

# Help is available for college search

Posted on [September 5, 2014](#) by [Ken Cashman](#)



— Liz Levine of Signature College Counseling Services

Liz Levine was prepared for the reactions she got at New Windsor's Community Day. As the head of the Signature College Counseling Service, she helps students select and apply to colleges. She can also help families in their search for financial aid.

The people who stopped at her table at the Aug. 23 event were surprised. They didn't know that such a service existed.

The business is unique. At present, it's the only one of its kind in Orange County. But Mrs. Levine didn't invent her job. There are similar services in other states, and there's a course that counselors can take to become certified.

But that doesn't explain how someone gets started. Mrs. Levine left a managerial position in the corporate world after helping her three children find colleges. "It can be a scary time for kids," she said of the application process, "and a stressful time for parents. But I enjoyed it."

Her son and two daughters appreciated her input. Soon their friends and their families were coming to Mrs. Levine for help. Sensing the start of a new career, she talked to some guidance counselors at Monroe-Woodbury High School, and found a certification program.

She took eight on-line college counseling courses from UCLA, and then completed an internship with an experienced consultant in New Jersey. In February 2013, she opened her business.

"I enjoy working with students," she acknowledged as she sat in her Woodbury home and office. "They start out stressed; I try to relieve the pressure and get them the best possible match."

The extent of the counselor's involvement can vary. Last August, a woman called her in a panic. "I have no idea where to start," she said. "I want you to handle everything for me."

The counselor interviewed the student and asked questions about his preferences. Together, they selected a half dozen schools, which Mrs. Levine says is enough if you've done your work properly.

She helped the student with his application and essays, and prepared him for his college visit — suggesting what to

ask and what to look for.

In another case, she helped a family with twins prepare for the burden of paying for college. “Don’t judge a school by the sticker price,” she advised them. “Let’s find the best fit. A lot of places give merit and financial aid.”

After her Saturday in New Windsor, Mrs. Levine remained busy. Three of the people she met on Community Day called her during the weekend to schedule appointments. On Monday, she drove to Albany to visit five colleges in the area.

Picking the right school is an important decision, Mrs. Levine says. People don’t do it often enough to become experts, That’s why there’s a need for a counseling service.

### **Tips for College Planning**

- The start is scarier than the finish.
- There is a college for everyone
- Start early (ideally at the end of your sophomore year)
- Decide on the affordability after the acceptances and financial aid award letter arrive
- If you would like *any* financial aid, fill out the FAFSA (Free Application for Financial Student Aid)
- You don’t need to have a career goal before you start college

### **SERVICES**

In a brochure for prospective clients, Liz Levine describes what she offers:

**Initial consultation** to lay the foundation for a college admissions plan and provide tools that can be used throughout the journey.

**Comprehensive plan** that encompasses college search and selection, application preparation, student profile and resume, essays (topic, development review) and final college selection.

**College selection** – defining goals and then devising a list of colleges that meet those targets.

**Essay** – topic, development and review

Financial aid counseling that will help families complete forms and understand financial aid options

**Customized packages** that allow clients to tailor the services to meet their needs.

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