

NEEDFINDING, POVS, HMWS, BRAINSTORMING, & EXPERIENCE PROTOTYPES REPORT





WE WILL COVER...

- 01** The team & topic
- 02** Additional Needfinding
- 03** POVs
- 04** HWMs

- 05** Solutions
- 06** Prototypes
- 07** Summary
- 08** 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**



Old focus:

U.S. college access for
international students



Updated focus:

Bridging the information gap for
international students applying to
U.S. college

Selecting New Participants:

Two new students, one domestic
and one international

COLLEGE GRADUATE

College Graduate

Florida Private HS

Middle Class

Interview Format: In-person



Background

- Recently graduated last spring from Stanford
- Working at big Technology Company as a hardware designer
- Went to HS in an expensive private school in Florida

Key Quotes

- "The School's college application help was generally not useful."
- "I would of had no shot of getting into a good school if I went to Ron DeSantis' public schools."

Spent a lot of time at after-school programs and commuting

Felt miserable at HS, almost no time at home.

Made most friends with college-orientated friends

SAY

THINK

Advice from like-minded friends is better than school

Classmates had a leg up due to privileged background

Thinks he has other family members depending on him

Stopped most of his EC after college

Parents spent most of their savings to send him and his brother to private school

Friends and him created clubs and teams for "college applications"

School's help was generally not useful

He didn't really enjoy his ECs

Like-minded friends have better advice bc of extra resources

Doing more activities was more likely to be better than excelling at one

School and friends didn't expect him to get accepted into a top school

Aware of financial situation, chose engineering ECs to help with the situation

School was not great, but public schools were not competitive at all in Florida

Due to his schedule, he felt that he grew distant from his family

Colleges could not fairly judge him if he was in public school

He was unseen in HS due to his academic diligence

Think that School's function is employment

Spent a large amount of his energy for ECs

Lived far away from other local students, from a different community

Would come home and collapse into his bed without speaking to anyone

DO

FEEL

Lots of his struggles came from the commute

Unrecognized for his work and efforts by the school

Proud when he surprised his class and school by being a "dark horse" in college apps.

Required a few hours of commuting each day to attend school

Didn't spend much time at home due to commute

Participated in any opportunities he thought would boost his chances

Didn't not commute for "fun activities" due to drive time

Envied the lifestyle with other friends

Felt that his group of friends was generally ostracized

Feels regret of not exploring other options and opportunities

Took as many AP classes as allowed

Didn't spend much time outside of "clubs for college" or school

Missed a lot of high school experiences

Jaded due to over-exposure to academic activities

Felt guilty if he were not to make money, due to parents' sizable investment in education

Competitiveness to outachieve his classmates regardless of class difference

NEEDS & INSIGHTS

THEY NEED...

To have equal access to
resources for academic
success



IT WOULD BE GREAT IF...

Students can get
affordable college
admission advice

BOLIVIAN STUDENT

Bolivia

Went to International School in Bolivia

Middle Class

Interview Format: In-person



Background

- International college student from Bolivia and Korea
- Had a sibling that had been through the application process and a cousin that helped her apply to school
- Used multiple paid-services during her application process

Key Quotes

- "It's not necessarily about being super genuine, but about kind of crafting a persona of who you want to be to the colleges."
- "When it comes to [international students], [colleges] want you to understand they want you for our money."

People were interested in applying to schools in Florida because it was close and had a Latinx community

Her brother did much worse because he didn't have anyone to help him, unlike her

The process is flawed since it selects for more domestic students

SAY

THINK

There should be more students sharing their experience online, through platforms like blogs

It's better to learn from other students who have been through the process

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

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

The college application process involves a lot of unknown factors

College counselor's involvement was minimal, contributing mainly to logistical tasks like transcripts

She didn't really care about grades until she noticed other people did

She wants a better way to track college information because she didn't know what quarter system was like

There are many resources online that can be consolidated

Her profile was more of a persona than something genuine

There should be tools to aggregate the information found online

Lots of people were super competitive and wanted to get into good schools

There was a lot of parental pressure in her decision-making process.

Didn't get into NYU, but did get into more competitive schools which she said was because she asked for financial aid

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

Counselors are not helpful, especially in international settings

Students don't really know how to pick schools to apply to, other than word of mouth

Considered pre-med, and she got pressured into applying for CS

COVID gave her the time to focus on college essays

Took a lot of AP classes to help with her applications

DO

FEEL

Annoyed at how expensive college application help is so expensive

She didn't know what to write about in her college essay

Uncertain of if she should talk about her international background in her application

Crammed a lot of applications the days before they were due

Doesn't respond well to parent pressure, so often did the opposite of what they said

Tried her best to avoid peer pressure, since it only made her mental health worse off

Never paid for a service, but wishes she did

Competition was unfair because a lot of people had rich parents who would help with apps

It's more of a numbers game for international, since she believes colleges don't want you to apply for fin aid

Nervous competing with domestic students

Unsure of how to craft her "persona" to fit what colleges were looking for

Went to a cram school in Korea to study for the SAT

Her cousin helped her out a lot because she had experience consulting other applicants

Started prepping since Junior year of high school

Brother pressured her to be software engineer

She didn't apply to a lot of schools because she felt disadvantaged as an international student

NEEDS & INSIGHTS

THEY NEED...

The college application process to be more affordable and genuine to themselves



IT WOULD BE GREAT IF...

Colleges were more transparent about what profiles and stats they're looking for in applicants

BRAINSTORM: CHINESE PARENT

POV

<p>We met...</p>	<p>A mother of a grade-10 student who goes to an international school in Hong Kong. Because her elder child went through the same process a few years before and she plays an active role in her children's education, she is very familiar with the college consulting landscape.</p>
<p>We were surprised to find out that...</p>	<p>Despite recognizing that the Chinese international college application process has lots of flaws, in particular with the high fees of agencies, she is still keen on looking for a counselor for her younger child because "there is no other way" to succeed in the competitive landscape today.</p>
<p>We wonder if this means...</p>	<p>She wants to seek support for her child through the college application process that has more reasonable fees but still offers non-generic, personalized advice.</p>
<p>It would be game changing to...</p>	<p>Give parents less exploitative college consulting packages while still making sure that the resources are of high quality for their children.</p>

HMW

1. Improve the way college consultants market themselves
2. Make college consultants/education companies less predatory in their pricing
3. Make information surrounding college applications more transparent/accessible
4. Allow a more organic connection to form between students and consultants
5. Have other ways for students to feel supported in their application process without making reaching out to counselors a "necessity"
6. Make information regarding college applications more accessible (price) and effective/high-quality
7. Involve parents in the international college admissions process in a more balanced/effective/healthy way (i.e. not overly invested)
8. More accurately estimate what a student needs from a counselor
9. More effectively prevent a counselor from overcharging
10. Decrease the information gap that parents and students might have regarding college admissions
11. Give parents/students more clarity regarding the landscape of different counselors e.g. each of their strengths vs. price points
12. Guide parents in choosing a suitable counselor

BRAINSTORM: COLLEGE COUNSELOR

POV

We met...	Jonas, a college counselor with 8+ years of experience. He has worked in Vietnam and mainland China before, now works for a private college application consulting company in Hong Kong.
We were surprised to find out that...	College consulting companies' interests are tied to college rankings. In other words, their pay is tied to the rankings of schools their students got into, even if the schools don't match students' personalities.
We wonder if this means...	College counselors want to have more autonomy to help students with fewer outside factors.
It would be game changing to...	Have a platform where college counselors can find students directly without private companies.

HMW

1. HMW change how counselors' bonuses are calculated
2. HMW redefine "good application results"
3. HMW get rid of college counseling companies completely
4. HMW connect college counselors directly with students
5. HMW give counselors more power in the application process
6. HMW get rid of college ranking system completely
7. HMW advertise strength of low ranking schools
8. HMW make student understand what they want better
9. HMW let counselors' bonuses tie to students' satisfaction
10. HMW extend the counseling's process so it's not just about getting into good schools

BRAINSTORM: INTL STUDENT

POV

<p>We met...</p>	<p>Karim is a wealthy international student from a French school in London attending Stanford University with two brothers who also attended Stanford.</p>
<p>We were surprised to find out that...</p>	<p>Karim's main struggle was appealing to what he thought American universities wanted, especially with his limited exposure to formal resources or advice.</p>
<p>We wonder if this means...</p>	<p>Karim created a fabricated portrayal of himself to fit a certain cookie-cutter archetype of a student that he or his brothers believed was more likely to be accepted.</p>
<p>It would be game changing to...</p>	<p>Help students navigate beyond superficial aspects of the college application process, convincing them that they need to convey themselves authentically without omitting their unique strengths and qualifications.</p>

HMW

1. Help utilize students' struggles to into an archetype as a unique characteristic in the process
2. Have "archetypal" students be less appealing to college applications
3. Tailor the student's characteristics to specific programs rather than tailor their portrayal of their characteristics to the program
4. Challenge student's assumptions of the existence of a "formula" for applications
5. Encourage college applications to portray more personality, like a dating app profile
6. Dissuade students from fitting a certain broad profile by exploding the "unwritten rules" of applications
7. **Help students delineate between useful advice and speculation that is not based on truth**
8. Create an archetype of application that integrates easily with unique aspects of applying students
9. **Make the struggle of appealing to foreign audiences a fun learning experience**
10. Have colleges learn outlier student's so they can fit their acceptance criteria to them rather than the other way around?
11. Help utilize students' struggles to into an archetype as a unique characteristic in the process
12. **Have "archetypal" students be less appealing to college applications**
13. Tailor the student's characteristics to specific programs rather than tailor their portrayal of their characteristics to the program
14. Challenge student's assumptions of the existence of a "formula" for applications
15. Encourage college applications to portray more personality, like a dating app profile

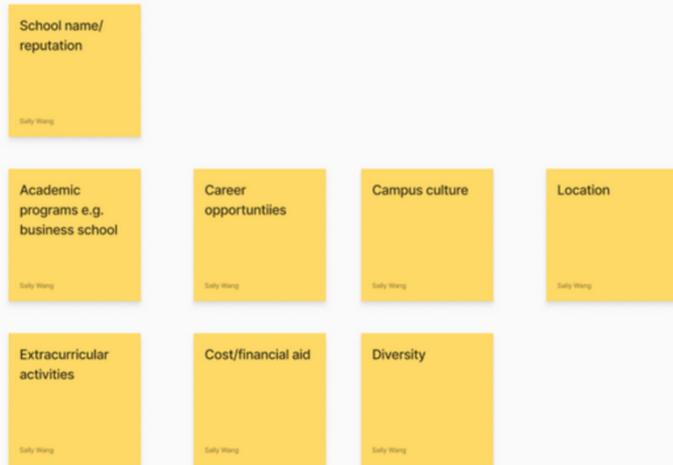
Open line of communication
between college admissions
to high school students

PROTOTYPE 1

<p>Critical Assumption</p>	<p>Students care about programs specific to their interest, but are not really knowledgeable about them.</p>
<p>Experience Prototype</p>	<p>Rank factors by how important each one was to their decision in choosing a college & by how easily they found information on it (Post-it notes).</p>
<p>Test Subject(s)</p>	<p>Stanford student. Recruited from a mutual friend. Relevant because they applied to multiple universities.</p>

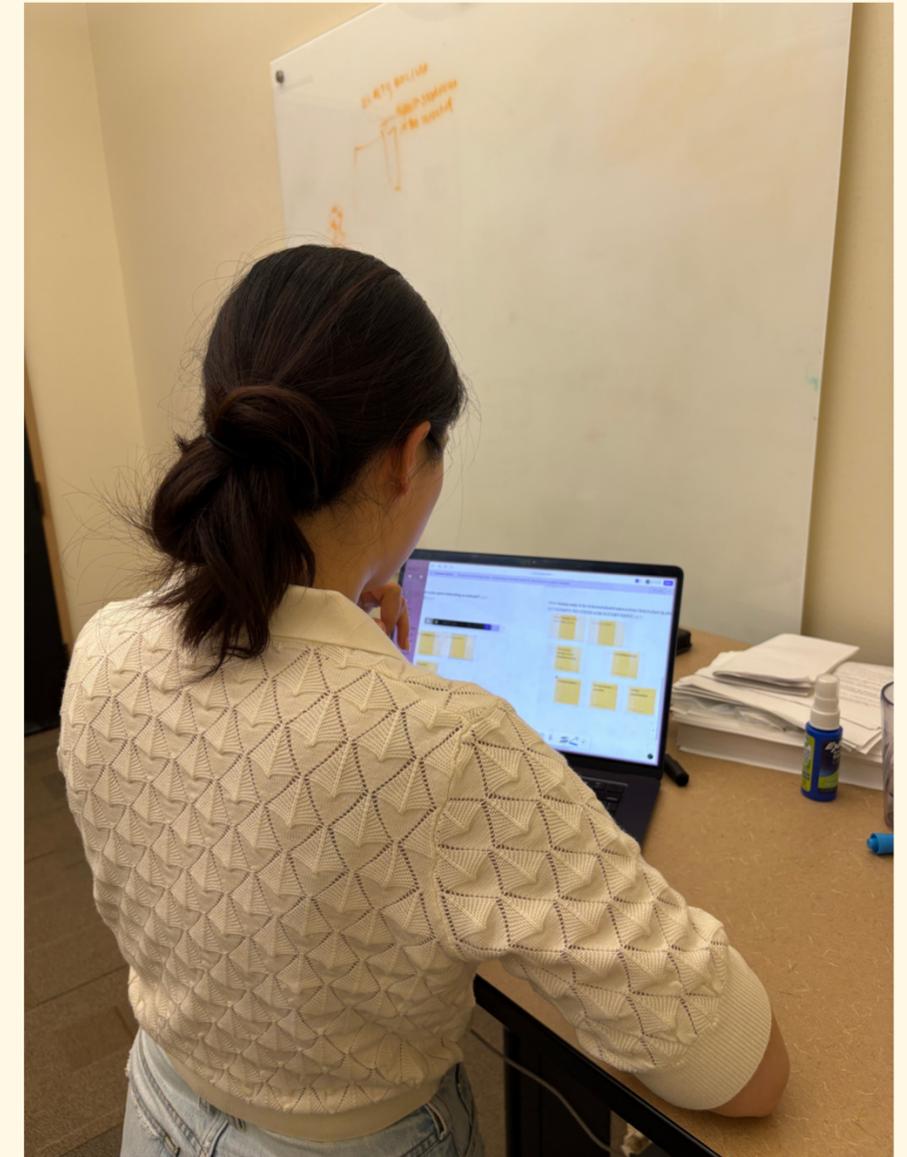
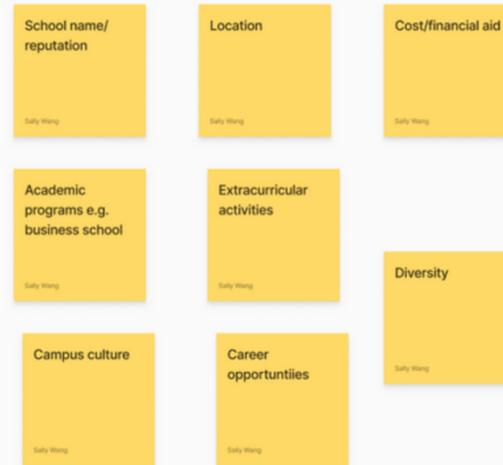
Section 4

How much weight did this factor had when you were choosing a college?
MOST IMPORTANT → LEAST IMPORTANT



Section 5

How easily was it to research/learn about this factor during your application process?
MOST EASY TO LEARN → MOST DIFFICULT



REFLECTION



- What worked:
 - Student expressed they did consider academic programs.
 - Students were engaged and personally reflected on what they valued.
- What didn't work:
 - For smaller schools, it was harder to find information on how their programs are different/unique.
 - Student expressed it was harder to find information about programs at smaller colleges, but they did not consider this to be a big problem.
 - They ranked it based on what they thought colleges wanted.
- Implications:
 - This direction is NOT the most suitable, seeing a notable number of international students overweigh college brand name.
 - Information accessibility of smaller schools/programs is not something they are concerned with.
 - The assumption was NOT applicable.

ETHICS



- Leaves out students interested in smaller schools.
- Heavily considers wealthier, very-ambitious college students.
- Limited scope in terms of how much information we could choose to include certain factors in the application process.

“Tinder” matching for
college counselors and
high school students

PROTOTYPE 2

Critical Assumption	Students care about college counselors' personalities, personal interests, and values beyond just their academic qualifications.
Experience Prototype	Wrote 15 college counselor profiles and make students choose who they would work with, analyze the reasons behind their decision.
Test Subject(s)	Stanford students. Recruited from friends. Relevant because they used private counseling.

EXAMPLES

Mai Yamada



- **Strengths:** Mai specializes in helping students connect personal passions to their applications, particularly in STEM and visual arts. Her focus on blending academic and extracurricular interests makes her popular among anime enthusiasts and artists alike.
- **Past Student Results:** Guided students to competitive programs in schools like Parsons, RISD, and USC.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Your passion is the best kind of authenticity.”
- **Hobby:** Loves Japanese anime and often incorporates elements of storytelling and character development into her counseling.

Rachel Wu



- **Strengths:** Rachel is passionate about social impact and helps students with volunteer and community service backgrounds find the right college fit. She excels at matching students with programs focused on social justice.
- **Past Student Results:** Placed over 30 students in highly selective social impact programs at universities like Duke and Georgetown.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Empathy is the key to standing out.”
- **Hobby:** An avid volunteer, spending weekends helping at local community centers.

Jonathan Green



- **Strengths:** Known for his high-energy approach, Jonathan focuses on competitive STEM programs and internships. He has deep insights into what top tech schools are looking for.
- **Past Student Results:** Helped students gain acceptance into MIT, Caltech, and other elite STEM schools.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Today’s sacrifice is tomorrow’s victory.”
- **Hobby:** Loves mountain biking and exploring trails in national parks.

Chris Thompson



- **Strengths:** Chris brings experience from admissions offices, offering unique insights into the college selection and admission process. He’s skilled at interview prep and school selection.
- **Past Student Results:** Students mentored by Chris have gained entry to Northwestern, Brown, and Dartmouth.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Your confidence is your best introduction.”
- **Hobby:** A sports enthusiast, especially tennis, and loves playing in local tournaments.

Thomas Park



- **Strengths:** Thomas has a data-driven approach and helps students maximize test scores and GPA. His experience in SAT/ACT prep gives his students a competitive edge.
- **Past Student Results:** Guided numerous students to test-optional schools like University of Chicago and test-heavy schools like Vanderbilt.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Excellence is a habit, not an act.”
- **Hobby:** A passionate musician who enjoys playing the piano and composing pieces in his free time.

Laura Chen



- **Strengths:** Laura is highly experienced with college essay writing and storytelling, helping students find their voice and tell their unique stories. She is known for guiding students with humanities and art interests.
- **Past Student Results:** Placed students at liberal arts colleges, including Bard, Smith, and Middlebury.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Your story is your power.”
- **Hobby:** A car enthusiast, Laura enjoys restoring classic cars and frequently attends car shows.

Ben Thomas



- **Strengths:** Ben has extensive knowledge of global university systems and helps students interested in studying abroad. His students benefit from his expertise in application essays and international programs.
- **Past Student Results:** Successfully supported over 50 students in their applications to universities in the U.K., Canada, and Australia.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “The world is your campus.”
- **Hobby:** Passionate about travel, Ben has visited over 30 countries and shares cultural insights with his students.

Emma Reed



- **Strengths:** Emma is a mentor who specializes in helping students find unique stories and angles in their applications. Her empathy and creativity make her a favorite among students with non-traditional backgrounds.
- **Past Student Results:** Helped 20+ students get into liberal arts colleges such as Amherst, Williams, and Swarthmore.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “You are more than a list of accomplishments.”
- **Hobby:** Passionate about painting and art history, often visiting museums to find inspiration.

Dr. Carlos Alvarez



- **Strengths:** With a Ph.D. in Psychology, Dr. Alvarez brings a structured and research-driven approach to applications. He excels at helping students highlight their resilience and growth.
- **Past Student Results:** Over 50 students admitted to UC Berkeley, Stanford, and other top West Coast schools.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Your journey is as unique as your fingerprints.”
- **Hobby:** Enjoys fishing on weekends, finding the patience it requires similar to the college admissions process.

Dr. Eliza Grant



- **Strengths:** Dr. Grant is a specialist in health sciences and pre-med programs. She guides students with a scientific focus to navigate competitive pre-med and research tracks.
- **Past Student Results:** Placed students in pre-med tracks at Johns Hopkins, UCLA, and University of Michigan.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Curiosity is the spark of greatness.”
- **Hobby:** Enthusiastic gardener who grows her own herbs and vegetables at home.

Sara Martinez



- **Strengths:** Sara is an expert in guiding international students through the U.S. application process. She’s known for her detailed understanding of visa processes and English language prep.
- **Past Student Results:** Has supported over 100 international students, with successful placements at NYU, USC, and Boston University.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Your background is your superpower.”
- **Hobby:** Enjoys cooking traditional dishes from around the world and sharing them with friends.

Michael Lin

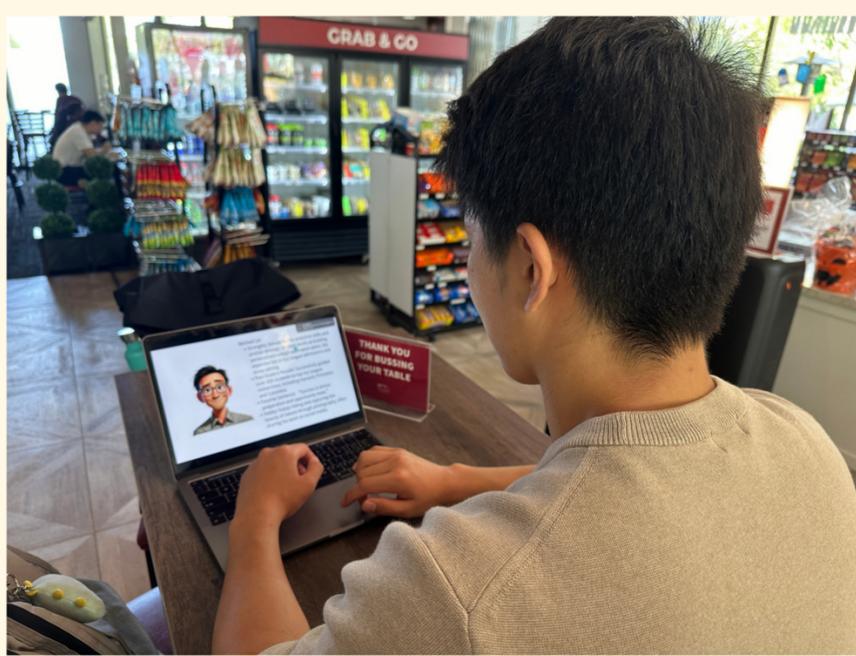


- **Strengths:** Known for his analytical skills and precise strategy, Michael excels at building personalized college application plans. His expertise lies in Ivy League admissions and essay editing.
- **Past Student Results:** Successfully guided over 200 students to top Ivy League universities, including Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Success is where preparation and opportunity meet.”
- **Hobby:** Enjoys hiking and capturing the beauty of nature through photography, often sharing his work on social media.

Anika Patel



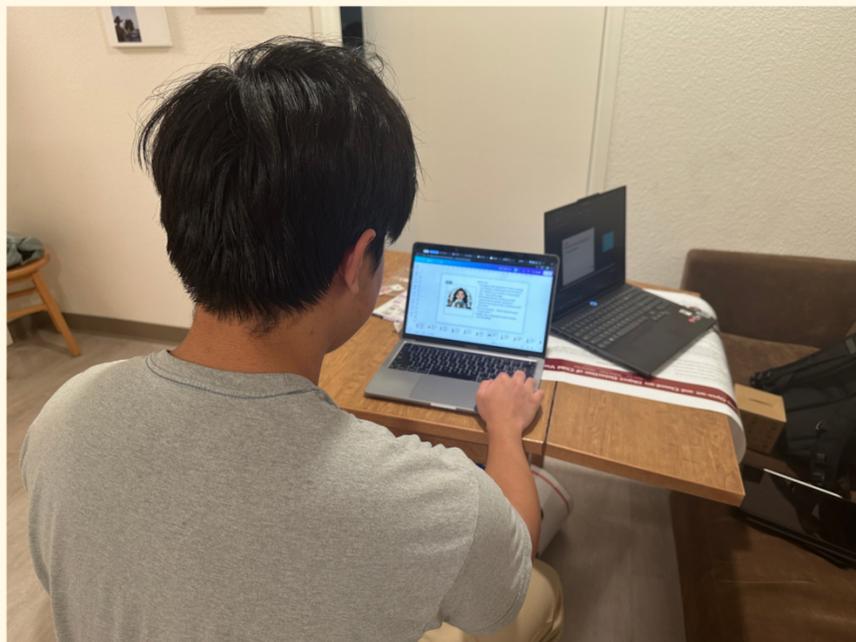
- **Strengths:** Anika specializes in essay coaching and building compelling personal narratives. Her students are praised for writing essays that “jump off the page.”
- **Past Student Results:** Achieved an 85% success rate for students applying to selective East Coast schools, including Cornell and UPenn.
- **Favorite Sentence:** “Words have the power to open doors.”
- **Hobby:** Runs a blog about creative writing and storytelling.



JJ: "This one had good results and he loves nature photography, we share the same passion."



Nathan: "I like this one because her past students went to schools I am interested in."



Sokserey: "I would choose her since she is good at revising essays and she likes anime, we would be friends."



Miguel and Bowen: "He loves traveling and he's worked with students from different countries, he should be able to help us (international students)."

REFLECTION



- What worked:
 - Very fun and engaging for participants.
 - They clearly enjoyed choosing counselors that matched them more closely, and there was usually a clear option for the students to pick.
- What didn't work:
 - We could've created better profiles with broader information and backgrounds that spoke to more students.
- Implications:
 - The solution IS extremely suitable.
 - Students work better with counselors that match themselves.
 - The assumption IS applicable: students do value more than just counselors' academic qualifications and past results.

ETHICS



- The counselor profiles are AI-generated. The model is biased, so when I requested it to generate 15 diverse profiles, all were Asian or White.
- The profiles are limited in their scope. For example, for students with more niche backgrounds, it might be harder for them to find someone suitable.

Connecting students with
peers via a marketplace
to exchange
information/advice

PROTOTYPE 3

Critical Assumption	College students are willing to share college advice and need non-college advice from others.
Experience Prototype	Created an exchange for homework help: they did an HCI interview for CS homework help.
Test Subject(s)	Stanford student. Recruited from a friend. Relevant because they applied to multiple universities.

help installing python
& Git

Price: 2 Questions

Set up Jupyter

Notebook...

Price 2 Questions..

Do your Homework

Price: 100,000 questions



REFLECTION



- What worked:
 - He understood the premise very quickly.
 - He liked knowing how much commitment he was getting himself into before.
- What didn't work:
 - Complained about the overhead of getting help requiring multiple back and forth.
 - Misused the experiment for attempted academic dishonesty (jokingly).
 - Didn't like the possibility of only partial help or advice, depending on what I accepted.
 - Felt transactional.
- Implications:
 - People can easily lie to get information they want.
 - This solution is NOT the most applicable.
 - The assumption IS true, but students may find shortcuts like lying.

ETHICS



- With just an honor system as the basis of this solution, more competitive students will likely have more information to share.
- This solution seems to exclude people from more disadvantaged backgrounds, as they may have less information to share.
- By opening up the type of information that can be exchanged, we can include broader perspectives and more people.

WHATS' NEXT?

Solution 2: "Dating app" matching system

- Address aforementioned implications and ethical concerns.
- Expand profile information and broaden our scope.
- Hone-in on understanding why students desire to work with counselors that match their personalities.



**THANK YOU FOR
LISTENING**



APPENDIX

SOLUTION BRAINSTORM

HMW have college consulting services be more affordable

- Create a cheaper, less-intensive consulting service for people who can't afford it. Steve Dou
- Have college students as counselors, schedule online and pay by hour. Zijian Luo
- Information funded by Colleges promoting their programs/information. Eric Hao Feng
- AI counselor. Zijian Luo
- Have a platform to compare price different counselors who offer the same services e.g. SAT prep, essay editing and their past rating, also showing their past experience/interactions with students. Sally Wang
- For a given student's budget and time left in application, have an AI helper give them recommendations for most worthy counselors in terms of price and quality. Sally Wang
- Instead of having one counselor that takes care of all tasks/applications of one student. Let one counselor help a group of similar students on similar applications. Zijian Luo
- Advice marketplace where HS applicants can trade hobby advice for college application advice. Eric Hao Feng
- Some way to standardize price of most basic services. Sally Wang
- Have more independent counselors rather than consulting companies. Steve Dou
- A system that charges based on how often the student uses it, and not just a one-time fee. Steve Dou
- Information parsed from existing sources and provided free to applicants. Eric Hao Feng

HMW connect college counselors/support around college applications directly with students

- student/ counselor matching platform. Something like how dating app works, students put their target school/ strength/ interest etc. counselors list their strength/ past student results etc. Zijian Luo
- Partnership program between consulting services and schools. Steve Dou
- Instead of focusing on private college counselors, provide better information to high school counselors to allow them to be more helpful toward students. Steve Dou
- Bridge information gap by having counselors create videos or online guides to help students apply to college. Steve Dou
- Connect students with past students of a certain counselor, so they can get some insight about this counselor. Zijian Luo
- Forum where current and past students can share resources with and help each other e.g. mock interviews, recommending books → peer-to-peer platform without counselors all-together → something similar to theStudentRoom in the UK. Sally Wang
- Students can directly pay counselors on the platform. Zijian Luo
- Friend Referral program where Friends of similar backgrounds refer other friends of similar backgrounds. Eric Hao Feng
- AI builds Applicant profile and matches with a profile of student with a specialized college advisor. Eric Hao Feng
- Recruit teachers to match their own applicants to specific advisors and programs. Eric Hao Feng
- Application where only students and individual counselors can reach out to each other i.e. no agency or firm can sign up. Sally Wang
- Have more rigorous and well-staffed, well-funded programs in international schools that offer college consulting. Sally Wang

HMW make information surrounding college applications more transparent/accessible

- Have a more centralized database where information is collected. Sally Wang
- Hear directly from recent applicants who went through the college application process. Sally Wang
- Have a message board of Applicants and former students to interact. Eric Hao Feng
- Open a line of discussion directly between college Admissions and Students. Eric Hao Feng
- Help students understand all possible programs and choices. Eric Hao Feng
- Have all the activity/ competition/school information on one platform, available to all. Zijian Luo
- A service that summarizes/condenses information online about applying to colleges. Steve Dou
- Allowing college counselors to charge a fee to share their information broadly. Steve Dou
- Helping students find resources specifically for their interests and profile. Steve Dou
- Have an AI assistant that can summarize information based on students/counselor's request. Zijian Luo
- A way for information to be open-sourced but still a way for "to check/confirm the incoming information validity e.g. Wikipedia?". Sally Wang
- Have an online forum where students/parents share their past experience. something like ratemycounselor.com. Zijian Luo