More than 20 years ago, when this article first appeared in The Journal of College Admission, “for profit counselors” (as they were then called by NACAC) were not welcome partners. It was acceptable practice to publicly denigrate the motivation, training and ethics of such independent practitioners publicly at conferences, and deny them the ability to hold leadership positions in many regional associations for college admission counseling (ACACs).

In that context, Antonoff’s 1989 article was a genuine breakthrough, as NACAC’s decision to publish the piece provided a first bit of legitimacy to the new profession. Reading the article, it is clear that Antonoff understood the importance of his writing and spoke directly to the question of legitimacy. He felt the need, for example, to explain his motivation for entering the field. He stated outright that he did not seek to undermine the work of school-based counselors, even writing that he decried “scapegoating and name calling.”

The balance of the article was dedicated to further justification: describing his role, denying accusations that independent educational consultants (IECs) were ‘packaging’ students, and combating the perception that independent educational consultants were making a killing while those employed by schools questioned why anyone deserved to be paid—for what they did for free.

Today, IECs are more fully integrated into the college advising process. Research conducted by The National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA), Inside Higher Education and Lipman Hearne has demonstrated the growing significance of IECs as their number and influence has grown. Today, independent research suggests that as many as a quarter of students bound for four-year schools hire an IEC for at least part of the college search and application process.

In recent years, IECs have headed many regional ACACs and it is now typical to find them on NACAC boards, committees and task forces. Where college admission officials once publicly said they “didn’t work with IECs,” most now attend professional conferences, assign a staff person to serve as the consultant contact and invite IECs on regular campus tours or plan special group visits.

We have also gotten past the early arguments with school counselors where independent consultants felt the need to justify their existence. Today, discussions continue, but focus on ways in which all advisors—whether employed by a school or hired by a family—can work cooperatively in the best interest of students. To be sure, a discussion that has shifted from legitimate right to exist to best practices is a good one.

It is interesting that Antonoff helped lead this transition. Many would credit him for a transformation within the profession, the development of stricter standards of ethical practice, and the creation of curriculum-based training for those entering the field.

Today, independent educational consultants are developing unique specialties that make them increasingly vital to students, families and schools. From learning disabilities to performing arts, home-schooling to giftedness, IECs are acquiring specialized skills that provide relief to school counselors struggling under larger work loads, and increasingly complicated student histories.

A major focus for some IECs is the “failure to launch,” especially among young adult males whose numbers on campus continue to fall. While all children seem busier than ever—over-scheduled teens seem the norm—little time is afforded for self-discovery and reflection. At the same time, we have come to realize that college admission does not occur in a vacuum. Adolescent anxieties, eating disorders, depression, gaming addictions, and others have become widespread. Taken together, these suggest further reasons for the growth of independent practice—the added time afforded to students and families to permit a thorough understanding of hopes, dreams, fears, limitations, and much more.

In just 20 short years, the practice of independent educational consulting has moved from one of requisite justification to full partnership. Students are the beneficiaries of that change, and great college matches are the result.