



Laurie Starks is a professional college admissions consultant in Southlake.

# The New College Try

When it's time to play the admissions game, Southlake families are calling in the professionals.

By Kathryn Hopper Photos by Jeena Stephen

It can be time-consuming, traumatic and fraught with tension.

No wonder that when it comes time for kids to tackle those college applications, many families would rather outsource it.

"It takes away the nagging," says Stefanie Mauler, who operates The Mauler Institute, a Westlake-based independent college admissions firm.

More and more families are seeing the benefit. A national survey conducted by the educational consulting firm Lipman Hearne found that 26 percent of high-achieving high school seniors hired an education consultant to help with the college search and application process.

Professional help doesn't come cheap. Consultant fees can start at several hundred dollars for a couple of hours of help and go up to thousands for a complete package that includes years of work with the student.

But don't think the kids get out of doing the work. Most professional consultants agree it's important that students take ownership of the process. They still have to write the essays,

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keep tabs on sending in test scores and complete the applications.

"If they can't fill out the application, they shouldn't go to the school," Mauler says. She takes up to 15 clients per class year and begins working with students as early as eighth grade.

"At any given time I'm usually working with about 60 active clients," she says.

Mauler, a mother of two, got involved in the business after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, where she worked in the admissions office.

"For every student we accepted, there were many more who could have been successful there," she says. "I started looking for patterns among those who were accepted and starting seeing things that stood out."

Mauler went on to earn her MBA from Harvard Business School. After a stint in corporate America, where she helped coworkers put together their MBA applications, she saw an opportunity to become an independent consultant and earned a graduate degree in college counseling from the University of California, San Diego.



#### THE DETAILS

**The Mauler Institute**  
themaulerinstitute.com

**Starks College Connection**  
starksc.com

Laurie Starks, a Southlake mother of three, had a successful business career in marketing at IBM before stopping to focus on family and community volunteering. She took a job working in the Carroll Senior High School guidance office and enjoyed helping families navigate the college admissions process until budget cuts eliminated her position.

Starks decided to become an independent consultant, working with a professional mentor for several years and earning a certificate in college consulting through the University of California, Los Angeles before opening Starks College Connection in 2004.

She works with Southlake kids as well as families throughout the DFW area and beyond, thanks to online conferencing via Skype, taking 20 clients per class year.

"I like to meet with families face to face to make sure we're the right fit for each other," she says.

Starks helps her students build their resumes, encouraging them to participate in activities they are truly passionate about.

"It's great to get into leadership roles junior and senior year, if you can," she says.

She also works with students to help them plan their high school curriculum, set up a realistic application schedule and craft those all-important application essays.

"I really do get them to have 100 percent ownership of it," she says of the application process. "The essay has to be from them, in their own voice."



Admissions officers can smell it a mile away when it's not. They know how a teenager communicates."

Many parents may come to a consultant with the goal of getting their kid into an Ivy League-caliber school, but professionals say it's important to sometimes look beyond the top brand-name programs to find hidden gems that may be a better fit for the student.

Because most consultants have toured hundreds of college campuses and met with administrators and faculty



Starks helps students choose high school courses, build resumes and excel at their college admissions essays.

nationwide, they have the expertise to recommend programs that may not be as familiar as bigger-name universities.

They also typically attend national conferences and stay on top of admissions trends.

Thanks to innovations such as The Common App, it's relatively easy for students to send applications to multiple schools. Mauler says she has had students submit apps to as many as 18 schools, but that's not what she typically recommends.

"A good rule of thumb is to apply to

two or three schools where you're at the top of the applicant pool, two or three where you're in the middle range and maybe two that are a reach," she says.

Mauler says the bottom line is there are many different paths to academic success, so there's no need to get too stressed out about getting into a top-ranked university.

"And I strongly believe that it's more about what you do once you get into school than which school you go to," she adds. **USE**

## Quick tips

Guidance from these professionals on successfully navigating the college application process:

### 1 Apply early.

"The early bird catches the worm," Starks says. "We get everything submitted well before the deadlines. Most of my students are done by the end of October."

Mauler says she recommends applying early to at least one university with rolling admissions, adding, "It's great to get that first acceptance. It takes some of the pressure off."

### 2 Apply to at least one Texas school.

"I tell my clients to do this because you never know what will happen in the next year," Mauler says. "Things change and the family may need to have a lower cost option or may need to have the student stay closer to home. It's good to have the option."

### 3 Consider a gap year.

Not everyone is ready to tackle the demands of college right after high school, and some may need time to figure out their professional/educational goals. Look for programs that can help bridge the gap and prepare your student for the big step.

### 4 Think about how your child learns.

Is he or she an independent learner or one who loves classroom discussions and team-oriented projects? Consultants recommend a personality test and skills inventory assessment to determine the best academic fit for the individual student. For example, Starks has her students complete YouScience, a two-hour assessment that measures natural aptitudes using real work samples.

### 5 Go on campus tours.

It can be hard for a high school student to understand the difference between a 40,000-student campus versus a 4,000-student school from just a brochure. "Start locally," Mauler says. "Even if you don't think you're interested in going to a particular school, you can start to identify things that you like or don't like about a campus."