

Elite US universities are within reach

By **TRISHA CRAIG**
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A RECENT story that made headlines all over the world concerns a wealthy Hong Kong couple and the alleged fraud committed against them by a former Harvard instructor. It is claimed that he collected over US\$2 million (S\$2.4 million) from them with promises to obtain admission for their sons to that elite institution by making large contributions on their behalf. As someone who is deeply familiar with the American university system, this is a painful story to me, for many reasons.

The first is that it solidifies in the minds of many the erroneous view that admission to the private elite institutions in the US can be bought through large donations. While it is true that many of these institutions have large endowments – Harvard's stands at around US\$30 billion currently – and that endowments partly depend on the generosity of their alumni and donors, the admissions process and fund-raising are remarkably divorced from one another.

A prospective student who is somehow extraordinarily well-connected – from a background of great wealth or power – may merit a particularly close look by school officials and may need to be treated with care and tact, but the admissions officers at these institutions are full of stories about the children of important alumni, politicians, royalty or global oligarchs who were turned down because they were not a good match for the school.

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It is the case that the cost for a single year is more than US\$50,000 – a staggering sum – but the schools' large endowments mean they are able to offer extremely generous tuition assistance for middle-class and poor families.

At Princeton, for example, the average financial aid package for those who qualify is over US\$33,000 per year and many students from modest means pay nothing to attend. Most remarkably, international students usually fall under the same financial guidelines as US citizens, so there is no distinction made when offering aid.

The Hong Kong couple's case also highlights the role of college consultants – people or firms who work with families to guide children through the application process.

From the point of view of international families who may be completely unfamiliar with how the US system works, it can certainly make sense to

have this sort of guidance.

At the same time, the added cost, often considerable, and not knowing how to find a reputable consultant may be extra obstacles that discourage talented students from considering applying to some of the world's top institutions.

Such consultants are not necessary. There is a wealth of material on the Web – from independent guides to candid testimonials from current students and graduates, and the sites of individual colleges and universities themselves.

That's where prospective students need to focus their time and efforts – getting to know as much as possible about a number of institutions and applying to those that suit a student's specific abilities, personality and preferences.

It is important to remember that while there may be prestige associated with attending these schools, it is not like buying a designer handbag. The school with the most well-known logo may be a poor fit

for a particular student.

Students and their families need to do the research, which can be time-consuming but is utterly doable, to find the most compatible place where the student can thrive.

This is the start of the season to apply for US colleges, when families sort through the vast number of institutions, narrow down the choices, pick their favourites and their safety schools, and students start writing their essays.

It is a stressful enough process but it would indeed be a pity, particularly for international students, if the pressure were turned up even further because of mistaken assumptions about the process, or worse, if good students declined to even apply altogether.

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