

# WHY DO IECA MEMBERS TRAVEL SO MUCH?

*by Mark Sklarow, Executive Director, IECA*

The key role of the educational consultant is to find the best possible match between a student's educational, social, community needs and desires, and what colleges offer. The role of the college consultant is not, as the media would have us believe, to sit back, let a student decide where they want to go and then "help them get in." A student's learning style, the campus' political environment, academic vs. social component, weekend activities, LD support services, physical environment, and so much more go into this important decision.

Many consultants indicate that one of the great satisfactions in their life is introducing students to a potential college that the family has never heard of, but which proves to be an exceptional choice—just the right match for the interests and educational needs. A great consultant needs to have as much information about colleges as possible. It is this accumulation of knowledge that allows the match to be suggested so that a student can then plan a visit and evaluate on their own. Consultants can gain this information from a variety of sources. To be sure, exploring Web sites, view books, and literature is important. However these are written by a university's hired public relations firm, and so while critical information will be shared, it is skewed to present the best possible image of a school. It's one thing for a small college to claim 75 clubs, but the real question is: are these clubs active? Welcoming? Supported by the student body overall? Consultants should also make use of published data, like that produced by Wintergreen Orchard House. But we all know that numbers—minimum GPAs, test scores, size of freshman class, etc.—tell only part of the story. Numbers do not capture the feel of a school. Other published sources such as guides from Princeton Review and Fiske are also critical components, but of course these are the evaluations of someone else, and someone whose opinion may or may not match your own.

Most consultants also get feedback from past clients, which is a way to ensure that their impressions of a school are in fact accurate. Others look at student Web sites and other ways to

get a less filtered view of what current students are thinking and saying about their school.

What really distinguishes consultants, particularly IECA members, from school-based counselors, is that they do visit campuses. How better to describe a potential school to a student than to be able to share a view, in order to discuss it as a potential match. Consultants sit in the dining hall, observe interaction, read bulletin boards to see what events are coming, notice the influence of the Greek system, and discern what the political climate is. A consultant wanders over to 'Main Street' to see the student/town interaction, observe the maintenance of the physical plant, and see if students USE the gym, the library, the student support center, etc.

Of course there are added benefits to such tours: consultants become acquainted with college admission representatives, developing a stronger professional relationship that is further aided by the hundreds of college that participate in IECA conferences and programs yearly. Moreover, while some consultants visit campuses individually, more visit together with colleagues or take part in the many organized tours that IECA plans throughout the year. This provides opportunities to interact with peers, discuss changes in the admission scene, new developments on campus, and so much more.

No one source of information is sufficient to gain a complete view of a college, but it is the visit—a personal visit by a trained professional—that when combined with statistics, published reports, Web sites and more, is likely to provide the best, most complete picture of a college or university. Such a picture informs the consultant whether or not a school should be placed on the list of possibilities, allowing a student to conduct their own research. It is this difference that makes consultants invaluable for families and makes IECA members the most respected in the field.