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Ethical Guideposts for Independent Educational Consultants

For school-based counselors and university admission directors, authority comes from the plaque on the door, the half of the alphabet assigned to you or the region of the country you represent. Ethical rules and appropriate behaviors—from social media to closed doors—often begin with institutional policies and memos from HR.

When you work as an independent educational consultant (IEC), however, both the source of your authority and the rules of behavior grow from your personal actions and internal compass. Such authority, ethical guideposts, and of course your reputation are won on a daily basis. It is also true that others are watching to see how you operate: college admission deans, the counselor at the nearby school with whom you “share” a student, parents, the media, and other colleagues. The fact that fees are paid adds to the need to operate as honestly as possible and resist pressure—parental, business or otherwise—to act in ways that are unacceptable.

Here are my top 10 rules:

#1 One thing that distinguishes IECs from their school-based colleagues is the need to market their services, whether through word-of-mouth, social media or traditional advertising. My strongest advice is to avoid promising results—like acceptance letters—or practices that lend themselves to abuse—like unlimited time. In too many cases promises made are impossible to keep. Let your mantra be: “Under promise and over deliver.”

#2 No reputable consultant would define their job as “helping to get students into Ivy League colleges.” A consultant’s role is to assist students—any student regardless of accomplishments or limitations—to find their way to a school that represents a great match: academically and socially. Why then do so many consultants insist on company names like “Ivy Coach” or “Ivy Select?” They may not mean it, but they’ve lost sight of their purpose and are coming close to an implied promise... and for that, see rule #1.

#3 Consultants are there, in part, to assure families that there are great college options for every student. Relieving family anxiety should be a primary goal. It is unethical to use loaded language, fear tactics and otherwise prey on parental anxiety to promote one’s practice.

#4 Consultants must be competent practitioners. A case must be referred out when your ability to meet the needs of the student is compromised. If a severe learning difference, a world-class musician, an exceedingly anxious, or other atypical case arrives at the office door (or emerges months later) and you no longer possess the knowledge to serve the student, you need to refer the student to an expert and exit.

#5 Particularly because a business relationship exists, remember that applications are about a student putting his or her own best foot forward—not yours. Consultants do not write or even heavily edit a student’s essay; opportunities to brag are not opportunities to inflate resumes or misrepresent a student’s achievements.

#6 Avoid even the suggestion of a conflict of interest. Can someone be an alumnus representative of a university or a local interviewer and still work fairly as an independent educational consultant? Yes, but working with a student who plans to apply to a school where you work or volunteer is not acceptable. Full disclosure is the first requirement, then bow out if a conflict appears to be developing.

#7 Independent educational consultants accept no fees, no payments and no kickbacks in exchange for referring a student. That means no “finders fees” from schools or camps, no “referral fees” from test-prep companies, etc. When a family pays you for help, you must refuse actions that compromise your advice.

#8 A consultant does more than assist with applications. Rather, a consultant tries to teach students a life lesson about hard work, initiative, success, and adversity. The best way to do that is to ensure that students—not

the consultant—drive the process. Families may think they are hiring you to do all the legwork, fill out the forms, conduct the research, and watch the calendar. In reality, your job is to help the student organize so that they—not you—are developing skills that will be necessary when they start living on campus.

#9 Be cautious when you contact college admission representatives. Many IECs never call admission directors. Yet over the last few years, an increasing number of college reps have told me they wish IECs called more. How do we reconcile the situation? A consultant should not be calling to promote or sell a student. Acceptable contacts fall into just two categories: information gathering or clarification, and discussing why the consultant sees that institution as a good match for the student. In other words, why was that school added to that particular student’s list?

#10 Never forget that while the parent may be the customer, the student is the client. Decisions you make, advice you give, information you share is based on the best interest of the student. This means working cooperatively and openly with the school counselor, as NACAC’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice (SPGP) requires. To be sure, parents are part of this: family finances, emotions and needs count, but a consultant should never propose solutions that harm a student because mom and dad are footing the bill.

My final thought is to consider what I call “*The New York Times Rule*.” Every professional at times is faced with a conflict or a decision about whether to compromise principles or give in to family demands. Consultants also are faced with circumstances that are “clean,” but because of the involvement of fees, campus trips or something else, may look suspicious. When deciding on an action, the best advice is to ponder: how would this look if played out on the front page of the *The New York Times*? Remember in these modern times, everyone with a blog or a Facebook account has the ability to post information about you throughout the community.

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