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At UNC, athletes' records contain many deletions

University officials say they’re just protecting students’ educational records

By Dan Kane and J. Andrew Curliss - dkane@newsobserver.com

Try to follow this part of a report that is part of the NCAA’s investigation into UNC-Chapel Hill football:

“Student-Athlete (blank) was interviewed two times. During his first interview, when asked about the last time he had contact with (blank), his response was ‘a week or so ago.’

“At the onset of his second interview, before being asked specifically about this issue, Student-Athlete (blank) indicated that he wished to clarify this issue. He said that he had stopped by (blank) house briefly (maximum of 10 minutes) the night before the first interview. He stated that he was on his way to (blank), so he stopped by (blank)’s house to ‘see if she had some cookies.’ ”

That passage is within more than 200 pages of records UNC attorneys turned over last week to The News & Observer, The Charlotte Observer and other media companies that had joined in a public records lawsuit to try to learn more about the UNC football scandal. The document and many others are full of wholesale deletions, some of which remove entire paragraphs and more of information.

On Thursday, lawyers for media companies will try to convince a state Superior Court judge that the documents should have been released – without the university’s censorship – months ago. The lawyers will also argue for the release of other records pertinent to the NCAA investigation that the university is still holding.

The release of heavily redacted documents last week is one of many examples in which university officials have held back information in the school’s worst athletic scandal in at least five decades.

What started as a case of football players taking perks from agents has now moved into a major case of academic fraud involving the longtime chairman of African and Afro-American studies. Evidence from the academic fraud
case shows that basketball players at one of the nation’s elite programs benefited from no-show classes as well.

In the case above, the censored passage suggests that just before the football player was to have been interviewed by NCAA investigators, he had met with a tutor suspected of providing improper help to that player and several others. The investigation later reported that a former tutor, who has been identified as Jennifer Wiley, had given improper help. She has repeatedly declined to talk about the case.

The redacted documents indicate that other teammates were at the tutor’s home as the NCAA investigation caught fire, but players denied the purpose of the gathering was to discuss the NCAA probe or for students to get their stories straight about it.

**Protecting ‘education’ records**

University officials have often cited two reasons for not making information public. The first is a 37-year-old federal law known as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. But the law’s author, former U.S. Sen. James Buckley, told The Columbus Dispatch two years ago that the law was intended to protect students’ grades and transcripts, and has been used too broadly by universities to hide information related to athletic issues.

The second is that the NCAA, according to the university, does not want information related to its investigations made public, and takes extreme steps to prevent its release. Information is often communicated orally, preventing the creation of a written record, and important information is given to outside lawyers or deposited on a non-university Web site that the NCAA controls.

Interviews of coaches, players and employees as well as some documents being sought by the media are not public because the information is kept elsewhere, university lawyers argue. The former head coach, Butch Davis, says that also applies to his personal cellphone records, which are also being sought by the media.

**A strip club visit**

The university cited the privacy law in refusing to release parking ticket information related to athletes as the probe began, saying they were an “education” record. The university issued an assuring statement that it had checked and could confirm parking tickets went to players or their family members while saying nothing about the source of paying them off.
A judge eventually ordered the ticket information released, and Chancellor Holden Thorp approved an appeal, saying the judge’s ruling “put the privacy rights of all of our students at risk.” The Court of Appeals disagreed.

The ticket information showed that the tutor had paid nearly $1,800 in fines for one player and that 12 players accumulated a total of more than $13,000 in parking fines, some unpaid. The NCAA specifically cited the tutor’s payment, made in August 2010 as classes were about to begin, in its infractions report.

The university is also using its duty to protect education records to justify its redactions in other documents, including one detailing a football player’s visit to a strip club.

The records released in recent days are in response to N&O requests filed two years ago.

University officials have also held back information related to the academic fraud case involving the former chairman of the African and Afro-American studies department. The case involves 54 classes, mostly filled with athletes, that had little or no instruction.

On Aug. 24, for example, University General Counsel Leslie Strohm told NCAA officials in a phone conversation that one of those classes included 18 football players and one former player.

But five days later, when the N&O requested information about classes that did not meet and required only a term paper, and how many football and basketball players were in them, the university did not disclose the class. It took additional N&O requests in recent weeks to produce the information, 10 months after the original request.

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**Records show unauthorized help at UNC-CH**

Football players got assistance with written assignments

By Dan Kane - dkane@newsobserver.com

One football player turned in a paper largely copied from another athlete at UNC-Chapel Hill, and appeared to have other students who were not athletes providing or padding other written assignments. Another emailed a friend the beginnings of a 10-page paper, who then sent him back a completed paper with the comment, “I got you to 10 pages.”

And at least two football players confirmed that they and others met with someone – believed to be a former tutor who was a central figure in an NCAA investigation – the evening before they were to be interviewed as part of the probe. None said they were there to try to get their stories straight, but one acknowledged making an incorrect statement claiming that he had not seen the tutor the previous evening.

These are details that emerge from roughly 200 pages of heavily redacted documents that UNC-Chapel Hill officials turned over in recent days. The documents have been purged of names, email addresses, what year the class work took place and other details. Also not included are the assignments, either the drafts that often ended up on someone else’s computer or the final version often sent back to the football players.

The documents are listed as “Academic Statement of Facts” and “situation” reports that either identify potential misconduct or ask the NCAA whether such conduct might result in a violation. The redactions and lack of other information make it unclear how much of what is in the reports turned out to be NCAA violations, or how those facts affected the football players under investigation.

They do quote email correspondence and snippets of interviews with investigators. In one example, email correspondence showed someone believed to be a tutor was struggling to fulfill an athlete’s written assignment: “(I)t’s 2 pages but I can’t expand anymore. I already feel like I am being redundant. I’m sorry but it’s better than nothing.”

Asked whether he did the work on that paper, the football player told investigators: “Not really I guess.” He later said he didn’t remember what he did, then denied that the tutor wrote the paper for him.
In March, the NCAA hit the football team with a one-year bowl ban and the loss of scholarships. It found that a former tutor, known to be Jennifer Wiley, provided impermissible free academic help to 11 football players, and committed academic fraud involving three football players by constructing significant parts of writing assignments for them. Wiley refused to be interviewed by investigators and has declined media requests for interviews.

“The former tutor wrote conclusive paragraphs for papers, revised drafts, composed ‘works-cited’ pages, researched and edited content and inserted citations, among other violations,” the NCAA’s report said. It makes no mention of other cases in which someone other than a tutor did a football player’s academic work.

University officials could not be reached for comment about the newly released records. Officials have taken several steps in the wake of the NCAA probe to try to ensure that student athletes aren’t cheating.

Kane: 919-829-4861
An enterprising woman I knew a long, long time ago had the philosophy that she wouldn’t give away anything she could sell.

I, on the other hand, was always trying to convince her not to sell anything that she could give away.

Duke and several other top-tier universities feel the time is right for them to give away precisely what they’re selling — an education — although not all of it and not the full experience.

Duke, Stanford and the University of Pennsylvania, among other blue-chip schools of higher book learnin’, are offering free online courses to all with a computer and a desire to fill their heads with more than the latest flibberty gibberty on Kanye West and Kim Kardashian.

Won’t giving away the product they sell cheapen its value and infuriate parents who are coughing up $56,000 a year in tuition and room and board, I asked Michael Schoenfeld, Duke’s spokesman?

No, he said. “It’s important to remember that these are all experiments. We’re not giving a degree online. Coursera (the California-based company that apparently birthed this bright idea) “brings together top universities online so that people around the world will have the opportunity to get a sample, a taste, of what the experience is really like. ... It can supplement it or extend it, but it can’t replace” the college experience.

Schoenfeld, Duke class of ’84, said he plans to take courses — World Music and Shakespeare — that he is interested in or “that I should’ve paid more attention to” when he was an undergrad.

Support for online

Fredessa Hamilton-Cobb, a 1977 Duke grad from Washington, D.C., said she is not bothered by the possibility of someone taking classes or perhaps even receiving a Duke degree online. “I’m at N.C. State now, and we’ve been doing it for a long time. Having seen it in action, I strongly support online learning,” Hamilton said.

Hamilton-Cobb, who teaches electronic media writing, said she figures Duke is offering the courses free for now “to work out the kinks. I’ve got a feeling
that eventually it’s not going to cost less to take online courses; it’s going to cost more.”

Far from diminishing the value of a Duke education, she said, online courses may enhance it, since it could give Duke and its students access to world-class professors “who may not want to move to Durham.”

What? Who wouldn’t want to move to Durham?

**Not the whole experience**

Schoenfeld said, “We’re not giving away a Duke education anymore than Stanford is giving away a Stanford education or Harvard is giving away a Harvard education.

“I don’t want to minimize the importance of what people get online. ... That’s ideal for some people, but what you miss is being around a dynamic and diverse set of peers and access to our support services. The residential and classroom college experience still has some value after a thousand years.”

Right on. Anyone who’s ever left home to get all colleged up knows that some of the most valuable learning occurs outside the actual classroom, such as when you realize neither your Aunt Jennie nor anyone else is going to come in fussing and making you get up to go to class when it’s cold and rainy: you discover you’ve got to do that on your own.

You also learn how to get along with a roommate who does laundry just once a semester because he thinks that turning his Fruit of the Looms inside out magically makes them clean. (Yeah, that means you, Curtis.)

As reported in an N&O story this week, more than 650,000 people around the world have already signed up for the free courses. Could all this, I asked Schoenfeld, result in a smarter, more literate and educated populace?

“Certainly, that’s everyone’s hope,” he said.

A memorable public service announcement from 40 years ago showed Abraham Lincoln — who had no college degree — entering an employment office and being questioned by a distracted, sandwich-chomping interviewer.

**Interviewer:** Lincoln, right? So, you’re looking for an executive position. But what about college?

**Lincoln:** Well, I’ve done a lot of reading and studying, sort of on my own.
Interviewer: Look, Lincoln. I know you’re a smart guy, and you know you’re a smart guy. But you ain’t goin’ nowhere without that sheepskin, fella.

Without that sheepskin — which at Duke goes for around $42,000 a year — even job-seekers with copious amounts of knowledge derived from online studies may face the same question with which the impertinent interviewer concluded his interview:

Hey Lincoln. You got a chauffeur’s license?
Myers Park residents are concerned about how traffic coming from the university’s planned Levine Center will affect Wellesley Avenue, which has been designated as a larger, “connector” street rather than a neighborhood street.

Queens University of Charlotte, neighbors in court over planned Levine Center

By David Perlmutt

For more than a century, Queens University of Charlotte and the surrounding Myers Park community have largely coexisted as peaceful neighbors, each considering the other a mutually endearing asset.

Neighbors often eat on campus. They take classes, go to lectures or concerts at Queens and cheer at sports events.

But now a group of homeowners and the Myers Park Homeowners Association are hauling the university into court over concerns about ambitious development projects well under way on the main campus.

Thursday, Superior Court Judge Timothy Kincaid will hear their challenge to a city zoning ruling that allowed Queens to construct two buildings the homeowners contend push Queens beyond city density restrictions.

“The Myers Park neighborhood is experiencing Queens on steroids,” said Charlotte lawyer Ken Davies, who represents the homeowners. “Nobody denies that Queens has been an asset to the community. But with its new buildings, it has reached the tipping point from an asset to a detriment in the eyes of many neighbors who have to deal with traffic every day.”
Davies, no relation to Queens President Pamela Davies, said city zoning administrator Katrina Young wrongly allowed Queens to begin building the $28 million, 145,000-square-foot Levine Center for Wellness and Recreation (with a 2,000-seat performance gym) and a seven-story building next door. That building will house five floors of parking for 500 cars and dormitory space for 180 beds on the top two floors.

Both buildings are already under construction. The parking deck is scheduled to open in the fall; the Levine Center will open by next summer.

The wellness complex is replacing the old Ovens Athletic Center. With a pool, fitness center and smoothie bar, it’s designed to enhance student life on campus and Queens’ ability to recruit top students.

Yet Davies said Queens’ zoning requires it to “maintain a suitable environment for family living.” He said the two buildings will push Queens beyond the city’s development density restrictions by 70 percent.

But Young allowed the buildings. She said a 2010 city ordinance excludes dorms and parking decks from the rule that restricts development density at Queens to roughly 50 percent of the total campus.

“Queens is well within” that ratio, said Charlotte lawyer Richard Vinroot, who is representing Queens.

**Traffic concerns raised**

The two buildings’ access point will be a long-existing entry off Wellesley Avenue.

The homeowners say Wellesley is 20 feet wide at the entry and wouldn’t be able to handle cars leaving sporting events or concerts with 2,000 people.

“If you’ve got that number of people emptying out of the Levine Center at once and half are in cars, you’re looking at an hour and half to get them all out of there.”

The homeowners wanted Young to designate Wellesley as a neighborhood street unable to accommodate heavy traffic. Young determined Wellesley could handle the traffic and designated it as a larger “connector” street.

After the city’s Zoning Board of Adjustment upheld Young’s decisions in March, the homeowners association took the matter to court to challenge the zoning board. Subsequently, a group of 12 Myers Park homeowners filed a similar action.
“We’d like to see a judge rule that the Zoning Board of Adjustment made a mistake, and force Queens to find a new route for ingress and egress,” Davies said. “The goal here is not for Queens to tear down the parking deck, but we want the judge to establish that Queens has reached its limit and can’t build any more parking decks or dorms on the main campus. We feel they’ve received unreasonable exemptions to allow for much more dense development.”

Vinroot said the university has done everything well within the rules. He’s filed motions asking the judge to dismiss both lawsuits. “The neighborhood is saying the facilities will be a nuisance,” he said. “You can’t anticipate a nuisance.”

Vinroot said Queens got its necessary approvals to build the wellness complex and parking deck/dorm, and the university has done everything possible to update neighbors on its building plans. “I am absolutely confident,” he said, “the court will uphold the zoning board.”

**University has reached out, made changes**

At many schools tucked into neighborhoods or butting up against towns, town-gown relations often grow tense. Yet Queens has tried to maintain a closeness to the neighborhood. After all, Myers Park began with the construction of Queens in the early 1900s.

For years, the university has met with neighbors and nearby churches and businesses to telegraph its building plans.

Responding to concerns, the school made the Levine Center a story shorter and moved it back from Wellesley. Queens also moved the parking deck/dorm on the other side of the Levine Center from Wellesley, obscuring it from neighbors’ view.

As the school evolved into a comprehensive university, it began making plans to move graduate programs to other off-campus sites and has begun returning the main campus to traditional undergraduate students.

“We are proud of the work we’ve done with the neighborhood. … We are committed to preserving the special nature of Myers Park,” said Rebecca Anderson, Queens vice president for marketing and community relations. “We believe that our plan – including returning the main campus primarily to a residential campus – will enhance the quality of life for students and neighbors.”

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More College Students Living at Home

By ANN CARRNS

About half of college students lived at home in the most recent academic year to cut education costs, an increase over the last two years, according to a new study from Sallie Mae, the student loan giant.

The increase is largely driven by students from more affluent families - those with incomes of $100,000 or more, the study found. Students from lower- and moderate-income families have typically lived at home for at least part of their college career. But more difficult economic times, and the increasing cost of a college degree, are prompting students from better-off families to live with their parents, too.

During the academic year ended in spring of 2012, almost half of students from high-income families lived at home, compared with about one-quarter two years ago.

That's one reason the average amount families spent on college declined by 5 percent in 2012, to $20,902 - the second consecutive annual decline found by the study.

Families also were more likely to eliminate certain colleges from consideration because of cost earlier in the selection process, the study found.

"Families are being more cost-conscious," said Sarah Ducich, senior vice president for public policy at Sallie Mae. "They're trying to find ways to spend less."

The fifth annual Sallie Mae study, "How America Pays for College," is based on interviews by the research firm Ipsos with undergraduates 18 to 24 years old and parents of undergraduates. While parents still shoulder much of the financial burden for their children's college education, they are paying less. In the most recent year, parents paid slightly over a quarter of college
costs from their savings and current income - down from about three-eighths in 2010.

To offset the shortfall from diminishing parent contributions, students shouldered a larger share of college costs from their own savings and through the borrowing of federal student loans.

Despite the higher sensitivity to cost, however, the study found that fewer than half of families had a plan for paying for college before enrollment. That suggests much more needs to be done to help educate students and families about planning financially for college, Ms. Ducich said. "The worse thing is to not have a plan, go for a couple of years, then run out of money and not finish," she said. Such students end up with debt, but no beneficial economic impact from having a college degree.

Are you contributing less to your child's college education? Is your child planning to live at home while in college?
Help for the Not So Needy

By CHRISTOPHER DREW

MIDDLE-INCOME parents are being squeezed more than ever these days — higher property taxes and cost of living, lower home equity, frozen salaries. Many no longer have enough savings and borrowing power to keep up with rising education costs.

Consider this run-through of the federal financial-aid form: a family making $75,000 a year might have to pay about $10,000 a year toward the cost of college before qualifying for need-based aid. With income of $150,000, the expected family contribution is $35,000 to $40,000. Student loans loom.

“We certainly have found that with the recession in recent years, many middle-income families and even some higher-income families are looking for more aid,” says Earl D. Retif, vice president for enrollment management at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Rather than lose bright students to less-expensive public colleges, universities like Tulane offer sizable amounts of aid based mainly on academic promise.

While there are no national statistics post-recession, an Education Department study released last fall showed that the percentage of students receiving merit aid grew so rapidly from 1995 to 2008 that it rivaled the number of students receiving need-based aid.
Recent College Board data from more than 600 nonprofit colleges and universities show that some are giving fewer students more money or stretching their dollars by handing smaller amounts to more students. But others are expanding the number of recipients as well as the amount of their awards.

“Merit aid is one of the few bright lights in college financing now,” says Bonnie Kerrigan Snyder, a college counselor in Lancaster, Pa., whose new book is titled “The New College Reality: Make College Work for Your Career.” She describes how students are allowed to fall in love with a campus, and only later do parents figure out how they will pay for it, if they can. She advises putting financials in the forefront, sprinkling schools that offer generous merit aid on your college wish list. “Consider the schools that will want you,” she says. “That’s how you will uncover the best deals.”

Advocates for low-income students have long criticized merit aid, contending that money is more fruitfully spent on those who wouldn’t otherwise be able to afford college.

The most exclusive colleges and universities — the Ivy League, Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and liberal arts colleges like Amherst — don’t offer merit aid at all. Grants go only to those deemed to have “need.”

“Need,” of course, can be defined in various ways. Last year, families making $180,000 to $200,000 got an average $23,750 in need-based financial aid from Princeton. Harvard is almost as generous.

But for those not getting into Princeton or Harvard (and most of you are not), it’s useful to review how much a college awards in average merit aid, and your chances of getting it.

The biggest scholarships come from the most expensive schools, where tuition and fees hover around $40,000 and other costs can add $15,000 or more. But just as critical is the number of recipients. Only about 1 percent of freshmen at Boston College, Skidmore and Johns Hopkins, for example, get merit aid.

The University of Miami, however, awards merit scholarships averaging more than $23,000 a year to almost a quarter of its freshmen, while Tulane promises an average of more than $20,500 annually to a third of its new students. The University of Southern California offers 100 full-tuition scholarships, more than 200 half-tuition scholarships and more than 250 awards equal to one-quarter of its tuition to freshmen each year. The
University of Chicago, which often competes with the Ivies for students, gives scholarships that average $10,600 to 16 percent of its freshmen.

Even public universities, despite state budget cuts, continue to offer merit aid to try to build an accomplished student body. Though it is awarding fewer small scholarships, the University of Alabama still provides automatic full-tuition scholarships to both in-state and out-of-state students who hit high levels on their standardized admission tests.

“A lot of it is done by computer programs to calculate how much aid they need to offer to each student so they can get the maximum number of desirable students without going over their financial aid budget,” says Mark Kantrowitz, the publisher of FinAid.org and FastWeb.com.

Many regional and religious colleges, he says, also try to “optimize their revenue” by offering partial scholarships to the students who can pay the rest of the tuition — even “B” students with an SAT verbal and math score of 1200 or less. Caution: You’ll have to maintain a grade-point average of about 2.7 to 3.0 to renew most scholarships after your first year.

Searching with cost in mind means students can’t set their hearts on just any college.

“They need to be more realistic in some respects,” says Deanna L. Voss, the executive director of admissions at the University of Miami, “and this is so tough for somebody who is 17 years old.” But, she notes, graduating with less debt will certainly make students happier in the long run.
Pat Grant, left, and Marlea Foster coach a client on the dos and don'ts of sorority rush, which at many campuses begins in August.

**Pledge Prep**

By ABIGAIL SULLIVAN MOORE

MARGARET KING of Birmingham, Ala., was at a loss about how to help her older daughter prepare to rush at the University of Virginia. In the South, where sororities have long been a momentous rite of passage, the road to sisterhood is long and not so clearly marked.

So Mrs. King, who graduated from Yale in 1984, before it had any sororities, enlisted the aid of Marlea Foster and Pat Grant, local consultants who had coached their own daughters through rush at Furman, the University of Georgia and Auburn University. Naming themselves the Rushbiddies, they opened shop in 2009 after hearing about the rush misfortunes of their daughters’ friends. About 50 mothers and their “chicks,” as the Biddies affectionately call them, attended one of their two-day workshops in April ($100 a couple), complete with mock rush party, wardrobe hints and paperwork prep.

And there is a mound of it. The smart rushee, the Biddies advise, will have a résumé stressing community service, leadership, academics and teamwork,
letters of recommendation from alumnae of each chapter, preferably on the
campus in question, and reference letters.

With the help of Ms. Foster and Ms. Grant, who wears a pink feather boa
during workshops, Mrs. King asked alumnae of about 10 chapters, several
from U.Va., to write her daughter’s recommendations. To guide their
plaudits, she sent them packets with a professional photograph, transcript
and résumé. To thank them, she dropped off a bottle of rosé in their
mailboxes.

The rush proved successful, but, she says, “I’m just glad I didn’t have four
daughters.”

For a generation that grew up on tutors, admission counselors and relentless
competition, prepping for rush seems only natural. A mini-industry of blogs,
Web sites, books and consultants now helps them prepare for sorority
recruitment and all its fallout, professionalizing what was once left to older
siblings.

Samantha von Sperling is an image consultant in New York, but lately her
bread-and-butter Wall Street clients have asked her to help their daughters
get ready for rush at schools like Harvard; the University of Wisconsin,
Madison; and New York University, which has added three chapters since
2006 and more than doubled the number of sisters, to 570.

“It’s the same kind of coaching I do on Wall Street,” Ms. von Sperling says.

Sororities are emerging in surprising force at campuses not usually
associated with the Greek tradition. Students raised on Facebook and fears
about post-college careers view sororities as the ultimate social network and
an extension of the community service begun in high school. Nationwide,
membership is up, growing a bit more than 15 percent from 2008 to 2011, to
285,543 undergraduates, according to the National Panhellenic Conference,
which represents 26 old-line sororities.

Twenty-eight percent of female undergraduates at George Washington
University last semester were Greek, about double that in 2006; at Lehigh
University, in Bethlehem, Pa., the number reached a high of 50 percent; at
the University of Rochester, 22 percent; at the University of Pennsylvania,
29 percent.

Though new chapters are being added and membership expanded,
competition is palpable for hot sororities. “The most sought-after
organizations aren’t able to keep up with the demand,” says Matt Supple,
director of Greek life at the University of Maryland, which recently added a new chapter.

Which sororities get the most first-choice rankings is a closely guarded secret.

“Sorority recruitment is like no other experience that you will ever have for the rest of your life,” says Sunday Tollefson, author of “Rush Right: Reveal Your Best You During Sorority Recruitment.” “It’s like speed dating meets interviewing meets beauty pageant meets upscale academic summer camp, complete with a counselor.”

Rush often begins in August or early fall — for January rush, substitute Uggs for fashionable flats. At the University of Mississippi, which has nine sororities, all candidates attend a first-round “philanthropy” event at each chapter that includes learning about its charitable work. Candidates can visit up to six chapters on the second round, depending on how many invite them to return, and three on the final.

In the early rounds, they have only minutes to make a positive impression. The trick, says Ms. Tollefson, whose Web site, SureSister.com, aims to demystify rush, is to be memorable for 10 minutes after each event. That’s when sororities typically decide who will be cut.

Appealing facial expressions, confident body language and good conversational skills are critical. “Practice, practice, practice in the mirror, saying your name, and see what you look like when you listen,” advises Denise Pietzsch, an etiquette consultant in Ohio who works discreetly with clients heading to Miami University. “If you’re a great active listener, they will remember you because you let them talk.” Her typical fee: $125 an hour.

Ms. von Sperling offers a Friday-to-Sunday intensive, for $8,000. One day is devoted to carrying yourself properly and the art of conversation. Treat rush, she says, as you would a job interview. Avoid politics and religion. “I teach them how to make interesting small talk: what you saw at the cinema, a trip to Europe. I don’t know too many 20-year-olds who are having a debate about economics.” Another day is for getting physically ready — hair, makeup and wardrobe. Ms. von Sperling organizes “outfits down to accessories, completely strategized.” Just in case a client forgets, outfits are photographed and placed in a style file.

When Rachel Lewis was president of Alpha Chi Omega at the University of Kansas, parents asked: “Should I buy all J. Crew clothing? Do they need
designer purses?” Ms. Lewis, a 2010 graduate, recently wrote “Recruitment 101: an Insider’s Guide to Sorority Recruitment” and started up Sorority Corner, a membership-based Web site. Her advice: “Dress like you are meeting your boyfriend’s parents. If it’s too short or too tight or too out there, it won’t impress.”

Sundresses by Lilly Pulitzer, the designer of happily hued clothing, are particularly popular for August rush. Two years ago, the company introduced the “Sorority Line” — totes, scarves, makeup bags and the like — using chapters’ colors and symbols. Sales are strongest in the South: “OBSESSED! E-mailing this to the entire Gamma Psi chapter at Wofford College!” gushed one fan on the company Facebook page.

The Rushbiddies host a fashion workshop at Saks Fifth Avenue in Birmingham; they also give individual consultations. In late May, they visited a client’s home in an affluent Birmingham cul-de-sac for a final session. They reviewed paperwork, dispensed advice and vetted dresses for August rush at Auburn. “This I love,” exclaimed Ms. Grant of a one-shoulder black cocktail dress destined for the last rush event. “It’s not too over the top.” And shoes? “Black strappy sandals,” said Ms. Foster.

During the session, the rushee, Mallie, who did not want her full name published because it might affect her chances, was mostly quiet, worn out by her recent finals. Her mother took notes and asked questions. Later, Mallie talked about rush: “It’s going to be stressful — not only making a decision for the next four years but for friends you will have for the rest of your life.” Because the experience can be so emotional, consultants provide “on-call services.”

Many aspiring sisters spend their summer working out and dieting. “Rushing shakes your confidence level,” says Maggie, who also spoke on condition she not be fully identified. She will soon be heading to Washington & Lee, and is trying to lose weight. “You are being judged on how you look,” she says. Case in point: A study of Northwestern undergraduates in a normal weight range, published in 2010, showed the thinner women more likely to join a sorority.

As rush grinds on, students often text their moms with frequent, sometimes tearful updates. “Drama Trauma Drama,” wrote one weary mother on a Greek chat forum. For some mothers, empathizing with the pain of peer rejection is excruciating.

“I lost six pounds that week,” recalls Julie Baselice, whose daughter Christina is now a Chi Omega at the University of Texas. “It was the most
stressful experience of my life.” As for Christina, she is grateful for the counsel of Marjorie Burciaga, an Austin, Tex., consultant, on how to handle herself during recruitment events. “It’s so easy to go in there and start talking, talking, talking,” she says. “You need to learn how to have a filter.” Many students who don’t get asked back by their dream sorority during the early rounds walk away from recruitment altogether. Last year at the University of Virginia, 27 percent left during January rush. Students often have their hearts set on a particular house, says Michael J. Citro, the assistant dean of students.

Or a rushee might limit herself to the house her mother belonged to (legacy status is a plus but no guarantee of a bid). Ms. Burciaga encourages her clients to keep an open mind about chapters they visit. “I talk to them about what seems like a good fit for them,” she says.

One obvious reason for rejection is inadequate grades. At the national level, sororities set a grade-point average, and individual sororities often raise the bar. Beyond that, candidates can rarely discern why a sorority rejects them.

Madeline D’Arcambal Braun, a Manhattan native entering her junior year at Indiana University Bloomington, says she had “absolutely no idea” why she wasn’t asked back. She dropped out of rush freshman year after the houses she wanted didn’t invite her back. “It’s exactly like a breakup. That’s how this feels.” Indiana is reputed to have one of the toughest rushes. Parents have complained on the Sorority Parents blog, operated by the National Panhellenic Conference, that space is too limited. Last year, a little more than half of the 1,718 women at Indiana who registered for recruitment joined a sorority; about 800 either didn’t continue or did not receive a bid. Possible reasons, say university officials: inadequate grades, student dissatisfaction with the chapters that chose them and vice versa, or not enough spaces.

This past year, the nonresidential sorority Theta Phi Alpha was added to expand slots, becoming the 20th chapter at Indiana. Ms. Braun decided to give this one a whirl, and joined sophomore year. “It’s awesome,” she says. “I’m always raving about it.” Another nonresidential chapter, Alpha Sigma Alpha, is coming this fall.

Rush at George Washington University is a different ballgame. No résumés are needed. Nor are alumnae letters of recommendation or references. Requiring them “is ludicrous,” says Sara Fischer, who as president of the
G.W. Panhellenic Association last year helped bring an 11th sorority to campus. “G.W. is not this kind of place.”

There aren’t a lot of legacies at G.W.; students are not drawn there for its Greek life. “Most come to school with a bad idea of sororities, like hazing,” said Marta Cofone, current Panhellenic president, struggling to be heard over the throb of Katy Perry at a meet-the-Greeks event during new-student orientation last month. Last year, a G.W. sorority lost its housing after an alcohol-fueled hazing incident.

“I wasn’t even going to join,” Ms. Cofone said, but the group leader she met at orientation was a “smart, intelligent and interesting person,” and Greek.

Several sorority members from New York and New Jersey, clustered at the Sigma Delta Tau table that night, recalled their mothers’ collective shock at their decision to go Greek. But, says Ms. Fischer, “being in a sorority is the best way to network.” She credits her Greek contacts with helping her secure an apartment, jobs and internships. She and others also attribute the recent growth of their sorority to recruiting a broad swath of women. “You’ll see that same set of Greek letters on someone with a nose piercing,” Ms. Cofone said, referring to the chapters’ names emblazoned on members’ T-shirts and caps. “That’s why it’s so successful.”

Valerie Berg, vice president of recruitment at G.W., notes that if students are open to any sorority who wants them, nearly all will get a bid. No prepping required.

Still, the elements of competition persist. Anticipating questions about October’s rush, Ms. Berg recently updated the sororities’ Facebook page. The topic: what to expect and what to wear on each day.

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