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THE COLLEGE QUEST SEVEN SENIORS, SEVEN DREAMS

Outside assistance

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Doug Imbruce's business idea was crystallized in a moment of "MTV Cribs" and freshman angst.

He was at Columbia University, where he says he wasn't miserable but he wasn't terribly happy, and he was pondering the option of transferring schools. He sat down to watch as Snoop Dogg took MTV on a tour of his home.

"It seemed ridiculous to me," Imbruce said. "The show communicated the most intimate details - how many Coronas were in the fridge, how many pillows he used and what kind of rims he has - and here I was making the big college choice, spending a lot of money and there wasn't content available at that level for making the college choice."

So Imbruce, who graduated Columbia in 2005, started theU, a company that produces MTV-style mini-documentaries of colleges and universities hosted by various TV stars from the former WB network. The company has teamed up with Princeton Review to promote the videos and is negotiating with a major Internet portal to produce 300 more college videos in the next 12 months.

TheU's success is indicative of a dearth of accessible information in a competitive college admissions process that finds students trying to find a perfect fit. Increasingly, parents and students are turning to outside specialists to help bridge the information gap. In recent years, independent educational counselors have been more

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prevalent in the business of helping students and parents navigate the college application process. The Independent Educational Consultants Association, a nonprofit professional organization, estimates that about 400 such consultants existed five years ago. Today, there are between 3,000 and 4,000, said Mark Sklarow, executive director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association.

Sklarow and others in the industry say factors in this growth include the rise in people attending colleges, less time for working parents, and a steady increase of students diagnosed with learning disabilities.

Though educational consultants advertising a price tag of \$30,000 and \$40,000 have garnered much publicity, the average is \$3,200, Sklarow said. Some offer pro bono services, but their target clientele are usually middle to upper-middle class.

Abby Siegel, a former guidance counselor at several schools, including Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, became a consultant after finding that her heavy caseload didn't give her students the time she thought necessary for the college admissions process. "It's just gotten so much more competitive to get into these schools that students try to get as much assistance as they can," she said.

There are those who criticize some educational consultants, saying they attempt to take advantage of this anxiety-ridden process. "What, in effect, people are paying for is a baby-sitting service," said Peter Van Buskirk, vice president of college planning solutions at Peterson's.

Laura Miller, the director of college guidance at North Shore Hebrew Academy High School, said she doesn't believe all educational consultants exploit the situation, but agreed that hiring an educational consultant can take ownership of the process from the student and his family.

"The process of applying to college is not to make parents feel that they have to go out and use their hard-earned money to pay consultants," Miller said. "It's not a mystery process."

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