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# How College Admissions Officers Spot Over-Coached Applications

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Close up of admissions office sign near public university campus

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As the admissions landscape at Top 25 schools grows increasingly competitive, families are overwhelmingly seeking expert guidance from private college consultants in the application process. While thoughtful and student-centered advising can definitively strengthen students' applications, much of the admissions consulting industry trends toward over-engineering students' profiles. When college consultants take a prescriptive role in manufacturing a student's application, admissions officers are quick to detect a lack of authenticity or a narrative that has been curated by a third party rather than developed over a student's high school career.

Here are some of the red flags that will quickly indicate to admissions officers that a student has hired a prescriptive college admissions consultant:

## 1. The Misaligned Major

One of the most glaring signs that a student has been coached is that they are applying to a niche major without the transcript or background experience to justify their interest. Families are sometimes advised to target smaller applicant pools by pursuing less common concentrations—Archaeology, Classics, Slavic Studies, or other highly specific fields—under the assumption that fewer applicants mean better odds. But simply stating that they are interested in the topic is not enough to compellingly show their preparedness or intent to pursue that discipline. Particularly in niche fields such as these, admissions committees will be looking for specific coursework, extracurricular involvement, and summer programs to demonstrate students' tangible knowledge of the field and their reasons for applying. In the absence of these meaningful experiences, the choice will likely be interpreted as a strategic attempt to “game the system” rather than a sincere desire to enter the field.

This doesn't mean that a student can manufacture a profile for one of these disciplines if they simply write strategic essays. Students must also remember that parts of the application are outside their control. A carefully constructed narrative about theoretical physics can unravel quickly if a teacher's recommendation casually notes a student's passion for mechanical engineering or biology. Even subtle inconsistencies like these can cast doubt on a student's authenticity.

## 2. The Picture-Perfect Profile

While a disjunction between a student's major and profile can raise red flags, the opposite extreme can be just as concerning. An application can also feel engineered if a student's entire extracurricular and awards profile is carefully tailored to one subject area. Admissions officers expect teenagers to participate in sports, the arts, their hobbies, volunteering, and other random activities unrelated to their core interests just for fun. While a strong application will attest to a student's core interests, authentic intellectual development often includes some measure of both breadth and depth.

Further, these secondary interests can also be the richest sites for admissions officers to glean information about who a student is outside of the classroom or to distinguish them from other applicants in the discipline with similar profiles and extracurricular backgrounds. When students don't have even a little diversity in their portrayal of who they are, admissions officers will likely question whether the profile reflects genuine growth.

### 3. The Global Impact Passion Project

Admissions officers know what high school students are capable of—and what they're not. When a student touts a passion project that generated millions in revenue, solved a global crisis, or secured high-level partnerships that typically require significant professional networks, they will likely assume that a student has leveraged their parents' contacts or paid for high-level external support. This does not mean students cannot accomplish impressive things, but that they should seek to accomplish these things on their own merit, even if the result is not as flashy or groundbreaking as it would be with significant help.

Beyond indicating that they are not a student's genuine work, these large-scale, global-impact projects are often less compelling than students assume. Admissions officers are more impressed by initiatives that address real needs in a student's own community, even if the reach is local rather than global. Smaller, sustained projects in a student's backyard can provide meaningful insight into what a student cares

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## 4. The Overly Polished Essay

There is a noticeable tonal difference between how most teenagers naturally write and how adults write. Admissions officers read thousands of essays each year; they are experts at identifying the cadence of seventeen-year-old authors. An essay that lacks the rough edges, occasional clunky vocabulary, or endearing spunk of imperfect teenage writing can quickly indicate over-coaching (or, perhaps worse, the use of AI). Admissions officers are not seeking literary perfection; they want to know who a student is *in their own words*. While the essay should be polished and reflect effort, it should still convey a student's voice and personality.

## 5. The Pay-to-Play Publication

Finally, in recent years, a proliferation of fee-based “academic journals” and publishing platforms has made it easy for students to list impressive-sounding research publications on their resume. Often, admissions consultants will sell these types of publication opportunities as a part of their consulting packages. But admissions officers are able to distinguish between reputable, peer-reviewed journals that publish high school research and those that accept payment in exchange for a publishing credit. The latter will not only reflect poorly on a student, but may even raise ethical concerns.

Ultimately, admissions officers want to see who a student truly is—not who they think admissions officers want them to be. Whereas over-coaching seeks to reverse-engineer an ideal applicant based on perceived admissions trends, a strong college consultant will encourage a student to embrace what makes them unique and build their profile according to what they truly care about.