METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING
A Consumer-Based Approach to College Admission

BY MATT STRUCKMEYER, Director of College Counseling

As a college counselor, perhaps my toughest task is educating students and parents about how selective college admission really works. Sure, everyone’s more cynical after the latest scandals, but even so, many still want to believe that admission is a meritocracy that rewards the “worthy” and hard-working. Instead, I urge my clients to adopt a consumer-based approach, one that reflects the true imperatives of the higher education marketplace in which American colleges and universities compete for students, and don’t play by entirely fair rules.

METAPHOR 1
Elite colleges are like Patagonia jackets.

Lucky is the company whose product has so much cachet that consumers will pay double and triple what the competitors charge for a highly comparable, if not virtually identical product. On my campus, Patagonia is that brand. The best 150 colleges in America are much like the puffy jackets sold by The North Face, Arc’teryx, and Marmot. When one looks closely, it’s clear they’re assembled of the same materials in identical fashion; the only difference is the label.

The Takeaway
Think of an elite college as a product with a brand, but one with many worthy competitors. Is it really worth the cost just to be able to sport the coolest label? What a coincidence that disgraced consultant Rick Singer wore a Patagonia in his perp walk.

METAPHOR 2
Applying to college is like buying a house.

College marketing experts have pulled off an audacious trick: convincing the majority of buyers that their product is scarce, and that to succeed, one must desperately “bid up.” Can you imagine shopping for a house and looking only in your neighborhood? Most of my clients display this attitude toward college. That’s what the Multiple Listing Service is for, which allows real estate agents to show buyers the true span of what exists in their price range and preferred style. How many home shoppers have found their dream residence, one they never even knew existed? Too many students and parents convince themselves that the only college worth having is the one you know about, often in one’s local region.

The Takeaway
Work with an agent who knows the breadth of the marketplace, and get excited about the gems that you didn’t know existed.

METAPHOR 3
Applying to an elite college is like asking a date to the prom.

Whether we care to admit it, all of us sort of know our “league” when it comes to dating; who’s in it and who’s out of it. So when prom rolls around, an invisible set of boundaries usually guide students to ask out someone who has a reasonable chance of saying yes. With college, many young people abandon this common sense entirely—abetted by their parents—and try to “ask out” colleges that wouldn’t say yes in a million years. These same students often wouldn’t think of asking out the dozens of others who potentially might say yes.

But the more important point is this: no matter how good-looking and charming a potential suitor might be, their date is unlikely to say yes if they knows that they are just shopping around for the best-looking date. Far too many elite-candidate “daters” make this mistake—signaling to colleges that they care about “hotness” and not the person. Shallow is as shallow does.

The Takeaway
Use common sense to consider colleges that will reasonably consider you. But show integrity and self-confidence by signaling that you care about how your “date” feels, not just how great you’ll look with such an attractive partner.