

A Booming Business in MBA Coaches

Consultants are doing everything from advising to writing essays for B-school applicants. Admissions officers beware

by [Jane Porter](#)

More and more these days, MBA applicants are paying big bucks to counselors to help them get into the business school of their choice. Growing numbers of applicants—including, increasingly, foreign students—and a relatively static number of slots make hiring a coach a way to stand out.



Admissions officers are less than thrilled. "If someone else has done the work, it's almost like you are admitting an impostor to the program," says Liz Riley Hargrove, assistant dean and director of admissions for Duke University's [Fuqua School of Business](#).

The concerns aren't dampening demand. Consultants estimate that about a quarter of applicants to top-tier programs pay for help on their applications (see BusinessWeek.com Video Views, "[Tips for Finding an MBA Program](#)").

No Help Allowed

That has enabled firms such as Stacy Blackman Consulting to flourish. What began seven years ago with one coach today employs 30 consultants across the country with "the phone ringing off the hook," says Blackman, who charges up to \$3,250 per application. The Los Angeles firm helps applicants pick programs, craft the perfect essay, and master interviews. While many admissions officers wish coaches would disappear, they acknowledge that they generally advise MBA hopefuls rather than writing their entire applications.

The same can't be said for all coaches. "The [consultant] I worked with had a Master's in creative writing," says a recent 26-year-old applicant starting at [Harvard Business School](#) this year. "The stories were my ideas, but he would bring all the color to the page." He recalls a friend at New York University's [Leonard N. Stern School of Business](#) who paid \$9,000 to have an essay written from scratch. "The type of help varies widely," says Mae

Jennifer Shores, an admissions officer at the University of Pennsylvania's [Wharton School](#). "Our concern is when consultants are used to write essays."

Many top programs have explicit policies against outside help. The Web site of the [Stanford Graduate School of Business](#) warns that applicants "cross a line when a piece of the application ceases to be exclusively yours in either thought or word." At Harvard, admissions officers interviewed 15% more applicants this year in an effort to "get to the authentic person," says Deirdre C. Leopold, managing director of MBA admissions and financial aid. At Fuqua, a rigorous in-house system of background checks will be in place for next year.

Between Borat and Hemingway

Graham Richmond is quick to defend consulting firms like Clear Admit, which he founded with a fellow Wharton grad six years ago. His goal, he says, is to "perfect the admissions process, not pervert it." He helped launch the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants this month to help legitimize the field (see [BusinessWeek.com](#), 6/27/06, "[Détente in the Admissions Office](#)").

Meanwhile, admissions committees will keep scrutinizing applications for a giveaway, such as writing that outshines the candidate's verbal skills. The best coaches, of course, are all over that. "You can't fool an admissions committee if you write like Hemingway and you sound like Borat," says Alex Chu, founder of MBA Apply, a one-man consulting service.

Adds Blackman: "We've definitely had some successes where clients have been big stretches, and they've been accepted." Consider the 25-year-old Blackman client with a 2.82 college GPA and a wish list of top schools. Some \$5,500 and three acceptance letters later, he says: "Every penny was well spent."

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