“So…why consulting?”

We’re sitting in a tiny cubicle in the Duke University Career Center, early afternoon in late September. It’s just one of fifteen on-campus job interviews—almost all in the management consulting industry—that I would attend during the first three months of my senior year. My interviewer, a calm, phlegmatic man in his early thirties, tosses the question at me with a slight smile illuminated by the room’s harsh fluorescent glow.

Across the table, I smile back at him gamely. The question is a freebie, and we both know it. It leads into a simple answer that every competent job candidate should have rehearsed and prepared to a tee. Without even missing a beat, I begin to outline my lifelong thirst for challenge, my passion for making a big impact, and my fascination with organizational structures—all to impress upon him that my path to management consulting has developed organically throughout my entire college career. No, make that throughout my entire life.

This fall, as I cleared interview after interview, hurdle after hurdle in my quest for a post-graduation consulting job offer, I must have answered this question convincingly a great number of times. But now that I’ve emerged on the other side, having finally secured and signed that offer I’d always wanted, I just have to wonder…was this actually a natural transition? Or did I just drink the Kool Aid?

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At 5:45, they begin to arrive.

Dressed in varying degrees of business casual, they slowly siphon into the ugly gray multipurpose room, lining up to sign in their attendance. Wielding leather pad-folios and adjusting their suit pants, they nervously pepper the seats towards the front of the room and chat tersely in small groups. Some munch on the plates of fruit and cheese at the back of the room. Others hover silently and awkwardly as the volume in the room begins to rise.
“Is it sad that I’ve been to so many of these things that I’m starting to recognize the recruiters?” My friend Nate plops down into the seat next to me, grinning ironically. I smile back, glad to see a kind face: Nate has been my buddy throughout the entire trying process, a friend to hang onto as we’re tossed through the stormy waves. But more about those waves later.

Nate casts a glance around the room and rolls his eyes.

Throughout the room, former Dukies stand fielding questions, surrounded by hordes of assertive undergrads nodding emphatically and wearing their best fake smiles. Though these alums were barely older than the students who filled the room, they were perceptibly more at ease, having already settled the uncertainty of their lives.

At 6pm, the lights dim, the PowerPoint brightens, and the hum of chatter magically dies down. All eyes are on our smiling presenter, who stands at the front of the room in his business-blue button down. He begins to introduce himself. It’s show time.

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“Oh my God, I can barely walk.”

Christina is carrying her heels in one hand and her bag in another, limping away from the Bryan Center with me after a long day spent interacting with dozens of corporations at Duke’s annual Fall Career Fair. She looks at me in despair, having spent all day on her feet with a plastic smile taped to her face, and I sympathetically echo her sentiment. For anywhere up to six hours today, Duke students have hopped brightly from one company booth to the next, hoping to make a good impression (as if it actually matters).

“Hi, my name is Emily, and I’m a senior English major here at Duke!” I recite brightly to recruiter after recruiter, smiling and shaking hands.

We meet representatives from consulting firms, investment banks, tech companies, and even the odd nonprofit or two. We give them our resumes and sign our names, in some collective delusion that they’ll actually remember us because of it (they won’t). We take their branded pens, water bottles, pads of paper, coffee mugs when all we actually want is a job. After enough repetition, all I really want is to run through the building knocking their tables over and hurling their stupid corporate pens right back at them. But then again, I’m too tired for that.
Those of us who lived through junior year internship season are no strangers to the Career Fair, and the horrific ritual that is Duke’s on-campus recruiting process. During the spring, the very same consulting companies descended in a whirlwind upon the Von Canon rooms, ready to pluck out the ripest, freshest Duke talent to become their summer interns. Six months later, they’re back to dole out full-time offers, and to blanket Duke with information sessions, interview workshops, and a scarily appealing message: consulting is the best and most secure way for indecisive kids straight out of undergrad to start their “careers.”

This time around, the atmosphere is somehow scarier and more competitive. There are more people, it’s louder, and everyone is more aggressive. We hear tales of people shoving each other out of the way, and some recruiters offering on-the-spot interviews. Still, we grit our teeth, tape on those smiles, and get out there to shake those hands. Because as seniors about to graduate into one of the grimmer employment markets of the past decade, we long to secure a job offer while we still inhabit the privileged space where corporations actually come to us, rather than the other way around.

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As the presentation begins, Nate pops open his leather legal pad holder emblazoned with the Duke crest (a must for every undergraduate job seeker) and slips out his fancy metal pen, poised and ready to take important notes on the crisp white sheet.

“I’m just going to fake the note-taking today,” he whispers conspiratorially to me. “I mean, how much more can I really learn? I feel like I could give this presentation.”

Most of the students present, myself included, are no strangers to the bizarre ritual that is the management consulting information session: we sign in, we listen to the presentation, and then we “network” in the hopes of perhaps—just perhaps—making a real connection. After a couple of these things, you might recognize the recruiters, but you’ll absolutely recognize the Duke students, because the same ones turn up over and over again.

Our presenter today is a second-year consultant from the Atlanta office named Tripp. Clearly a former frat boy (I mean, come on. His name is actually Tripp with two p’s. It said so on his biographical PowerPoint slide), the now neatly buttoned-down Tripp gushes about how much he misses Duke, and declares that his two favorite activities here were Tailgate and fraternity barbecues.
“A lot of you guys might not remember Tailgate, but seriously it was so much fun. Wow, it’s great to be back.”

Great—now I can’t stop imagining corporate consultant Tripp running around a parking lot in a neon tank top and shutter shades, spraying cans of Keystone Light on people. How times have changed for our friend Tripp.

Tripp begins with some vague details about the firm and its entry-level positions, glossing over the substantives of the kind of work a first-year consultant would actually do. If you work for us, he claims, even as a 22 year-old kid, you’ll get to jet all over the world, delivering business recommendations to CEOs. Tripp actually displays pictures of example projects and their interesting locations. And the great thing about consulting is that you have the opportunity to explore so many industries and business practices through your engagements with various companies. If you graduated and worked for an ordinary corporation, you’d get pigeonholed into that industry immediately. But with consulting—at least for a while, you’ll never even have to make a choice.

Never mind that, in reality, you’ll spend months in random places like Waco, Texas and Billings, Montana for four out of five days of your week (remember, we go where the client is!). Never mind that consulting is the service industry that essentially does the crappy grunt work that actual corporations don’t want to do themselves (think: recommending layoffs so that a company will have an excuse to do it). And definitely forget that as a newly minted consultant, you’ll be at the very bottom of the food chain, spending most of your days doing fairly inane bits of quantitative research that largely involve staring at an Excel spreadsheet all day. No—Tripp wants all of us to know that the consulting lifestyle is glamorous, intellectual, and “just so awesome, guys.”

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“Finance, consulting, engineering, grad school, and Teach for AmEmma.”

My roommate and I are sitting around on a Tuesday night complaining about recruiting when we have the epiphany: Duke’s outlook on life is awfully close-minded. We got here by talking about what Duke students seem to see as “acceptable” post-graduation career paths, and somehow, we only come up with five.
Five? Just five? For an “elite” education that purports to open so many doors, it seems like a significant amount of them are already shut in the process. Whether you end up on Wall Street, at medical school, or in Silicon Valley, the majority of Duke students tend to pursue opportunities that are some combination of pre-professional, low-yield, or high pay. The students who take on volunteer fellowships like Teach for AmEmma or the Fulbright Scholarship see it as a detour on the way to something they perceive as “greater”: a law degree, an MBA, a career in finance.

In some ways, this isn’t even our own fault. If you log into Duke’s online job recruitment database, you’ll find hundreds upon hundreds of entry-level and internship postings. But out of those hundreds, I challenge you to find opportunities ranging outside of finance, consulting, or engineering (and that includes computer science). If you looked at the calendar for information sessions and on-campus interviews, you would have largely found consulting firms, investment firms, and banks. If you asked the Career Center for support, they have huge bouts of advice on how to secure a job in the corporate world. But those students who happen to be interested in alternative career paths (say, media, policy, or art)? Well, resource-wise, they’re pretty much on their own.

Still, it’s almost like this idea of what Duke students should be doing with their lives have somehow ingrained itself inside of all of us, from top to bottom.

But this isn’t the reason I chose consulting, right? I didn’t fall victim to this mindset, to that weird funneling that happens at Duke. No, I made my decision totally independently. I did my research (from the pamphlets they gave me) and came to the conclusion that this is truly the right path for me, as someone who hasn’t decided what to do with her life.

Part of me knows that this isn’t true. And it doesn’t really care.

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Once Tripp has finished gushing about the firm’s incredible work, we move onto what the corporation can do for you. By this point, a girl named Emma has started to talk. Emma is a slender, studious-looking brunette who introduces herself as a biology major at Duke who went into consulting with the intention to take some time off before pursuing her dream of medical school. But after two years with the firm, she’s fallen so in love with consulting that she’s already
applied to Columbia Business School for admission next year. Oops. I guess working at this place just does that to you!

Because, you see, this multinational corporation really does care about your personal development. They’ll let you engage in lots of pro-bono work, because they care about the community and the world. And after two years, you’ll even have the chance to do what’s called an “externship,” where you can step away from consulting to work for a nonprofit for nine months (all while keeping your consulting salary, of course!). In fact, they’ll even pay for your MBA—that’s over $100,000 of investment (remember, consultants quantify everything)—as long as you get into a good school and promise to come back when you’re done, to complete another two years of indentured servitude.

“They invest so heavily in your development, and you gain so many transferrable skills that you’re in the position to do pretty much anything after you’re done with the first two years.”

Emma really wants to hammer this point home. Pictures of famous consulting alumni pop up on the PowerPoint. She points to former consultants who went on to found companies, to create nonprofits, to become academics, to take over the world, et ceterah. Hell, even John Legend was a management consultant back in the day (I swear it to be true. Google it). And remember that famous rich guy who recently ran for president on the Republican ticket? Yeah, he started out consulting with us. I doodle on my legal pad: If consulting is so great, then why didn’t they stay?

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“So if an English major doesn’t get consulting…what do they do?”

John smirks. Sometime during the height of on-campus recruiting season, the two of us are preparing for our case interviews. We all have a bunch of them coming up in the next week or so, and the pileup of stress is creating the worst kind of pressure cooker.

Basically, the case interview is what the consulting industry uses to assess their candidates in lieu of a traditional interview. These cases are business problems that your interviewer might have actually worked on in the past, and even though he might have had six months to figure it out, you’re expected to crack it in under thirty minutes. No big deal.
John is having a particularly hard time with cases. He’s exhausted out of his mind, and just doesn’t have any business intuition (which is unsurprising, since he’s majoring in biology and chemistry). After finally slogging his way through a single case, John hurls at me this question that isn’t really a question. More than anything, it’s an insinuation of so many things, the least of which is the inutility of my beloved English major.

“What?”

“You know…your major is so easy. If I don’t get consulting, I have a backup. But you guys don’t have any skills…”

I stare at him blankly in horror. His snarky remark that was clearly meant to derail me causes such a violent swelling of shock and anger to bubble up inside of me that it knocks the breath out of me. I thought he was my friend, I thought he respected my decisions, I thought—I don’t know what I thought. I want to tell him he’s wrong, I want to ignore his comment, and most of all, I kind of want to slap him in the face.

But the worst part of all is that his question really hit close to home. In one remark, he manages to imply that liberal arts students go after consulting because it’s the only industry that doesn’t discriminate their hiring based on major. Their message is come one, come all—it doesn’t matter what you studied if you possess the analytical abilities.

His remark bothers me way too much not to be close to the truth.

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Now we’re looking at the firm’s application timeline, which usually involves handing over some combination of resume, cover letter, standardized test scores, and college transcripts. The next girl, a tall blonde named Chloe, has begun to talk. When Chloe introduces herself, she tells us that she majored in Visual Studies and English when she was at Duke, so she wants you to remember that you really don’t need an economics or math major to become a consultant. You can do whatever you want, major in whatever you like, and the firm will still be interested in you (as long as your GPA is high!).

And on that note, I’m sorry to inform you guys, but the GPA cutoff is 3.5. And yes, the resume reviewers really do need to see your SAT scores, because the math scores are an accurate representation of your analytical ability. They’re completely unaware of the fact that you took
that test five years ago as a high school junior, and that your intelligence has probably changed dramatically since. And of course you all have to write a cover letter, even though, with the average of 500 applicants we get per position, we never actually read them. That’s not a problem for Duke students, right?

“I wouldn’t worry too much about the cover letter or anything. You’re all so great at writing.”

It’s a rather high initial application hurdle (40 interview slots, 500 applicants…well, you do the math), but if you can clear it the company will invite you to come to the Career Center for an on-campus interview. And if you perform exceptionally well, they might even invite you to the “final round”—where they’ll fly you out to your first-choice office, and make you walk around it for an entire day, doing back-to-back case interviews just to ensure that your first success wasn’t a fluke. We’re consultants. We like having lots of data points.

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“So, our client is an online movie rental service, and they’ve been seeing declining revenue recently. What do you think is going on here?"

I’m sitting in an interview room again, but this time, the room is a fancy, airy office in Washington, D.C. My interviewer is an unsmiling German guy in his late forties, and he delivers me the case in a flat voice, completely deadpan. When I begin to talk, he furrows his brow at me under his steely glasses.

Seriously though, it’s only 2pm and this is already my fourth hour-long interview of the day. You’d be tired too. We flew in from Durham last night around 5pm, attended a reception and dinner with some of the firm’s consultants from 6:30pm to 10pm, and then had to be up and ready to catch a ride to the office at 7:30am the next day. From there, we continued onto a day peppered with tours, interviews, panels, and a brief lunch. Yes, why don’t you tell me about how great this company is just one more time? It’s not as though I don’t already have your mission statement memorized by now.

So when I get to that last interview, I’m exhausted. I’d been okay until now, but the food coma, exhaustion, a caffeine crash, and stress (SO much stress) have gripped my brain. I begin to
babble about volume and price and start drawing crazier and crazier diagrams, and my interviewer’s knitted brow grows tighter and tighter as I back myself into a corner.

A week later, they called me to tell me that I didn’t get the job.

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At the end of the presentation, they ask if there are any questions. And even though no one really has any—remember, everyone in this room has already sat through at least three nearly identical presentations—the hands fly up, because it’s expected of us. In some twisted world, people just want to impress them.

A girl in the front wants to know whether the company will sponsor other forms of graduate school besides the MBA. Great question—sure they will, as long as you do a joint degree and can justify why the extra education would benefit the firm in the long run. A boy near the back wants to know if there are any opportunities at the international offices. Of course there are! As long as you have work authorization.

As we’re walking out the door, Nate sighs again about how much he despises recruiting season, how this necessary evil is a tiring, gigantic waste of time. I’m personally kind of angry, frustrated with the way these companies take advantage of indecisive, uncertain, and terrified undergrads such as myself. Do they really think I haven’t done my own independent research into how consulting really works? Do they really think that I believe every word they say?

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“Well, I just called to tell you that we all thought you’d be a great fit for the firm, and we’d like to make you a full-time offer for the position.”

I’m on the phone with my interviewer from a few days ago. My heart is pounding in my ears, and I can hardly believe what I’m hearing on the phone. He begins to talk logistical details, telling me about how an HR representative would soon be in touch, that an offer sheet to sign has already been emailed to me, but I barely hear a thing. More than anything else, I’m so utterly relieved to be through with the brutal, demoralizing trial that is on-campus recruiting.

Is it possible that I’ll actually be going back to the days before there were always applications to fill out and information sessions to attend? Can I really tuck my suit back into the depths of my closet again, just like during the pre-interview era? It’s hard to imagine returning to
the days before case interview practices and office visits, back when emails and phone calls didn’t cause a lurch in my stomach because they might contain decisions. Those days before missing classes, trudging through homework, being tired all the time…

“Congratulations again.”

My interviewer (I guess he’s not my interviewer any more…so, my future coworker?) pierces through my thoughts with his laudatory voice. After thanking him and hanging up the phone, I log into my email and I stare in disbelief as the offer letter flashes onto my screen.

At that moment, I think I’m elated. I should be elated. Because this is the best possible way to start my post-graduation career.

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