

# Sonia's



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# Story



by John L. Mahoney

**For seasoned admission professionals, travel is a grind. We fly on weekends to qualify for lower fares, risk traffic citations to make our scheduled appointments, and we are separated from friends and family.**

Yet meeting prospective students and parents where they live is essential. We witness the nuances of the marketplace and we hear the perspectives of our secondary school colleagues. We learn the pulse of college admission.

In the Fall of 2002, I visited 44 high schools. The final school left me with a powerful impression of what this process is for young people and those who make their living working with them.

The school is private and independent, acknowledged to be among the best in its region. The college counseling center is comfortable and inviting, with a sofa and easy chairs. The students are invariably bright and inquisitive.

I've worked with the college counselor, Sonia, for years, in her role at a Catholic high school for young women and in her latest position. She has always participated in my meetings with students, listening attentively and offering comments at appropriate times.



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On a late October afternoon, six students were waiting for me when I arrived. Following introductions, I learned that all of them had visited my campus and knew the basic information. The session promised to be lively and challenging, a cut above the traditional high school visit.

But something was wrong. The students' faces betrayed strain and exhaustion. I began by asking them, in a general sense, how things were going with senior year and college applications. The gates opened.

The first young lady spoke of how exasperated she was at this point and the others nodded their assent. She had completed her research, she was preparing the applications, she was worried about early admission options versus regular decision, and she hadn't a clue how it would all turn out. She looked at me intently and asked, “Do colleges really know what we're going through?”

I told her we do and that my institution was trying to reduce some of the confusion by not enrolling half our class from the early action pool, though we easily could. The students appreciated this, but they told me we were the exception. Other colleges seemed to be encouraging early applications as a demonstration of interest and suggesting that applicants' chances for admission were better.



We moved on to essays. They asked about subject matter, about writing on topics that were important to them as opposed to what they thought would work best, and about the risk of stating an opinion that might not be shared by the person reading the essay.

I urged them to write about their passions because that would allow them to produce their best work. I told them to articulate and support their opinions, confident in the knowledge that a well reasoned argument, even on a controversial topic, would be respected.

But I encountered skeptical faces, which seemed to say, “We know you’re trying to help, but this is our future, there’s a lot at stake, and we can’t afford to make an error.” I glanced at Sonia, whose eyes told me, “This is what they’re going through and these are smart kids from good families, who will ultimately do fine in this process.”

Another young lady, realizing the turn our meeting had taken, chimed in that she was afraid of being penalized for having moved so many times due to her father’s career. She had been at this school for her junior and senior years, following grades nine and 10 at two different schools.

An accomplished musician who had devoted her free time to her instrument, she pointed out that, for all its academic rigor and reputation, her current school had no music program of any kind. How would this affect her college applications, since she had been afforded no outlets for her talent?

To compensate for the extracurricular void, which was beyond her control, she had opted for seven academic courses in her junior year, three of which were Advanced Placement. Did I think this would help to redeem her in the eyes of an admission committee?

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Time expired. Not a single word had been exchanged regarding my institution. These young people had offered me a window to their minds and hearts as they navigated a process for which we were responsible.

I wrestled with guilt as they gathered their belongings and reached for their backpacks. Departing the room, the first young lady turned to say, “You know, it really helped that somebody in admission was just willing to listen and talk to us about these things.”

Heading back to my hotel, I realized I had, indeed, listened. But nothing had changed. I wondered, for how many others did these young people speak?



The young woman whose family had endured so many moves applied early action to my institution. On November 27, our review process complete, I called Sonia to discuss her candidates.

I told her how much I liked the young woman, how her poignant story had affected me during our meeting. Since she was being deferred, I said to Sonia, “She seemed really fragile to me, almost tormented by the process, so I wanted you to be prepared when her letter arrived.”

Rather than responding in the way I expected, Sonia said, “Aren’t they all fragile?” I felt like I’d taken a punch to the stomach and I stuttered a response, that, of course, they are all fragile, but this one seemed to require some extra care.

I hung up the phone, unable to clear Sonia’s question from my mind, wondering if it would still be there when application reading began again in January.



Toward the end of March, admission professionals are like prisoners suddenly released from captivity. For three months our lives are consumed with transcripts, score reports, recommendation letters, and essays. Thousands of files are read and thousands of difficult decisions are made.

Evaluating the attributes of so many deserving young people in such a compressed period of time is a brutal psychological endurance test. We emerge from quiet study areas and conference rooms imploring spring to reinvigorate us.

Sonia sent me an email shortly after she learned I had admitted the young woman who had been deferred at early action: “Thank you! I don’t know where she’ll end up, but it’s nice to see you recognize what a great girl she is. What convinced you? Just curious.”

While her grades were not stellar, I knew she had the ability and she was a kid who needed a break. Her peripatetic life made her more interesting to me, yet she seemed preoccupied with the things she didn’t have.

The direct answer to Sonia’s question, I continued, was that the October meeting at her school revealed the young woman to me. Sonia created a setting that allowed those kinds of exchanges to occur. I wrote, “My visits there are always some of the best and most gratifying—and it’s due to you and your students. It’s clear you know them and care about them and they love and respect you.”

About an hour later, Sonia responded: “Your email made me cry... My relationship with you has always been one of the best, if not the best. Which makes everything so much harder. You see, the administration is not renewing my contract for next year. They received ‘complaints’ in the fall and let me know they were evaluating the situation... Then, in December, we had so much success with early admission, I thought it would be a no-brainer. Turns out there were more complaints over Christmas and, despite our success, they are letting me go at the end of the school year. This year’s class is super competitive and some of the parents had high expectations and when I disagreed with them, sometimes siding with the students, they didn’t seem to like it. It breaks my heart, because I do love these kids, especially this class, and everything I do is for them—not the parents, not the administration, not myself. I guess it didn’t come across that way.”



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Most people agree that today’s college admission process is deeply flawed. We who work in college and university settings shoulder a large portion of the blame. We emphasize technology over people, marketing over fit, prestige over quality, rankings over reality, and the bottom line over the greater good. We send so many conflicting messages to the marketplace about our institutions and our policies that people no longer know what to believe.

The fault lies not only with us. Admission deans often face inordinate pressure from their presidents and trustees to grow application pools, improve quality, increase diversity, and reduce expenditures on financial aid. In short, upper level administration wants it all, so deans do what they must to retain their jobs.

Parents and headmasters contribute to the chaos. Young people are victims when their parents call the shots on where they should apply and where they will enroll. College counselors will apparently be challenged if parents report to headmasters that their directives are not being appropriately supported or achieved.

On May 1, Sonia emailed me to say how pleased she was that the young woman whom we discussed had chosen to attend my institution. She concluded, “I hope things are going well and hopefully winter went on its way.”

