

You're a *what?*

Admissions consultant

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Aiming for the Ivy League? Admissions consultant Derek Meeker can give you advice on how to get in.

“There are a lot of myths out there about what school officials are looking for in an application,” says Derek, who specializes in law school admissions. Part of his job is to steer clients in the right direction and, hopefully, increase their chances of getting into a school that’s right for them. He helps with everything from selecting an appropriate school to writing personal statements.

An admissions consultant’s work often begins with assessing clients’ strengths and weaknesses and discussing possible schools to consider. During this initial consultation, Derek covers a few basics. “It’s sort of a counseling process,” says Derek. “I ask them about their personal background, academic interests, jobs that they’ve held. And I help people to identify what’s unique about themselves.”

One challenge in this work arises when clients’ aspirations outshine their qualifications. “While I get clients from all over the spectrum, the majority want to go to the top schools—those that have a 6- to 15-percent acceptance rate,” says Derek. “I am very realistic with people. Sometimes, that’s not an easy conversation to have.”

Other times, admissions consultants help clients realize how much potential they have. For example, one of Derek’s clients originally hadn’t planned to apply to the most competitive schools. After hearing her story and her background, though, Derek encouraged her to apply to top-tier schools; he knew that she had an excellent chance of getting accepted anywhere she applied. And he was right: Ultimately, the woman was accepted to one of the highest ranked law schools in the country.

How much help an admissions consultant provides, and the amount of time spent with a client, vary based on each client’s needs or desires. In addition to helping clients choose schools, these workers frequently offer advice on letters of recommendation, resumes, and essays or personal statements. They might, for example, suggest that a client write about

a specific topic, such as overcoming a challenge, to provide the admissions committee with a more complete picture of who he or she really is.

Being able to identify good writing—and suggest improvements—is critical for admissions consultants, as is attention to detail. “I love helping people with their writing and with becoming better writers,” says Derek, whose undergraduate degree is in journalism. “It’s not just about helping them get into the best school. I try to give detailed and specific advice that can help my clients even after they get into school.”

Tact and interpersonal skills are also essential for admissions consultants. “You have to be able to relate to people openly and honestly, and not be abrasive,” says Derek. “Clients are depending on you for your honest advice. They might not want to hear what you have to say, so you have to be diplomatic.”

Other qualifications of admissions consultants vary. Some consultants, like Derek, have previous experience in college admissions. As the former dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Derek once decided which applicants to accept and which to reject. Former admissions workers often have backgrounds in education administration or marketing. Some consultants have experience as guidance counselors or academic advisors. And others may have applied successfully to a top school themselves.

Many consultants work for an admissions or educational consulting firm. Others are self-employed. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not collect employment or wage data on admissions consultants.

According to the Independent Educational Consultants Association, however, experienced educational consultants, a category that may include admissions consultants, earned an average of \$72,000 in 2006. But consultants’ earnings vary based on the number of clients they have and the level of experience they bring to the job. Admissions consultants often charge by the hour, up to about \$150. Some charge a preset fee, sometimes in the

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thousands of dollars, to help with a specific issue or for comprehensive help on one or more applications.

Although admissions consultants may meet with their clients in person, face-to-face interaction is not necessarily required. Their work can be done through e-mail and over the phone, so their clients can be located almost anywhere. Consultants are often busiest from August until January, when most students prepare applications. But their day-to-day workloads vary. “It’s unpredictable,” says Derek of his schedule. As a result, some consultants work only part-time.

Admissions consultants work with prospective undergraduates and with law, medical, business, and other graduate students. Derek says there is ample work for admissions consultants because there is strong competition to get into good schools—particularly graduate or professional schools.

At his former post, for example, Derek and others on the admissions committee reviewed as many as 6,500 applications for 250 openings. And that was several years ago. “All of the top schools have more than enough applicants who are qualified,” says Derek. So, he says, prospective students have become increasingly willing to seek help in applying. “Admissions consulting has definitely become more common in the last decade.”

Many of Derek’s clients are older, working adults who are interested in returning to school. “I’ve had some really great success stories,” he says, “and those clients are really happy.”

People seek consultation for a range of reasons. Some applicants struggled academically in high school or as undergraduate students. Others have personal issues that affected their grades or admissions test scores. Still others might have a criminal record and want to know how to handle it on an application. “It’s really rewarding to help someone through the process who comes to you and is lost,” he says.

A common problem, says Derek, is that applicants often are so focused on trying to impress the admissions committee that they

say only what they think the committee wants to hear. This can hurt applicants if they don’t understand what admissions officers are really looking for.

For example, he says, working the night shift at a fast-food restaurant is just as important to note on your application as a prestigious internship or part-time job at a law firm. And if a teaching assistant is the best judge of your academic work, then that’s the person who should write your letter of recommendation—not necessarily a department chair or a high-profile faculty member.

Derek’s advice highlights the importance of being genuine. Applicants’ credentials are important, but it’s their character that counts. “At the end of the day,” he says, “you just have to be who you are.”

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