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Forget Oxbridge. For today's gilded youth, Ivy League is the goal — and parents will spend a fortune to get them there

Private school pupils, fearing they are being snubbed at home in favour of state-educated peers, are turning to the US instead — guided through the steps by a lucrative consultancy industry



Susie Cochin de Billy, Founder of Arcus Advisory, features in **The Sunday Times**, 26th September 2021, in an article by Sian Griffiths and Shanti Das.

Tiger mother for hire

Similarly well-versed in managing wealthy parents' expectations is London-based coach Susie Cochin de Billy.

"I often get students and parents come to me and they say, 'We want to apply to university but we only want to apply to the Ivy League. If we don't get into the Ivy League, we're not interested in America,'" she says.

"That's a very bad strategy and it's also narrow-minded. It's like saying, 'Oxford, Cambridge or nothing?' Have you heard of Bristol? 'What's Bristol?'"

The former interior designer is now offering a very different sort of service to the capital's elite.

She is the founder of the Chelsea-based Arcus Advisory, a bespoke counselling service that offers parents "discreet and very personal" assistance with US college applications, charging up to £11,000 for an unlimited package, where clients can call on her around the clock.

Since starting her business 12 years ago, she has seen the level of interest grow "exponentially".

"I would say that 12 years ago, there weren't that many students applying from England ... so if you were a very strong student you could get into the Ivy League," she says.

"I probably get four or five times as many inquiries now. I turn away a lot of students. There are a lot more people doing what I'm doing now than there were 12 years ago, and there's enough work for all of us."

She scorns companies, though, that "churn out essays". She says her clients prefer dealing with someone with more experience. "I'm 100 per cent bespoke. You get me, not a 21-year-old student doing it on my behalf. I like to think I'm one of the top."

Sometimes, her job involves awkward conversations, she says. British parents — and children — can have unrealistic expectations about the amount of work that's involved with a US college application — building up your extracurriculars and writing dozens of essays on top of your normal schoolwork. Each university demands two or three essays each, so students — who might apply to ten or 15 different places — end up writing 30 to 50 essays, with each one going through several rounds of drafts.

Because the application deadline is in January, it can mean masses of work over the festive period. "You always get the last-minute students sending you things on December 31 and I'm up until 3am helping them with that. I put in umpteen hours for a student. I'm often the tiger mum the parent doesn't want to be."

If the student also needs help getting good grades, or tutoring to prepare them for the SAT or ACT exams, they typically work with a third-party tutor, meaning extra hours, and cash. "Some students need four or five sessions of SAT tuition. Others need eight months," she says. Tutors typically cost £90 to £120 an hour, but some charge up to £600.

When it comes to gaining real-world experience, students are often in for a shock. According to Cochin de Billy, one week of work experience at "a job that your family's connections got for you somewhere in Mayfair" will not cut it.

Teacher recommendations are also "extremely important", she says — and here the British tendency towards understatement can be an issue for UK applicants. "Faced with the typical English teacher recommendation saying, 'Joanne is quite good', ... the Americans will think, 'She's a total failure'."

While most students are enthusiastic about the idea of going to the US, it is often not their dream but their parents', she admits.

"Usually it's the parent driving the car. But what I hope is that the children are keen. Sometimes the parent is the only one driving the car, and then that's harder.

"I had one student where he was ignoring me and not answering emails or texts. I was tracking him down. The mother was hands off. I was like, 'I need these essays and I need them now.' The mother said, 'That's why I hired you. I need somebody who's actually a little scary.'"

One of her former students, Carolina Nasr, 24, says Cochin de Billy was "a massive help" with her US college applications.



Carolina Nasr went to Virginia university with the coach's help

The sharp-witted daughter of a former private equity firm director, who attended £23,000-a-year Godolphin and Latymer, an all-girls day school in west London, is acutely aware of her privilege. "I could not be more of a stereotype, to be honest," she says, laughing. "I'm pretty much as Kensington as they come."

She also acknowledges that this comes with drawbacks. "Not to criticise the private school system in the UK, but you're spoon-fed everything your whole life. So it's difficult to wean yourself off that. I'm not a self-starter; at least, not at that time I wasn't."

At first, Nasr knew she wanted to attend a "quintessential American campus university" but wasn't sure which one. "Susie said, 'Virginia suits your checklist.' And that's where I ended up going," she says.

Over six or so sessions and countless email exchanges, Cochin de Billy helped Nasr, who got 11 A*s at GCSE and 35 at IB (out of a maximum of 45), perfect her application and supported her with essay-writing, editing drafts and correcting grammar.

"When you're that age you do need someone to hover over you," she says. But she adds: "I had a very clean and honest application. No one wrote my essays for me. No one bribed anyone. There's no denying that I come from an advantageous position where my parents could help me, but I definitely put in the work myself."

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