

How to Choose the Right College Counselor for Your Kid

Admissions advice has become big business. Here's what one industry veteran thinks you should look for—and avoid—when seeking help from an outside adviser.

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Independent college admissions counselors have gotten a bad rap in recent years. First there was the [Varsity Blues](#) scandal in 2019, a multimillion-dollar bribery and test-cheating scheme masterminded in part by independent college adviser Rick Singer. Next came the rise of the [Rock Star College Counselor](#), who for a mere few hundred thousand dollars or so, promises to mold students (starting in middle school) into perfect Ivy League candidates.

All this publicity has left a great swath of the profession—individuals who have spent years working successfully with college applicants, without cheating or charging exorbitant fees—feeling understandably chagrined.

Among them is [Mark Moody](#), co-founder and president of [Solstice College Counseling Network](#), a directory and professional support group for independent counselors with at least a decade of school and/or admissions office experience. Moody would like families to understand what a good college counselor can and can't do and, most important, how to pick the best one for your college applicant.

T&C: Does every family need to hire an independent college counselor? Who should, and who can skip it?

Mark Moody: Honestly, no. If your student's school employs dedicated college counselors with manageable caseloads, and your student is curious about college and ready to dive in when that support is available, they likely don't need extra help.

There's a lot to assess in a short window, though, from admissibility to affordability to the right academic programs. Most public school counselors do not have the time or resources for highly individualized admission counseling. Independent education consultants (IECs) can provide that support over the summer (crucial to today's timeline) and on evenings and weekends.

I think of myself as an admissions wilderness guide. I can save time and energy by helping clear a path to the other side, showing you memorable sites you might not discover otherwise, and keeping you out of the quicksand. The families who benefit most want a partner for research and application storytelling, a filter for the information overload, and an objective voice that helps keep things calm at home.

How can/should independent college admissions advisors complement a student's high school college advisor? Is there ever conflict between the two? How do you handle that?

I defer to the school counselor's contextual understanding and stay out of their lane. With clearly defined roles and open communication, school and independent counselors can complement each other without conflict.

A school counselor knows the nuances of the high school setting, the teachers, the curriculum, and, often, the admissions reps who read applications from their school. They're asked to write a recommendation that can affirm the central narrative about who this person is in the world. Make sure your student helps them do that well, and also writes them a thank-you note.

What qualifications should families look for?

First, look for active membership in organizations like [NACAC](#) or [IECA](#) that vet their members. These organizations publish counselor directories on their websites.

I know many excellent, student-centered IECs who built real expertise through professional development, college visits, and networking. Significant experience in admissions offices and school counseling programs is a valuable foundation. Admissions work, at just about any level of selectivity, provides insight into how decisions are made; school experience builds understanding of adolescents and school rhythms.

There are entire categories of IECs who specialize in areas like the performing arts, STEM, international education, and athletic recruitment, usually with relevant personal backgrounds and deep expertise. Like a lot of people I know, I enjoy being a generalist, and I also refer to a better-fit expert when that makes sense.

Look for the word “ethical” in a counselor’s messaging, and watch out for red flags. If the initial conversation or marketing uses fear as a tactic, promises to “get you in” anywhere, shape a manufactured story, “game the system,” or build a resume of purchased activities, move on. Famous college names on a website don’t tell you whether a counselor actually helped. I’ve heard of IECs who open with questions about GPA and scores, or who suggest that a student has to apply or have a certain academic profile to earn their support—I’d skip that, too.

There are enough great IECs doing this the right way that you can find someone with the right knowledge whose style feels comfortable for your student. That piece of counselor fit is important for trust and collaboration, so make sure the student has final say in the counselor choice.

The best counselor for your family will help everyone stay on the same page, bring a steady perspective to the conversation, and remind you to celebrate your kid’s successes.

What should an independent counselor actually do—and not do?

Look for a partner, not a producer.

A good counselor maps out a timeline with key milestones, helps shape a balanced application list around the student's needs, academic profile, family priorities, and financial situation, then helps students tell an honest story in their own voice. They stay engaged throughout the process, including advising on deferrals, waitlists, and comparisons of financial aid and merit discount offers.

The work begins with helping the student see themselves: what conditions help them thrive, and what they genuinely care about. You want a counselor who leads with questions, is humanely realistic, and supports the student's vision while helping them question their assumptions and see new possibilities. The best counselors work from an educator's mindset.

I aim to help students understand which factors actually matter when choosing where to spend four years. Admission stats are manipulable, and college social media campaigns are sophisticated. Research shows that college selectivity is not a reliable predictor of learning, job satisfaction, or adult well-being. What matters most starts with faculty mentorship, hands-on opportunity, and a sense of belonging in a community. Those are all accessible well outside the most selective tier, and not guaranteed within it.

A counselor should never write essays, promise outcomes, encourage unethical or dishonest behavior, subvert school guidance, advise concealing any part of a student's identity in an application, make students redirect their interests for the sake of applications, or drive a process that belongs to the student. Find someone who centers the student and treats self-knowledge and self-acceptance as goals of the journey.

You visit colleges every year. Why does that matter?

Describing a community after walking through campus buildings and talking with students, faculty, and admissions leaders adds texture that a guidebook can't capture. Colleges evolve over time and become more or less compelling for different kinds of students. Firsthand experience ensures that my advice reflects their current reality.

There's so much advice out there—TikTok, services charging hundreds of thousands of dollars. What should families think about?

There's a lot of uncertainty in the college admissions experience, and a lot of factors you can't control. Resist the temptations of clickbait posts and anecdotal advice in parent forums. Someone's story of "how I got in" is not a blueprint for anyone else. Help your student stay focused on their own purpose for going to college, your priorities and limitations, and their evolving, evidence-based understanding of fit.

The top priority is aiming well with a researched, balanced list centered around a core of "targets" (possible but not guaranteed admission) and some desirable "likelies." Add a couple of reasonable reaches, but don't build your list and strategy around them. Much of what online experts and some of the most expensive services market as an edge are really gimmicks for getting into "unlikelies" that have little to no impact on how an application will be reviewed.

Seek advice from experts who approach this conversation with curiosity about the student, rather than with hype about how hard it is, a strategic plan to shape your child's "story," or by broadcasting their overestimation of their expertise to the world.

Can you end up doing too much?

Absolutely.

Every admissions dean I know wishes that more students could easily answer one simple question: “What do you do for fun?” Keep an eye on whether your student’s high school life and this process leave room for rest, curiosity, reflection, and for your kid to actually be a kid sometimes.

At a selective college, an application gets roughly four to eight minutes of attention. A student’s file resonates and inspires the reader to advocate, or doesn’t. What stands out is authentic enthusiasm for interests, curiosity, and rough-edged humanity. Genuine, demonstrable local impact on a human scale always trumps a laundry list of dutiful achievements.

There’s an activities arms race in some communities, escalated by what I call seeking the mythical $n+1$: signing up kids for all the things you hear that “everyone else” is doing, plus one magical, differentiating accomplishment that tips the scale. Summer programs have become a particular fixation, to the dismay of every good counselor I know, along with purchased research experiences endorsed by a Ph.D. student. As enticing as it can be to believe that you can force an admit into existence through collecting prepackaged activities or working through a checklist, that’s not how it works.

A well-informed college counselor will help you filter that noise and help your student spend their time productively, developing and deepening their real interests along with their understanding of themselves and the meaning of a college choice. Experience shows me every year that this approach is the most likely to yield a confident, satisfied college student.



[Learn more about Mark and MSquared College Counseling](#)