

Incoming education consultants in the USA

There are a large number of US-based education consultants that advise international students about studying in a high school in the USA. Many focus primarily on placements for home students but international placements are also a growing sector of their businesses.

BETHAN NORRIS reports.

While the work of incoming high school consultants based in the USA may be essentially the same as that of many other education agents based throughout the world, there are a few key points of difference. One difference is the issue of accepting commission payments from schools, with the consultants taking part in this feature all stressing that they charged the family of the student for their work and did not accept remuneration from the schools that they worked with.

Indeed, in this sector of the industry, the practice of accepting commission payments for enrolments is widely seen to be verging on the unethical. Claire Law from Educational Avenues in Rhode Island and South Carolina, says, "I am part of the IECA [Independent Educational Consultants Association] networks – a nationwide network of 300 or so certified educational planners. Our principles of good practice forbid us to work with any college. We are paid directly by the student's family and advocate for the student and present any of the 3,600 in the USA or any of the boarding/private schools in the USA that fit the student's needs."

Paula Feldman, an Educational Consultant from Corona del Mar, CA, says that she views commission payments as a "conflict of interest on the part of the agent and the school". She emphasises the importance of having the child as the focus of her work rather than financial considerations. "Being an educational consultant is not a job," she adds. "It is a profession that has an outcome that affects the life of a child and family. Advice and consultation should be based on research that is done in person at schools and not through the Internet which is written by the schools."

The history and, for many consultants, main focus of educational consultancy work in the USA perhaps explains this industry's approach to the job of advising students about where to study. The consultants' association IECA was set up over 30 years ago with a remit "to effectively serve families in placements that include colleges, local day and boarding schools, schools or programmes for students with learning or behavioural needs, international placements, summer opportunities, and graduate and professional schools". While this covers a broad range of placements, many education consultants in the USA find that the main focus of their work is dealing with students with particular educational needs and have a long history of research and qualifications in this field.

Feldman says that she has worked in the field of education for 40 years. "I have been an elementary teacher in public and private schools [and have] also worked at the University of California's Learning Center for boys with diagnosed learning disabilities," she says. "I opened my own office to address all youngsters with the potential to learn but who, for a variety of reasons, were not achieving their potential."

Feldman adds that over the years she has built up contacts with schools throughout the USA, Canada and Europe that offer opportunities for the competitive academic student as well as those with more challenging academic issues, whether they are from the USA or overseas. "My work has extended to Gap year programmes, summer programmes and semester programmes," she recounts.

Ben Mason from Mason Consult, which has offices in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New

York City, Vermont and Utah, says that "more and more of our business is from overseas" although the specialist nature of the advising they do remains. "We specialise in placements in two areas," he says. "Very bright children with good English skills whose parents are interested only in the top US and Canadian boarding schools. Our second area is working with learning disabled and other complicated children whose needs cannot be met at home or in an offshore boarding school."

While many education consultants may be branching out into international placements, it is usually a minor part of business. Law says that 15 per cent of her time is spent dealing with international enquiries. "I give out a tonne of free information," she says. "Very few actually use my services. My best leads are from those who are referred to me by my other international clients."

When it comes to attracting new international clients, many consultants rely on favoured methods such as their website or existing contacts overseas. Susan Hendricks from Prep School Search in New York, NY, says

that she is a member of many professional organisations as well as having her own website. "I am planning to give some presentations in the near future," she adds. Consultants often travel widely and build up contacts at schools in the USA and overseas, which can yield

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new international enquiries.

Whether advising international students or home students, consultants report that their work is largely the same, although applying for a US visa can offer an additional challenge to the admissions process. "My services include initial evaluation and advice on appropriate school choices and thorough, step-by-step assistance through the admission process," says Hendricks. "If a family needs assistance with visas, I am available to support them in that process."

However, consultants report that their work does not end with the successful admission of a student into a school. Feldman says, "My obligation to each family is to remain involved until a child graduates. The comments of teachers and grade reports of my students are sent to me and that is tremendously helpful in assessing the placement. For those parents who live abroad, I continue my contact through emails and phone calls."

In short, educational consultants in the USA provide a comprehensive service that focuses on ensuring the right fit between a child and a school using a variety of methods. Visiting schools appears to be the absolute minimum for getting to know an establishment and some consultants also use other methods to pick the right school for a particular client. Law says, "We have visited 1,000 or so colleges alone. We are publishing a book about 'Finding a college that fits your personality' that uses the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)." She emphasises, "We are certified professionals in MBTI and other vocational assessments. We make that magic match between international students and the colleges."

