

One program offers 9 days of essay writing, SAT prep, etc.: \$2,295

BY TAMAR LEWIN
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How far can the frenzy over college admissions go?

Far enough, apparently, to have high school students flocking to a brand new kind of summer program - college admission prep camps.

No campfires. No hiking. Just hours a day of essay writing, SAT preparation, counseling, mock admission interviews and a potpourri of workshops and college visits, all intended to give high school students an edge on the admission process.

This summer, three companies are offering college-admission prep programs on seven campuses from Los Angeles to Boston. Two of them, Academic Study Associates and Musiker Teen tours, have long experience in teen summer programs, and the third, Brighton, is a startup founded by a former employee of Academic Study Associates.

While there is nothing new about high school students spending summers at a college, taking both academic and test-prep courses - and perhaps visiting other campuses in the process - this year's offerings go further, building a whole program around the admission process.

The pitch is none too subtle.

"Colleges don't accept people, they accept applications," said the news release announcing the Brighton program. "In the vast majority of cases, the admissions officers that decide whether to 'admit,' 'wait list' or 'deny' will never meet the candidate. With that in mind, it doesn't make much sense to struggle for years to compile a wonderful academic and extracurricular record only to rush together applications at the finish line."

Better to spend time over the summer, the Brighton materials say, making sure that every element of the application is "carefully crafted to tell a compelling story."

Brighton's director, David Allen, said: "The more the pressure's cranked up, the more parents and counselors seem to be driving the process. The kids are throwing up their hands and saying, 'Yeah, whatever,' so having them do this on a campus, away from parents, where they can get excited about living like a college student, is a good thing."

Brighton's nine-day \$2,295 program at UCLA and Tufts is the shortest and least expensive of the three. The June session at UCLA is nearly full, although there are still plenty of openings in the August sessions at both campuses.

All three programs include preparation for the SAT, writing essays and guidance on college selection, interview tips and college visits. The Musiker program - \$2,899 for 12 days at Northeastern University or Georgetown, offered in partnership with The Princeton Review - includes more college visits than the others. Bob Musiker, an executive director, said that about 120 students had enrolled so far for the 200 available openings.

Academic Study Associates was the first to try the college-admission prep camp idea last summer, with pilot programs at Pepperdine and Amherst. This summer, it is offering 11-day, \$2,695 programs at those campuses and Dartmouth, and an optional one-week \$995 Northeast college tour covering 31 campuses.

"School counselors just can't give kids the kind of service we can," said Marcia Evans, the company's executive director, "and the educational counseling industry has gotten enormous. I think parents have as much angst or more than the kids. Part of our program is to help kids get a little distance and demystify the process. It's a very intense program, but the kids gobble it up and ask for more."

Those who went to Academic Study Associates' pilot programs last summer said it was both useful and fun.

"The kids were great and there were only 12 of us," said Taylor Finch, who attended the program in Amherst last summer, and is

now a junior in Scarsdale, N.Y. "I got SAT prep and wrote two college essays. And the mock interviews were really useful. I learned not to be so fidgety, and not to touch my hair."

Jennifer Eisenstein, a fellow camper who is a junior in Wellesley, Mass., was equally positive.

"As much of a pain as it is to go spend 11 days of your summer doing real work, it was definitely useful," she said. "I came back to school a couple steps ahead of everybody else. I had a list of colleges I wanted to look at, and nobody else had that."

"And I have a college essay done, that with a little bit of tweaking, I can really use."

So far, all three programs seem to be attracting at least as many students going into their junior year as into their senior year - and that is a good thing, the directors say.

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