

## THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS PROCESS MARCHES ON DESPITE COVID-19 TURMOIL

### ADVICE FOR HOW TO NAVIGATE THE PROCESS AND TELL YOUR STORY

BY JENNIFER WINWARD, Ph.D.



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With the anxiety-inducing news that the new school year will begin remotely on Aug. 17 due to coronavirus precautions, most rising seniors and their families in Beverly Hills may not feel ready to engage in the necessary planning for the upcoming college admissions season.

But the fact is, the Common Application portal and the University of California admissions process opened on Aug. 1, and Early Decision applications for many college and universities are due no later than Nov. 1. That means it's time to start preparing or fine-tuning draft essays and personal statements. In today's column, I share some strategies to help spark your creative process, get the words flowing onto the screen, and perhaps reduce some stress at the same time.

#### Play the Role of Admissions Officer

Put yourself in the seat of an admissions officer at a university you founded. What would you look for in a student? Do you want someone who's a know-it-all, or someone eager to learn? Do you want someone fixed in his views, or someone open to new perspectives? Do you want someone who didn't invest much time into your application, or someone who put considerable effort into understanding your university's values and defining how he sees himself supporting your mission? Admissions officers are people. They're going to care more when you care more.

Admissions officers are looking for contributing members of the campus community. Get inspired by President John F.

adolescent learning and brain development expert has garnered her recognition as a "Top 5 Female Entrepreneur" by the Women in IT Awards, "Top 40 Under 40" by the San Diego Business Journal, and as the "Most Influential Education Leader" by the San Diego Transcript. Dr. Winward earned her Ph.D. with a dual emphasis in Neuroscience and Developmental Neuropsychology from the University of California, San Diego.

Kennedy's call to action – think not of what your college can do for you, but what you can do for your college.

Envision how you see yourself growing as an active, involved member of the campus community (e.g., academics, research, student leadership, professional programs, or work opportunities at the bookstore or alumni relations office). And tell your story with humility. Do not put others down or brag excessively to make yourself appear greater (by the way, this is good advice for everyday life, not just for a college essay). Remember, you're not explaining what you've done, but sharing who you are.

#### Start Early – Polish Takes Time

Whatever you do, do not wait until the last minute. The personal essay is an important part of your application, and it is worth the time and investment to get it right. The essay can take longer than you expect (often times months), especially with multiple rounds of revisions. If you want to receive comments from editors, then you need to have time to receive and incorporate their feedback. But please remember the final product you submit has your name on it, so you should honor yourself while considering and incorporating others' feedback.

#### Be Genuine

The ultimate goal of your essay is to honor your voice and your story. When you pick something about which you genuinely care, your unique voice will come through and your essay will be more engaging and

memorable. Tell a story only you can tell, so you give the readers the feeling that they met you. Consider how you want to be remembered. Telling a story just because you think it is impressive will backfire.

Trust yourself and choose a topic that you'll be comfortable writing about. Anything forced or artificial will be quite obvious to the reader. At the same time, embrace difficult or controversial topics as long as you treat them with respect and maturity. Include humor as long as it's tasteful, respectful, and not forced.

You have to dig into what matters to you. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable is a powerful way to share your story – something that requires a deep examination of your own perspective. That process can be challenging, so allow yourself the reflection needed to honor your voice in the process.

Many colleges have more than one essay because they want a more holistic sense of who you are. Figure out how to best portray yourself while taking advantage of the multiple prompts to highlight all facets of who you are. Don't write about the same topic in every single one. Show them a more complete picture with distinct topics for each prompt.

One more note about the prompts themselves. As you explore which colleges might be a good fit, evaluate if the prompts get your creative juices flowing, or seem laborious. Perhaps the prompts could be a clue about fit.

#### Research the Colleges Thoroughly

Colleges won't learn anything about you from a generic essay explaining why you want to attend Michigan in which you just reuse your "Why USC" essay and replace "USC" with "Michigan." If you're asked to describe why you want to go to a college, your answer should be incredibly specific.

First of all, it's important for YOU to know specifically why a college is a great fit for your academic, personal, and professional goals. Otherwise, you shouldn't be applying there. The next task is to communicate in a specific, genuine way why that college is the best fit. Consider a school's identity – its slogan, its mission, its research, its unique service projects, its niche areas of expertise – and determine how you fit its identity.

#### Embrace the Creative Process

The best way to capture your voice is to talk to someone close to you (or even to a pet) about important moments of growth, reflection, and challenge in your life. As you're sharing, record yourself. Play back what you say – note how you say it.

The moments of vulnerability, passion, and authenticity will come through. Use this recording to guide your writing process. Remember, your ultimate goal is to capture your voice and to stay true to yourself.

There's no better way to achieve that goal than to capture your voice from the outset.

#### Remember the Small Moments that Made a Big Difference

Sometimes the best, most memorable essays are about a conversation or a moment in time. Small moments can make big impacts – ones that affect confidence, perspective, and values. Don't overlook what may seem mundane but has actually been profound. Cliché topics like service trips and sports can prevent something being unique to you. Sometimes the more specific a topic you pick – even those small moments – the bigger the story you tell.

The essay is NOT a regurgitation of your activities. The essay is an opportunity to add a personal perspective – a deeper insight into who you are – without repeating information found elsewhere in the application. The personal statement and other essays are supposed to reveal your curiosity, personal growth, motivation, and initiative. They should reflect your unique qualities. Think of them as the "why" behind the "what" in which you should explore – honestly – your character, resilience, and leadership.

#### Review, Review, Review Before You Submit

I encourage you to share your essay with someone who has never met you. That's right – a perfect stranger. Here's why. Those closest to you already know you and your story and might have ideas on how to fill in any gaps they perceive. That's precisely why you should ask a total stranger to read your essay. Make sure the person doesn't have lingering questions. Is there something you left out that makes your essay confusing? Ask the stranger what he or she thinks of you after reading it. Is the person's impression of you how you want to be perceived?

Next, read your essays and your application out loud and slowly. Otherwise your eyes can play tricks on you and not catch errors if you're reading only in your head. Just because words are spelled correctly doesn't mean they're being used correctly. Consider if I typed, "I considered an agreed" instead of "I considered and agreed." Spell Check wouldn't catch that mistake but reading out loud would.

And finally, make sure you've answered the prompt being asked. If a question asks you to "evaluate a significant achievement or experience and its impact on you," then make sure you don't forget to include its impact. Yes, it can be hard to tell your story inside the constraints of the prompt, but you must make sure you're answering the full question. Admissions officers want to see your passion, your character, the way you reason, think, and reflect.

Good luck. The good news is that you'll be writing about a fascinating topic where you're the expert! ●