

The Secret Handshake Algorithm

September 15, 2014 | [17 comments](#)



by [Janet Rosier](#), IECA Professional Member (CT)

According to this article in *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Steve Ma of San Francisco is selling his service to parents who want to get their child into an Ivy League college. Or for a little less money, a “top” college. He knows the secret handshake. Or, in this case the secret algorithm.

“His proprietary algorithm assigns varying weights to different parameters, derived from his analysis of the successes and failures of thousands of students he’s coached over the years.” The article goes on to tell us that more than 10,000 students have used his company’s services and nearly all are Asian immigrants.

This is not a new story. The stereotypical Asian family wants their child to go to the most prestigious university and will pay to guarantee this. And, guarantee it he does. According to the article, *“Ma guarantees that his students will get into a top school or their parents get their money back—provided the applicant achieves a certain GPA and other metrics.”*

Let’s read that again—he guarantees that they will be accepted providing they achieve a certain GPA and other metrics. The GPA and the other metrics are—surprise!—the exact criteria colleges use to evaluate applications. No one needs to pay someone to “get” this secret information. This is widely known—that high grades in a rigorous curriculum, high scores on standardized tests, leadership and other outstanding attributes are what the most competitive colleges are looking for.

IECA's own Mark Sklarow is quoted in the article and he gives short shrift to Mr. Ma's method. *"The IECA doesn't accept counselors who guarantee admission, says CEO Sklarow. "Anyone who makes a guarantee is a fraud and a huckster," he says.*

So, just what is Mr. Ma selling and who is buying it?

The parents are new Asian immigrants or super successful business people in China who sign detailed contracts: *"The contract set out incentives that would pay Ma as much as \$1.1 million if the son got into the No. 1 school in U.S. News' 2012 rankings. (Harvard and Princeton were tied at the time.) Ma would get nothing, however, if the boy achieved a 3.0 GPA and a 1600 SAT score and still wasn't accepted at a top-100 college. For admission to a school ranked 81 to 100, Ma would get to keep \$300,000; schools ranked 51 to 80 would let Ma hang on to \$400,000; and for a top-50 admission, Ma's payoff started at \$600,000, climbing \$10,000 for every rung up the ladder to No. 1."*

The article gives us examples of what families are paying for. News flash—it's not the algorithm. What they are paying for is for Mr. Ma or one of his employees to get the student to get his grades and scores up. Essentially, they babysit the students, *"Beyond tutoring and test prep, ThinkTank employs about 30 college-admission consultants to help high school students enroll in advanced classes at community colleges, assist them in finding internships and volunteer groups, and even support parents struggling to disentangle their kids from video games."*

I found this example to be one of the most disturbing revelations about how he and his employees work with students. *"Recently, Ma and Alan [a student] organized a mass screening for hepatitis B, including setting up blood-test booths at ThinkTank's centers."* This is exactly what is wrong with his approach. The uber competitive colleges are looking for students who have the imagination, creativity and drive to conceive of and implement these kinds of activities on their own and, no doubt, this is how Mr. Ma will have the student spin the story for the colleges. But it is Mr. Ma who has the imagination, creativity and the drive—to get outrageous sums of money from families who have outsourced this rite of passage to someone who has guaranteed them a successful outcome.

This is appearance over substance and exactly what the elite colleges are **not** looking for. The reason they want these attributes in students is so that they will bring this passion and initiative to their campus.

It also begs the question of how these students will fare once they get to college and no one is coaching them through every minute of every day. But wait, there is more—*"Ma says he also sees many who graduate from college and are lost; for these kids, he's considered starting a program to teach job and life skills."*

Maybe the first lesson for life skills should be that they should do their own work and learn from their own failures and fix their own mistakes. Those are the skills that get students through high school, college and the rest of their lives.