know – you know, is a little bit different than what I would like. I mean, I do work with low-income kids and I do [work with an organization that provides college counseling to disadvantaged youth] and stuff like that but, you know, it kind of didn’t occur to me until after I got into it, and it’s like you are only working with a certain range of types of students, you know?

However, I did hear of several cases of IECs connecting with the rare disadvantaged students within their upscale community. Interestingly, the IEC above was not the only IEC who gets some other pro bono client references through a family member who is a sports coach in an otherwise affluent town. Said another IEC:

We’ve lived in [particular affluent suburb for several decades], so people know this is the right place and they know we care. [Our firm may be willing to offer reduced fee services if] there’s even just a family situation that’s just not working, which is going to get in the way, or a parent who’s just lost a job or parents who’ve just lost a job…

I did interview one IEC who said that she consciously decided to locate herself in a place where she would be accessible to less affluent students and could do pro bono work with a charter school in her city:
I moved here in 2003 and I made a conscious effort to work with kids in
[lists some working and middle class suburbs] which they are relatively
affluent relative to the city but relative to [upper middle class suburb], the
western suburbs, they’re not. And so, I would describe the bulk of my
clients as really sort of middle middle class. They don’t have a
tremendous – they have money but they don’t have a tremendous amount
– they’ve paid for their house, their car, and they don’t have a tremendous
amount saved for college. They don’t have a tremendous amount of
disposable income. So, I am going to say that is most of my clients.

Another IEC who is an unusual case because his practice is based in an urban setting,
rather than an affluent suburb, told an interesting tale of a student who reached out to him
because she heard about him through a neighbor:

I’ve only had one American student who ever approached me on her own
and she did it because I was counseling a few of her friends next door and
she was a first generation Chinese-American student from Boston. That
was a lot of fun [laughs]! [Interviewer: Were her parents on board with
this?] Oh, I never saw the parents. [Interviewer: But they agreed to pay?] Yes, they did and she – I’m still smiling because I told her I would help
her for free and she said no, no, I want to pay and I said ok – and she was
really naïve – so I said, I am going to charge you 30 dollars and she said
fine, that’s fine. [Interviewer: for the whole time?] $30 dollars for the
whole time and she paid me in singles! [laughs]

Although many of my respondents do not go looking for pro bono students to help,
several do have commitments to do pro bono work in collaboration with organizations that serve
disadvantaged communities. Sometimes, these organizations will refer pro bono work clients to
them. Most often, but not always, the pro bono work that they do with these organizations is in
the less intensive and more impersonal form of giving talks at public schools and libraries.
Although one could argue that this form of community service is not as valuable as actual one-
on-one counseling, it does have the advantage of allowing for the dissemination of important
information to a larger number of people in a time-efficient manner. Furthermore, such talks
may help audience members learn how to maximize the potential of other resources, such as
school guidance counselors and more intensive pro bono IEC services.
Many IECs offer a form of pro bono service that is somewhere between the community talk and one-on-one counseling, in terms of personalized attention and intensity. This type of assistance usually involves helping students for a few hours at a time with discrete parts of the application process, like essay-writing. One IEC said:

I’ve also volunteered with [an organization] in the summer as a writing tutor, last year, at Amherst College. I also volunteered with [another organization] and that was just to volunteer my time to help students write their personal statements for their college applications. That was with the Boston public schools – and [with the first organization] – it was the same thing, I volunteered to help them with their personal statements for 4 very intense days….

One of my respondents gets her pro bono students through the A Better Chance program. Another IEC sometimes gets clients through a group with which he used to be affiliated, a sports organization that mentors inner-city students. Another interviewee says that her group is part of a larger corporation that provides social services and it has a charitable foundation, so they do some pro bono work at shelters, etc., through them. Also, many IECs used to work at independent schools, many of which participate in programs where they accept and fund a number of disadvantaged students. Sometimes, headmasters of those schools will contact IECs to ask for their help with these students. Another IEC says that she participates in a professional group consisting of several local IECs; sometimes the people in her group who charge more for their services will send less advantaged clients to her.

One interesting case that I found is that of an IEC who has done pro bono work for Children’s Hospital. She said she started doing it when one of her clients died from cancer. She wanted to help other sick children, but ended up doing work for hospital employees’ kids. Another IEC also ended up working with terminally-ill students. In her case, the referrals came to her through the “Make a Wish Foundation”:
So the “Make a Wish Foundation” actually hired us, and so one of the young woman’s wishes was to have help to get into college. You know, so many kids want to visit a TV set or go on a vacation, but Make a Wish Foundation hired us to work with her, and that was – She ended up in my pro bono bucket because they paid x number of dollars and that wasn’t a student that I was going to turn away, just cause we weren’t done.

One major difference in how IECs make connections with their pro bono work clients as compared to their “regular” ones is that while for typical potential IEC clients, it is almost always the parent who initially reaches out to the IEC, with disadvantaged students, it is more often the student, an organization, or a non-parent adult mentor, who makes first contact. Most IECs rarely hear from a student first, and as one IEC put it, “[When I am contacted first by a student] you know, I try to be enthusiastic for the student, but I also know that frankly, if their parents have not sought that sort of support then there’s a financial reason for it.”

Another IEC spoke about how parents rarely contact him about providing pro bono work for their children:

Another group that I work with serves some lower income students in the [small poor/working class city] area and I was put in touch with them through a credit union that I’ve worked with in the past. So, it doesn’t seem to be directly from the parents or students, it’s more from others who worked in that environment who helped me to get in touch with them.

One IEC gave some examples of other non-parent contacts who reach out to her:

I always set aside a third of my client base for pro bono clients and those are people mostly who come to me through family and friends, other teachers that I’ve worked with in the past and those tend to be first generation college students.

One IEC, however, did tell me about an unusual case of a well-educated but lower income woman who was an artist (and possessed a lot of cultural capital) and asked for help for her child. She paid at a reduced rate and also rendered him some of her artistic services in kind:

I think it’s rare for a lower income parent to reach out to someone like me….They find me through – because they’ve got – I only work word of
mouth, so every call I get is someone saying so-and-so referred me to you. So with the lower income, I mean this mom this year, she’s got a college degree, actually from [a local private art school], but she’s low income.

As we have seen here, however, unlike IEC-family relationships with full-pay clients which tend to be driven by a parent, the relationship between the IEC and pro bono client is usually initiated by a non-familial third-party and the ensuing IEC relationship often excludes parents or guardians.

In this section, we have seen the differences in the ways in which affluent and disadvantaged families learn (or don’t learn) about available IEC services through their social networks. There is a large body of sociological literature on social networks and status attainment that deals with the relationships between resources embedded in social networks and socioeconomic attainment. (See Nan Lin’s review of the topic in the 1999 Annual Review of Sociology.) One of the seminal works in this area is Granovetter’s (1973) on the “strength of weak ties.” According him, we are more likely to hear about job opportunities and other avenues for advancement through “weak” (or, less close) social ties and people of higher social classes have the advantage in this, because they have more access to people in high social and occupational positions, and because they possess more weak ties than those who are less socioeconomically advantaged.

Different students, different roles?

When asked about whether the role that they play and the services that they provide to disadvantaged students as pro bono work differs from that of their “regular” work, the following response from one of my IECs is not unusual:

Well, it’s the same basically; it’s helping these kids identify who they are, what they want, and how they are going to get it. It comes down to that.
However, I have found that IECs work with disadvantaged students in a few ways that are different from how they work with other “full-pay” students. My interviews show that in most cases, the service that IECs provide to pro bono students is more targeted and of a shorter duration. With their pro bono clients, they also place more of an emphasis on developing certain forms of cultural capital, strategizing about maximizing financial aid, and helping them to make better use of their school guidance counselors.

Unlike the more “holistic,” soup-to-nuts approaches that IECs often described when telling me about their full-pay clients, which can, in practice, involve families signing-up for large, all-inclusive “packages” that sometimes come with unlimited hours of IEC service – when IECs described their pro bono work, it typically centered around targeting the few areas where the less-advantaged student needs the most help. This more targeted approach, combined with the fact that it is highly unlikely that a pro bono student will connect with an IEC at an early point in the high school career, means that the course of their working relationship will typically be shorter and involve fewer meetings as compared to the standard full-pay relationship.

One area that was mentioned most often was “writing skills,” as they relate to writing application essays. The other areas where help is needed that IECs tended to mention were “schooling options” (being aware of the range of institutions to which they could apply) and financial aid – two areas that are necessarily interrelated for these students.

A few IECs looked beyond the aforementioned “hard” skills and knowledge to less tangible know-how (which sociologists would refer to as “cultural capital” or “habitus” – dispositions [Bourdieu, 1984]). One IEC said that in general, these students need not only information about the college process but also encouragement to take initiative:

So you have to give them the information – you have to do that with the [organization] kids, but you have to give them the encouragement to take
the initiative, 'cause they just don’t have the team behind them that’s going
to do that.

Sometimes, IECs described disadvantaged students as not being used to asking for help.
One IEC described how some of her pro bono work clients do not understand what she is trying
to do for them at first, “and some of them you have to fight to give the help because… they’re
like ‘who are you?!’” IECs typically turned the fact that these students did not feel “entitled” to
help into a positive trait that they would then use to make unfavorable comparisons to some of
their full-pay clients. As one IEC put it, “The [typical, affluent] kids who come to an
independent consultant aren’t necessarily more highly motivated – their parents are.”

One IEC generalized about his pro bono students:

Some need to be shown how to do the mechanics a little bit more. They
may not be as comfortable filling out online forms, things like that, as
some others are. By the same token, give them something to do and they
get it done. They tend to not have that sense of entitlement that a lot of the
other kids have.

Another IEC said that her pro bono work is less intensive than her work with her regular
clients, but that a large part of what she does with her disadvantaged client is helping them to
become familiar with the vernacular of college the admissions process:

Often times the very first session that I do with these guys is a “college
knowledge” session and it’s about the terminology around the college
process and I do a Jeopardy game but it’s all about the vocabulary.”

The following IECs comments can also be seen as relevant to a discussion of cultural
capital:

I think that they’re petrified as well and maybe even more so because they
don’t understand it [the college admissions process]. [They] really don’t
understand it and don’t understand the culture and everything and that’s
why I think they find it so hard to find us. I mean, ideally, what we should
do as a group is go to them and offer advising.
In a similar vein to the above reference to the “culture and everything,” another IEC mentioned that one disadvantage, among many, faced by her lower-income applicants, who are often potential first-generation college students, is that they wonder, “What are these people like that are going to be reading my file?” Getting information about the application process and knowledge of particular schools by visiting campuses to speak with admissions officers, current students, etc., can become a prohibitively expensive proposition for many of these students, a fact that some IECs also made reference to.

When I spoke with IECs about the bulk of the work that they do – the “regular,” full-pay portion of their practice, they consistently spoke about how important it is for students to be able to show colleges that they have participated in certain types of extra-curricular activities, which are also good indicators of the forms of cultural capital that they possess. In their discussion of their pro bono work clients, IECs recognized that these students might have fewer extracurricular activities on their résumé because they need to work at jobs or because their school does not have the resources of an affluent suburban school. This reflects another way in which the role of the IEC is somewhat different when s/he works with disadvantaged youth. An IEC will probably not encourage a disadvantaged student to take on expensive or time-consuming activities or “enrichment” opportunities in order to “look good” for the admissions committee.

Finally, when I spoke with IECs about the work that they do with their “regular” clients, they often stated that they go above and beyond the work that a school guidance counselor could typically do for a student. However, as will be discussed again later, when working on a pro bono basis, many of my respondents saw themselves as helping their clients to make better use of their school counselors. Said one IEC, “For me, it’s about breaking down those barriers that allow them to go maximize their relationship with their guidance counselor.” I find it interesting
that IECs spend a lot of time talking about how guidance counselors really cannot do enough for students, but then they tell me that disadvantaged or middle class students who cannot afford IEC services should make more use of them. We can see here how when IECs do pro bono work, their “personal assistant” role takes a backseat to the one of “mediator” who helps students navigate the existing college advising system already in place in the school. However, the mediation is different here, as it is not between parents and children, as it is for the typical full-pay client. As we will see, IECs who work with pro bono clients may at times find themselves stretching to advise students who have some different concerns than those of their usual clientele.

Do IECs steer disadvantaged students to different schools?

Since it appears that IECs typically play a different role when they provide services to students who they work with on a pro bono work basis, it is logical to ask whether IECs tend to steer these students to different types of schools from their more advantaged peers. For as one IEC put it, the big question that sets apart their disadvantaged students from their affluent fully-paying clients is:

How will I handle financial aid – and that’s probably the biggest issue is that this isn’t simply a matter of where would I like to go next year – this is a matter of where can I amass the resources in order to be able to go?

In earlier interviews that I had conducted with counselors at The Bottom Line, the aforementioned organization that provides college advising exclusively to low-income urban youth, I found that those counselors tended to steer their students to public and more affordable schools, most often local, and not “reach,” so I was somewhat surprised by what I found in my interviews with for-profit IECs who engage in pro bono work with disadvantaged students. As one IEC said, “where cost is a real big factor, then yes, part of their list will be from the point of
view of cost, but also it’s got to be an appropriate college. So, I’m not promoting lower cost colleges solely on the basis of cost.”

A common theme that emerged from my interviews with IECs was that while they don’t necessarily steer disadvantaged students to different schools, they might have other reasons for doing so. Said one IEC, “And it’s interesting – it’s not [steering] to different schools necessarily, it’s a different reason for going….. So it is not necessarily different schools, it is different motivation for choosing schools.” An example of this can be seen when an IEC suggests an expensive elite college to both a full-pay client and her pro bono peer. The IEC thinks that the school, with its affluent student body and high status reputation will be a good “fit” for the former, while he is also aware that it is often the more selective and expensive schools that have “deeper pockets” when it comes to awarding financial aid.

One common theme that emerged from my interviews was that it was most important to steer students toward schools that are academically “appropriate.” Said one IEC, “[Where I steer students] has nothing to do with economics. It has a lot more to do with who they are as students and who they are as people.” Another IEC said, “So, I do try to steer students to ones that are academically appropriate first, and then focus on the financial aid as well, because I know how important that is in terms of them getting through college.” Considering that many disadvantaged students have received subpar academic preparation, I find it interesting that none of the IECs mentioned anything about the importance of selecting a college where a student who came from a low-quality high school and needs remediation might be able to get support.

Most of my respondents were adamant about the need to look beyond public schools and other institutions that are typically seen as affordable. One IEC spoke of some of the considerations when deciding about choosing a public school over a private one:
We’ll go after schools where we know they’re going to be a great fit and they’re the type of kid someone’s looking for, and those are the schools that have deep pockets and those are not always public schools, because the deeper pockets are actually the private schools. So, we do a real mix. Many of those students have done well on their MCAS [Massachusetts standardized testing], so they’ll have tuition free at a lot of the public schools, so then we’ll have to weigh ok, if an Endicott gives us 25,000 but we could go to UMass Amherst for … What’s the final number look like in terms of scholarship and grant which we never have to pay back versus loan?

Many IECs claimed to be aware of which private schools are known for giving generous merit-based aid. Said one IEC, regarding whether he would suggest that his pro bono clients consider private colleges:

So I make sure that they always have to have a state school on their list and then if there are [private] schools that I know that in the past have been generous with kids who are full-need I will definitely talk about those schools.

The IECs in my sample tended to be optimistic about the possibility of finding schools for their pro bono work clients that would provide them with sufficient financial aid. Said one IEC, “I’m convinced that you know the financial aid out there is good enough. I will know those schools that don’t give good financial aid and I’ll tell them.” One IEC even went so far as to claim that financial aid decisions were evidence of a “meritocracy.” When I asked for clarification, he said:

Let’s look at either colleges that are more affordable, more likely to give you aid – and financial aid – let’s face it – 97% of colleges out there is a meritocracy. [Interviewer asks, “It is?”] Yeah. [Interviewer asks, “How so?”] I mean, who’s really need blind. Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford and maybe one or two others. Everywhere else, it’s really like they give more aid to the people they want. So it’s a meritocracy. And so, you know, your reach school is going to give you less money than your moderate school or your likely school. And so, that’s part of the reason, you know, so when you’re factoring finances into that, so it’s more that aspect of things.
Typically, for a variety of reasons, disadvantaged students who apply to college tend to limit their list of potential schools to their local area. However, IECs sometimes spoke about how they try to encourage their students to look farther afield, in large part because some schools are more willing to give merit-based aid to students who will increase the geographic diversity of the student body. Said one IEC:

And the other thing that they need help – and there is a family issue – is that a lot of those families – immigrant families – don’t want their kids to go far away and the trouble is that the kids would get more money if they would go far away. So, you have to educate the family to try to convince them that it really is in their best interest and in the kid’s interest to let them go further afield.

While the topic of geographic diversity came up more than once, none of my respondents directly brought up the fact that many of their disadvantaged clients would also contribute to the racial/ethnic diversity of the student body of many schools. I would guess that this avoidance was due to a type of political correctness which often takes the form of “color-blindness” where an individual claims to not “see” race. Racial/ethnic diversity was referred to in a somewhat indirect fashion here, however:

If someone is really bright and talented, they could come from, you know, Timbuktu, and I’d say, you know, go to Yale, go to Vassar, go wherever, because I think top-tier schools want diversity and some of them are need blind. If it’s someone who would be very average and – let me say this to you – again, top-tiered schools are very diversified.

IECs in my sample rarely discussed issues of whether their disadvantaged clients would feel comfortable on predominantly middle or upper middle class campuses. I would imagine that this is because of insufficient experience with disadvantaged students and because they are used to working within a framework where the ultimate goal is admission and what happens afterwards is not of much concern. The following exception came from an IEC who stood out among the counselors in my sample for having an especially elite clientele:
There are some schools that are for average students that are economically-stratified that are filled with kids who are privileged and I wouldn’t encourage a kid who was average and poor to go to one of those schools. I would let them know about the school culture and I would say, “Visit it. If you feel comfortable with it, [then] that’s fine.”

It seems that disadvantaged students who work one-on-one with IECs are likely to end up applying to a larger and more diverse list of schools than their peers who do not have outside assistance. IECs make them more aware of the availability of application fee waivers and may help to obtain them. They also tend to encourage students to look beyond public schools, to also include certain private institutions that the IEC knows have reputations for giving a lot of merit-based aid. In particular, some of the higher-tier schools are known for giving more merit-based aid in the form of grants. They might also encourage these students to apply to schools outside of their initial geographic limitations, in cases where they suspect that a school might give them more merit-aid in the hopes of increasing the geographic diversity of the student body. I think that the following quote best sums up the typical attitude of an IEC who works intensively with lower-income students:

I think I tend to look at their profile and they probably have already slotted themselves into a certain level of school or type of school and I want to stretch them and make them aware that there might be other things and not to let the cost and those things totally thrown them at the beginning and see what kind of [financial aid] package they could get and so forth.

Before beginning my research, I assumed that IECs would restrict the pool of schools that they would recommend for consideration to their pro bono students. I was pleasantly surprised to find that for the most part, they still took a personalized “matchmaker” approach to their suggestions. On the other hand, admission and access to higher education does not mean that all students will be successful and attain graduation at the same rates. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to graduate with a bachelor’s degree and to aspire to
graduate training (Walpole 2003). Unlike the IECs at the Bottom Line, who tend to point disadvantaged students toward schools that are closer to home and institutions where they will likely encounter more first-generation or disadvantaged students, and promise to offer mentorship throughout the students’ college career, standard IECs do not usually take those factors into account when helping pro bono students apply to college. We would need to follow pro bono students through their college careers to see if admission to these more expensive and oftentimes selective schools eventually leads to greater upward mobility.

**The challenge of financial aid guidance**

Not surprisingly, college financing is one of the areas in which disadvantaged youth need guidance. Many IECs stressed how important it is for their less-advantaged students to seek out financial assistance – especially in the form of merit-based grants that will not have to be repaid. Perhaps because many typical IEC clients do not need such assistance, out of my interviews with twenty-five IECs, only two or three claimed to be experts on financial aid, however. Some IECs will refer students or families to outside assistance in handling these matters.

The ins-and-outs of financial aid are complicated. Even parents with professional degrees and current PhD student have been known to have trouble filling out the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). One IEC says that she is probably one of the most well-versed in financial aid because of the pro bono work that she has done. Another IEC told me that she thinks that there might be a niche market developing for IECs who know a lot about financial aid:

I start to think that there are some college counselors that are specializing now, like there’s a niche market developing within that families who know they are going to need a great deal of financial aid should find – it might be money well spent to work with or at least have a few meetings with a college counselor who’s very knowledgeable about the financial aid,
because you don’t want to end up in a situation where a kid has all these “yes’s” and can’t go anywhere.

One IEC claims that he is unusual because he actually “does” financial aid:

But one of the things that differentiates me versus most of the people I think you’ve spoken with is that I do several things more. I do for high school students’ college admission, but I also do financial aid. I’m one of about twelve in the country that I know of that are truly doing financial aid as well as admissions. There are some people who just do financial aid – all but one of those that I have ever heard of are selling financial products or services, so their real objective is something else I would say, that’s not very ethical. They are effectively charging for a sales call.

The above IEC says that most of his peers don’t understand how colleges choose students and how they decide to give aid, but he claims that because he comes from a business background, he understands the “business” of college. He also says that his clientele is more economically diverse than that of many IECs. Another of the small minority of respondents who claimed expertise in financial aid also started his career in business.

Not only are IECs typically not well-versed in the complexities of financial aid, but many of them are not used to engaging in conversations with students and/or parents on this potentially sensitive topic. The following IEC seems to have a good handle on navigating these issues:

Helping them fill out financial aid forms and how to do it is something we’ll walk a family through. It’s a very sensitive subject. We like to meet our pro bono kids family members whenever – whether it’s mom or dad or someone in place, if they’re a ward of the court, whomever’s going to fill out that form, we like to meet early on in the process so that when it does come time to sit down with someone’s tax forms, they’re comfortable enough with us to know there’s no judgment attached.

Although only one of my respondents mentioned making personal calls about financial aid on behalf of a student, I wouldn’t be surprised if this isn’t a more widespread phenomenon, as most IECs have contacts at a variety of colleges and universities, so these needn’t always be
“cold calls.” The following example illustrates the potential benefits of having an advocate who is willing to speak up on your behalf:

She came to me in January of her senior year after she had applied and she had begun to get the feeling that she wasn’t going to be accepted to her choices, which was true. [Interviewer: What could you do at that point?] I did a lot. She also needed pretty much a full – I actually worked with a couple of people who just need a lot of money and that requires phone calls and I did a phone call and she had to live in Boston, so limited choices. You know, for her, I did a lot, but that was an instance in which it was these are your two other choices and I can call and find out if A you’ll be admissible and B whether they’d fund you.

When considering whether IECs are contributing to the upward mobility of lower income students, one thing we would have to examine is the form taken by the financial assistance that they are receiving: loans, grants, etc. If these students are leaving school saddled with large debt, then they will be at a disadvantage compared to their more advantaged peers who will be free to do things like pursue expensive graduate degrees, start businesses, or develop equity through homeownership.

**Disadvantage and Deservedness**

My conversations with IECs highlighted concepts of deservedness, and attempts to define disadvantage emerged that are useful for understanding how IECs make sense of what they do in terms of pro bono work. From my interviews, one theme that began to emerge was that of IECs trying to determine whether students were disadvantaged “enough” to “deserve” to receive services on a free or reduced-fee basis. According to an IEC who won’t do work for reduced fees, when he does pro bono it is usually because someone referred them and vouches that they have “no money.” He also says that if a guidance counselor, teacher, or clergy recommends someone, he will do it.
One IEC says that for students who can’t afford her full packages, she will sometimes do limited work on an hourly basis at hourly rates, but she prefers not to and she won’t do it for free, but she will give free talks at organizations. She said,

I mean, I do it [pro bono work]; it has to be the right circumstances. Families need to be able to pay something. The families who cannot pay anything – it is not going to be a good fit. I think that they need to pay to show some good faith, so some compensation. I don’t do a lot of it. And a couple of years ago I had a student who was in his late 20’s who was going back to school after a number of personal challenges over the years, drug addiction and some other things going on and he finally kind of had his life together, but he was supporting himself.

It should be noted, though, that this situation appears to be relatively uncommon, as she was the only IEC in my sample to mention an older non-traditional student coming to her for help.

Another IEC says that she will not work on a sliding scale because it is too hard to figure out who really can’t pay full-price, referring to parents who call and say that they cannot afford her services:

I’ve had a number of parents – and it’s been interesting – I don’t work on a sliding scale, quite frankly because I do this stuff through the school, so I don’t know… That’s sort of the way it is, because you never actually know who can really afford it and who can’t and once you start playing those games [laughs]. That’s not where I want to spend my time, playing those games.

In a similar vein, one IEC says that “I will work occasionally on a sliding scale, but I really have to know [that the family really can’t pay.] (He then went on to describe the case of a wealthy family from Dubai who tried to whittle his fees down by three thousand dollars! – a move that I would describe as chutzpadik, or brazen.) A couple of IECs agreed that you need to be “wary” when someone says that they can’t pay full-price.

One IEC who prefers not to work for free said:
It’s usually some kind of – I think that – I think it works better – as they say – when you know you’ve “got some skin in the game.” If it’s totally free, then you’re just not as motivated as, you know, than if you’re paying a little something. I don’t care if it’s five bucks. So, it’s rare that it’s totally free, but we don’t ask for peoples’ tax returns. We don’t negotiate our fees, because if somebody says “well, that’s a little pricey, will you do it for less?”

Another IEC expressed similar concerns about determining true need:

When I do a student pro bono, it is almost always because someone else has asked me to do it – or made the referral and has verified these people don’t have any money – because a lot of people could say they don’t have any money – you don’t really know. And so, if a public school guidance counselor or a priest, minister, rabbi you know says, I need you to do this, then fine – done!

The images that Americans have of the “deserving poor” play an important role in motivating or discouraging personal and corporate philanthropic efforts, but they also have consequences for who receives the benefits and for how we think about social stratification. In the US, people see welfare and other social programs as being for “others” – not for “people like us” (Glazer 2005). However, when it comes to our ideas about who deserves to be the recipient of charity or other philanthropic efforts, we prefer to see the needy as sharing our values. When Silver and Boyle (2010) studied advertised images of the poor, they found that when corporations portray poverty, they show it as something that has simple solutions. The four strategies that they show for helping the poor are (in order of frequency) philanthropy, volunteerism, information, and product sales. Interestingly, 76% of the ads pertained to educational initiatives intended to alleviate poverty. The ads portray the poor as people who share core American values, but are faced with factors beyond their control, thus falling in line with “morality tale” narratives. The preferred (private) solutions and depiction of the poor denote an ethos of individualism and veil the structural causes of inequality. While my respondents did not share their views on poverty with me, as I mentioned before, several IECs in
my sample praised their pro bono students for their motivation and contrasted them with their more “entitled” full-pay clients. Furthermore, I doubt that any of them would blame children from having been born into poverty.

The concept of “deservedness” can be traced through the history of philanthropy and social services. At different times and in different contexts, the dominant ideology has maintained that certain groups are more deserving of assistance than others. A somewhat recent example of this can be seen in the name and content of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which was supposed to “get people back to work and off of welfare.” It is also a place where we can witness some contradictions in the dominant American narrative about the connection between educational attainment and upward mobility. Despite the usual claim that education is the key to upward mobility, with this act, many states reduced their support of postsecondary education and shifted the emphasis to work programs (many of which offered very low pay and little in the way of skill-building or professional development). There was much variation in the ways in which program administrators at state and local levels interpreted work activity requirements; in some places school could be considered a form of “work,” but some programs only counted vocational education while others allowed for pursuing bachelor’s degrees (Pearson 2007). The literature leads me to think that my findings about what the IECs are saying about who is deserving and why are not surprising; the archetypical potential pro bono client is in some way(s) different enough from the IEC and the typical full-pay client (in terms of socioeconomic status, neighborhood of residence, race-ethnicity, etc.) to be considered an “other” whose problems can be solved via an individualized and educationally-oriented solution, but s/he is also shares dominant American ideas about the value of applying oneself in educational pursuits – as a stepping-stone to occupational and
(ultimately) financial success. It is important to note, however, that it is possible that IECs talk about the need for discernment of true need is as much about insecurity that their professional status could be devalued when their services are given out for free, as it is about broader conceptions of deservedness.

**What about those in the middle?**

As we can see, although the typical IEC client is affluent, there are some opportunities for the disadvantaged to benefit from various types of IEC pro bono work. What seems to be largely missing from the story is the vast middle of our population – the ones who cannot afford IEC services and are not considered “disadvantaged enough” to receive pro bono services. This is an interesting difference between how pro bono is handled in the IEC and psychological professions. In psychology, procedures are in place to help clients who find, at some point, that they are unable to pay, but there is not much help for potential clients who cannot afford services from the outset (Treloar 2010). With IECs, it is the other way around. When I asked IECs about what kinds of advice they would give to families in this position, several IECs said that one possibility was to allow clients to pay in installments. One IEC describes such a situation:

> We also, for families that need to pay over time – I just had a family pay me over 7 years – so they could pay 50 or a 100 dollars a month, but 7 years ago they needed help getting their son into college. So, they just paid their last 50 dollars. So, I will set up payment programs for families, because it’s a time-sensitive process, it doesn’t mean we all can come up with x hundreds of dollars at a time, so we will – because I don’t ever want to lose the opportunity to work with a student just because mom and dad can’t come up with the money that it’s going to take to really pull it off. And I do see kids once – and I do see kids once a week [laughs], so it really differs.

Says another IEC:
I have a flat-rate, they can pay it in installments – or twice or whatever. And I will take hourlies in the fall for families who haven’t signed on with anyone and they want me to see their student around the essay or the interview – something specific and then I’ll change my hourly rate.

The above quote also demonstrates something else that I heard from quite a few IECs when I brought up issues of affordability – the possibility of working with an IEC on an hourly basis (as opposed to a full package-deal), whereby one could save money by limiting the hours spent with the IEC, usually by selecting particular parts of the process to focus on. For example, one IEC suggests that middle income families might pay for a few sessions where the IEC could “just give them kind of an overview of this is what you should do next, kind of a little road map after that.” Another IEC suggests that those who cannot afford a full-package sign-up for “two or three jump-start sessions.”

It is interesting to note while many IECs insist that an unlimited, holistic, “full-package,” approach is the ideal, if pushed, they will say that families with less money can make do with fewer hours of help. It seems that as IEC services become more widespread, more options might become available in terms of hourly-work or smaller packages. One IEC who doesn’t work one-on-one with students on a pro bono or reduced fee basis explained how she offers smaller and more limited packages or hourly rates to make her services more affordable for some:

Yeah, what I’ve done is used a sliding scale to accommodate families in that way. I’m trying something a little bit different this year and it also seems to be working, where I’ve divided my services into different packages so I have a full package that covers the gamut of services that I provide and I have a more limited package where essentially we do everything except drafting a list for the student or I simply draft the list for the student, that’s another package of options and I charge you know accordingly and then I also offer hourly consultations to families…
Most of the IECs seemed a bit bewildered, though, when asked about what they might suggest to a middle-income family that needs outside help with the college application process, however. Says one IEC in answer to such a question:

Yeah, that’s a good question. Maybe a one-time meeting. Often we will refer to colleagues whom we trust in the IECA who maybe aren’t in the Boston market, who are a little less expensive. Or, we might say, start early, because our comprehensive fee, you know, if you started today as a senior, is just about the same as if you started today as a sophomore, so you could get an extra year or two. But I agree, I wrestle with that one – how can we help more of the folks in the middle? It’s a great question – I’d be interested to see…

A couple of IECs who did not know where middle income\textsuperscript{14} parents would go for help suggested that parents and students make use of resources provided by the Boston Public Library. Says one IEC, “I don’t know how they would seek out different kind of help. I don’t know where they would go to seek out different kind of help. You know, I could say go over to the public library where they have the TERI [The Education Resources Institute] group.”

Despite IECs’ frequent claims that school guidance counselors could not “do enough” (largely because of time constraints and difficult student-counselor ratios), when asked about what they would suggest to parents who could not afford IEC service, but would not be eligible for pro bono, several suggested that parents and students engage more with guidance counselors. As one IEC put it:

The other is to – and this is true for everybody – people who could afford independent services and those who can’t – they really need to take

\textsuperscript{14} I should note here that when I asked IECs about those “in the middle,” I defined that term to them as the vast segment of the population that cannot afford to hire an IEC, but are not seen by the IECs as being eligible to benefit from pro bono services. This term is not consonant with what sociologists or economists would categorize as “middle class” (although it likely contains that stratum). One IEC, for example, who had a pretty generous take on the matter said, “And if people can demonstrate financial need to me, people who make less than 100,000 dollars a year, that’s a reason for me to lower my rates.” This is interesting because this is around the income level that Harvard and a handful of selective colleges has set for the limit on where they will stop meeting financial need with grants rather than loans. It is still at least two times the mean household income in this country and is only reached by fewer than 20\% of households (US Census report, 2012).
advantage of their school guidance counselor. Most people don’t manage that relationship. They’re really quite good.

This is echoed by another IEC:

Oh, there also lies a big problem because they can’t afford us, or they can, but they are also saving for college. I would say bug your guidance counselor, get to be known, don’t take anything at face value, go out and explore, do as much as you can – come see us on a one or two time basis. I will spend four hours for one session – no student will last that long. I don’t think I will, but I’m honest, I mean, you pay me that fee, I’ll spend as long as you need.

The above quote points to a contradiction that was evident in some of my interviews, where an IEC would initially express reluctance to do much pro bono work, but when I would pose the question of what kind of advice one might give to a family who was middle class and could not afford his/her fees, s/he would then offer to make (hypothetical) accommodations. This might be related to the earlier discussion of “deservedness.” For example, one IEC who said that he would not negotiate fees, when asked about what he would recommend to a middle income person who cannot afford full price, said that he would talk to them about what they could afford or would let them pay in installments:

Well, I think on a case by case basis, I would say, “you know what, it seems like you could really use my help, you seem like a family that’s really reaching out for the right reasons for help. You know, let’s talk about what you could afford – or could you pay me x over y months, spread it out?” That kind of stuff.

Not only is the issue of money touchy, but typically, at higher levels of social class, it becomes less acceptable to talk about money – especially about one’s own income or wealth. Perhaps this discomfort is reflected in the words of an IEC who says that if a parent or family claims that their college decisions are based entirely on money considerations, then he does not think they are a good fit to work with him, because “anybody who says that they’re just
concerned about the money falls into the same category as my clients who come to me and say my child has to get in here. The answer is ‘I can’t help you.’"

IEC services do seem to be expanding somewhat into the middle class sector, as some employers, especially in New England, are starting to offer IEC services to employees’ children as part of their employee benefit packages (‘Admissions Counseling as a Benefit’ 2005). In a *Boston Globe* article, an observer, spoke of companies such as IBM, Johnson & Johnson, PepsiCo, Goldman Sachs, Harvard Pilgrim, and Yale-New Haven hospital, who have offered IEC services as a benefit, “The CEO and the CEO’s secretary both have access to the counseling for their children” (Jaschik 2004). One of my IEC interviewees said that she has two corporate clients who have her come in to give presentations as part of their employee benefit program. However, this type of work that she describes is not very intensive. She continues, “I just go in and you know do the presentation [on college planning or financial aid, etc.] and leave…..I am not taking on individual clients; I’m electing to sort of spread the wealth a little bit more broad-based.”

One of my respondents belongs to a large IEC firm that has a corporate division that provides college counseling to employees at some big corporations as a benefit, but she admits that they are able to do this because they are a big organization and have set the model for this:

There are now about, I think, seventy-five companies – companies like IBM and Morgan Stanley and Merck and Novartis – companies that typically have asked [our large IEC firm] to come in and as an employee benefit to all of their employees, we’ll do a workshop and we’ll one on one sessions so we’ll help families with their essays and so it is – and because it is a free employee benefit, it’s – you know they’re not paying a dime – it’s the company that’s paying it, so it’s not really pro bono but I feel like that gives us a huge – I mean, I’m touching families and being a part of helping families out who would not have access to the kind of service that we would normally provide if they had to pay for it, so, you know, everyone from CEO’s and execs to you know to administrative assistants and employees again who you know really love the advice and
really take great advantage of something that they would not normally have exposure to, so. So that’s a part of it, it isn’t really pro bono but I think that it’s a huge—it really sets us apart in some ways, the corporate work that we do.

Some IECs and IEC companies have started to contract with school districts to counsel students for free (Wildavsky 2000), although my sample only yielded one example—an IEC who works with a charter school to provide counseling to its students. Another of my IECs works for a company that now provides an online college-counseling service that costs thirty-seven dollars per month. From one perspective, these examples, in addition to the fact that many IECs and IEC firms take on some lower income students pro bono, or for reduced fees, is some evidence that a democratizing trend may be taking place in the IEC industry. From an opposing (and more cynical) perspective, it just looks like IECs are finding new ways to make money or advertise their services by having companies sponsor their programs.

**Student and parent respondents on economic inequality and the IEC process**

Asking students and parents questions about whether they had any concerns about hiring an IEC and about which types of students would most benefit from working with one was my subtle way of trying to see if I might elicit any commentary from them about social inequality and the inequities of the college application process. To be fair, I recognize that it is somewhat unrealistic to expect adolescent Americans to think or say much about economic inequality and social class, when the same cannot be said of the majority of American adults. In general, discussion or debate about class is largely absent from the public sphere, including that of popular culture, partly due to fears of the taint of being “anti-American” (Mantsios 2004). Economically advantaged people, in particular, rarely talk about money, largely due to discomfort with their privilege, fear of inciting anger or envy, or, from the opposite side, a kind of reticence that stems from being in a place of security. Furthermore, the advantaged are often
lacking in useful social comparison information and see themselves as “normal” (Pratto and Stewart 2012).

When I asked students if they had any concerns about the prospect of hiring an IEC, only one student explicitly mentioned feeling disconcerted about the possibility that it might give him an unfair advantage over people who could not afford the help:

I had – sort of had – twinges of worry over the, uh, the equitability of it. I could clearly get a college counselor because I had – because my family had the means. But, that was it.

Interestingly, though, I asked him later about who he thought would most benefit from working with an IEC, and he answered, “The people who are least able to do it themselves.” When I asked him for clarification, he explained that he meant “people who have organizational problems,” thereby moving away from a focus on inequality. Other students mentioned that “motivated” students as well as students who are reluctant to speak-up for themselves would especially benefit from IEC services. Harkening back to the idea of IEC as matchmaker, who helps students wade through their many options, one student said that he thought that “students who sort of tend to be overwhelmed by an abundance of choices” might most benefit from working with an IEC.

One of my student respondents, who was unusual in that she attended a large socioeconomically diverse urban high school, said that she did not want other people in her school to know that she had worked with an IEC “because it has, like, a stigma about being, like, a snobby person, obviously, because, you know, it’s a privilege to spend 3000 dollars or whatever.” Her desire to disassociate herself with the upper class of her school is consistent with Jenny Stuber’s (2006) work on how college students talk and think about social class. Stuber found that both upper middle and working class students construct symbolic boundaries vis-à-vis
those above them in the stratification system. Upper middle class students drew the strongest boundaries in relation to those above them in the stratification system, perhaps in an attempt to claim the moral high ground and minimize their privilege. She found that people feel closer to those falling below them in the class hierarchy than to those above them and that the privileged contrasted themselves with those above them in order to obscure inequality and minimize privilege. This idea may also explain why one student interviewee (who came from an affluent family and attended a very highly regarded public school) said that having an IEC “helped [him] get on a similar level to, like, the other kids [from private schools and better resourced public schools] that were applying.

Affluent students may want to downplay their privilege to minimize inequality, but I think that much of this tendency can be explained by a pure lack of lack of class awareness on the part of the student. This is what Meagan Elliott (2006) found when she looked at the silences embedded in discourse about social class on a university campus. She found that there was a widespread misconception that all of the students on campus were middle class. She does note, however, that working and lower class students were more aware of social class differences than their more advantaged peers. This obliviousness to social class position is relevant to my own work, in that the spread of IEC services helps to reinforce the idea that “everybody” goes to college and “everybody” is middle class.

A few students acknowledged that lots of students go to schools that do not have adequate college counseling services available and I was impressed with one student who, when asked about whether working with an IEC gives someone an “edge,” said that

I think if there were to be an effect then through something, then it would be more a kind of side effect of the type of schools that people who tend to get the counselors would come from. So, you’ve got wealthier families who are at in many cases better schools in better neighborhoods…
When I asked parents about which types of students they believed could most benefit from working with an IEC, parents brought up family conflict, students with special needs, unmotivated applicants, etc. However, many of them also brought up issues related to inequality of resources and the ways in which all students could really benefit from the more intense and personalized attention of IECs. As one parent said,

I actually think … most [students would benefit from an IEC]. I would say any student that’s in a large high school could benefit and any student whose parents may have not gone to through the process either themselves or with elder siblings could benefit….I just think that, um, the less resources the student has, the more they could benefit from having you know this kind of counseling.

In several of my interviews, talk of the decision to hire an IEC was laced with a sense of guilt about purchasing an advantage that is not accessible to all. As one parent said,

You know, I kind of think, like, on one hand, I know it’s unfair, to have [laughs] in a way, you know, just sociologically, or whatever, it’s kind of unfair and we could do it because of our income. On the other hand, we have to pay all the tuition [laughs]. So I don’t know, you know. Life is not fair.

Often, the guilt was mixed with a sense of fear that to not hire an IEC would be doing wrong by one’s own children. As one parent put it,

I think the parents who can afford it use it. They do it. They do. And it’s almost a fear of if they can afford, why not? And maybe there’s a downside if we don’t….But I do think most parents who can afford it do – in this community, where education’s really a priority.

Some parents talked about how things are more inequitable in higher education today, as compared to when they were applying to school. One parent said,

The other thing I guess that bothers me about the whole – about the expectation of what [my husband] was just saying, is, I feel like with the test prep situation, you can buy your scores – and it perpetuates the fact that people with the means can buy the score to get their kids into good schools, and just continue, so that – [In] the good old days – I mean, I
came from a – my parents had a college education but were not professionals and were not um, and I was in a little you know rinky-dink NY small high school, but I was able to get into a really good college and it launched my career and you know, I sort of say you know, where does the system let somebody do that now?

These parents seemed to make a connection between hiring an IEC and their concerns about inequities in higher education. As one mother put it when I asked her to compare the college application process of today with that of her day,

I think it’s also a process of those who have do and can and those that don’t get screwed, unfortunately……Kids that don’t have a parent that can help them do better on the test or get focused on when they need to take the test, definitely with their writing and even the college application process, I mean this is how we’re going to sort it out. I can definitely see especially with [my son’s] friends, the difference between kids that have parents that are kind of on the ball, meaning that they got themselves someone to work with, you know….I think it basically, it’s very socioeconomically bent. I think that the ones that didn’t have anybody and kind of struggled – either made really bad choices or didn’t get into a lot of places, or couldn’t figure out really where they wanted to go.

One parent spoke of the dearth of guidance counselors to fully meet the needs of students in today’s public high school in the context of cutbacks faced by public schools in recent years:

You know I feel like good guidance counseling should be something the schools offer. I feel like just so many – just like so many other things – like music and phys. ed. and everything else – our budget cutbacks mean that the guidance department, at least at Brookline High, is so overworked that if you can afford it, you go and get a private counselor….

In general, parents seemed to recognize that most students need something more than what they can get from their school guidance counselors. However, they acknowledged that it would be most helpful for those students who, for a number of reasons, did not have, as one parent put it, a “parent advocate” but rather a parent who wasn’t “as engaged or knowledgeable, or not capable of being as engaged” in the process.
Lots of parents talked about how they wished that more students could have access to these types of personalized college counseling services. As one parent put it,

I think – personally, you know, the problem is right now if you are a public school student, is I really think that no child is getting the kind of attention that really helps them kind of do some of the nuanced – you know, do they survive? – A lot of them do, but do they get kind of – I actually think every child could benefit from more attention.

Although the parents in my sample had chosen a private solution to solve a perceived problem, some of them spoke of how they wished that IEC services could be made accessible to a broader population or even brought into the public schools. They were driven to an individualistic solution to a systemic problem, which is, in this case, the general inaccessibility of sufficient guidance in the college admissions process.

**IECs and Meritocracy**

The existence of IECs seems to throw a kink into IEC clients’ belief in the existence of a meritocratic society in which education serves as a vehicle for upward mobility. The concept of deservingness can be expanded upon as we think of the ways in which parents and students talk about the efforts exerted in working with IECs. In much the same way that those who manage to save and invest their wealth oftentimes come to see themselves as virtuous, the hard work that the student (and maybe parent) puts into working with an IEC helps make them see the process of working with an IEC as (somewhat) compatible with meritocracy. As was the case with this student:

I don’t think that any help that I got gave me any edge in getting in that I wouldn’t have had anyway. I mean, I still would have written almost exactly the same essay. And the essays were really the only part of the whole application that she had any input in – the classes, the grades, the test scores, was all stuff that I did without any input from her. So I mean, if there is any effect, I think it is pretty minimal.
Parents and students often spoke of how working with an IEC actually makes students work harder on the application process. Here, a student warns that working with an IEC may not be for everyone:

But if you’re not willing to, like, put in the work – and it is a lot of work – even with their help – it’s a lot of work, because they’re going to make you edit your essays a lot more than probably if you weren’t working with someone.

This focus on the hard work involved in working with an IEC probably helps to assuage any guilt that someone might feel about having this advantage. This is reminiscent of what Sanders and Mahalingam (2012) found when they studied a group of college students taking a semester-long course focused on social class. They found that privileged students did not want to be seen as skating by on their elite social position, so they were quick to point out that they worked hard to gain admission to the university and that they continue to exert great efforts in their studies.

Conclusion

Knowing what we know about the types of schools that affluent students tend to attend and graduate from, it does not seem like IECs play much of a role in the social mobility of the typical IEC student. However, the story may be different for pro bono students who perhaps wouldn’t otherwise have applied to more well-resourced (and sometimes, more selective) schools without the encouragement of an IEC. This is important because, according to Hoxby and Avery (2012), most low income student who have top test scores and grades do not apply to the nation’s elite colleges, but high-achieving students from lower-income backgrounds who attend selective colleges have a much greater chance of graduating than those attending less
selective and non-selective colleges (Jack Kent Cooke Foundation 2007; Walpole, 2003). This trend contributes to economic inequality and low levels of stability.

At first glance, it may appear that there is a gap between my doubts that IECs make much of a difference in getting affluent students into selective colleges and my comments on the perpetuation of inequality, but I believe that this can be bridged in two ways. The first one is by looking at social network effects on mobility. In this chapter, we saw how affluent families made use of their social networks to gain familiarity with the idea of hiring an IEC and then in deciding which one to hire. We also saw how IECs’ reliance on word-of-mouth advertising, combined with less advantaged families’ lack of access to networks who are “in-the-know” about IECs can prevent them from taking advantage of some of pro bono resources that could be theirs. A qualitative study helps to illuminate these factors and how, in Peter Bearman’s words (2005:63), “the micro process is tightly linked to and responsible for the macro-structure that we observe.”

The second way of understanding the gap is through an understanding of the different types of services IECS perform for the two groups: for the former, the services offered to the former group are more emotionally-oriented (mediation and therapy/counseling), while the emphasis for the latter group is on offering practical advice about the nuts and bolts of the college application and how to pay for college.

From the perspective of the dominant ideology of the American Dream, IECs’ efforts to help less advantaged students apply to college can be seen as a move toward creating greater equitability and opportunity for social mobility. The concept of contest mobility, in which individuals are seen as participating in a fair race in which the prize is elite status, is often associated with the American Dream (Turner 1960). Turner and other functionalists like to
contrast the education system in the US with the sponsored mobility that they perceive in other societies, such as Britain. In a system of sponsored mobility, members of the elite hand-select individuals to promote into high status groups. While this isn’t an entirely analogous case – IECs are not necessarily members of an elite – the case of IECs doing pro bono work does bear some similarities with sponsored mobility, as it involves an individualistic approach to creating upward mobility.

If we take a more structural perspective on inequality, the IEC’s work with both full-pay and pro bono students doesn’t seem to have much influence on altering the course of the general reproduction of the social class structure. According to Samuel Lucas’ (2001) Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) hypothesis, as education participation rates expand, higher SES groups will have less opportunity to maintain their status solely by attaining more education. Rather, they will use their knowledge to help them maintain “better” or more valuable educational opportunities. The theory seems to play out when Sigal Alon (2009) describes how when high-status groups reach a saturation point at a particular level of educational attainment, inequality shifts upward to the next level of attainment. For example, much of the recent post-secondary expansion occurred in 2-year schools, while growth at 4-year schools stagnated. Says Alon, exclusion and adaptation are two mechanisms used by the privileged to expand inequality. Disadvantage in the admissions process for lower status students increased with greater college selectivity. When there is low demand, the secondary system becomes more inclusive, especially at the lower rungs of the status hierarchy. Increased demand for a college diploma increases competition, which increases the importance of test scores for consideration by selective institutions. According to Alon, the privileged adapt to this selectivity, which
intensifies the class divide and leads to expanded inequality. I view the hiring of IECs and tutors by a largely upper middle class clientele as part of this process.

The IECs approach to (and ways of speaking about) engaging in pro bono work is not surprising when considered within the context of Americans’ general ambivalence about inequality. The United States is the most unequal among economically advanced nations and Americans, compared to our peers in those other countries, tend to have less concern about and interest in rectifying the situation (Glazer 2005). Part of this could be because Americans believe that there is a lot more social mobility than there actually is and they are more interested in opportunities for social mobility than equality (Glazer 2005). Also, as Susan Fiske (2011) points out, Americans are more tolerant of inequality in the economic sphere, as opposed to the social sphere, because of our tendency to link inequality with effort and merit.

There have been have been certain times in United States history when American were more concerned about inequality, such as the Depression, or World War II. However, even at these times of heightened interest in promoting equality, there have been limits. For example, as Jennifer Hochschild says, Americans find it hard to sustain an interest in equality when it is anything more than a “thin equality of opportunity synonymous with liberty” (2006:44). I conducted my interviews during a time of deep economic recession. It would seem that if there was ever a point at which Americans would start to acknowledge structural inequalities it would be now, but this is not reflected by my research findings.
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I suppose initially I felt “do we really have to do this?” – you know, we live in a good town, pay a lot of taxes, went to a good school and you know, is this just something that rich people do, just to make them feel better? And you know, while I didn’t want to set up, as I said, a situation of conflict over [the college application process], I also was thinking to myself, well, is this kind of abdicating my responsibility and sort of wanting to get out of a tense situation?

--Sandy, Parent

In this study, I explored the role of the Independent Educational Consultant in the college admissions process. I examined families’ motivations for hiring IECs and inquired into the ways in which they believe that that hiring IECs gave them a competitive edge. While I came into the project thinking that the main story to emerge from my research would be one of social reproduction, what I found was as much, if not more, about the emotional work that IECs are doing and what that says about upper middle class parenting. In this concluding chapter, I will delineate some of the gaps in sociological knowledge and literature that my work helps to fill, discuss relevant policy implications, point out remaining questions, and suggest new directions for research that can build upon this work.

At the methodological level, my use of qualitative research methods allows for a perspective not often found in the literature on stratification and schooling, which tends to be quantitative in nature. By examining interactions and relationships between individuals, it is possible to delineate the mechanisms by which cultural assumptions and lived experience contribute to reproduce the existing social order into the next generation.
My work can make contributions to sociology of education and social stratification and mobility. It can also serve as a vehicle for exploring central themes at the juncture of those two fields, namely, the relationship between educational attainment and social mobility. Furthermore, engaging with social reproduction theory promotes conversation with scholars working in those two related subfields.

Many studies in the sociology of education that deal with the relationship between educational attainment and stratification focus on the money directed to public schools through taxes or private schools vouchers and tuition, but my project falls into the recently recognized and newly emergent research area of the privatization of supplemental – or “shadow” – education, which includes tutors and test coaching. In recent years, questions surrounding issues of privatization have emerged in a variety of areas of American life. Concerning education, debates over for-profit charter schools and the corporate take-over of public education feature prominently in the media, for example.

The hiring of IECs can be seen as a reaction to what Hacker (2008) calls the “privatization of risk,” the idea that in a time of growing economic instability, government and employers are placing more responsibility for the management of risk on the shoulders of workers (Hacker 2006). In fact, an entire two-pronged “admissions industrial complex” has grown up around the American higher education system, of which the IEC industry is a part. The IEC business can be seen as a form of “shadow education,” an extra-curricular educational opportunity utilized by families who wish to maintain or improve their child’s social status. The IEC industry is an example of parents hiring professionals to do a job that is provided for free by the public schools, but that they deem insufficient.
The expanded use of IECs, particularly among the upper middle class, should be seen within a broader social context of economic uncertainty in which even those Americans with comfortable lifestyles fear that their children will not be able to attain or maintain the socioeconomic levels of their parents. These uncertainties have produced a form of intensive parenting – some would call it “paranoid parenting” – among affluent parents who feel internal and social pressure to ensure that their children reach certain educational and occupational goals. Families who have the money to hire IECs see it as an investment in their children’s future. The case of the IEC thus illuminates an intersection between economic forces and family dynamics. However, motivations for hiring an IEC go beyond concerns about economic security.

Despite my preconceived notions that had been informed by portrayals of the IEC industry in the media, IECs are generally not there to pull strings or do magic tricks (although connections may play a bigger role when they are working with students who are considering less selective schools). Families hire IECs with the hopes of maximizing their children’s potential in the admissions arena, but it appears that the maintenance of peaceful family relationships and the management of uncertainty also ranks high on the list of reasons that families hire IECs. When asked about the “edge” that they believe that they have gained, both parents and student stress the many ways that IECs help them to manage their emotions and tackle the college process with efficiency. Oftentimes, these families do not face any restraints in choosing which colleges (and how many of them) to apply to, so the IEC also helps them limit their seemingly “infinite” options. Parents also appreciated how their IECs keep the focus on their children as unique individuals and offered advice accordingly.

Hiring an IEC can be seen as an effort on the part of parents to “outsource” some parental tasks. I described three metaphors that are illustrative of what I see as the primary role that
families are looking for IECs to play and illuminate a few areas in which parents are willing to “outsource” some of their parental duties. An understanding of the roles that parents are looking for someone to fill led me to see IECs as metaphorical matchmakers, mediators, and personal assistants. Parents very much want someone else to mediate family conflicts that emerge during the application process, especially those involving a perceived need to “nag” their children about meeting deadlines and help them wade through “infinite” choices, in order to curate a list of schools that the student would love to attend.

I thought that a major role of the IECs might be to help students transform various forms of capital into those that would be more valuable in the admissions arena, but it seems now that this is for the most part unnecessary. (The story may be different for disadvantaged students who receive pro bono IEC services.) As a result of a parenting style that emphasizes the cultivation of children’s unique talents and personalities, there isn’t that much need for IECs to package most of these students or re-make them into good college applicants – they have been groomed for years for this moment. IECs step in to help students learn how to communicate their desirability as applicants to admission committees. The form of capital that parents (and sometimes students) cash-in on during the high school years largely involves social capital as they exploit their social connections to learn about and select IECs.

While it does not seem like IECs play much of a role in the social mobility of the typical affluent IEC student, an examination of the IEC industry does highlight many of the ways in which socioeconomic advantage functions in the college admissions arena and may extend this privilege into adulthood and maybe even into the next generation. In other words, the IEC industry may be one factor out of many in the reproduction of privilege, but surely it is not the only one. (Again, the situation may be different for pro bono students who perhaps wouldn’t
otherwise have applied to more well-resourced (and sometime, more selective) schools without the encouragement of an IEC.) As a college education becomes accessible for a wider range of social classes, IECs are part of an effort by the higher classes to hang on to their places in the institutions where they have traditionally been well-represented. IECs’ ideas about pro bono work that benefits disadvantaged students are consonant with dominant American ideology about individualism, meritocracy, and the American Dream.

It may be that IECs are responsible for helping to reproduce a sense of class privilege, as distinct from the reproduction of the class structure. Having knowledge of the IEC world can serve as something of a boundary marker membership in an upper social strata that is reinforced through discussion of the topic with one’s peers. Michele Lamont (1992) found that there is a greater belief in egalitarianism and universalism among upper middle class Americans (as opposed to their French counterparts), who deny the significance of class and occupational difference. However, she labels these as “ritualistic denials” that accompany a sense of superiority that is maintained by drawing a boundary between themselves and those on lower economic rungs. In this context, making the financial sacrifices involved in hiring an IEC allows these families to believe that they have done everything possible to ensure their children’s success in the college admissions arena and beyond, thereby promoting feelings of deservingness and fairness that predicate this country’s economic and social order. It also helps to instill feelings of empowerment (or, more cynically, entitlement) in the younger generation that will motivate them as they seek to maintain the privileges of their social class of origin into adulthood.

The appeal of IEC services can be registered on several levels, and it can be hard to parse the extent to which an individual is motivated by status versus emotional needs, for example. On
the occasions when IEC clients graciously invited me to interview them in their homes, invari-
ably, their houses were lovely, but not flashy. I can only speculate that for these families, admission to “good” schools is an acceptable status symbol for which to aspire, in a way that would not be true for ostentatious cars or clothing. These are people who are willing (and able) to invest their time and money in education, and the act of hiring an IEC forges their identity as members of a particular social class, as does the fact that most families use their social networks to learn about and choose IECs.

The lack of socioeconomic diversity of the student bodies at the types of colleges attended by IEC student-clients can also serve as incubators for certain perspectives on social class and a sense of where one is positioned in society and discourage discourse on matters related to social class (Sanders and Mahalingam 2012; Stuber 2006; Elliott 2006). Sanders and Mahalingam (2012) found that a lack of discourse about class on campus camouflages economic privilege and halts critical reflection and conversation, especially on the part of the privileged, in that it determines what is acceptable to talk about, how it can be spoken about, and whose voices are accepted.

Consider the make-up of today’s student body: The majority of the 24 percent of Americans aged 25 to 29 currently holding a bachelor’s degree come from families with earnings above the median income and 75 percent of those attending colleges that are classified as “most competitive,” come from families with earnings in the top income quartile, while only three percent come from families in the bottom quartile. Furthermore, very few colleges can afford to admit students on a need-blind basis and several schools have recently given up on the attempt to do so (Bombardieri 2013). However, as Stuber (2006) noted, some of the ideas that upper
middle class students have about class and their position in society can be attributed to spending their formative years in economically segregated neighborhoods and schools.

**Policy Implications**

Outside of academia, I hope that my work will be interesting and useful to many educational policy-makers, researchers, practitioners, administrators (at both the K-12 and post-secondary levels), and college admissions officers. I found that the impact of IECs on low-income students can be higher than that which they have on affluent youth. Policy-makers might build off of my work to develop ideas for programs that could reach out to disadvantaged students who attend schools where college guidance counseling resources are over-stretched to provide much-needed interventions in the college admissions process. Perhaps this work will also lead to interventions aimed at middle income students, the ones who cannot afford to attend prep schools or pay for expensive IECs, in addition to the low-income students who qualify for the types of services provided by organizations such as the Bottom Line.

While I recognize that college is not the right fit for all students, I want to make sure that it is seen as a realistic goal for students from lower-income families and that they have supplemental guidance in reaching that goal. I believe that expanded access to better (and earlier) college advising services to disadvantaged students could go a long way towards making this a reality for many more young people.

There is a good possibility that we will see growth in college counseling services, in general, or IEC services, in particular, aimed at disadvantaged youth, even in an environment in which the calls for the defunding of public education in low-income neighborhoods ring loudly, but only if those efforts are provided by private citizens or non-profit organizations. Most
Americans see education as a means of upward mobility and consider the pursuit of a college degree by the poor as a “bootstrap” maneuver. Furthermore, there is a strong history of philanthropy aimed at the youth population in this country, much of it aimed at empowering them to become solid adult citizens (Williams, 2007). Whether such attempts to provide supplemental college advising to disadvantaged youth actually lead to upward mobility remains to be seen.

The case of the IEC industry is another example of the ways in which the middle class is being squeezed in the realm of American higher education. There is robust college admissions counseling available for the affluent few who can afford to pay IECs – and for the lucky few who are determined to be needy and deserving enough to receive a typically watered-down form of their services.

Remaining Questions and New Directions

For this project, I chose to utilize qualitative research methods – primarily interviews – because they were best suited for answering my research questions. However, engaging in qualitative research necessitates having a small and ungeneralizable sample. For example, I recognize that by training my focus on one geographic region, I may have overlooked ways in which the IEC market is different in other regions of the country, in terms of size, cost of services, and perhaps, culture.

Interviewing, despite its appropriateness for my study, has its own specific limitations. On the most basic level, there is the question of whether one can trust what people say. Observing sessions with IECs and their clients as well as some of what happens in the daily lives of IEC clients could be a valuable way to supplement my interview data. Additionally, by
choosing to interview each respondent only one time, I elicited data that was anchored in a single
moment in time.

There is a potential role for quantitative researchers who are interested in studying IECs. While my study was not intended to be an evaluation of the effectiveness of working with IECs, someone who wanted to engage in such a project may want to conduct a comparative study with a control group who did not use IECs, that would involve matching students with similar grades, test scores, SES and comparing the selectivity and/or prestige levels of the schools where they gained admission.

Another angle for future researchers on the IEC industry might involve redirecting the focus onto college and university admissions officers. As I conducted my research, I was pleasantly surprised that I didn’t encounter signs that the counselors in my sample were behaving unethically, by writing students’ essays for them, for example. However, while I was writing this conclusion, an opinion piece by a former application reader at UC Berkeley appeared in the Education section of the *New York Times*. Referring to the personal statements in her application pile, she wrote that “many betrayed the handiwork of pricey application packagers, whose cloying, pompous style was instantly detectable…” (Starkman 2013). (Note the explicit assumption that IECs “package” students.) During the course of my research, I engaged in an informal conversation with an admissions officer at a well-respected local university. It would be interesting to speak with admissions officers at a variety of colleges to get their perspectives on what they see as the role and value of the IEC in the application process, the nature of their relationships with them, and about how they react when they detect that an IEC or parent has had a heavy hand in an application.15

15 According to one account, some admissions offices have a phrase, DDI, short for "Daddy Did It," that they apply in these cases (Schworm 2008).
At the IECA annual conference in Boston in 2012, I heard a talk by Richard Weissbourd, a child and family psychologist at Harvard and author of *The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children’s Moral and Emotional Development* (2009). When he introduced his topic, “achievement pressure as threat to morality,” the audience, mostly consisting of IEC’s murmured with recognition. He argued that affluent kids are doing as badly (or worse) on moral and well-being measures as compared to poor kids, despite their privilege, largely because they have been taught to believe that achievement is more important than morality. He said that parents are setting this example by doing unethical things, especially in relation to school and college admissions, or by encouraging kids to do good deeds merely for the sake of getting ahead in what he calls the “Community Service Olympics.” He claimed that these parents are sending mixed messages about achievement by saying that they just want their kids to be happy, but then spend a lot of money and effort on college admissions. Without doing broad observations, it is hard to accurately tell how their stance towards college admissions fits into rest of their lives.

Bearing in mind that the hiring of IECs is part of a constellation of intensive parenting practices, it is interesting to think about these children’s futures: what will happen to these kids when they get to college and beyond? According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, children of “helicopter parents”\(^\text{16}\) are more satisfied with their college experience and gained more from it (Nelson 178). However, according to some reports (Kadison and DiGeronimo 2004), recent years have seen an increase in serious mental health issues among college students. Could there be a link between intensive parenting and the kinds of problems that kids have on campus? Margaret Nelson (2010) claims that intensive parenting does not abate when kids

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\(^{16}\) This is not to say that the parents in my sample should be classified with this term.
become adults. For example, parents call university career services to see what they are doing for their kids. Nelson suggests that some “professional middle class” parents actually like it when their kids are still unsettled and somewhat dependent for a while, because it allows them to keep parenting at intensive levels.

One possibility for future research would be to follow IEC student clients through college and into post-graduation young adulthood. Will students who have worked with IECs continue to purchase help for managing other aspects of their lives during their college years? According to a recent New York Times article, “Some Tutors Are Shouldering a Wider Load” (December 14, 2012), some adolescents and young adult college students are beginning to utilize the services of personal assistants or life coaches. These relationships sometimes emerge when an academic tutor begins to take a more holistic approach to advising a student by offering guidance on personal matters – and are usually only possible if students’ parents will pay for them.

We don’t know what the results of a history of this personalized attention – some would say “handholding” – will be. Will it make it harder for these individuals to function as independent adults? Or, another possibility is that IECs taught them valuable time management skills, such as how to break down larger tasks, which will lead them to be more productive and effective adults. If my peers (now in their late 20s and 30s) are any indication, however, unless they go into “business,” high-tech, or certain fields of law or medicine, many of this latest crop of young people will not grow up to achieve the same level of upper middle class lifestyle as their parents, so they may not be able to afford to keep hiring help as adults.
Conclusion

As this project was drawing to a close, it was reported that college enrollment fell two percent in 2012-13, the first significant decline since the 1990s, a drop that mostly involved for-profit and community colleges (Pérez-Peña 2013). However, it looks like 2013-14 will begin a several-year drop in enrollment at traditional four-year, nonprofit colleges. After more than a decade of sharp growth, the traditional college-age population is in decline. In addition, many adults who had gone back to school during the recession have now decided to reenter the job market as the economy begins to recover. The colleges that will be hardest hit will be the less wealthy, less prestigious, and less selective ones that are most dependent upon tuition dollars for survival. It is possible that this change could increase the influence of IECs on the admissions chances of students who apply to these sorts of schools, since those are already the kinds of places where IECs are most able to use their connections on behalf of applicants.

The IEC business is like a microcosm of college admissions as a whole, with regard to its gross inequalities and potential as an avenue for upward mobility. Like with other forms of privately-purchased assistance, IEC services contribute to Raftery and Hout’s (1993) “maximally maintained inequality.” As with the larger college admissions process, the expenses involved favor the advantaged, and while there is some supplemental assistance available for those who can prove that they are extremely disadvantaged, the middle class doesn’t have much recourse.

Earning a college degree has become accessible to a greater proportion of the population, but much of the increase can be found in the community college and for-profit sectors of higher education, IEC services have started to expand their reach, but those services are a watered-down version of what the advantaged can pay for. College admissions favor those whose parents are well-educated and know the ropes. For example, parents are more familiar with the application process are better able to help students put together an application in time for early decision
deadlines and are aware that applying early decision can raise a student’s chances of acceptance. Likewise, a good IEC anticipates the many steps of the application process and can facilitate this process.

The savvy and typically affluent parents in my study know that they need to begin thinking about college during the early years of parenting if their children are to evolve into appealing college applicants. My research found that parents (and to a lesser extent, students) are embedded in social networks that provide helpful social capital in the form of general information about the existence of IECs and recommendations for particular counselors. In the end, the IEC industry (and those who hire its services) cannot be blamed, on its own, for causing social inequality, for it is merely one element of an entire system that favors the advantaged. Furthermore, the ways in which parents, students, and IECs in my sample talk about inequality as it relates to college advising and the application process reflects the dominant American ideology that sees the struggle for upward mobility as a contest fought by individuals employing individualized strategies.

Earlier, I spoke of risks perceived by middle and upper middle class Americans that lead to more intensive parenting tactics. However, millions of less fortunate Americans today are facing real risks at a more basic level of unemployment, hunger, and lack of health insurance. In the educational realm, for example, recent months have seen cuts to Head Start early educational programs due to governmental “sequestration.” The set-backs caused by such a move can last the rest of a child’s life. According to Hacker, uncertainty can lead an economically struggling family to not invest as much in productive forms of risk-taking such as education or job training. The rise of the IEC industry highlights a bifurcation in American society in which the experience
or perception of different types of risk motivates the advantaged to aim higher, while it takes the wind from the sails of those who most need a boost.
Appendix A: Methodological Appendix

Introduction

This appendix outlines how I gathered data and the kinds of epistemological questions that I considered in data collection and analysis. To answer questions about the role of independent educational consultants in the college application process, I utilized qualitative research methods throughout this project. I assumed that opportunities for observation of interaction between IECs and parents and students would be limited due to confidentiality issues and that interviews would be the better option. My plan was to ensure greater validity via triangulation\(^\text{17}\) – by meeting with members of all three groups (IECs, parents, and students) independently so that I could compare their perspectives on different issues.

Data Collection

This study is largely based on data collected from structured interviews with IECs and parents and students who have hired them. Between and July 2010 and April 2012, I conducted formal interviews with 25 IECs, 20 parents, and 7 students.

\(^{17}\) Triangulation can involve using multiple observers, theories, methods, or empirical methods for the purposes of verifying data from more than one source. My efforts to elicit data from interviews with IECs, parents, and students can be classified as a form of data triangulation which is a mode of comparative analysis, as well as an example of confirmatory triangulation. This method, which is common to qualitative research, involves seeing each group as representing the perspective of a different group of “stakeholders” (Guion 2002).
To find my sample of private IECs, I searched the online directories of the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA), and National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) for Massachusetts-based counselors who do college advising. I found that Massachusetts IECs represented about 10% of the IECs listed as working in the United States. I also noted the many Massachusetts IECs who appeared in more than one directory. I dropped the few who were outside of eastern Massachusetts. (Depending on the organization, between 75% to 85% of the Massachusetts listings were for the greater Boston area.) I then contacted the remaining IECs by phone and/or email to solicit interviews. The IECs responded positively, for the most part. A few failed to respond, some could not be interviewed because we had incompatible schedules, but only one outright refused to be interviewed. I then augmented list of IEC interviewees with a few that I found via word-of-mouth. This process resulted in a sample of 25 IEC interviewees.

To help get a sense of the IEC industry outside of the Boston area, I also conducted what I call “written interviews” with four IECs in other parts of the country, who I found by networking with HECA, a professional organization that tends to draw from the western part of the US.

At first, I found my parent respondents by asking my IEC interviewees to refer me to their clients. However, after locating my first fourteen parent interviews this way, I eventually decided that I should expand my pool, due to fear that IECs could be selecting clients in a biased manner. I found the remaining parent interviews by asking my earlier parent interviewees to refer me to friends who had also worked with IECs, and through an IEC who was not part of my

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18 These communications took place entirely via email. After determining their willingness to participate in my study, I would email the IEC my interview schedule and s/he would respond to the questions in writing. If I had questions about their answers, I would ask for clarification via email, as well.
IEC interviewee pool. I also wrote to the PTAs of local districts where IEC services are common, to ask for parental referrals. I then asked the parents if I could have permission to interview their children about their experiences with working with an IEC.

Of the 25 IECs with whom I conducted formal interviews, five (or 20%) made referrals that resulted in interviews with parents. I conducted interviews with 20 parents. One parent interview was the result of a referral from one of my early parent interviewees. Three parent interviews were the result of referrals from an IEC with whom I had conducted a short, informal interview.

I conducted most of my interviews with IECs at their place of business or at coffee shops. Interviews with parents generally took place at their homes or at coffee shops. With the exception of two interviews that took place via Skype, I conducted interviews with students in their parents’ homes. Most of my interviews were one-on-one, with the exception of one interview that I conducted with two IECs together who are business partners and another interview where I interviewed a mother and father together. Children’s parents were usually home at the time of interview, but were not present in the room. I digitally recorded all interviews.

In my recruitment materials for locating IECs to interview and in my initial emails to potential IEC interviews, I told them that I was a doctoral student in the Sociology Department at Brandeis University and that I was doing research on the role of IECs in the college application process, that the project had been approved by the Brandeis Institutional Review Board, and that I hoped to conduct 45 minute interviews with IECs – preferably in person, but with the option of using telephone or Skype if necessary. The recruitment materials for parents were very similar. As I recruited students thought their parents, I did not have recruitment materials for them.
In general, conducting interviews with my respondents was a pleasant experience. IECs seemed to respect me as an academic and speak to me as an equal. I attributed their willingness to speak with me to their regarding me as someone who they expected would present their profession in a more objective light than that often given by journalists in sensationalist articles in places such as the \textit{New York Times}. Parents and students, too, seemed happy to chat with me about their experiences with the college application process. They knew that I am a graduate student at Brandeis University, a local university that is highly respected. Another thing that I would do is put my Johns Hopkins folder on the desk in front of me, knowing that they would then ask me if I went there as an undergraduate and that they would be impressed because it is a selective school with a high “name brand” recognition.

In addition to my formal interviews with IECs, I also conducted two interviews and one group interview at The Bottom Line in Boston. The Bottom Line is a privately-funded organization that serves nearly 2,000 disadvantaged students through two programs - College Access and College Success - from offices in Boston and Worcester, Massachusetts, and New York, New York. The College Access program provides college counseling, while College Success offers mentoring to former Access students during their college years. Brandeis Sociology Professor David Cunningham was able to connect me to a Brandeis alumna who was working as a college advisor at Bottom Line. I conducted an interview with her and another one with the Director of Development. I also did a group interview with three additional counselors at the Boston Bottom Line office.

Although this project is largely interview-based, I did engage in some observational research at a multi-day IECA conference that was held in Boston in May 2012. The organizational leadership gave me complimentary access to the conference with the
understanding that I would not participate in any role other than that of observer, so for the most part, I sat quietly in sessions and took notes. (Despite the fact that my name tag was labeled “Researcher,” I don’t think that most people paid much attention to me, although a couple of IECs asked me if I was a journalist, upon noticing that I was taking [field] notes.) Observing at the conference allowed me to compare the responses given by my interviewees to the things that IECs said among their peers, when they did not know that they were being observed by an outsider.

Analysis

I used Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis program, to aid me in organizing, coding, and analyzing my data, which included interview transcripts and field notes from observational sessions at the IECA conference.

My analysis of the data was informed by a grounded theory approach whereby theory is generated through the research process (Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory is an inductive, as opposed to a deductive, approach. This means that rather than starting out with a hypothesis to be approved or disproved, the researcher enters the field with the intention of gathering data that s/he will later use as construction materials for theory-building. In my case, I entered the field with several themes in mind that could be relevant to a study of the role of IECs in the college admissions process. I had designed my interview questions with the intention of eliciting data related to these things, but I also kept my ears open for responses that pointed to other themes potentially worth exploring. During my first few interviews, I discovered new themes worth pursuing and revised my interview questions accordingly. This process provides an example of
the iterative and non-linear nature of grounded theory – a researcher may tack back and forth between different stages of the research process.

**Potential Limitations**

Generalizability was not my top priority as a qualitative researcher. Still, I initially had a concern about the generalizability of my study, due to the fact that I almost exclusively drew my sampling pool from the IEC population that is affiliated with one or more professional associations. Also related to questions of generalizability is concern about my decision to limit my research to eastern Massachusetts IECs and the (mostly local) clients that they serve. However, Massachusetts – the Boston metropolitan area, especially – represents one of the largest and oldest IEC markets in the country. None of the IECs said that there was anything unusual about the local market. Interestingly, though, a few did use the Metro New York City market as a foil to show how reasonable Boston rates and practices were in relation to what goes on there.

Another potential limitation of my project is one that is common to all interview-based research. At the most basic level, how does one know that one’s respondents are telling the truth? And from a phenomenological standpoint, even if a respondent answers your questions in good-faith, s/he can only report on his/her subjective experience. Triangulation is an important strategy here, which can be done in regards to methods and informant types. By interviewing IECs, parents, and students, I made sure to get at least three different perspectives of the situation, and I could consider the ways in which their accounts might match or diverge. As mentioned earlier, my observations at the IECA conference also served the purposes of triangulation.
Summary Statistics

1. IECs

N=25 IECs
16 female, 9 male
100% White

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Professional Background</th>
<th>Raw Number</th>
<th>Percentage*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College Admissions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent School Admissions</td>
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<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Guidance – public school</td>
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<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Guidance/College Advising – independent school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher – independent school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Instructor</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEC for independent schools</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12 special education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education advocacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College financial development</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages will add up to more than 100% because some IECs listed more than one prior occupation.

2. Parents

N=20
19 female, 1 male
100% White

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Level of Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Men N=15</th>
<th>Women N=20</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

199
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>MD</td>
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<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>MBA/CFP</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
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<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
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<td>&lt;1%</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
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<td>45%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate’s</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
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</table>

### 3. Students

N=7 students  
4 female, 3 male  
100% White  
3 high school seniors / 4 college students (freshmen and sophomores)
Appendix B: IEC Interview Protocol

Questions for Independent Educational Consultants

Part A

1. How long have you been involved in the IEC business? How did you get involved in the field? In what context do you work (independent, part of a firm, etc.)? What kind of training did you have, if any?

2. What would you say is your most important task/role in the college application process?

3. Why do parents hire you?

4. Do you do any kind of prescreening of parents (or students)? What are some red flags that tell you that this professional relationship might not work out?

5. Do you have a contract with parents? What are some things that you state in the contract (things you will do, won’t do, proper expectations, etc.)

6. Are your relationships with parents typically easy or challenging? Can you tell me about a time when your relationship with a parent or parents was strained? What makes for an “easy” relationship?

7. When during the course of a high school student’s academic career do you typically begin working with them?

8. What kinds of relationships do you form with your student clients? What makes for an easy versus a strained relationship with a student? Is your relationship with a parent ever very different from the relationship that you have formed with his/her child?
9. Who is your clientele? Can you describe some demographic patterns (ethnicity/race, social class, etc.)? Do most of your students go to public or independent (private) schools?

10. What are some things that you can do, or ways that you can help a student in the admissions process that their parents or guidance counselors cannot do for them? (Follow-up: what is your relationship with high school counselors – do you work with them, work around them, do they know that you are working with their students, any conflict, etc.?)

11. What characteristics of students make for a good (successful) college applicant? What kinds of qualities do you seek to encourage in your clients?

12. Do you ever recommend that your client take any particular classes or join certain activities in order to make him/her a more attractive college applicant?

13. How important is it that a student’s own “voice” comes through in the application? If it is important, how do you support this?

14. Do you ever have any concerns about making your clients stand out, especially if many of them come from similar backgrounds? How do you handle this?

15. What are typical habits or mistakes on the part of students that need to be overcome?

16. Do you find that you ever need to “manage” students’ or parents’ aspirations (for example, aiming too high or too low)?

17. Can you tell me about one of your greatest student “success stories”? How about an unsuccessful case?

18. What kind of guidance might you offer to a student who has a mediocre record (in terms of grades, test scores, etc.)?

19. Have you ever seen a student who you did not think was “college material”? What was the situation? How did you handle it?

20. How do you view your role in the college admissions process?

21. Would you say that students who work with IEC’s have an “edge” in the admissions process?

22. Do you ever have contact with admissions officers? When?
23. How has this job influenced your view of college admissions? Is there anything that you have learned about it from being in your unique position?

24. What role do you think wealth or income plays in college admissions? How about social class? (Follow-up question: Do you think that there is equality of opportunity in the college admission process for students from different social backgrounds?)

25. How much do you charge? Where are your fees on the spectrum of high to low for this area?

26. Are you affiliated with any professional organizations? If so, do you think that there are any differences between affiliated and unaffiliated consultants, in general? As an affiliated IEC, is there anything that you can do for a client that an unaffiliated IEC couldn’t?

27. Why is this work important to you? Most rewarding aspects? Biggest challenges?

**Part B**

1. Do you do any pro bono or reduced-fee work for students who cannot afford your typical services?

2. What percentage of your workload is dedicated to pro bono/reduced-fee work in terms of hours spent and number of students? Do you think that this is typical among your peers?

3. How do these students find you?

4. Do you think that lower-income students have different reasons for seeking out consulting services than do their more privileged peers? Why, or why not?

5. Do you find that your lower-income clients need help with anything that is usually not necessary for your higher-income clients?

6. Are there any ways in which you play a different role when working with these students? If so, in which ways? What are some differences, if any, in the ways that you work with high v. low income students?

7. Do you tend to steer less privileged students to different schools than the ones that you would recommend to your fully-paying clients? Why or why not?
8. I have found that IEC services are available to families of means and sometimes to low-income families. What kinds of suggestions do you have for middle-income families who might need help with the admissions process?
Appendix C: Parent Interview Protocol

A. What do parents say that the IEC does for them and their children?

- How did you get the idea to hire an iec?
- How did you find your iec?
- Did you interview other iec’s before you settled on this one? If yes, why did you hire this one instead of one of the others?
- What were the major concerns that led you to hire an iec?
- At what point in your child’s high school career did you start working with iec?
- What type of secondary school does/did your child(ren) attend?
- What kinds of guidance/college counseling are available at his/her school?
- Is there anything that you and your child get from an IEC that you do not feel like you get from your child’s school counselor?
- Did your child’s guidance counselor know that s/he was working with someone outside of school?
- What is the highest level of education that you have attained? If a college graduate – How has the application process changed since you went through it?
- What kind of help is your child getting from an IEC that s/he couldn’t get from you?
- What are some of your child’s interests outside of the classroom? When did he or she begin to explore those interests?
- Has your IEC recommended that your child take any particular classes or join certain activities in order to make him/her a more attractive college applicant?
- What are some of the things that you look for in a college/university for your children?
- What do you want your child to get out of his/her college experience? (Socially, educationally, preparation for a career?)
- If parent went to college – what kind of school and do you think your child would be happy at that type of school?
- Has your child been accepted to college yet? If so, was s/he accepted to his/her first choice school? Did s/he apply early admissions? If child was waitlisted, did iec take any action or offer any suggestions for gaining acceptance?
- Do you think that working with an IEC give your child an “edge” in the admissions process? Explain.
- How has your iec been most helpful? Has working with him/her been worthwhile?
• What are some things about applying to college that you have learned from your IEC that you did not know before?

B. What kinds of perceptions do parents have of IEC’s, in general, and the one who they hired, in particular?

• Does/did the iec seem to take your preferences into account as s/he counseled your child(ren)?
• Were there ever any tensions between what your child was looking for in a school and what you wanted for them? If so, how did the iec handle this? How about differences in how you should handle the application process?
• Would you recommend using an iec to other parents? An IEC in general, or this one in particular? Why or why not?
• How do you think the process was different for your family versus one that did not use an iec?
• Before you hired an iec, did you hear any stories and read anything that concerned you about them?
• What kinds of students do you think would most benefit from working with an IEC?
• Hiring an iec can carry a significant expense? How do you rationalize your decision to spend money on this service?

C. Interactions

1. How do parents describe their interactions with the IEC? Was his/her personality working/working style good for you and your kid?
• What kinds of emotions, if any, does the college admissions process cause for you? (Additional prompt: How about for your child(ren)?)
• Are there any ways in which your iec helps you to manage those emotions?
• Have there been any challenges involved in working with an iec?
• Do you know of anybody who encountered challenges in working with their iec?
• How would you describe your relationship/interaction with your child’s iec?
2. How do parents describe their children’s relationship/interactions with their iec?
• What has your child’s attitude been towards working with an iec?
• Did the iec give your child any advice about how to present him/herself at interviews or in the personal statement? Are there any ways in which the iec tried to get your child to bring out his/her uniqueness? How? What do you think about those suggestions? (“real” or not”, etc.)
• Do you think that the iec allowed your child’s own voice or uniqueness to come out in the process?

Final: Do you know of any other parents who have hired an iec who might be willing to speak with me? Do you think that I might be able to interview your child one day?
Demographics – parents’ occupations and levels of education
Appendix D: Student Interview Protocol

I. The Student’s Perspective

A. What do students say that the IEC does for them?
   - How did you and your family get the idea to hire an IEC? Was it your idea or someone else’s?
   - What were the concerns that led you and your family to hire an IEC?
   - What would you say is the biggest thing that the IEC does for you and your family?
   - What are some things about applying to college that you have learned from your IEC that you did not know before?
   - What type of secondary school do you attend?
   - What kind of guidance counseling is available at your school? What kind of help with the college admissions process could you get from your school guidance counselor?
   - Is there anything that you get from your IEC that you do not feel like you get from your school counselor?
   - Did your guidance counselor know that you were working with an outside person?
   - What kind of help are you getting from your IEC that you couldn’t get from your parents?
   - Do many or most of your friends work with IEC’s? Do a lot of kids in your grade at school work with them?
   - Did you discuss your IEC with your friends?
   - Has your IEC recommended that you take any particular classes or join certain activities in order to make you a better college applicant?
   - What are some things that you look for in a college/university?
   - What do you think makes you a good candidate for admission at the schools that you are considering?
   - What do you hope to gain from the college experience (socially, academically, etc.)?
   - Are you confident that you will find a job after college graduation? Why or why not?
   - How optimistic are you about your chances of getting into the “right” school for you?
   - Do you think that working with an IEC gives you an “edge” in the admissions process? Explain.
• Do you know if your IEC had contact with admissions officers at schools where you were applying?

B. What kinds of perceptions do students have of IEC’s, in general, and of the one whom they work with, in particular?
  • How do you feel about working with an IEC?
  • What has been the best thing about working with an IEC?
  • What kinds of students do you think would most benefit from working with an IEC?
  • If you had a friend who was applying to college, would you recommend that s/he work with your particular IEC, why or why not?
  • How well-prepared do you think that your IEC is to work with college applicants like yourself? Explain.
  • How do you think your college application process was different than it was for those who did not use an IEC?

C. Interaction
1. How do students describe their interactions with the IEC?
   • What kinds of emotions, if any, does the college admissions process cause for you? (Additional prompt: How about for your parent(s)?)
   • Are there any ways in which your IEC helps you to manage those emotions?
   • What is your relationship like with your IEC?
   • Have there been any challenges involved in working with an IEC?
   • Conflicts between what you and your parents wanted? How did IEC handle this?
   • Conflicts between what IEC and parents wanted?

2. From my observations, what else can I say about how parents interact with the IEC?
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