

NEEDFINDING REPORT

CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES IN INTERNATIONAL
COLLEGE APPLICATIONS





WE WILL COVER...

- 01** Introducing the team & our topic
- 02** Needfinding methodology
- 03** Interview results & analysis
- 04** Summary
- 05** Next steps

MEET THE TEAM!

SALLY

Economics '25
Hong Kong



STEVE

CS '25
California



ZIJIAN

Symsys '26
Chengdu, China



ERIC

CS '24
California



WHY THIS TOPIC

Why education development and the focus on international students?

Interest

Personal
Experience &
Awareness

Relevance &
Reach



NEEDFINDING METHODLOGY



Selecting Participants

1 parent, 1 college counselor, 1 international student & 1 American student



Choosing Questions

Some standardized and some specific to the stakeholder's interests and concerns



Recognizing Limitations

International students chosen were in positions of privilege - but this is not representative



EXAMPLE Q'S

- 01 What has your experience been like with the college preparation/application process?
- 02 What is the biggest challenge in your role during this process and why?
- 03 What do you really like about the current education system?
- 04 How often do you interact with other stakeholders e.g. counselors and how were the interactions?
- 05 What resources did you find most useful in your college preparation process?

CHINESE PARENT

Hong Kong/China

Parent of grade 10 girl

Actively seeks out college consulting firms

Interview Format: Zoom



Background

- CEO of engineering consulting firm in Shenzhen, China
- Younger daughter in Hong Kong international school (grade 10)
- Currently in the process of choosing a college consultant and facing difficulties

Key Quotes

- "There are very few good things for the child out of this [college application] experience"
- "The services offered by consulting firms right now are all in a pipeline—there is no individualization"

CHINESE PARENT

SAY

THINK

Parents choose to sign with a college consultant for different reasons

counselors come in all different forms

If you want the best for your child, you work with the CEO - doubling or tripling the fee

Some parents choose counselors to communicate better with their children

"John Locke [competition] is dominated by Chinese students"

Signing with the agency is only the first step in a never-ending purchasing cycle

Some parents want the counselors to help students every step of the way

Since Covid, the industry has become more complicated and difficult to navigate

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Students sign with counselors as early as Grade 9/10

Baseline price is 43k USD and could go up to 170k USD

The fear of missing out - if you don't sign with an agency, other people will

Overwhelmed in the face of many consulting firms

Overwhelmed in the face of many consulting firms

Students faced less stress before Covid

Aggressive marketing by counsellors often hide the truth behind simple statistics

Students faced less stress before Covid

Overwhelmed by the number of agencies to choose from (who all promise to be the best)

Hard for children to show/develop their true passions

Seeking out counselors is almost a must these days for international students

Parents feel pressured to help their children as much as possible

Parents need to pay total deposit up front (no refunds)

Parents have to filter out noise to find truly helpful resources - but it's unclear whether they even exist

There are always more services you can purchase

Many parents are very involved in the college application process

Parents have to filter out noise to find truly helpful resources - but it's unclear whether they even exist

Parents need to pay total deposit up front (no refunds)

Many students follow the same pipeline, so they do the same activities

Students/parents have to compete for the best services at one agency - even more payments?

FEEL

The college application process is filled with external factors

Because one family/person cannot change the system, you can only join in and "play the game"

The college admissions process can be just as stressful on the parents

Frustrated at how "packaged" international students are

The college application process is filled with external factors

A good counselor should grow and motivate the child, not or predetermine their paths

The college application process gives both students and parents a lot of stress

A good counselor should grow and motivate the child, not or predetermine their paths

Standardized testing is being "gamed" in East Asia - which defeats their purpose

Many agencies are just "middleman" to overseas services

Because one family/person cannot change the system, you can only join in and "play the game"

Very difficult to counselors to be genuine in the current environment

NEEDS & INSIGHTS

THEY NEED...

A more transparent,
genuine, and equal system
to support international
students in their college
application journey



IT WOULD BE GREAT IF...

There is some way for
international students to
reduce reliance on
“middleman” counselors
that lack standardization
and personalization

COLLEGE COUNSELOR

Hong Kong/China

Working with over 40 students this year

8 years of experience

Interview Format: Zoom



Background

- College counselor with 8 years of experience
- He mostly helped students in Asia, he works in Vietnam, Mainland China, and now in Hong Kong
- He worked in international schools and private college application consulting companies

Key Quotes

- "When you have to make sure the students go to schools with high rankings, that mentorship part goes away."
- "There are so many things that could be done to help us organize data."

NEEDS & INSIGHTS

THEY NEED...

A way to work with students in less profit-driven settings and a better way to manage student data



IT WOULD BE GREAT IF...

Connect parents with someone who can convince them better and build a tool for counselors that updates information and keep data

STANFORD STUDENT

From London French Schools

Senior

Interview Format: In-Person



Background

- London student in French Schooling
- Brothers both went to Stanford
- Applied and accepted to Stanford ED

Key Quotes

- "Our French schooling system never taught us how to apply or gave me any resources"
- "The majority of my application support came from my brothers and parents who had already gone through the process"

STANFORD STUDENT

SAY

THINK

SATs were completely foreign to him until the process started

I had to be very selective with letters of recommendation.

My friends didn't look at International Schools because they tend to be very expensive

Writing about yourself in French is typically different than English

The only resources I had were my parents & brothers

I wasn't sure what I was going to do apply to college, I just knew I going STEM"

My brothers told me to apply since they knew I had a better chance with two brothers @ stanford

Studying at a country in second language was intimidating

Unlike Americans, I didn't have college counselor

It was lucky for me that I had 2 brothers who have done this already

His process didn't really change from his brothers.

"Unlike Americans" perception of applications in America being guided

American ideals/benchmark seem more "fake" while French are more objective

School name was more important than program/degree

The way college apps are set up cannot really get to know someone well

Schools with high ranking are more valuable

American education isn't perfect

Thinks friends wouldn't consider the process for international schooling due to cost

It wasn't as difficult as most students since he has two brothers @ stanford

Changes should be made to how applications are conducted

Commonly would seek brothers for advice

Communicate with brothers and parents about the application a lot

Made his decision on school based on brother's insistence

Tried to step in the shoes of an American applicant

Sought help and LOR from those accustom to the American process

Didn't talk to friends about applications

A lot of self-guiding and exploration

Do tasks in ways that he felt Americans would be most receptive to

Did research on US-schools by himself.

DO

FEEL

Felt as if any resources school could provide would be inadequate

Understood that international schooling is expensive and unobtainable for peers

Other international students might not have the immediate resource he did

Frustrated in the "fakeness" of school applications

Insecure about vouching for himself or his achievements

Applying to US universities comes with a lot more barriers for international students

Isolated and cannot relate to a lot of friends around him

His process didn't really change from his brothers.

He really leaned in on his brothers' support - he was lucky in that sense

NEEDS & INSIGHTS

THEY
NEED...

To be perceived genuinely
and to culturally
assimilate



IT WOULD BE
GREAT IF...

Applying Students could
find guidance on
applications while
accounting for cultural
gaps and norms

DOMESTIC STUDENT

UC Santa Barbara

Senior

From Cupertino

Interview Format: In-person



Background

- Finished two-years of community college before transferring to UCSB
- Majoring in Accounting/Business
- Grew up in the Bay Area in a competitive high school environment

Key Quotes

- "I learned the most about applying to college from speaking with other students. My counselors didn't help at all."
- "I couldn't afford a private counselor, and since English wasn't my native language, it was hard to speak with counselors."

DOMESTIC STUDENT

SAY

THINK

DO

FEEL

He used multiple websites to find out strategies to apply to colleges

He used simple tools like the G-Suite to organize his college applications

There was a student who tried to sabotage others at their high school

He wasted a lot of time on activities that he didn't enjoy just for college applications

He said he had a lot of fun doing summer programs

A lot of information online is outdated from year to year

The students who grew up in competitive middle schools had an advantage

High school counselors could only meet twice a year with each student

He was tempted multiple times to hire a private counselor

The counselors gave generic advice, and didn't really help when he asked them for personal advice

Sought out online, easy-to-access resources

Turned to other people to learn how to apply to colleges

Did a lot of extracurricular activities in college because he saw others doing them

Spent 3 hours a day for 2 weeks working on applications

Crammed a lot of applications the days before they were due

Tried (unsuccessfully) multiple times to meet with his school counselor

Didn't approach his teachers since it seemed like they were overwhelmed

Looked at other successful applicants' essays

Paid students small amounts of money to edit his essays

Exaggerated certain parts of his essays because he saw other people doing the same

People are putting too much pressure on each other in high school

College counselors don't actually know what they're doing

There are many resources online

Students who don't have a good English background are at a disadvantage

Counselors are overwhelmed

There's a lot of competition to do extracurricular activities

There are many resources online

Too many students are applying to too few schools

The high school system is not well-equipped to support its number of students

There should be tools to aggregate the information found online

Annoyed at how expensive college application help is so expensive

Confused about how to write essays

Confused about how to write his activities on his application

Extremely pressured when they see other people applying to colleges

Felt incredibly burnt out after applying to just a few colleges

Stressed about the overwhelming amount of information online

Fearful of approaching counselors or other experts in the space

Skeptical of how well certain resources work

NEEDS & INSIGHTS

THEY NEED...

A way to receive a personalized, tried-and-tested way of learning how to apply to colleges



IT WOULD BE GREAT IF...

Receive advice from students who have researched and been through the college application process



SUMMARY

- 01 Applying to colleges in the US for international students can often come with many barriers - financial, information gap, etc.
- 02 Some choose to not apply at all due to problems of cost, while others with the resources face their own struggles
- 03 The college consulting industry is oversaturated in East Asia - and the quality of firms is questionable
- 04 Even for domestic students, the quality of counsellors is unreliable - not PERSONALIZED!
- 05 The tools counsellors use to manage data/relationships can be improved

WHAT'S' NEXT?

- Expand our interviewee scope to capture a broader range of users and stakeholders
- Narrow down on particular painpoints we want to address
- HMW statements and experience prototyping



THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

