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Paying a price for the perfect admissions essay

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TWO SIDES TO EVERY STORY

Getting into college nowadays is more difficult than ever. If you don't believe it, just take a look at how students are trying to get in.

Perfect SAT scores no longer guarantee admission to the Ivy League, and heightened competition has prompted high school students to seek any advantage they can get.

One tried-and-true method is hiring a tutor or editor to help polish college admissions essays. But not everyone agrees that students should shell out cash to improve their chances of getting into a dream school.

Advocates of editors argue it's a small price to pay when someone's future is on the line. Opponents say kids can get the same help for free.

PRO:

Jeremy Cohen, 18, attends Metropolitan Schechter High School in Teaneck and said he waited until working on his college essays. His mother suggested a tutor. "It was kind of a shot in the dark," he said. "I definitely needed an edge."

By Cohen's own admission, his grades have been terrible throughout high school. He hoped an essay boost would help get him into one of New York's city or state colleges. So he and his mother went to Uniquely U., an editing service that Maxene Mulford runs out of her home in Stamford, Conn. Mulford charges \$200 per one-hour session, and said that usually ironing out an essay usually takes five sessions.

That includes grammar and punctuation, but Mulford said that isn't her focus.

"What happens here is really different from what most people expect," she said. "It's really about finding your own narrative and seeing your whole application as a narrative."

Cohen, who wants to pursue a career in music, said the approach helped him craft an essay that was more personal and coherent than what he would have been able to on his own.

CON:

Not everyone believes high school kids should outsource their editing. Gary Schimel, a guidance counselor at Hasbrouck Heights High School, said students do not need to pay someone to help them get into college.

"I feel you should be able to write an essay," he said. "When you pay someone to virtually do it for you, I don't understand that at all."

Schimel thinks that when it comes to minor editing -- things like grammar and punctuation -- guidance counselors and teachers should be able to provide students with enough help to get them through admissions essays. And that doesn't cost a dime.

"The only thing that drives this is competition to go to better schools," he said. "The competition is much greater, and they feel like if they pay money, they're getting a better service."

Even if that were the case, some feel the benefits are relatively small. Catherine Lugg, an associate professor at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, said personal essays are not the most important factor in college admissions departments.

"It's not going to fix that D in chemistry," she said. "It's probably bringing psychological comfort more than anything else."

Overall, hiring tutors gives an advantage to students from wealthier families, but not a very significant one, Lugg said.

"This may give a few kids a half a step advantage," she said. "It's the metaphorical frosting on the cake."

That's what Robin Nierstedt thought. The Hasbrouck Heights High School junior doesn't plan to pay a tutor when she writes her college essays. "I'd get a teacher to help me. I wouldn't pay," she said. "I actually think my essays are kind of good."