

Getting the Inside Edge

Want to Know How to Get In to a Good College? Go to the Pros in the Admissions Game—School Counselors.

BY ALICIA ABELL

THREE SCHOOLS TOPPED NELL CONSTANTINOPLE'S college wish list: Northwestern, a big university outside Chicago; Middlebury, a small college in Vermont. But how to get into one of them? Elena W. Marks, Constantinople's college counselor at DC's National Cathedral School, set the strategy. Apply early. In a matter of weeks, Marks said—the odds are in your favor. And bet on Northwestern. It accepts a bigger percentage of applicants than Middlebury, and its admissions office would give Constantinople a leg up because her mother is an alum.

The final move in Marks's game plan: The counselor called Northwestern's dean of admissions and talked over her student's application.

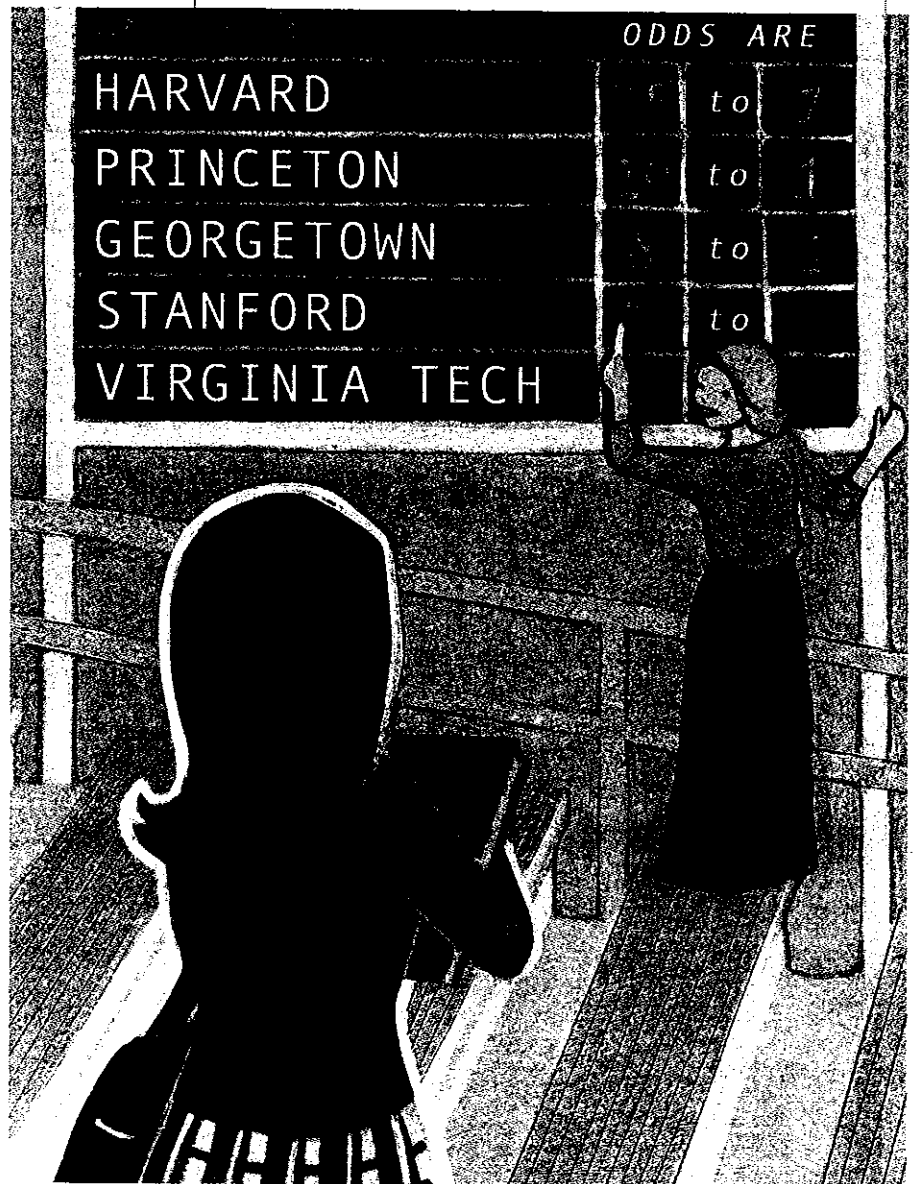
In the end, the plan worked: Constantinople got in.

Stories such as these are the stock and trade of NCS. About 80 percent of the school's graduates are accepted to their first- or second-choice school. At least a quarter enroll at Ivy League schools.

Parents and students say that Marks, a Harvard alum who has directed NCS's college-counseling office for more than a decade, deserves a lot of credit for this success. She is so plugged in to admissions offices that college reps even call her at home to talk about applicants.

NCS is not the only private school working the phones when it comes to college admissions. Many put a premium on helping their kids get into college. While public-school counselors typically work with 200 or more students, the load for private school counselors is usually a quarter of that. This gives them time to meet with students, get to know them, and identify the best "fit."

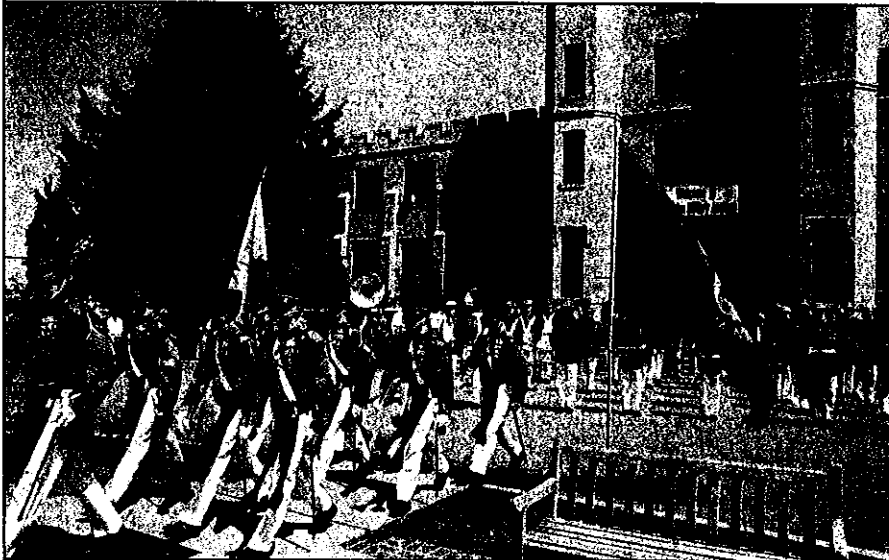
Contributing editor Alicia Abell wrote about private-school admissions in November 2002.



Some counselors, like Marks, oversee virtually every element of the application; others offer advice and information but leave control of the process in the hands of the student. None can promise happy outcomes, but all aim to give kids an edge in the college-admissions game.

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THE MECHANICS OF MOST PRIVATE-school college-counseling programs are similar. An introductory College Night during the junior fall is standard, followed by individual meetings with counselors starting in the spring of the junior year. Some schools—including NCS, DC's Maret, and Bethesda's Georgetown Prep—also meet with sophomores and their parents.

Though most parents stand aside after these initial meetings, some join in with gusto. Leonard King, director of college counseling at Maret, says he meets with parents as many as six times and fields their phone calls and e-mails.

Schools vary in how they see their role. Some serve simply as a resource, while others manage each senior's application.

"A more progressive, student-centered school may give a lot of the responsibility to the students, whereas others may be more top-down and adult-managed," explains the School Counseling Group's Peter Sturtevant, a former Maret teacher and college counselor who has been advising kids about colleges for almost 20 years.

At Sidwell Friends in DC, counselors get involved when asked, says 2000 graduate Molly Browne. "They would look over your application or read your essays if you wanted them to, but nothing was forced on you. You could seek out as much or as little help from the school as you wanted."

NCS is not so laissez faire. Coursework for seniors each fall includes a weekly seminar nicknamed "College 101," which covers the nitty-gritty of applications. The class even has a syllabus and a text—the school's legendary college handbook, which includes résumés as well as a tally of which NCS graduates have enrolled.

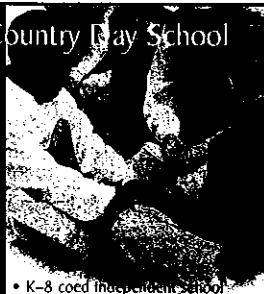
Students also are urged to attend an essay-writing workshop and prepare rough drafts of their application essays during the summer before senior year. Marks usually reviews the final versions. "Like with everything, the girls are taught to do not an A job but an A-plus-plus job on college applications," says the parent of a current senior. "Marks is emphatic about perfection."

SOME SCHOOLS HAVE A LOT OF INFLUENCE over where students apply, even creating an initial list of schools to consider—a task usually left to the applicant. Maret's King does this to get students to look at a broad array of schools. Other counselors create the list to make sure that too many of their kids don't apply to the same colleges, hurting each other's chances.

Marks often advises girls where to apply based on NCS's track record with the school, her relationship with its admissions office, and the number and caliber of the

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other NCS girls applying. “One thing we do that’s different from other schools is that we really try to have a strategy,” Marks says.

Marks gives students a straightforward assessment of their chances of admission to a school based on grade point averages and SAT scores. This “dealing in facts,” as Marks calls it, is aimed at making appraisals less personal, but it can hurt feelings.

“Kids resent when they want to apply to Yale, for example, and Nina tells them no,” says a parent. Knowing Marks’s clout in admissions offices, some families are reluctant to reject her recommendations. “We went to look at colleges,” says another parent, “but in the end, Nina decided which school was right for my daughter.”

Another Marks strategy is to urge her students to apply early, when the odds of getting accepted are better. In recent years, some 75 percent of the NCS senior class has applied early decision or early action. It’s an unwritten NCS rule that those who get accepted will enroll, regardless of whether they applied through a nonbinding early-action process.

This strategy, which gives colleges certainty about NCS applicants, appears to pay off: More than half of NCS students who apply early get in; the national average is a third.

Colleges “know that the girls who apply early from NCS will go,” says Nell Constantinople, a 2001 graduate.

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MANY COUNSELORS TAKE TWO OR three trips a year to scout schools that they’re talking to kids about. “Colleges change, just like high schools change,” explains King. “I want to know if the colleges I’m recommending live up to what they say they do.”

College visits also help counselors match students with specific schools, says King. “I try to jot down notes to myself, such as ‘See so and so when you get back; they would really like it here.’”

Colleges sometimes sponsor campus tours for high school counselors. These often include useful presentations by admissions officers, says Roger Frantz, counselor at O’Connell High School in Arlington. “What the colleges and universities are looking for changes from year to year. So I keep going to these meetings to hear about the newest desired crop of candidates.

“For example, MIT is interested in ‘underrepresented’ minorities like Native Americans, Central Americans, and Eskimos (but not Asians), while Stanford University wants an applicant’s personal essay to be Pulitzer Prize quality and a piece ‘that only a student can write.’”

Several schools organize college tours for students. Bullis and Sandy Spring Friends School take juniors to visit nearby colleges.

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THE BEST COUNSELORS ARE TALENTED and versatile. "You need to be organized, personable, hard-working, articulate, a strong writer, good on your feet, willing and able to reassure anxious parents and kids," Sturtevant says. "You really do have to have it all."

A key factor is experience. King, one of the most respected college counselors in the area, has been at Maret for 31 years. "Being there for that long, I've established some credibility with colleges," he says.

Counselors with experience in college admissions often have good contacts and inside information on the process. Georgetown Visitation's Suzanne T. Colligan has worked at several colleges, including Georgetown, George Washington, and Trinity in DC. Holton-Arms's Tish Peterson is a veteran of Boston University, Georgetown, and George Washington. Bullis's Eric Monheim worked at Kenyon College in Ohio. Kenya Smith of Edmund Burke has done admissions at Ohio Wesleyan and Kalamazoo College.

Gonzaga's Jodi Hester, a former admissions officer for Grinnell College in Iowa and Johns Hopkins University, knows that college reps spend much of the fall on the road visiting high schools. They appreciate the smallest courtesies—snacks for the car or directions to the next stop. "When you're doing that kind of work," she says, "it really can make a difference."

MANY SCHOOLS TRY TO ESTABLISH strong relationships with colleges and admissions officers. They visit schools frequently and invite college officials to their campuses. Maret and NCS each host more than 100 college reps a year.

Such visits help a college understand a school's curriculum and grading. They also give counselors the familiarity to call a school on behalf of a student.

When Sidwell's Molly Browne aced the verbal section of the SATs on her second try, her counselor knew exactly whom to contact at her first-choice school. "This is great," the counselor said. "I'll fax it right over."

Some counselors call colleges in February—after applications have been read but before decisions are made. They talk about students' strengths and weaknesses, respond to questions, and supply additional information that might help a kid's chances.

These phone calls often give counselors an early read on the college's decision. In her book *Admissions Confidential*, former Duke admissions officer Rachel Toor writes. "I go down my school group and tell the

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

counselor 'likely' for the students whom I know will be admitted, 'possible' for those who will be placed on the waiting list, and then 'unlikely' for the ones I've already auto-denied. Everyone understands this code."

Maret's King tells colleges when he thinks they're misreading an application; in some cases, he fills in relevant personal information, such as a divorce. But if it's clear an applicant doesn't meet the school's expectations, he doesn't fight the decision.

Gonzaga's Hester takes a similar approach. "I will say, 'Did you see this?' or 'Did you miss that?' But I'm not going to beg anyone to accept a kid," she says.

MICHAEL J. ORTIZ, A COUNSELOR at the Heights School in Potomac, says lobbying for students doesn't help that much. "We think our students' applications speak for themselves. A kid tends to reach the level he's ready for."


In her book, Toor describes most counselors' campaigns for students as a nuisance. "I would not trust many of these people to recommend a good restaurant, let alone give me an honest assessment of an applicant's intellectual abilities," she writes.

Still, Toor admits that she found a few counselors whom she could rely on to help sort students. "[A]t a handful of schools, I actually used the counselors to help me with the kids I wasn't sure about."

Good counselors, she wrote, offer "helpful and insightful things about each student who's applying and what sets them apart from the others."

At NCS, parents are convinced that Marks is a counselor colleges listen to. She calls every school that each of her students has applied to, although she says she won't oversell her kids. With NCS, colleges "get what they think they're getting," she says.

"I think the admissions people trust her," says a former NCS parent. "It makes their job easier if someone else can weed through the applicants and say, 'This is the kid for you.'"

"She's in a class by herself," says Abigail K. Wenner, whose daughter Becca is a senior. "I don't think there's anyone in the DC area—or probably the country—who does as good a job as she does." 

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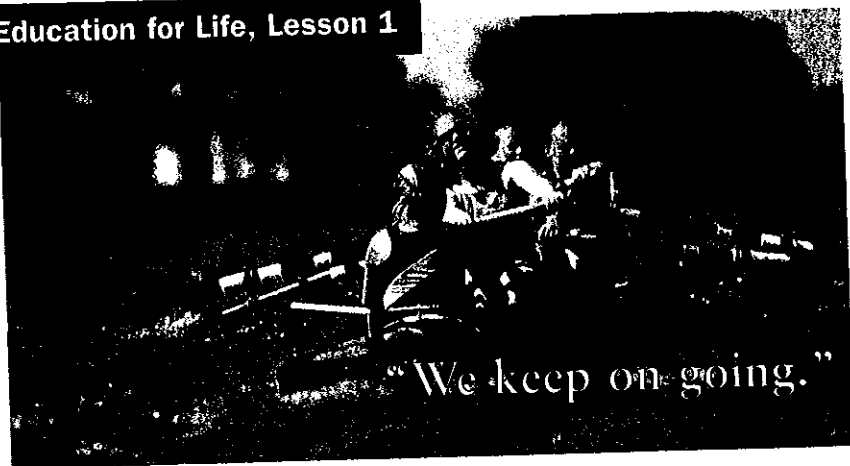
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