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SESSION V: THE APPLICATION PROCESS (PART II)

ACTIVITY #2: THE COLLEGE ESSAY

Opening Discussion:

The college essay stands as the last major application hurdle for many students. They may complete everything else, but the essay seems to be waiting for a stroke of divination. This activity is designed to help students kick-start their essays. It is very important to have them fill out as much as possible in the session. The goal is for students to see the essay as an opportunity, not a chore. Having them pre-write gets them started in a concrete way.

Activity/Handout:

Handouts: The College Essay: Getting Started

NACAC's Top 10 Tips

Common Application or Universal College Application essay topics (or essay from one of their applications)

Sample Essays to Evaluate

Instructions:

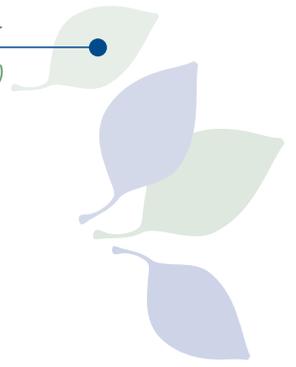
1. Give each student a copy of “The College Essay: Getting Started” and ask them to complete the questions.
2. Read with them **NACAC's Top 10**, answering any questions as you go over the hints. (for more information, see www.nacacnet.org/PublicationsResources/steps/Articles/Pages/CollegeEssay.aspx.)
3. Read the Common Application topics. Ask students which topic they would probably choose to write about. Have them circle it. *If they are already writing about other topics, list some of them on the board.*
4. Stress that whatever the essay topic is, their purpose is to tell the admission committee something important about who they are.
5. To help them begin an essay, guide them through “College Essay: Getting Started.” This complete activity, as well as other resources for essays, can be found at www.collegeboard.com/student.
6. Hand out the sample essays and ask the students to read them and decide what they like and don't like about them. Encourage them to base their decisions on how well the response answers the topic, how many specific “showing” details there are, and how well written the response is. Then read them the critiques from admission committees. Discuss.

THE COLLEGE ESSAY: GETTING STARTED

College Board's *Recipe for a Draft: How to Kick-Start Your College Essay*

(View this activity and other resources at www.collegeboard.com/student/apply).

- Think about yourself. What are your best qualities? List several of them here: _____, _____, _____, _____.
- Choose one of the qualities you listed above, one you'd like to convey to the college admission committee. **Complete this sentence: "I am a very _____ person."**
- Set a timer for about 20 minutes. Pretend you're taking an exam at school and responding to this prompt: ***Tell a story about an experience or time when you showed you were a very _____ person (using the characteristic identified above.)*** Write non-stop for the designated time.
- Congratulations! You have started a draft of a college application essay.



NACAC'S TOP TEN TIPS FOR WRITING A COLLEGE ESSAY

(Read a more detailed discussion of each tip at www.nacacnet.org/PublicationsResources/steps/Articles/Pages/CollegeEssay.aspx).

1. **Start early.** The more time you have, the less stress you'll have.
2. **Be yourself.** One of the biggest mistakes students make is "writing what they think others want to hear."
3. **Be honest.** College admission officers have read hundreds—even thousands—of essays. They are masters at discovering any form of plagiarism.
4. **Take a risk.** Don't settle for the essay that everyone else is writing.
5. **Keep in focus.** Use the essay to help the admission officers get to know you as a person.
6. **Write and rewrite.** Don't try to write a masterpiece on your first try.
7. **Get a second opinion.** Even best-selling novelists ask other people to read their manuscripts before they're sent to the publisher.
8. **Proofread.**
9. **Don't confuse applying online with sending email.** Make sure that you put as much effort into an online essay as you would if you were sending it snail mail.
10. **Don't expect too much from an essay.** The application essay is important, but it's not the only thing that is considered.



SAMPLE ESSAYS TO EVALUATE

Below are essays written in response to long and short essay topics. Read each essay once and evaluate whether it is effective. These are actual essays written by applicants applying to a major state university.

Essay #1—Describe a person who has had a significant influence on your life.

The person who has had the biggest influence on my life would be my twirling coach, Nicole. Not only is she a coach, but a friend and a role model.

Although some days at practice can be absolutely dreadful, I know that she only screams and pushes to make us better and I love that about her. Not only is she there for us as a coach, but also as a friend as well. Whenever someone has a rough day, she is the perfect person to talk to. She seems to have the answers to almost everything. She often sits us down as a team and has talks about being the better person in an argument, being a good leader, and most of all, being a good person.

Not a day goes by that I don't think about something that Nicole has taught me. Whether it is getting in a petty fight over nothing or just wanting to be lazy and not pick up by baton for an hour's practice, I often think, Nicole wouldn't be happy with my decision, or Nicole wouldn't do that. She seems to indirectly alter some of the decisions I make, which I believe are standards for a great role model.

If I would have never met my twirling coach, I don't know where I'd be today. So many of my decisions I make are influenced by things she says and her actions. She definitely has had a great amount of influence upon my life as a coach, a friend, and a role model.

Essays # 2 and #3 (same short answer topic; essays by two different students): If you were to work with a professor to design and help teach a class, what topic would you choose and why?

Essay #2:

Like many young adults, I am constantly on the run trying to get to the next activity I have scheduled. The day never seems long enough, and there is always something left undone. School, for example, is a source of a lot of stress and anxiety. I often find myself getting distracted thinking about the Calculus test or the English paper, long after they have passed.

A year ago I went to a meditation retreat in the Catskill Mountains. Since then, I have been regularly practicing meditation, an ancient yoga practice independent of all religions. However, every religion utilizes the value of meditation in one form or another to achieve eternal bliss and peace of mind.

Although I am somewhat of a “beginner,” I have already witnessed many benefits. I have found I am able to concentrate better and have an increased immunity to distractions. I find meditating helps to relieve much of my tension and enables me to work with much more zeal. Many nights I have to study for multiple tests or quizzes, so I meditate a few minutes before I start each new subject. Once I have done this, my mind is clearer and more responsive to the information it is fed.



At college, I would like to share the wonder of meditation with others to help them get through the tough times. The message of meditation transcends religious lines and can be beneficial to everyone. Working with more accomplished individuals, I would like to explore the therapeutic aspect of the practice; and, perhaps through statistical, historical, and spiritual data, support this ideology. The opportunity to work with a professor would help me structure and deliver the message better. Guest speakers as part of a club or college course would enhance the experience of meditation. I believe this course would be a great learning experience and benefit for interested students.

Essay #3:

If I were to work with a professor to design and teach a class, the topic for my new course would be a broad study of major modern day religions as Judaism, Christianity, Muslim, and Buddhism. Through education this class's objective would hopefully be to curb prejudice and increase tolerance of other religions. I feel that especially now during this time of crisis in our nation that to toleration can only further expound on the unity we now possess.

Essay #4: Describe the environment in which you grew up and how it has shaped your personal goals.

I grew up in a brick house on Nottingham Drive, a place with old furniture and young faces, with small rooms that never seemed empty. I grew up with my pointy nose buried in books, wearing stretch pants and bows and listening to my father's new songs on the guitar. I sat at a dinner table as girlish voices made fun of that pointy nose along with my big ears, and I finally learned to laugh about them. I grew up with a big-nosed father who always had a joke on his tongue and a mother who always had an answer. I heard that as long as I worked hard enough, I could do anything.

I grew up eating fresh tomatoes from my grandpa's garden and later saw that same garden overrun with weeds. I grew up during summers at the lake, with cousins who couldn't read until fourth grade and could break every object in sight. I watched at a distance as relatives struggled through life, searching for paths to independence. I heard stories from the adults' fold-out table, of women abandoned by the men whom they had depended on. Somewhere amongst those stories, I made up my mind not to make their same mistakes.

I grew up with a determination to make something of myself, to stand apart from the crowd. I listened to seemingly endless stories about the Depression, wars and old friends. I wondered if I would ever get a chance to tell my stories. I wondered what type of stories I would have to tell.

I began to understand that I have a choice. I can choose the stories that I want to tell. I can choose whether or not I repeat others' mistakes. And I can choose what I make of myself. As to how I make these choices, I'm sure that all I have to do is remember the stories from when I grew up.



ADMISSION COUNSELORS' CRITIQUES OF ESSAYS

Essay #1

This essay does not work because it lacks depth. The writer just skims the surface and gives the reader vague details about the coach. She doesn't tell HOW her coach influences her life. The writer needed to take this essay to the next level. The writing also lacks sophistication. The word choice and sentence structure are very simplistic.

Essay #2

This is a good short answer response because it is a very specific topic and shares a personal experience. The writer uses clear details and writes well. This brief answer response also shows that the writer is open minded, curious, and motivated to work with others.

Essay #3

Even though this is a short answer response, the writer needed to go into more depth. The topic is too broad as presented and doesn't allow the writer to talk about the details. The writer also did not proofread carefully; there are words missing and other grammatical errors.

Essay #4

This essay is an excellent example of how concrete details can create a vivid story. The writer's strong observation skills and sensitivity to her family hold the reader's attention. Her reflections at the end are well supported by the story. The writer uses language well and shows a sense of style.