

Hiring a Coach in Pursuit of an Advanced Degree

By CECILIA CAPUZZI SIMON (NY Times).

THE way back to school for many adults hoping to complete a bachelor's or master's degree is akin to being set loose in the wilderness without a compass. Adults have spent years juggling careers and life demands, and have "no clearly articulated path to a degree," said Donald E. Fraser Jr., director of education and training at National Association for College Admission Counseling, whose members include independent consultants and school-based advisers.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the 25-and-over student population grew 43 percent from 2000-9 and will increase an additional 23 percent by 2019. Mr. Fraser says he and other professional academic advisers are "paying close attention" to this market.

Business for independent academic consultants has grown considerably as traditional students seek an edge in high-stakes undergraduate admissions. (Some 160,000 high school seniors used them in 2009, 100,000 more than in 2005, according to the Independent Educational Consultants Association.)

Adults represent a small portion of that business, but as a sour economy makes even seasoned professionals consider further education, more working adults are seeking such advice on admissions and careers. For them, much is on the line — jobs, finances, time, lifestyle sacrifices. "If you're out in the work force and out of an academic mind-set for years," Mr. Fraser said, "who are you going to turn to?"

For adults, a degree is a means rather than an end, says David Petersam, president of AdmissionsConsultants in Vienna, Va. Younger students, he says, typically go to college because they feel they must and often obtain first jobs that have nothing to do with their majors but allow them time to explore career direction.

Adults going back to school have no such luxury. Many are like Sami Balbaky, who earned a master's in biomedical engineering from the University of Southern California in 2010. His approach to the application process was one-shot and full-throttle. At 29, he saw little room for error: He identified his top schools, did the legwork for his applications, collected transcripts, prepared for the Graduate Record Examination and wrote a personal essay. But he "could not click the submit button" on his applications, he says.

Mr. Balbaky wanted his essay to be "bulletproof and unassailable," so in 2008 he hired Write Track Admissions in Washington. He spent an entire summer working via computer from his home in San Francisco with an adviser, "transforming my essay from a manifesto into a personal statement" that helped win him admission to his top-choice school, he says.

Those who hire consultants can work with them for a few weeks or many months, and pay anywhere from several hundred dollars to thousands of dollars (not tax deductible as an education expense) depending on the services and time needed.

Pricing is by the hour or by the package. AdmissionsConsultants, for example, offers both options. Hourly rates range from \$150 for applicants to medical school, to \$250 for M.B.A. applicants. Fixed-fee packages are priced by the number of applications and the type of degree. A “Gold Package” of five applications for graduate programs, for example, costs \$4,000.

For that investment, a client can expect an evaluation of prospective schools, guidance on admission strategies, help with an essay’s theme and structure, interview preparation, G.R.E. advice and career information. With luck, a consultant becomes a sounding board who provides an insider’s view on each school’s admissions predilections and the marketplace forces that influence them. One wouldn’t want to apply for a Harvard M.B.A. in finance, for example, at a time when university officials expect slack demand for the specialty.

Clients concede that it is expensive. But it was worth it to Ramsey Day, who bought a single-school graduate package from AdmissionsConsultants.

In 2011, Mr. Day decided to apply for a graduate degree in public administration while winding down a job as head of the United States Agency for International Development’s Montenegro office.

At 36, out of school for 14 years, and living out of the country, Mr. Day said he “had no idea what graduate schools were looking for.” He worked with an adviser online or by phone from Montenegro, and completed an application to American University’s School of International Service.

He figured he would replicate what he learned with four other applications completed on his own, including one to Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, where he was accepted and started a master’s of public administration last fall. Cost of the one-year program: \$50,000. The cost of the consulting services — \$1,500 — was “pennies compared to what I will get from this degree,” he said.

Whether to hire a private consultant depends not only on one’s willingness or ability to pay, but on the type of program and school desired. Prospective students of schools with high admission rates, 25 to 30 percent, probably don’t need them.

But Mr. Petersam and other advisers say they are beginning to serve a different adult clientele that, if not for the economic downturn, would not consider graduate school. They are needier and more confused, and seek guidance that is part career-counseling and part life-coaching.

“This person is coming to us and saying ‘What do I do?’ ” said Mr. Petersam, who has been advising adults since 1996.

Mark Sklarow, executive director of Independent Educational Consultants Association, says this customer is of concern to him and his group’s 1,000 members.

“With adults, sometimes there is almost a desperation to move forward with school because they see that as the answer,” he said. “My fear is that adults go to school without a game plan, they spend time and money, but they’re not furthering their careers.”

Consultants are adapting their services. At Write Track Admissions, a detailed questionnaire is administered upfront and is devised “to get as personal as possible,” said Hamada Zahawi, a co-founder of the company. “Why have they made certain life decisions? What happened 10 or 15 years ago that impacted their goals? Do they have children to raise?”

Often the decision is not to go back to school. Such was the case with a client of Mr. Petersam’s who had been running a construction business but was battered by the housing bust.

“He hated it and wanted to go back to school to do something else,” he said. “I said to him, ‘You’ve got a lot invested here. Before you throw out the baby with the bath water, slow down. Do you hate everything?’ ”

After consulting with Mr. Petersam, the client realized he liked sales and marketing, but didn’t like the responsibility of running a business.

The result? Instead of retooling at school, he closed up shop and took a sales job with a larger company.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 12, 2012

An article on March 1 about independent college counseling services erroneously included statistics about the benefits of independent counseling from a 2011 survey. They applied to undergraduate applicants — not to students seeking master’s degrees, which was the focus of the article. (The survey showed that 23 percent of admissions directors at private master’s-granting universities and 20 percent from regional and state universities found the use of private counselors to be effective for undergraduate applicants.)