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How I Spent Summer Vacation: Going to Get-Into-College Camp

By TAMAR LEWIN

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 teenage summer programs, and the third, Brighton, is a start-up 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 press 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: "These kids, all the kids are there with their great grades and their great SAT scores, so those factors that used to be secondary, like how well rounded they are, and whether their essays really say something, are a lot more important."

"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."



For students and parents ready to leave no route unexplored on the way to a choice college, admission prep camps provide something new. Jennifer Eisenstein of Wellesley, Mass., said she found one useful.

All three programs include preparation for the SAT, writing essays and guidance on college selection, interview tips and college visits. Bob Musiker, an executive director, said, "Choosing a college has become a \$100,000 decision, and people want to make sure they're making the right choice."

Mr. Musiker, like others in the business, emphasizes that the college admission process has become tougher and more competitive than it used to be. "Pretty much anybody who can take an SAT course does take an SAT course," he said. "No one wants somebody else to be more prepared than they are."

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 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 the company's 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 at Amherst last summer and is now a junior in Scarsdale. "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. I teach Sunday school and it's about a girl who came up to me last year and asked if I believed in God."

Her mother, Beth Eisenstein, said that, as an alumni interviewer for Georgetown, she is aware of how increasingly competitive the admission process has become.

"Almost every kid I talk to has the grades and the résumé and can clearly do the work, but most of them don't get in," she said. "We have an excellent guidance department, but I still thought it might be helpful for Jenny to have somebody help her through the process."

So far, all three programs seem to be attracting at least as many students going into their junior year as into their senior year.

"It gives them a little more time to rationally plan their admissions calendar," Ms. Evans said.

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