

WHY DO IECA MEMBERS TRAVEL SO MUCH?



by Mark Sklarow, Executive Director, IECA

The key role of the independent educational consultant (IEC) is to find the best possible match between a student's educational, social, emotional, and community needs and desires, and what schools, colleges or programs offer. The role of the IEC in a school, program, or college application process is not, as the media would have us believe, to sit back, let a student decide where they want to go and then "help them get in." A student's learning style, the campus' political environment, academic vs. social component, weekend activities, LD support services, physical environment, and so much more go into this important decision. For those IECs serving students with behavioral and emotional needs, the importance of matching an adolescent with a program's offerings is even more critical, and therapeutic approaches and services can be added to the long list already mentioned.

Many IECs indicate that one of the great satisfactions in their life is introducing students to a potential school that the family has never heard of, but which proves to be an exceptional choice—just the right match for the student's interests and needs. A great independent educational consultant needs to have as much information about educational options as possible. It is this accumulation of knowledge that allows the match to be suggested so that a family can then plan a visit and evaluate on their own. IECs can gain this information from a variety of sources. To be sure, exploring Web sites, view books, and literature is important. However these are written by hired public relations firms, and so while critical information will be shared, it is skewed to present the best possible image of a school or program.

For example, it's one thing for a small college to claim 75 clubs, but the real question is: are these clubs active? Welcoming? Supported by the student body overall? College IECs should also make use of published data, like that produced by Wintergreen Orchard House. But we all know that numbers—minimum GPAs, test scores, size of freshman class, etc.—tell only part of the story. Numbers do not capture the feel of a school. Other published sources such as guides from Princeton Review and Fiske are also critical components, but of course these are the evaluations of someone else, and someone whose opinion may or may not match your own.

A therapeutic program, using another example, may claim to work with substance abusers, but an IEC needs to understand their philosophy, track record, follow-up care, and so much more. IECs need to look toward the varied accrediting bodies, but even these tell only a small part of the story, especially given the more fragile nature of the student's well-being.

Most IECs also get feedback from past clients, which is a way to ensure that their impressions of a school are, in fact, accurate. Others look at Web sites and other ways to get a less filtered view of what current students are thinking and saying about their school.

What really distinguishes IECs, particularly IECA members, from school-based counselors, community-based counselors, and therapists and test-prep providers, is that they do visit campuses...a lot. How better to describe a potential school to a student than to be able to share a personal view, in order to discuss it as a potential match. School and college IECs sit in the dining hall, observe interactions, read bulletin boards to see what events are coming up, notice the influence of the athletic department, and discern what the political climate is. An independent educational consultant wanders over to 'Main Street' to see the student/town interaction, observe the maintenance of the physical plant, and see if students USE the gym, the library, the student support center, etc. Those working in the area of behavioral and emotional needs often find themselves on a mountaintop, in a field, or hiking a trail to understand what a teen experiences, how therapy is delivered, and how get to know counselors and therapists.

Of course there are added benefits to such tours: IECs become acquainted with admission representatives, developing a stronger professional relationship that is further aided by the hundreds of colleges, programs, and schools that participate in IECA conferences and programs each year. Moreover, while some IECs visit campuses individually, more visit together with colleagues or take part in the many tours that schools, colleges, and programs organize for IECA members throughout the year

This provides opportunities to interact with peers, discuss changes in the admission scene, new developments on campus, and so much more.

No one source of information is sufficient to gain a complete view of a school, college, or program but it is the visit—a personal visit by a trained professional—that when combined with statistics, published reports, Web sites and more, is likely to provide the best, most complete picture of an institution. Such a picture informs the consultant whether or not a school should be placed on the list of possibilities, allowing a student and family to conduct their own research. It is this difference that makes consultants invaluable for families and makes IECA members the most respected in the field.