

GET EXPERT HELP TO PICK THE RIGHT SCHOOL

Educational consultants can take the pressure off parents — and put students on the path to career success

BY ANNE BOKMA

BRAD AND LAURIE LANGFORD LEARNED the hard way that failing to carefully consider the right post-secondary program can lead to career regrets. They didn't want their two sons, Monty, 20, and Chaz, 15, to make the same mistakes they did.

That's why the couple, both 50, from Chatham, shelled out \$700 for each son to work with David Lawson, an educational consultant in Burlington. Lawson has helped thousands of students over the course of his 40-year career figure out who they want to be when they grow up — and which post-secondary program will help get them there.

"We hired David because we want our kids to look back when they are 40 or 50 and be happy with the career they chose — and not be wishing they had picked something else," said Brad. "We are doing what we can to try and help them find their way."

Educational consultants such as Lawson help students and parents navigate the complex post-secondary world by staying on top of the multitude of academic programs and educational institutions, as well as admissions trends and scholarship opportunities (see sidebar: Educational consultants: 9 ways they can help).

"A lot of kids are making the biggest decision of their lives in the dark," said Lawson, adding students feel pressure to pick a career path at a young age, and parents aren't always sure how to help. Both are stressed because the price is high if they choose the wrong program — with a four-

year degree costing \$80,000 or more for a student who lives away from home, flunking out of first year can mean a \$20,000 mistake.

"The anxiety level of parents and young people is profoundly greater than it was 20 years ago," said Lawson, whose services are in such high demand he has an eight-month waiting list. "Helping students define their areas of interest and expertise, and determine the path forward is what provides young people with the confidence to move forward with optimism."

Toronto lawyer Heather Asher* and her husband, Paul, hired Susan Lawson (no relation to David Lawson), an educational consultant in Oakville to work with their high-achieving 17-year-old daughter, Caroline, over the course of a year to decide on a program (she chose arts and sciences) and pick a university to attend this fall. One of Caroline's challenges was deciding whether she should go to McMaster in Hamilton or McGill University in Montreal. After consulting with Lawson in two hour-long phone conversations, Caroline opted for McGill, a choice she is now happy with.

"Choosing what and where to study is a daunting process for kids and parents and everyone wants to get it right," Asher said. "I'm a great believer in getting professional help, and Susan was an important emotional and psychological support for our daughter. She was invaluable because she is someone our daughter could trust and she had the right knowledge to assist."

Educational consultant Susan Lawson worked with Caroline, a Toronto student, to help her choose a post-secondary program.

As for Caroline, she says working with an educational consultant boosted her confidence about the program and the school she ultimately chose. "Having a knowledgeable, unbiased adult who was dedicated to getting to know me and helping me make the best decision was unbelievably helpful," she said.

Susan Lawson says she helps students consider career options that weren't even around in their parents' day, such as wind energy engineering and digital communications. "I can open their eyes to programs — and job titles — they didn't even know existed and help them make one of the first big decisions of their life."

A lot of students harbour lofty (some might say unrealistic) career goals, such as being a sports star or actor. David Lawson says he tries not to discourage those ambitions but will suggest more practical options. "People can have big dreams, but they also





A SENSE OF CAREER DIRECTION AND A ROUTE FORWARD ACADEMICALLY MAKES LEARNING MORE MEANINGFUL

need a specific goal,” he said. “I aim to help students take the things that interest them and understand them in a broader context. For example, with the student who wants to go into theatre because she starred in the high school play, I can help her understand the skills that allow her to excel in drama could also be applied to other areas — sales, for example, can be considered a performance

discipline. We can introduce all sorts of choices that they might not have considered.”

Working with an educational consultant early on (David Lawson suggests Grade 11 is ideal) often helps boost a student’s motivation — and, correspondingly, their marks — while still in high school.

“When they have some sense of a career direction and can see the route forward academically, suddenly learning becomes more meaningful,” said David Lawson. “They become more enthusiastic and they perform better.”

He recalls the mother of one young man who had been putting in a lacklustre effort in high school. She called him excitedly after he met with her son. “After our meeting he asked his mother to stop at Staples on their way home because he wanted to buy an organizer. Previously that sort of thing had been unthinkable. But now he had a plan.” ●

** Name changed by request*

9 WAYS an educational consultant can help

1. **CONDUCTING** personality, interest and aptitude assessments, thus helping students determine their strengths.
2. **EXAMINING** possible areas of study and career options that fit their skills and interests.
3. **DETERMINING** what they can do now to improve their chances for future admission.
4. **IDENTIFYING** study programs that suit their academic abilities and professional interests.
5. **DETERMINING** which colleges and universities offer the most suitable programs.
6. **CLARIFYING** admission criteria and offer coaching on admission essays and interviews.
7. **PROVIDING** guidance to get back on track after encountering academic challenges.
8. **OFFERING** expertise on admission to U.S. colleges, availability of scholarships and programs/schools suitable if they have a learning disability.
9. **ADVISING** on graduate programs and offer career counseling after graduation.