

Web site help for students applying to college

November 3 2009, By Scott Duke Harris

Two of my best friends are named Pete. We went to the same high school and the same university, Cal State Fullerton, which has been described as "the Harvard of north Orange County" -- by me, at least.

Some 30 years later, the two Petes shared an improbable anxiety: Each had a child who was a star [student](#). Kyle and Laurel were sweating out applications to the Harvard of Cambridge, Mass. Their parents may have been perspiring more -- one proud Pete in particular.

This tale of two Petes will resume in due course. But right now I find myself wondering whether Kyle or Laurel or their parents would be impressed by a new startup called AcceptEdge. Will its unprecedented algorithms really make the college quest more assured and less stressful? When the time comes, will AcceptEdge or some other [Web service](#) help my own children navigate these treacherous straits?

What I don't doubt is that high-schoolers and their parents will discover and use AcceptEdge, much as homeowners use Zillow to "Zestimate" their home's value, or the lonely-and-looking try eHarmony or Match.com.

"Helping students and parents deal with the anxiety of the college process is a growth industry," said Jim Jump, president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling. The 72-year-old organization has 10,000 members, mostly professionals employed by secondary schools and universities, as well as some independent counselors.

The virtual college road-trip today may involve visits to informational Web sites operated by the College Board, Petersons' college planner or U.S. News & World Report, known for its controversial college rankings. College Confidential features students sharing perspectives on campus life. A few sites include questionnaires that suggest good college "fits" based on social, cultural and academic criteria, and Cappex includes a "What are my chances of getting in?" calculator

AcceptEdge, founded by two collegians and incubated at the venture firm NEA, claims it has a more powerful proprietary [algorithm](#) intended to assess a student's chances of being accepted at particular institutions. Its method, the founders explain, involves a comparison of a student's GPA, SAT and ACT scores and extracurricular resume against university student data that is compiled from 15 publicly available data sources, including social networks. AcceptEdge augments the data with its own surveys and Facebook applications.

AcceptEdge co-founder Max Hodak, 20, says it evolved from a spreadsheet he put together at age 17 while attending a private prep school in New Jersey, comparing his own academic scores against university data provided by a guidance counselor at his school. His computations, he said, helped guide him from a likely rejection from Yale toward the warm embrace of Duke University, which had intrigued him with a vaunted biomedical engineering program. Once AcceptEdge gains traction, "I'm definitely going back to that," he said.

Hodak was still in high school when he first encountered co-founder Jason Mueller online, in a Facebook developers forum. Mueller, who has had paid internships at Sony Ericsson and Red Hat, is more focused on shaping AcceptEdge's business, while Hodak concentrates on technology.

To some, it may be disconcerting that such a service exists -- another

sign of how the college quest has become a pressure cooker. I've often encountered teenagers who stress over their grades, test scores and extracurriculars, as well as the occasional overbearing parent. I recognize that I and my wife are not immune.

Certainly the current reality bears little resemblance to my innocent, frankly clueless approach in the mid-1970s.

College life really was more innocent then, according to Peter Van Buskirk, former admission officer at Franklin and Marshall University in Pennsylvania and author of "Winning the Admission Game," published in 2007. In the 1970s, academics enjoyed a "if you build it they will come" attitude, Van Buskirk told me, because there were so many of us college-bound baby boomers.

That's no longer the case. Students often spend their high school years grooming themselves for a particular university, selecting courses and extracurricular activities they hope will make them stand out. Parents pay for tutoring or expensive SAT preparation classes, all designed to highlight their child's brilliance.

Van Buskirk, who has his own for-profit Web site called theadmissiongame.com., said AcceptEdge's greatest value would be to enlighten students and encourage them to explore options beyond brand-name institutions to possibilities among some 3,800 colleges nationwide.

But AcceptEdge, I fear, could also exacerbate the pressure. If a high schooler's heart is truly, perilously set on Stanford, for example, AcceptEdge claims it can show how a student can best enhance his or her odds by taking, say, another Advanced Placement class, retaking the SAT or running for class president.

AcceptEdge also plans to direct students to a network of "qualified

private college admission advisers" that can offer personal guidance and assistance to students. Many independent counselors offer worthy, ethical services, Jump and Van Buskirk agree, but some are unethical and manipulative, making inflated promises and charging exorbitant fees.

Over the years the Petes and I have occasionally ruminated about how we probably could have attended UCLA or USC. But, gee, the California State University campuses cost just \$100 a semester then. We could work our way through, get an apartment with our pals. We had a lot of fun and our Cal State degrees also gave us a head start on our careers.

Then again, it was a summer internship in New York, so far from home, that I remember as the single best 10 weeks. In the coming years, I hope my regrets become gentle lessons for Luke, now a third-grader, Quynh, a first-grader, and their baby brother, Khai.

I'm sure I'll be as proud as the two Petes if my children blossom into such impressive students as Kyle and Laurel. As things turned out, one Pete was happily stunned when Harvard accepted his young'un?, and the prouder Pete seemed a bit surprised when his wasn't but pleased she chose a fine university close to home. In the final analysis, so what? By all indications, Kyle and Laurel are both thriving, and growing respectively fluent in Japanese and Russian.

The moral: Where you go doesn't matter nearly as much as what you do when you get there.

Which is not to suggest that I won't be reading my kids' essays. And maybe suggesting revisions.

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