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**THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY: JUST TELL ME WHAT
TO WRITE AND I'LL WRITE IT**

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TO WRITE AND I'LL WRITE IT**

by

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Dissertation

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Dedication

- To my boys. Everything thing I do I do with you in my mind and in my heart. Thank you for your love, your patience, your humor, and your reminders to “come outside and play!”
- To my husband, Jon, you are my North Star and my Orion. Thank you for keeping me grounded and showing me that it’s always a ‘lovely day’ as long as we’re facing it together.
- To my family, thank you for making me who I am, for instilling in me a desire to be better, to learn more, and to finish what I start.
- To my colleagues, your support and humor throughout the insanity of this process kept me grounded in ways that no one else could. I’ll appreciate you forever for your support. You have supported me like family through this process and I will be forever grateful.
- To my friends, your relentless efforts to distract me from this project made completing this journey even sweeter. Thank you for your support and your reminders that there’s life outside of school.

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THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY: JUST TELL ME WHAT TO WRITE AND I'LL WRITE IT

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This study aims to develop a method for more clearly understanding the topics that applicants choose when writing their college or university application essay. As such, the purpose of this dissertation is two-fold. First, to analyze the unstudied volume of advice and guidance available to applicants on the World Wide Web, this study will analyze the guidance that is available to motivate and guide applicants as they embark on writing their essay. Second, this study examines the college application essay and will create a categorization of the application essay topics on which a select group of applicants chose to write. The purpose is not to evaluate the applicant or their demographics, nor is it to suggest “best practices” for college applicants to follow when writing their essays. Furthermore, as an examination of popular media and of narrative expression, this analysis does not attempt to reveal a

causal link between media and the resulting narratives. Instead, this inductive analysis develops a baseline theory that begins a discussion of the application essay and the multitude of information that might guide its creation.

The motivation for this study is grounded in the following: 1) many colleges and universities employ selective practices in their admissions process and they consider the application essay to be a helpful tool in selecting from among otherwise academically eligible students; 2) applicants consider the essay to be one of the most challenging and unfamiliar aspects of the application; and 3) a multi-million-dollar industry has developed to assist students with college and university applications.

This research supports prior studies that indicate that the writing of college application essays (or personal statements) is in fact as Paley (1996) suggests an exercise in a rhetorical conundrum. Applicants emerge from the angst and confusion of how to approach and what to write about in their college application essay to produce a work that reveals personal characteristics that they think are important to college admissions officers and that they hope, will ultimately, result in admission to their institution of choice.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Thresher (1989) referred to college admissions as the “Great Sorting,” the social process that results from individual choices and decisions made by millions of people on the basis of “calculations and estimates projected a generation into the future and in part on beliefs, opinions, whims, ancient loyalties, and areas of ignorance scarcely amenable to rational estimate” (p.3). He commented that this process largely occurs outside of the walls of admissions offices, often long before an applicant has even considered beginning the application process. Each year, for many students the formal admissions process begins after students contemplate whether to attend college and which to attend while thousands of colleges select the students who will be allowed through their hallowed gates.

In 2004, more than 1.8 million high school graduates applied to at least one of the more than 4000 colleges and universities that make up the highly stratified system of postsecondary education found in the United States. In recent years an already complex process has been made even more so by the ever-growing numbers of students who choose to apply to more than one institution. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (2006), 81% of first-time freshmen who applied to college nationwide in 2004 applied to more than one institution compared to 66% eight years earlier. Of the 1.4 million first-time freshmen who applied to more than one institution, 36% applied to more than four institutions and 10% to more than seven.

The level of complexity involved in the “great sorting” depends to some degree upon the admission model employed by a given institution. The Rigol (1999) divides institutional admissions processes into two types: eligibility based models and selective models. Eligibility-based models are admission processes based on a publicly stated uniform standard against which students are evaluated and selected for admission (p.3). The admission standards are unambiguous and the competition for admittance is against the standard, not against other students. Open admissions institutions, where the eligibility criteria alone determine admissibility, constitute the purest form of eligibility-based admissions. Selective institutions, on the other hand, may employ an eligibility-based model for initial sorting of qualified applicants but then go on to consider additional criteria on which to further evaluate qualified candidates. In a selective model, the admissions process is not as transparent and students find themselves facing off against other qualified students for a space in the class (Rigol, 1999, p.8).

Admission decisions at selective institutions involve selecting from among qualified applicants, and the nature of “being qualified” continues to change. Median test scores continue to increase and students find themselves competing based upon much more than grades and test scores as writing ability, resumes, and letters of recommendation take on more significance in the selection process (Fitzsimmons, 1991; Hawkins and Clinedinst, 2006; Kilgore, 2004). Whether an institution utilizes only an eligibility-based model or other selection criteria depends on its educational mission. A 1999 College Board report identified three philosophical perspectives that

underlie an institution's selection process: capacity to perform, effect of education on the individual, and potential to contribute. The report further categorized these philosophical groupings into seven admissions perspectives that form the selective decision making models used to evaluate applicants: academic quality, personal qualities, potential to benefit, overcoming educational adversity, potential to contribute, student body needs, and fiduciary needs.

While these philosophical perspectives and admission decision models define the process for admissions officials, students are often unaware of the intricate details that lie behind the evaluative credentials that they are required to submit and are even less privy to the basis on which decisions are made. Weick (1969) contends that admission decisions based on these criteria are purposive, well thought out, calculated and planned. Nonetheless, students, as well as those involved in the process with them, can only trust that the admission process is as rational as it is competitive.

Kilgore suggests that for many college applicants "it makes sense to believe that college admissions should be a simple ordering of students based on some combination of academic criteria, such as grades, test scores, coursework, and so on" (p.5). Alternatively, Kilgore (2004) suggests that students also understand a parallel model, albeit one that is not without controversy. For some, expanding the concept of "merit" beyond test scores and grades is a welcome relief; to others it is an irritation. The development of selective college admissions has shifted the process from a narrowly defined academic exercise to one that reflects a "holism," a consideration of the student beyond an explicit and uniform set of objective attributes (p.5). The

addition of essays, resumes, teacher recommendations, and portfolios attest to this shift. These criteria may enhance the understanding of a student's academic qualities, but more consequentially, they say something about who the student is as a person.

Kilgore (2004) determined that:

...students recognize that colleges want to fill their classes with the best students they can and often this means with the best people they can get – people who are motivated, curious, involved, enthusiastic, passionate, and socially adept. (p. 6)

Paley (1996) suggests that students recognize the need to reflect this holism. She asserts that students are “positioning” themselves for entry into the competitive admissions process long before they become high school seniors. Their high school years, and particularly their senior year, are consumed with the college application process. They work to maintain grade point averages, establish class rank, and earn the best possible SAT and/or ACT exam scores. But for many applicants, one more hurdle exists: they must compose what is likely to be the first consequential piece of writing in their lives – the college application essay, one of the few criteria over which applicants have any evaluative control. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling's *State of College Admission* (2006) reports that 58.1% of the institutional respondents to its *State of college admission* reported that the essay or writing sample held considerable or moderate importance in the college admission decision. So, for even the most qualified students, the college application essay represents an important credential that could secure their place in the college of their choice or force them to decide among other options.

Outside of the world of college admissions, the college application essay carries little significance. The field of rhetoric and composition describes this type of writing as homely discourse. Miller (1984) describes homely discourse texts as those “mundane genres that, while enjoying neither wide public circulation nor high profile status, often carry significant instrumental importance” (p.155). Miller suggests that:

...to consider as potential genres such homely discourses as the letter of recommendation, the user manual, the progress report, the ransom note, the lecture, and the white paper, as well as the eulogy, the apologia, the inaugural, the public proceeding, and the sermon, is not to trivialize the study of genres; it is to take seriously the rhetoric in which we are immersed and the situations in which we find ourselves. (p. 155)

As college bound high school seniors will profess, this essay has the potential to determine their academic fates. Recognizing the need to display personal characteristics that cannot be gleaned from objective criteria, the essay gives applicants the opportunity to tell their story and to tell who they are. In the context of admissions philosophies, the essay allows them to exhibit how they can contribute to and benefit from educational opportunities at the institution and to reflect on their capacity to conform at that particular institution.

For all of the angst that the college application produces and despite its value in the context of the application process, higher education literature rarely considers the essay as a topic and it is rarely studied by the academy (Swales, 1996). Because of its relative lack of value outside the small window that is the college admissions process, the application essay is considered an “occluded genre.” Therefore, while the essay is extremely valuable to the applicant and to the university, as an object of study, it has been relatively ignored.

As applicants contemplate the role of the essay in obtaining their goal of admission, the literature that does exist suggests that it is important to the researchers and university administrators to recognize the situational context of the essay. The essay is not a criterion whose value has been affirmed, like a test score might be. Once it is submitted, the writer no longer controls the essay (Brown, 2004, 2005; Paley 1996; Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993); instead, the reader is in control. The reader, or the admissions officer, is familiar with the rhetorical purpose of the essay and has read hundreds, perhaps thousands, of essays. The value of the essay then can only be affirmed within the context of the admissions process at a given institution. The applicant, on the other hand, has written few, if any, rhetorical pieces in the same vein as the college application essay and is not privy to selection criteria that eventually determine the class. The admissions officer decides if the applicant's essays accomplish the rhetorical goal of assisting the applicant towards gaining admission to the institution. Certainly, individual life experiences and goals permeate the volumes of essays that the admissions committee encounters, but the officer alone determines the value of the story that an individual student tells.

Brown (2005) suggests that readers approach essays with a process that has been developed during their previous experiences reading applicant files. He argues that Swale's occluded genre includes two qualitatively different types of texts: those that request information from the reader (i.e., the application letter) and those that "wield the power to evaluate, judge, or bestow something requested by the reader" (p. 15). In the latter, not only does the applicant cede the power of interpretation to the

admissions officer, but the application essay becomes a communicative event of its own rite. In the few studies that have examined the essay or personal statement, researchers assert that the lack of discussion surrounding the essay causes students to be suspicious of its true purpose and that yielding interpretation of their essay to such an ambiguous process increases suspicion among applicants that a “hidden agenda” surrounds the essay (Bhatia, 1993; Brown, 2005). This agenda warns writers that, no matter how mundane the topic, their reflections must acknowledge that agenda if they are to be successful (Bhatia, 1993). The research has also shown that seemingly unimportant nuances, such as the order in which different parts of the applicant’s file are read, might influence the circumstances under which the reading occurs. Similarly, depending upon the situation, prototypical essays may be quickly dismissed as ordinary, or conversely, the reader may have less tolerance for a writer whose essays take rhetorical risks (Brown, 2005).

Here lies the conflict and the point of interest that led to the writing of this dissertation. The application essay has been relatively ignored in research concerned with the college application process. And yet, in a critical moment in time for millions of college applicants the essay takes on an importance that rivals that of the well researched standardized test scores, curriculum selection, and college choice subjects.

As demonstrated by the preceding examples, the writing of the college application essay is wrought with the angst and frustration that embodies much of the college application process. But, as Brown and others suggest, the applicant feels

even less control over this component of the process. While one might presume that essays are completely within student control because, after all, they are writing them, the literature suggests otherwise (Hatch, Hill, and Hays, 1993). College applicants bemoan the unknown but critical question of “what do they want to know?” Applicants seek information regarding the purpose and value of their essays in the admission decision process and approach the essay as a means to tell their story, to package and sell themselves to an audience that they do not know (Paley, 1996). The applicants are motivated to gain admission and the essay is one mean to that end.

This situation creates an “inherent imbalance of knowledge” between writers and those who read their essays (Brown, 2004, p.243).

Faculty members who review applications develop keen senses of the formal attributes of the genre and its range of permutations. By contrast, applicants have read few, and written even fewer, documents of this kind. Thus they may feel themselves to be composing in a rhetorical void in which they must write in an unfamiliar genre for an audience they do not know nor will likely ever meet. (p. 243)

College applicants have stories to tell, and they want to tell them in the manner most compelling to the reader. And yet, they are constrained by the rules imposed by the college application: prompts, page limits, and the unknown value of the essay relative to other components in the application (Brown, 2005). If Bhatia’s (1993) argument that there is a hidden agenda in the college application process and that the essay, an occluded genre of writing, is designed more to be exploited by the reader for their purposes rather than in benefit of the writer’s intent, then the writing of the essay is indeed challenging. College applicants also fear that an ulterior motive lies behind the essay prompt. Fearing that there is an implicit right or wrong answer to the prompt,

students worry about how much to reveal to an institution (Vidali, 2007). They believe that their admission decision hinges on their ability to determine the underlying motives of the admissions committee.

In an attempt to settle this imbalance and to find the right answer, students search for assistance with their essays, often from guidance counselors and English teachers first. But one has to wonder how well equipped, how able, and how inclined these individuals are to help the large numbers of students who knock on their doors (Bishop, 2006; Gose, 1997; Cohen, 2006). Katherine Cohen (2006) of IvyWise, an independent college consulting firm, suggests that as high school officials become more unavailable or unable to serve their growing and diverse population of students, students and their families become more likely to enlist the assistance of private consultants or to seek answers from the popular media to help bring clarity to the college application and essay writing process. She states that her firm “help[s] students present themselves honestly and in their best light to colleges to get the best possible results. Sometimes this means that students write about how they deal with their weaknesses, failures, and setbacks — experiences that can serve as building blocks for great personal statements.” Ms. Cohen contends that private consultants like those in her firm have extended their services to more than 22% (58,000) of the 260,000 high school students admitted to private institutions in 2005. In exchange for her firm’s services, families pay fees ranging from \$150 for an essay writing workshop to more than \$33,000 for two years of intense college planning consulting.

If not seeking help from counselors and teachers, many aspiring college students turn to the expanse of popular guidebooks and websites. While books that address the entire college application process are most prevalent, a wealth of books focused solely on college application essays has emerged, including *Essays That Will Get You Into College* (Kaufman, Dowhan & Dowhan, 2003), *Writing a Successful College Application* (Ehrenhaft, 2000), *Fiske Real College Essays That Work* (Bain & Hammond, 2006), *The College Application Essay* (McGinty, 2001), and *College Admissions Essays For Dummies* (Woods, 2003). These guidebooks are often aimed at a general college bound audience rather than at a particular institution or type of institution. Similarly, because these books are often written by popular writers who do want to sell their work, they are also filled with sometimes contradictory advice, raising the book's allure because of its "different" information while also potentially adding to the angst of an already anxious process.

A brief examination of *Essays That Will Get You Into College* (Kaufman, Dowhan & Dowhan, 2003) reveals five key attributes of a successful college essay: get personal, use plenty of details, be different/unique/interesting/funny, be honest, and tell a story. At the same time the book warns writers not to use excessive details, make up those attributes that make them different/unique/interesting/ or funny, draw attention to weaknesses, and expect everyone to like their story. Much of this kind of advice is too vague or too glib (Brown, 2004) and is often contradicted by other sources, often within the same book. Such generic and conflicting directives are often

difficult for students to reconcile, which contributes to the panic about writing the perfect essay.

In addition to books on writing college essays, numerous online sources address the topic. The researcher chose to focus on the World Wide Web because adolescents are voracious consumers of the Internet (Wager, 2005; Pew, 2001; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999)). As a result, it made sense to conduct this research in a method that simulated the actions of a typical adolescent. Consequently, Google, “the world’s leading search engine,” was a logical place to start. A Google search (www.google.com) of the string “college application essays” yielded 177,000 results, including some websites designed to assist students in writing the college essay. Search result #49, www.atjustcolleges.com, informs students that “college application essays, or personal statements, are to a large extent social exchanges and require a balance between sincerity and goodwill on the one hand and finesse on the other (www.justcolleges.com/essays/essay_purpose.htm). But, by and large, the search results yield for-profit essay writing and editing services. Students can turn to any number of web-based companies for assistance with creating, writing, and editing their application essays. The leading search result, as defined by rank order on Google, Essay Edge (www.essayedge.com), proclaims that it has been named “*the world's premier application essay editing service* by The New York Times Learning Network and *one of the best essay services on the Internet* by The Washington Post. [emphasis original to quote]” EssayEdge contends that its services, ranging from \$59.99 for a second opinion on a previously reviewed draft to \$299.99 for platinum

service, yield the best results, have the finest editors, and are the leader of the college application industry.

Statement of the Problem

The competitive nature of college admissions is evident by the increasing selectivity of college admissions and the importance of non-objective criteria in the college application process. Beyond the availability of high school officials and private college guidance counselors, a volume of web-based services exist to assist students in writing college application essays. While the popular media offers advice to students about how to write their essays, the Academy has not engaged in significant scholarly research to examine this advice or the essay that it seeks to inform. A review of the literature reveals only three published studies that have addressed a genre similar to the college application essay (Paley, 1996; Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993; Vidali, 2007). These studies examined the personal statement from a rhetorical perspective, addressing the statement from the reader's point of view. Vidali (2007) similarly examined the essay from the rhetorical standpoint but as it relates to students with disabilities. These studies are discussed in detail in the review of the literature. This research seeks to begin a scholarly discussion of the college application essay from the applicant's point of view in a traditional college application process.

The profession of college and university admissions relies on anecdote and professional speculation to understand the application essay but has not engaged in research to test the anecdotal evidence (Walker, personal correspondence, November,

2005). This study intends to fill that void. The plethora of websites and guidebooks suggests that applicants seek advice beyond what admissions officers provide. Given this, it is as important to know what that advice is being given.

Further, as previously stated, research has focused on the application essay for examination in the fields of rhetoric and composition, social work, sociology, and others but has not examined the essay from a practical standpoint for the admissions profession, in particular, scholarly research has yet to examine the stories or topics in detail for the benefit of the profession. Unlike previous research that focuses on the reader's perspective or columns containing anecdotal reflections, this research studies the application essay from the writer's perspective. Rather than focusing on how the readers are interpreting the essays, this research is interested in what the students are writing.

Purpose of the Study

The framework for this study is the development of a method for more clearly understanding the topics that applicants choose when writing their college or university application essay. As such, the purpose of this dissertation is two-fold. First, this study will describe the guidance that is available on the World Wide Web to motivate and guide applicants as they embark on writing their essay. Second, this study will create a taxonomy or categorization of the application essay topics on which a select group of applicants chose to write. The purpose is not to evaluate the applicant or their demographics, nor is it to suggest "best practices" for college applicants to follow when writing their essays. While these results are worthy of

follow up, they are beyond the scope of this initial investigation. Furthermore, as an examination of popular media and of narrative expression, this analysis does not attempt to reveal a causal link between media and the resulting narratives. Instead, this inductive analysis develops a baseline theory that begins a discussion of the application essay and the multitude of information that might guide its creation.

The motivation for this study is grounded in the following: 1) many colleges and universities employ selective practices in their admissions process and they consider the application essay to be a helpful tool in selecting from among otherwise academically eligible students; 2) applicants consider the essay to be one of the most challenging and unfamiliar aspects of the application; and 3) a multi-million-dollar industry has developed to assist students with college and university applications.

This study analyzes the popular electronic media that are available to college applicants when they are preparing their application essays and explores what applicants choose to reveal about themselves by examining what they write about in their essays. To do so, this research employs a three-part interpretive research methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) in which the researcher combines elements of meta-analysis (Noblit & Hare, 1988), qualitative content analysis (Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield, 2005), and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987).

The meta-analysis involves the initial restriction of the websites for data collection. This restriction was conducted via an analysis of popular websites available to students to assist them with writing their college application essay. Noblit and Hare (1998) suggest that meta-analysis is an appropriate methodology for

this level of analysis because it allows similarities and differences to emerge from multiple accounts of the same phenomena. The second phase of the research involves the qualitative coding of the website data. Qualitative content analysis (QCA) allows for the recognition of the contextual meaning of the website sources through the development of themes that emerge from the data (Bryman, 2001). The final analysis examines a sample of 150 college application essays. These essays are examined in a method consistent with Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield's (2005) Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA). ECA allows for an inductive focus on the meaning of text and emergence of ideas, rather than the frequency with which those ideas are presented.

Research Questions

This research contributes to the scarce literature that examines the college application essay, specifically by focusing on the application essay from the writers' (the college applicants') perspective. This study explores the process that embodies the production and delivery of the college application essay by conducting an interpretive analysis of web based resources to which applicants might refer when writing application essays and on the product that they create. Through a qualitative content analysis of purposely selected popular media and through an ethnographic content analysis of application essays submitted to a university admissions office, this research answered the following questions:

RQ1: What advice is available to students on the World Wide Web regarding college application essays?

RQ2: What are college applicants writing about in their application essays?

RQ3: What is the relationship between what students write in their essays and the advice that is available to them?

Limitations and Assumptions

This study involves only a small sample of application essays from a single large public institution. However, as is made evident in Chapter three, this institution is similar to other colleges and universities that utilize personal characteristics in the application process. The site institution also has a unique blend of applicants: some are guaranteed admission under state law and others must compete vigorously for admission to highly ranked programs. Given this, the research assumes that applicants to this institution write and submit essays with the same fervor as applicants to any institution that employs a selective admissions process. Given this unique blend of automatic and competitive admissions, the researcher used measures to ensure that the selected samples originated from a pool of applicants competing for admission rather than those guaranteed admission.

Given the introductory nature of this analysis, a small sample size is acceptable. This research is meant to introduce a new focus and to begin a dialogue concerning the questions raised in this research. The small sample size from a single institution might raise concerns about generalizing the data. However, such concerns are alleviated by the diverse representation of students applying to this institution and by the fact that the institution is public and located in Texas. Four-year public institutions in Texas utilize a common application, including identical essay topics that are reasonably consistent from year to year, enabling students to prepare their essays over time.

As previously mentioned, a portion of students applying to the site institution are guaranteed admission. While not verified, it is assumed that applicants with guaranteed admission will not approach the writing assignment with the same vigor and thoughtfulness as those competing for admission. As a result, to ensure that the essays examined by this research were written in order to gain admission through a competitive process, the sample pool includes only essays of students who were not automatically admitted. Further detail regarding this selection process is provided in Chapter three.

Significance of the Study

While grappling with what is likely to be the first consequential piece of writing in their academic lives, college applicants tap into a variety of sources when preparing to write their college application essays. This process places the applicant in a challenging rhetorical situation: at a moment in which they consider the stakes to be incredibly high, they are being asked to reveal themselves to an unfamiliar audience and to turn over interpretation of that revelation to a process that is out of their control. With the exception of three studies (Hatch, Hill, and Hayes, 1993; Paley, 1996, Vidali, 2007) focused on the undergraduate application process, this type of writing is largely unexamined. As competition for spaces at selective institutions increases and as the call continues for institutions to engage in applicant review processes that focus on personal, non-objective, selection criteria; the significance of the college application essay increases. Simultaneously, a burgeoning number of

assistance products and services provide advice to students about how their essays should be written.

As the value of the application essay increases, the necessity and desire for empirical data regarding the characteristics of the essay also increase. This study begins a conversation regarding the application essay writing process. The examination of popular media in conjunction with an analysis of the essay indicates the role that the extensive consumer industry plays as it aims to advise and support the wants and needs of college applicants and their parents. This consumers' market is a driving force behind the preparation for the college admissions process, and admissions officers must examine and come to terms with the impact of the industry on their selection process. Today's college applicants are doing all they can to demonstrate to the admissions committee that they are the students that colleges are seeking, that they are motivated, intellectually curious, and passionate (Paley, 1996). The nature of the college admissions essay, one that functions as a communicative event of self-revelation, is the vehicle by which students display these characteristics to admissions officers. The examination of the college application essay in this context provides empirical data that supports the value of non-academic factors, particularly essays, in the college admissions process. Specifically, this study answer the questions of what *undergraduate college applicants are saying in* and *what advice might be influencing* their essays.

This dissertation also provides empirical data to college and university admissions personnel by answering the question of *what college applicants saying so*

that admissions officers may then study the logical follow-up question of *why are they saying it*. This dissertation does not test a hypothesis; rather, it seeks to contribute to theory development by focusing the applicant's perspective in this part of the admissions process rather than the institutions perspective. As an introductory study, this dissertation builds on data from emerging studies concerning graduate school personal statements by focusing on the undergraduate essay. It also contributes to the literature considering generational characteristics, as it reveals the nature of the college applicant's experiences and challenges. In addition it begins to address the influence of e-advice that is available to students that may be guiding the content and quality of the essays received by admissions offices.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter One introduces the study and provides an overview of the rationale and purpose for studying the application essay. It includes background information on the college admissions process and the application essay and considers the essay both from a rhetorical and an institutional standpoint. The chapter also contains the statement of the problem, the research questions, and the scope of the study, assumptions and limitations, and the significance of the study.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature. The chapter reports on relevant literature in four areas: college admissions, consumerism and the internet in higher education, research on admission factors other than academics, and research on the college application essay.

Chapter Three reports on the research design, collection, and methods of analysis. It reconsiders the purpose, the research questions, and the methodological procedures. The chapter also details the data collection, including the methods used for sample and site selection. A detailed profile of the site institution from which samples were collected is also included. The chapter concludes with a description of the data analysis and coding methods, triangulation of the data, limitations of the study, and the definition of terms.

Chapters Four and Five are analysis chapters. Chapter Four details the analysis of the literature on advice given for college admission essay writing. The first section of the chapter describes the eight most popular websites that were identified and evaluated for this study and reports the findings related to RQ1. Chapter Four also identifies the four concerns that applicants encounter when faced with the college application essay: angst, how to write, for whom the student is writing, and what to write. These concerns led to the emergence of axial codes for the analysis presented in Chapter Five and led to suggested topics on which applicants might choose to write: events, passions, places, people, and religion.

Chapter Five reports on the results of the analysis of 150 college application essays submitted for consideration in the admissions process at the site institution. The advice literature guided applicants toward five areas to be considered when choosing a topic. This chapter reports on the examination of the essays within the context of the axial codes and identifies the selective codes that answer RQ2 of this research project.

Chapter Six provides a summary and discussion of the results and suggestion for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter two contains a review of the relevant literature. The chapter reports on existing literature in four areas: college admissions, consumerism and internet usage by college applicants, research on the use of personal qualities in admissions, research on the college application essay.

College Admissions

Higher education has not been ignored in scholarly research. Sociologists and educators have grappled with issues of access and equity (McDonough, 1994; Bowen, Kuzweil & Tobin, 2005). Economists and others have examined human capital economic theory as it relates to education (Beattie, 2002; Becker, 1993). Historians have traced the evolution of the modern university (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997; Clark, 1984).

There is a 40-year history of college admissions research. One of earliest collections of papers regarding issues related to a developing admissions profession was submitted in 1968 by The College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB). The CEEB published a collection of papers termed the *Colloquium on College Admissions Policies* collected from a meeting covering a range of admissions issues, including admissions policy, retention, and educational mission. The volume, while not offering any systematic or empirical evidence, provided some of the first professional insights into the types of issues that are raised by the college admissions community.

Sacks (1978) provided the first critical piece of literature on the “problems” of admissions. The author contributed his perspective on the crises faced by applicants

applying to institutions of higher education and the effects of admissions procedures upon applicants. The key recommendation of Sacks research was that institutions find a place for applicant's perspective in the college admissions process. According to Sacks, a significant step toward identifying the problems applicants face is to better understand their perspective as shared in their essays. This dissertation will attempt to identify and then view the essay writing task from these perspectives.

There have been a series of scholarly articles regarding selective college admissions, focusing on elite institutions in the United States. Karabel (1984) examined Harvard, Princeton, and Yale and provided a theoretical framework regarding institutional change and status group struggle. Kiltgaard (1985) reviewed the admissions process at Harvard during the late 1970's and early 1980's. He focused on the ideologies that shape the values underlying the admissions process and on admissions processes, objectives of selection, and prediction of academic success. Karen (1990) explored the political and organizational context within which admissions takes place and shows the ways in which meritocratic and class-based factors play roles in the decision making process. Conley (1995) focused her analysis on the perspectives of the admissions officers making admissions decisions from a social justice framework. While each of these makes substantial contributions to our understanding of the college admissions process, particularly in elite institutions, they all consider the application process from an institutional perspective. While these researchers have contributed vital information for our understanding of the college selection process, their research does not include the applicant's perspective on the

process. This research will provide that missing perspective. This dissertation seeks the applicant's voice in order to better understand how applicants convey their unique characteristics to offices of admissions.

Consumerism in Higher Education

There has been extensive research on college choice and college aspiration. Researchers have traditionally focused their studies regarding college choice on economic, sociological, and combined models (Gonzalez and DesJardins, 2002; Kohn, Manski, & Mundel, 1976; Litten, 1982). Economic models focus on the benefits applicants expect to accrue from their institutional selection (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Paulsen, 1990). Sociological models focus on how college aspirations change based on social class, ethnicity, and wealth. Combined models focus on social justice and include both economic and sociological forces (Conley, 1995; McDonough, 1994; Paulsen, 1990). While extensive research exists regarding applicant's college choice from and their corresponding enrollment behavior from sociological and economic perspectives, there has been little research and theory development regarding the application process from an applicant's perspective (Gonzalez & DesJardins, 2002, Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Paulsen, 1990).

A variety of researchers have written on the behavioral change in applicants as illustrated by their increased number of applications to colleges and universities to which they applied (Dey, Astin, & Korn, 1991; McDonough, 1994; Sanoff, 1994; Shea, 1994). These researchers submit that in the 1980's and early 1990's institutions

received more applications than would have been expected given the decrease in the number of high school graduates (Gonzales & DesJardin, 2002; McDonough, 1994). As reported in Chapter one, the number of colleges to which a single applicant applies has increased significantly since the early 1990's (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2006). McDonough (1994) argues that the increased standards for admission, the increased marketing by college admissions officials, and diminished high school guidance operations have fueled this growth and given rise to the college application assistance industry.

Studies have suggested that high school applicants are receiving insufficient college counseling to compete in selective college admissions processes. Cohen (2006) suggest that college applicants who are given their first college counseling session in the spring of the junior year are at a disadvantage when applying to colleges and universities that evaluate all four of their high schools years. Further, The National Association for College Admissions Counseling's *Annual State of College Admissions Report* (2006) reported that the time that high school counselors have time to devote to college counseling is continually shrinking. Non-counseling tasks rob high school counselors of the time they could be spending on college counseling responsibilities. Furthermore, according to the *Annual State of College Admissions Report* (2006) caseloads for public high school counselors average 315 students, seriously limiting the time a counselor can spend with any one student.

McDonough (1994) argues that some college aspirants, fearful of their ability to get into a "good" college and at a loss for significant support and assistance in

school, rely on the private counselors and companies providing application assistance. She asserts that just as applicant's parents seek professional, legal, financial, and medical assistance when the need arises, they do not hesitate to seek professional help for their children as they go through the college application process. She suggests that applicants and their families are driving the "professionalizing" of the management of the admissions process and that parents have become

...commodified by enrollment managers and that in response, high school seniors have treated *college knowledge* – information about college choice and admissions standards – as a commodity and have consumed the ever-growing number of college selection guidebooks, software, videos, laser disks, as well as coaching and counseling professionals' services. (p. 443)

The Internet is also serving as an alternative place for applicants to seek application assistance and particularly essay writing assistance. As will be reported in Chapter 4, the Internet is brimming with information regarding the college application process. This generation of students is a voracious consumer of Internet-based information (Wager, 2005; Pew, 2001; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). These students, born when the information age was well under way, have grown up in an environment where information technology is interwoven with all aspects of their lives.

This study will extend McDonough's research into the commercialization of the college application process by examining the professional help market that currently exists for applicants to utilize as they write their college application essays. The literature suggests that this generation of students utilize the Internet just as they would any other resource, perhaps more so. Given the applicant's propensity to refer

to the Internet as an “official” source for information, it is of particular importance to begin making connections between what applicants’s might find on the Internet to what they later convey to admissions committee. This study aims to fill the gap that exists between what is known about this resource and what it offers to college applicants.

Research on the Use of Personal Qualities in Admissions

As previously stated, the “great sorting” of college applicants occurs within the admissions offices and the complexity of the sorting process depends on the admissions model employed by the colleges and universities (Thresher, 1989). Rigol (1999) divides institutional admission processes into two types: eligibility based models and selective models. Those institutions that employ a selective model considers a host of factors beyond the traditional academic measures such as test score, class rank, and grade point average (Rigol, 1999). The literature refers to these non-academic factors as “personal qualities.” There are a variety of methods collecting and evaluating personal qualities and “character” perspective in the admissions process. Rigol (2003), in the College Board publication *Admissions Decision-Making Models*, offers the following credentials and methods as examples for collecting non-academic information regarding applicants: resume of extracurricular activities, personal inventory, interviews, teacher and counselor recommendations, and essays.

Selective colleges and universities request many of these credentials from their applicants (Rigol, 2003). The essay is often requested as both a means to

evaluate writing ability and to evaluate personal characteristics. These writing samples have traditionally come in a variety of forms: essays, autobiographies, and other types of free-response questions and prompts (Willingham & Breland, 1982). In the distinct world of undergraduate admissions, the writing sample is often an essay about the applicant's interests, goals, and academic aspirations. While admissions offices do not generally request autobiographies, students do often provide "life history information not available in other parts of the application" (p. 33). Willingham and Breland (1982) note that personal statements or essays (as they are generally referred to in undergraduate admissions) can be coded in a number of ways in order to provide relative evidence to admissions officers in their selection process. This evidence could be coded and gathered in such a way as to provide evidence of a creative, intellectual, or planning orientation and to gather more significant evidence to determine fundamental psychological attributes (see, for example, Atkinson 1958). While psychological development and aptitude have been extensively studied as they relate to current college students (see, for example, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Astin, 1997; Evans, 1998), the application of psychological attributes as a projective technique have not been found applicable to undergraduate college admissions (Willingham & Breland, 1982).

Historically, there have been only a few studies conducted on the validity of personal statements as a genre of writing. Nichols and Holland (1963) sought to elicit evidence of creativity from National Merit Scholarship finalists. Their approach was particularly novel. Rather than selecting random statements from applicants as had

been done in previous studies (see, Holmes and Hertel, 1967), the researchers solicited essays from subjects who had been pre-selected based on academic qualifications. They were therefore able to control for non-academic factors. In their research, Nichols and Holland (1963) found that free-response statements correlated positively and significantly with non-academic achievements during the first year of college.

Willingham and Breland conducted the seminal research on non-academic factors in college admissions in 1982. The resulting text, *Personal Qualities in College Admissions* (Willingham and Breland, 1982) asserted that colleges and universities had long been collecting information to elicit personal qualities from students but that admissions officers were not using the data. They found that the bulk of decisions were being made with the use of class rank and test score alone. Their actions, supported by predictive validity studies, demonstrated that grades and test scores are the most effective predictors of academic success (Fishman & Pansanella, 1960; Hills, 1966; and Shrader, 1971). The authors found this to be most true for those applicants who were unequivocally admitted or denied admission. Willingham conceded the predictability of rank and test scores when he found that class rank and test scores were the best predictors of academic achievement in a follow-up study in 1985.

As is still the case for many applicants who are not readily admissible, they are the only applicants who received consideration on the basis of non-academic factors (Morgan, 1983). Willingham and Breland (1982) determined that there were a

variety of other factors that could be considered useful, such as special talents (scientific or artistic skills), career-related talents, drive and initiative, extracurricular involvement, concrete achievement, and personal background (including, geographic location, alumni and donor relationships, and professional affiliation) (pp. 17-20).

The authors believed that a more consistent and systematic approach to the use of personal qualities could assist institution with better aligning the selection of their student bodies with their institution's stated educational goals and mission. Their primary concerns are still echoed today. Written statements are easily obtained from applicants, however, questions of authenticity and authorship impedes the use of the statements for more critical decisions. Furthermore, even in 1982, with limited use in decision making processes, one reviewer told the authors that "careful reading of [the] statements is 'sheer drudgery'" (Willingham & Breland, 1982, p. 35).

Research on the Application Essay/Personal Statement

There has been limited scholarly interest in the college application essay and/or personal statement. The literature that exists on the application essay and personal statement focuses on the essay as a rhetorical text and is discussed within the context of the fields of rhetoric and composition and on graduate applicants to medical and scientific fields. Only very recently, with Vidali's (2007) research, has any research focused on the undergraduate essay and on the student's who write the essays.

The field of rhetoric and composition refers to the college application as the "homely discourse" (Miller, 1984), a genre of writing that is immensely important

within its relevant context but has little significance outside of that context. The situational context of the application essay and the homely discourse that defines the essay has been rarely studied and thus typify the “occluded genre” that the essay represents. Swales (1996) argues that the personal statement, recommendation letter, and job evaluations are occluded genres. Along these same lines, this researcher contends that the application essay is similarly an occluded genre.

Hatch, Hill, and Hayes (1993) studied readers’ impressions of writers’ personalities through essays submitted for college admission. They argue that when people read writers’ texts that they make inferences regarding the writer’s personalities. As is the focus of this dissertation, the authors suggest that a great deal of advice is available to writers on how to appeal to readers. The study conducted by Hatch et al., sought to identify the types of inferences that readers’ will make about writers as they read their writing. The result of their research has important implications for college admissions and the role of the application essay. The researchers found that reader’s perceptions of writer’s personalities: (1) were consistent across readers, (2) were, in some cases, influential towards the acceptance of the writer’s message (the applicants were “admitted”), and (3) could be revised by altering the message (the essay). Of particular relevance is that they found that admissions counselors were more likely to admit writers who projected positive personality characteristics than those who projected negative traits.

Paley (1996) conducted a study that established a think-aloud protocol for four high school students while they were writing college admissions essays. These

essays were evaluated, in the same think-aloud vein, by four college admissions officers. Paley's study explored the dynamics of writing college application essays. She suggests that "the college application essay is a test of *emotional literacy* or of the student's ability and willingness to comply with a rhetorical paradox: *relaxing* and writing a *confessionally revealing* essay to a largely unknown audience simply because [they] were told to do so" (p. 86). Paley contends that the applicant "is forced to take up a kind of shadow-boxing (p. 86) because it is impossible for the applicant to gauge how to appropriately answer the question, given the perceived audience, and remain true to themselves under the compulsory, restrictive nature of the college application essay. Similarly, Ede and Lunsford (1984) found that the invitation to college applicants to disclose aspects of their personal lives to an "invoked audience", an audience that is called up or imagined by the writers, leaves the applicants facing a rhetorical nightmare.

This study provides a useful approach to evaluating application essays. While, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine what applicant's *say* in their college application essays, Paley suggests that only some applicants will successfully navigate the paradox that precludes them from being self-revelatory and that others will devise a persona that is less *emotionally tested* by the admissions process. Paley contends that "what they write is the conflicted product of the imperatives to relax and open up, issued by authorities who can exclude them" (p. 103). This study will contribute to this research in that it will evaluate a large subset of college applications, potentially broadening the scope of her research.

Brown (2004) conducted a mixed method study to determine the characteristics that distinguished personal statements written by applicants to a graduate psychology program from the personal statements of those that were denied admission. His work concluded that “the modifier *personal* in ‘personal statement’ is something of a misnomer” (p. 245). His research found that successful applicants to graduate psychology programs constructed professional identities rather than focus on their personal lives. In essence, he found that applicants increased their chances “by the degree to which they manage to construct convincing professional identities committed to a clear research agenda.” Brown examined the writing of the personal statement by focusing on applicants who sought help at the university writing center where he was employed and by examining popular advice books aimed at assisting graduate and professional students with their applications to graduate school. He found the popular advice books generic and contradictory and concluded that they supported Paley’s notion of the “rhetorical paradox” previously mentioned.

Brown’s line of research further reported that there is an “inherent imbalance of knowledge” between writers and those who read their essays (2004, p. 243). He asserts that applicants are caught in Paley’s “rhetorical paradox” because they are trying to convey their unique selves to an audience that they do not know through a method of writing with which they are unfamiliar.

Vidali (2007) is the first to consider the undergraduate essay. Rather than conduct a descriptive genre analysis, as has been the methodology previously utilized in the examination of the personal statements, she conducts a case-study to examine

how the student's rhetorical motivations and identities are represented in their texts. Vidali argues for the development of a new theoretical framework in which to consider and understand the ways in which students rhetorically manage their identities. Her research focuses on students with disabilities and in particular on the student's comments regarding their rhetorical motivations for sharing details regarding their disability in their admissions essay. Her research stems from the lack of a discussion on the role of student disability in collegiate writing and from the literature, as described above, which narrowly focuses on the essay from an institutional perspective.

Vidali's employment of freak show theory is particularly compelling. She writes:

I employ freak-show theory to understand how disability comes to be seen as an object of rhetorical or textual curiosity, and how disability is used in expected, resourceful, and transgressive ways. [...] In using a freak-show lens to analyze the essays and experiences of three students with learning disabilities, I do not seek to associate them with the freak show's sometimes negative connotations. Instead, I use this unusual theoretical perspective to radically re-view what these essays achieve as texts; to highlight the intense pressure under which students produce texts; and to emphasize the rhetorical risks and rewards of disclosing disability. (p. 623)

Her study reveals that applicants, in this case those with learning disabilities, reveal their disabilities in an effort to stand out from other applicants. She asserts that the disability is their "angle". Following the essay analysis, Vidali interviewed her three "applicants." Her interviews with the students confirmed that while "their essays quite differently adopt and resist dominant rhetorical modes of disability, their

claimed rhetorical motivations sound strikingly alike” as they admitted that their revelation was part of the application strategy (p.630).

This study will continue Brown’s line of research and broaden Vidali’s research. Similar to Vidali (2007) this study will focus on the student perspective as represented by the undergraduate application essay. This is not a rhetorical analysis and as Vidali states:

I am not interested in re-creating the judgments these students have already suffered through, and also because the relentless focus on whether these essays are “successful” elides the personal, political, and rhetorical challenges involved in writing them. (p. 623)

Instead, this study will particularly consider the role of web based resources in helping applicants settle the “imbalance of knowledge” and examine how applicants settle the “paradox” to be “confessionally revealing”; what do they, in fact, *say*?. While there is not necessarily a professional life for undergraduates to construct (as graduate students are able to), they are burdened with the prospect of creating an identity that satisfies the unknown audience to which they are writing. Rather than a professional identity or “body revealing” identity, the aforementioned literature suggests that applicants are creating in the essay, the person they feel best “fits” the institution to which they are applying. This study will provide insight into these representations.

Summary

This chapter has summarized the literature relevant to an exploratory analysis of the college application essay and review of popular Web-based literature. It reports on four areas: college admissions, consumerism and internet usage by college

applicants, research on the use of personal qualities in admissions, research on the college application essay. Each of these areas supports the significance of the focus of this study by framing the study in the context of increasing standards in college admissions, a commercialization and professionalization of the admissions management process, the role of non-academic factors in the admissions process, and the role of the application essay.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter Three describes the research methodology used in this study, particularly the research design, collection methods, and analysis. This chapter also describes the appropriateness of the three-part methodology used in this research and the strengths and limitations associated with choosing qualitative research. Following the explanation of the design, this chapter discusses the protocol for data collection including the criteria for and description of the site and sample selection. The protocols used for data collection are outlined and their reliability and validity defined. Finally, the qualitative analysis process is described.

The purpose of this study is to develop a baseline theory regarding the guidance that college applicants might use as they write their essays and the topics on which they choose to write. Specifically, the research asks (1) What advice is available to students on the World Wide Web regarding the college application essays? (2) What are college applicants writing about in their essays? (3) What is the relationship between what students write about in their essays and the advice that is available to them?

Research Design

The exploratory research presented in this dissertation utilizes a modified constructivist research paradigm. Relying predominantly on the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Mertens, 1998), this research focuses on the construction of self as represented through the college application essay with the goal

of creating a lens through which to examine how students construct the selves they present to colleges and universities. Doing so requires examination of the sources to which students might turn for guidance and the resulting text that they present to admissions offices. This is best done through qualitative research, which Denzin and Lincoln (1994) describe as a multi-method, interpretivist approach to research in which researchers attempt to interpret and “describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals’ lives” (p. 2). Qualitative research brings together several forms of inquiry to explain the meaning of social phenomena, and qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). This research examines submitted college application essays in their natural setting—from the pen (or more likely, the computer) of the student to the admissions committee. Miles and Huberman (1994) argue that one of the strengths of qualitative research is the ability to “have a strong handle on what ‘real life’ is like” (p. 10), unimpeded by researcher interference. Given these reasons, a qualitative methodology is most appropriate for the examination of the college application essay.

As previously cited, little empirical research regarding the college application essay exists. The research that has been conducted has focused on the college application essay and personal statement from the institutional perspective (Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993; Paley, 1996). Brown (2004) initiated the scholarly discussion of this writing genre in his dissertation, which focuses on the personal statement as part of the graduate school application from the student’s perspective. This research

continues in that same qualitative vein but focuses on the freshman essay, allowing for the examination of what students reveal about themselves through personal anecdotes.

Methodology

To facilitate the exploration of the college application essay and the relevant advice presented in the popular media, this research combined three levels of analysis: meta-analysis (Noblit & Hare, 1988), qualitative content analysis (Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield, 2005), and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, D., 1987). This research examines a naturally occurring phenomenon in the lives of college bound high school seniors as they might experience it. Given the interpretivist nature of this study, the research is inherently inductive and, as is a strength of qualitative research, flexible (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interpretivist research focused on individual accounts, or essays, is not intended to be representative of the group at large. The studied essays are snapshots into individual life experiences; examining these snapshots is the first step toward gaining a greater understanding of the world of the college applicant directly from the applicant's viewpoint. The mixed-method qualitative approach is meant to contextualize those life experiences.

Data Collection

This research examines the college application essay in the context of the guidance that high school students might obtain to assist them with their writing. As cited previously, adolescents are voracious consumers of the Internet and Internet research (Wager, 2005; Pew, 2001; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). These

studies indicate that students turn to the Internet as their primary resource for guidance in multiple aspects of their lives. The sheer volume of Internet sources that are returned, more than 178,000 hits when searching Google.com for information on the college application essay, indicates that there is a robust market responding to a demand for college application information. These websites are largely aimed at a general college-bound audience, and therefore, provide general, and often repetitive advice. Given the volume of the Internet market, RQ1 asks what type of advice students find when they turn to the World Wide Web for guidance on the college application essay. In order to examine this information, initial data collection began with a meta-analysis of popular destinations on the World Wide Web. Unlike traditional meta-analysis which integrates the results of many studies (Noblit & Hare, 1998), this analysis allowed the researcher to become familiar with the available online content and to summarize key points and identify broad themes and trends, thereby determining the direction of the remainder of the research.

Because of the wealth of information available on the World Wide Web on the college application process, the research examines only the 10 most popular sites as they appeared in Google.com at the time of data collection. No further manipulation of the search was conducted in order to ensure the inclusion of sites likely to appear in a search that a college applicant might be expected to initiate. Pechacek (2007), in a survey of most popular gadgets and websites among teenagers, lists Google.com as the number one website, followed by Wikipedia, MySpace, and AOL instant messenger. The protocol outlined by this research respects the need to

conduct the search in a manner consistent with a general web search and not one designed specifically for empirical research (Wager, 2005; Pew, 2001; Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999).

The second phase of the research uses qualitative content analysis to examine the data that emerged from the meta-analysis. Qualitative content analysis is particularly appropriate for this phase of the study because it allows for exploratory analysis (Carney, 1973). While the meta-analysis provides broad themes to familiarize the researcher with the content of the popular media, the qualitative content analysis immerses the researcher in the most relevant data present on the World Wide Web.

World Wide Web Sample Selection

Qualitative research often requires purposive rather than random sampling (Kuzel, 1992; Morse, 1989). Specifically, phase two of the research conducts purposive sampling of the websites analyzed during phase one. This sampling was done in order to select the online resources that best represent the guidance literature students might turn to when seeking help with their college application essays. Such *judgmental sampling*, a technique that Fetterman (1998) describes as one that allows researchers to rely on their “judgment to select the most appropriate [...] unit based on the research question” (p. 32), is especially appropriate to this study. It allowed the researcher to mingle with (wallow in) the data and to experience them from a larger perspective before focusing on the data most relevant to the research.

Qualitative content analysis also allows for the recognition of contextual meaning through coding and theme development (Bryman, 2001). Themes and trends emerge from the data and the significance of the themes is determined by their repetitive occurrence (Burton, 2000). More substantive methods of coding follow in the third phase of the research. The themes generated by the qualitative content analysis determine the primary categories present on the World Wide Web sites and serve to guide the remaining essay analysis.

Institution Selection

The third and final phase of research, which constitutes the bulk of the project, examines a selection of college application essays. Answering research question 2, which asks *what are college applicants writing about in their application essays*, requires the accumulation of college application essays submitted to an admissions office as part of a normal admissions process.

As previously cited, college admissions is a competitive process with more than 1.8 million high school graduates sorting themselves among more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. system of postsecondary education (McDonough, 1994). The *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* (2006) reports that these students are increasingly applying to more institutions than their predecessors did a decade earlier. The competitive nature of college admissions directly affects the selection of the sample essays for this research. Colleges and universities have several agreed upon sources for sharing data: the Common Data Set (www.commondataset.org), National Association of College Admissions Counseling (www.nacacnet.org), and the

College Board (www.collegeboard.com). These sources provide a robust amount of primarily quantitative data for research purposes. It is uncommon, however, for colleges and universities to share data about their own applicants (B. Walker, personal communication, February, 2006). The selection of the site institution for this study is based on this fact along with the fact that this study can, in fact, be replicated by other college admissions offices.

Researcher As Participant

It is common in qualitative research for the researcher to be actively involved in the inquiry process (Patton, 1990). The researcher interacts with the data and serves as the interpreter. Consequently, the researcher's perspective and values become part of the data. In this study, the researcher did not participate in the creation of the data, but her interpretation of the data was guided by her experience in college admissions and years of reading application essays. It is important to disclose the relationship of the researcher to the profession of higher education admissions and enrollment management to recognize the transferability of the research to other institutions.

The researcher's interest in the college application essay stems from her work as an admissions officer at The University of Texas at Austin. During her years of counseling students, speaking at high schools, and working with parents, she found that the essay and what it should contain causes a great deal of angst for students. In ten years of reading applications, she often discussed the essay with colleagues at other institutions and turned to the research literature to see if others had studied the

subject. Beyond anecdotal information shared through state and local meetings, between colleagues, and between institutions, there appeared to be no empirical research on this vital part of the student application. The scarcity of literature on the subject of the essay in college admissions led to this study. The role of the researcher in the field made the data available.

The professional role of the researcher means that it was possible for her to obtain essay samples submitted to the site institution. The ability of any admissions office to replicate this study to answer this and similar questions for the benefit of their institutional enrollment management process and to better understand their applicants is a strength of this qualitative model.

University Profile

This study involves the study of application essays collected from The University of Texas at Austin, an appropriate option because of the researcher's affiliation with the institution and because of its unique selection characteristics.

The University of Texas was founded in 1883 and is located in Austin, Texas. UT is a public doctoral research institution with a budget of more than \$1.7 billion. The University also has a research budget of more than \$411 billion (UT Austin Enrollment and Essentials, 2007). The institution is moderately priced for students with a Texas resident budget of \$18,400 for tuition, fees, and on-campus housing; a value that earned it the *Princeton Review* listing of "Best Overall Bargains" based on cost and financial aid among the most academically outstanding colleges in the nation (UT Austin Rankings and Kudos, 2007). The University awards more than 12,000

degrees annually from more than 16 colleges and schools. UT Austin's degree programs are consistently ranked among the best in the country. The University also ranks sixth in the country for undergraduate degrees for minority groups (UT Austin Rankings and Kudos, 2007). UT Austin has an active alumni organization, with more than 450,000 living alumni around the world (UT Austin Enrollment and Essentials, 2007). Further, the city of Austin has been ranked as one of America's "best big cities to live", "most educated cities", and "safest large cities" (Rankings and Kudos, 2007).

These and other positive attributes generates considerable interest in being admitted to UT Austin. The University received more than 27,315 applications for the freshman entering class of 2006; 13,307 applicants (49%) were admitted and 7,417 enrolled (56%) for classes (Office of Information Management and Analysis, Common Data Set, 2006-2007). The 2006 freshman class was ethnically and geographically diverse. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the 2006 class was 54% White, 5.2% African American, .5% American Indian, 17.9% Asian American, 18.7% Hispanic, and 3.4% foreign (UT Austin Statistical Handbook, 2006). Geographically, students at the University represent every county in Texas, every state in the United States, and 127 foreign countries (UT Austin Statistical Handbook, 2006).

Given the profile of the University, it is not surprising that UT Austin interacts with more than 80,000 prospective students in a recruitment year (Orr, personal communication, June 21, 2007). The UT Office of Admissions responds to this interest with hundreds of high school visits per year in high schools around the state

of Texas and in areas outside the state of Texas. The Office of Admissions also has fully staffed satellite offices to serve the needs of prospective students in four major population areas: Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and the Rio Grande Valley (Office of Admissions, *Be A Longhorn*, 2007).

Selecting from among more than 27,000 applicants to admit a class requires some level of scrutiny. The University of Texas at Austin is unique among institutions of higher education in how the Office of Admissions selects its class. The Rigol (2003) asserts that an institution approaches the question of who should be admitted in one of two ways. An institution that “embraces an entitlement or open [admissions] philosophy” usually has a transparent admissions process through which admission is guaranteed if the applicant meets certain academic requirements (p. 5). Conversely, institutions that seek to “...reward exemplary experiences, to identify students who will most likely benefit from the particular college’s offerings, and to enroll students who will enhance the institutional community in some way” (p. 5) tend to be less transparent, more difficult to gauge, and with no guarantees. Rigol (2003) writes,

At the most simplistic level, and as often portrayed by the media, there appear to be two basic approaches to selection: formulas (by the numbers) and judgments (also called comprehensive, holistic, or “whole folder” review). The formulaic approach generally includes high school GPA or rank and possibly test scores; the judgmental approach usually implies a review of the applicant’s entire file, including the complete application, essays, recommendations, and other information. (p. 9)

Rigol (2003) also explains that many institutions do use both methods within a more complex process (p. 9). Such is the case at UT Austin. In 1997, the University’s

admissions policy expanded beyond a formulaic model that relied on test scores and class rank (Office of Admissions, Top 10% Report, 2007). Instead, the admissions process became one that includes multiple factors, including but not limited to the high school record, standardized test scores, essays, leadership, extracurricular activities, awards/honors, work experience, service to school or community, and special circumstances. Of note, beginning with the class of 2005, race and ethnicity was added to the list of special circumstances included in the review process (Office of Admissions, Top 10% Report, 2007). The Office of Admissions, further explains that

Test scores and class rank are still considered; but the ambition to tackle rigorous high school course work, the production of quality prose, the desire to make a difference in one's school, home, or community, evidence of employability (work), and some sense of having excelled in any number of areas are also considered. Moreover, admissions officials place these attributes in the context of the circumstances under which the student lived. Since 1997, the rational, thoughtful, and reasoned judgments of people complemented prediction formulas. The University of Texas implemented an admissions routine that analyzes the qualities each applicant would bring to an entering freshman class. (p. 2)

However, not only does the University complement a formulaic process with a holistic process, it is also subject to a transparent admissions policy under state law. In the spring of 1997, the Texas Legislature passed HB588, more commonly known as "the Top 10% law" (Office of Admissions, 2002). This legislation guarantees automatic admission to any state university for students graduating from Texas high schools in the top 10% of their class. The class of 1998 was the first to enter the University under this new law. According to Office of Admissions published reports (2007), top 10 percent students made up 42% of the entering class in 1996. That

number has steadily risen. In 2006, 71% of the first-year students who enrolled at UT Austin were automatically admitted.

The dichotomy of the UT Austin admissions process paints an interesting picture, one that is relevant to the selection of students from whom essays were gathered. On the one hand, 8,122 of those admitted were admitted automatically, by law, with no consideration of the variety of factors considered in the holistic admissions process that is otherwise employed (Office of Admissions, Top 10% Report, 2006, table 2a). Conversely, the remaining 30% of admitted students (5,185) were chosen from 19,193 remaining applicants, through a rigorous holistic admissions process. The selection rate for non-HB588 students was 27%.

The impact of top 10% admissions goes beyond general university admissions. The University is required to accept every HB588 qualifier who applies. In order to facilitate the movement of students through the admissions process, the University limits the enrollment of HB588 students to no more than 75% of the available spaces in its most competitive programs (Undergraduate Catalog, 2006-2007). According to Susan Kearns (personal communication, October 17, 2006), Associate Director of Admissions, these programs are Business, Nursing, Kinesiology, Communications, and Biomedical and Mechanical Engineering. Only a portion of HB588 eligible applicants are guaranteed admission to these majors. Kearns states that students outside of this eligibility parameter compete for spaces with all other non-HB588 applicants.

Essay Sample Selection

This final phase of the research uses elements of ethnographic content analysis (ECA). ECA allows for “an inductive, reflexive analysis... focusing on meaning and the emergence of ideas rather the frequency with which particular terms occur” (Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield, 2005, p. 1183). Contrary to other types of qualitative research, ECA allows for more narratives to be examined rather than just the frequency of themes. This phase of research focuses on the application essay and examines the essay in the context of themes that emerged from the analysis of the advice literature on the World Wide Web.

The sample essays used in this study are essays submitted by applicants who applied for admission to the University of Texas at Austin for the summer/fall class of 2006. The requested essays are responses to Topic A (ApplyTexas Application, 2006) which reads: “Describe a significant setback, challenge, or opportunity in your life and the impact that it has had on you” (www.applytexas.org, 2006). All evaluated essays are samples from the 19,193 applicants who were not admitted on the basis of HB588 and, to ensure a diverse sampling of applicant essay responses, come from a stratified random sample based on ethnicity. In summary, the data requested of the Office of Admissions includes 150 essays, selected from non-HB588 eligible applicants stratified to include 20% African American, 20% Hispanic, 20% Asian American, 5% American Indian, and 40% White. In addition to the essays themselves, the researcher was given corresponding raw applicant data with which to develop descriptive statistics.

The researcher received the essays as electronic Word documents stripped of personal identifiers and the raw applicant data as an electronic Excel file, also stripped of personally identifiable information. To each essay and corresponding file, the researcher assigned pseudonyms chosen from the 2006 most popular names from *ThinkBabyName.com* and assigned to the appropriate genders.

Data Analysis and Coding

Data analysis began with meta-analysis of the websites returned from a search on the string “writing the college application essay.” The data gathered from the careful reading of these websites guided code development for the qualitative content analysis of the eight most popular websites. Coding of the data began with the qualitative content analysis of the websites. The first coding was conducted by hand. Following this initial read, the text of the websites was uploaded in MaxQDA 2007, a qualitative data analysis software package, for a second review following a modified version of the analysis scheme outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). The electronic analysis of the websites consisted of 1) affixing short codes to the web text on MaxQDA; 2) noting reflections and other thoughts via memos (akin to yellow stick-it notes) on the texts; 3) running reports of the codes across the ten cases to identify similar phrases, patterns, repetitions, and themes; 4) exploring the generalizations among the emergent themes and patterns; and 5) analyzing the patterns from the generalizations. At this juncture, the researcher adopted the coding scheme suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and developed a) open codes, b) axial codes, and c) selective codes. Open codes were large, general themes drawn

from the advice literature from the World Wide Web. The open codes identified, presented in chapter four, were: (a) angst, (b) how to write, (c) for whom is the applicant writing, and (d) what to write. These open codes guided the qualitative content analysis of the website from which smaller, more focused, themes emerged. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this as axial coding. For the purposes of this research, axial codes were developed in response to open code (d) *what to write?* The axial codes that emerged from this phase of the research were (a) events, (b) passions, (c) places, (d) people, and (e) religion applied to and analyzed in the final stage of the research: the ethnographic content analysis of the essays.

Phase three of this study, the ethnographic content analysis of the college application essays, reapplied Strauss and Corbin's (1998) method using the codes developed from the advice literature. The larger axial codes from the advice literature: (a) events, (b) passions, (c) places, (d) people, and (e) religion served as open codes for the examination of the sample essays. This process allowed for the development of axial and selective codes specifically in response to the overarching question of *what to write?* Thus in phase three, the open codes of (a) events, (b) passions, (c) places, (d) people, and (e) religion were further broken down into more specific axial codes that broadened the experiences represented by the open codes: (a) academic opportunities, (b) careers/jobs, (c) travel (d) religion, (e) moving, (f) activities, (g) family, (h) adversity, (i) illness and death. The final, selective coding identified traits that applicants demonstrated through their essays, representing why they were a good candidate for admission. These selective codes represented the

individual experiences presented in the applicant's essays. The selective codes identified were: (a) perseverance, (b) willingness to take risks, (c) educational and personal growth, (d) maturity, (e) leadership and service.

Triangulation of the Data

As an exploratory study, the researcher used three interpretive analyses to develop theory based on codes and themes that emerged from the websites and college application essays. The meta-analysis allowed the researcher to delve into the concept of the college application essay and to understand what it represents. The results of this analysis guided the development of codes and themes for examination of the second phase of the research, the qualitative content analysis of the ten most popular websites. In turn, the continued emergence of the themes presented from the meta-analysis validated the codes that were then used for the qualitative content analysis. The third source of data, the college application essay, validated and continued to respond to the themes that emerged in each phase of the research. This pattern supports the ability of the observations and interpretations to be repeated (Stake, 2000). This cross-checking of themes and codes across multiple sets of data satisfies Denzin's (1978) requirements for triangulation. The three data sources—the World Wide Web at large, a more focused analysis of the ten most popular websites, and analysis of authentic college application essays—provided the opportunity to create the redundancy necessary to ensure triangulation. Researcher bias was avoided because, as Strauss (1987), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Corbin and Strauss (1998)

suggest, the themes appeared in sufficient numbers for them to be included in the final analysis.

Limitations

Using only a fraction of the application essays submitted to a large public institution might appear to be a reason to limit the applicability of the theory to college applicants in general. However, while the individual stories expressed in the college application essays cannot be extrapolated to the larger population, the model described in this study can be used at the institutional level to begin conversations regarding the merits of the essay in the enrollment management process and in further understanding the class of students being admitted to particular universities. In this case, this exploratory protocol was designed to create a theory that admissions officers can use to enhance empirical information.

The researcher took measures to limit the potential interference of the selectivity of the site institution by controlling for competitive students who would presumably be submitting application essays to enter into the competition for a relative few number of spaces.

Summary

In summary, this chapter presented the research design, collection procedures, and data analysis process used to examine and understand the kind of advice available on the World Wide Web for college applicants writing their application essays and what applicants are saying in those essays. This chapter provided background information on the study, a description of the methodological analyses used, sample

and site selection protocols, site profile information, and validity information. The role of the researcher in the study was also detailed.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE ADVICE LITERATURE

Chapter Four reports the findings of the website analysis as it relates to the college application essay, describes the evaluated websites and reports the findings related to research question one.

In contrast to the limited consideration of the college application essay outside of the college admissions process, the Internet contains thousands of sources regarding the writing of the college application essay. Independent private counselors sell their services to students for a fee ranging from \$250 for an essay writing evaluation (Penn Group, 2007) to two years of college counseling consulting for upwards of \$40,000 (Hernandez, 2007). Online chats also allow students and parents to ask questions of admission essay experts (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A64845-2004Oct1.html>).

A Google search on the string “writing the college application essay” returned tens of thousands of sources of written advice regarding the essay. This research focuses on the ten most popular websites identified during a typical Google search by students seeking online assistance; two sites were eliminated for redundancy and irrelevance. Results from analysis of the eight remaining sites follow.

The Websites

The following section describes the websites evaluated in this analysis. The sites offer various services to students ranging from non-profit based college search assistance to service-for-a-fee consulting and editing services. This section reflects the diversity of advice available on the web to students while simultaneously

reflecting the extent to which for-profit services are offered and consumed in the college admissions process.

Spark Notes

SparkNotes (2006) and SparkNotes.com are extensions of a business enterprise that assists students through study guides and aids, which are available as both published study aids sold through bookstores and as hundreds of free online and downloadable study guides. Their online services include study aids covering the high school curriculum, test preparation, fast facts on hundreds of topics, and the college search. SparkNotes describes itself as a company “created by Harvard students for students everywhere” with writers who are superior students or recent graduates in the field that they cover.

SparkCollege (www.college.sparknotes.com), a sub-section of the SparkNotes site, is the reference point for students in the college admissions process. The site includes sections relating to the college search, the admissions process, financial aid, college life, and student message boards. Consistent with SparkNotes publishing reputation, SparkCollege attempts to establish credibility with college applicants by providing a robust site for those engaged in the college admissions search. Students can evaluate colleges and universities in the *find a college* section; participate in surveys that help to link students to colleges that fit their interests, wants, and personalities; take student created video tours of the nation’s fifty most popular schools; and read articles written by students on the first-year experience. Of particular interest to this research is the SparkCollege message board. The message

board, hosted on a variety of college topics, includes a board dedicated to the application essay. This board is covered in more detail later in this chapter.

Cambridge Essay Service

The Cambridge Essay Service (CES) (2007) is described as an admissions counseling firm for applicants to elite graduate business schools. The website claims to “know HBS [Harvard Business School], Stanford and Wharton (and Columbia, Kellogg, MIT, and Chicago too” (www.hbsguru.com). The CES website displays an essay rater through which graduate applicants can receive a free grading of their application essay, services that sell for \$300 for interview preparation to \$2,200 for a full service including essay outlining, editing, and multiple revisions for each school to which the applicant is applying.

Essay Edge

EssayEdge (2006) declares itself the “net’s best and biggest editing resource”. EssayEdge offers essay and editing services to students applying to college, graduate schools, professional schools, and private high schools. According to its website, the professionals at EssayEdge graduated from the nation’s most selective institutions and provide services to millions of users and tens of thousands of customers. The EssayEdge website offers a multitude of resources, including, but not limited to *Admissions Essays 101*, an admissions center, resume writing assistance, and SAT/ACT preparatory services.

EssayEdge describes the college application process as a “job, [one in which] you must distinguish yourself from hundreds or even thousands of applicants with

similar test grades, activities, and SAT scores.” They attempt to assuage the fears of college applicants by telling them that “[they] have the benefit of control” and that EssayEdge offers them the opportunity to edit their essays to perfection while maintaining their unique voice. The site includes hundreds of testimonials from students who have benefited from their services. EssayEdge charges fees ranging from \$84.95 for a scholarship essay, recommendation letter, and proofreading services to \$104.95 for premium editing services, which guarantees that Harvard-educated editors will edit and critique the essay. Their most comprehensive service, Platinum service, offered for \$305-1005 based on word count, is described as a seven-stage admissions essay consulting service that includes a personal interview and telephone interaction.

College Board

The College Board is a not-for-profit membership organization “whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity” (College Board, 2007). Best known for its SAT and PSAT/NMSQT programs, Collegeboard.com also offers a student centered website that includes information on College Board tests, planning for college, finding the right college, and applying to and paying for college. The site also offers articles and guidance about the college application process, particularly on the college application essay. The articles and guides shown on the website are excerpts from College Board publications including *The College Application Essay* by author and educator, Sarah Myers McGinty (2004).

Associated Colleges of the Midwest Consortium

ACM.com, the website for the Associated Colleges of the Midwest consortium, offers resources for faculty and staff at ACM colleges, study abroad information, and resources for high school students and counselors. Within the high school and counselor section, ACM.com offers a pre-college planner and various college selection process guides including some addressing campus visits, writing the college application essay, participating in a college fair, and getting information about financial aid.

Peterson's: The Best College Admissions Essays

The Peterson's website provides information regarding their books for help on the GRE, GMAT, and LSAT. Further, Peterson's offers application essay writing guides and test prep books. The subsequent page in the link, www.west.net/~stewart.htm/best.htm allows students to read portions of the *Best College Admissions Essays* book and in-depth interviews with admissions officials at Ivy league and other elite institutions; review *50 Awesome Admissions Essays* for inspiration and brainstorming; read *Oodles of Ideas* for distinctive, attention-grabbing admissions essays; and look over *Checklist of Do's and Don'ts for Theme and Content*. Ironically, in the same space in which Peterson's, an educational resource since 1966, advises students about voice, power statements, and being honest in their writing; the website which houses its primary essay writing publication points students in the direction of dishonesty and application fraud. Along the footer banner, in what appears to be a revolving advertisement space, of the

www.west.net/~stewart.htm/best.htm site, “Ads by Google” displays essay writing services that are not designed to offer advice to students regarding the writing process, but rather, provide essays for a fee to students willing to purchase them. Examples of websites listed on the banner include www.writing-essay.biz, which compiles a list of sites from which students can purchase essays by the page. The website features www.essayrelief.com, custom writing for \$9.95 per page; www.superiorpapers.com, custom essays that are 100% “plagiarism free” and cost from \$10.95 per page if needed in more than seven days to \$29.95 per page if needed within six hours; and www.masterpapers.com, offering custom essays for \$14 per page.

Accepted

Accepted (2006) offers editing services to students applying to college, graduate, and professional schools. The editors at Accepted.com assist with essays, personal statements, letters of recommendation, statements of purpose, resumes, and any other written credential required by admissions offices. Accepted offers services ranging from \$220.00 (\$285.00 for rush service) for a critique and polish of an already written essay, to a full college essay consulting and editing package for \$720 (\$935 for rush service), or the most comprehensive option, a block of 10 hours for \$1,800 (\$2,340 for the rush service) which can be used for consulting, editing, or interview preparation. The essay consulting and editing package is described as one that “can help [students] produce a compelling, thoughtful essay and save gobs of churn time. [...] Throughout the process, your editor will eliminate these evils while

pushing you to differentiate yourself from your competition and ensuring that your personal statement tells your story in your own voice”

(Accepted, 2006).

The Penn Group

The Penn Group (2007) describes itself as the largest college resource on the Internet. The site touts their business success in placing 87% of early decision applicants into their first choice school. Resources on the site include a college guide, articles regarding the application process, the college experience, the high school to college transition, a college admissions chances calculator, sample essays, personal statements, and student blogs. The Penn Group offers a variety of application services. They assert that the Comprehensive Admissions Essay Assistance service, offered for \$299 per essay, “has achieved ideal results for students in search of the perfect admissions essay.” In this four-to-seven-day service, The Penn Group offers students a consulting portfolio that includes brainstorming over the telephone, outline development, draft sketching, and full essay completion. They describe this service as their most popular feature.

Advice on the College Application Essay

The previous pages report on an initial review of the websites for descriptive information about the sites and the services they provide. Additional review of the sites identified themes regarding the type of advice they provide about writing college essays. Keeping in mind what the literature reports regarding what students face when preparing for and in writing their essays, the researcher chose to identify as open

codes those elements that have been reported upon in the literature. The advice literature identifies four issues that students encounter when preparing essays and personal statements: (a) angst, (b) how to write, (c) for whom the student is writing, and (d) what to write. These codes serve as the open codes for the development of axial and selective codes that are used later in this study.

Angst: Creation and Resolution

It is impossible to ignore the manner in which the websites promote themselves to students. Their marketing first creates anxiety in the student and then assuages those fears by way of the services they offer. Essay Edge opens its *College Application Essay Services* section with the following:

What is your greatest achievement? Who has influenced you the most? Write page 217 of your 300-page autobiography. This year, five hundred thousand college applicants will write five hundred thousand different answers to questions like these. Half will be rejected by their first choice school, while only a select eleven percent will gain admission to the nation's top colleges. With acceptance at all-time lows, setting yourself apart requires more than just blockbuster SAT scores and impeccable transcripts – it requires the perfect application essay [...] You must distinguish yourself from hundreds or even thousands of applicants with similar grades, activities, and SAT scores. To achieve this, your essay must not only demonstrate your grasp of grammar and ability to write lucid, structured prose, but also paint a vivid picture of your personality and character, one that *compels* a busy admissions officer to accept you [emphasis original to quote]". (Essay Edge, 2006)

This statement tells students that they must compete with tools that are beyond their current abilities. It suggests that regardless of how strong their test scores are or how much they have achieved, the essay, and only the perfect essay, will make or break the student's application. Beyond the need for perfection, the statement tells students that the essay also has to be "compelling" enough to catch the attention of "a

busy admissions officer,” suggesting that without this perfectly compelling piece of writing, the essay may result in a denial.

Not surprisingly, EssayEdge goes on to offer its solution to the student’s quandary:

EssayEdge will give you an advantage in the ultra-competitive college application process by editing your admissions essays to perfection, while at the same time maintaining your unique voice. We’ve helped tens of thousands of students beat out high school valedictorians for admission to Ivy League schools. We’ve also helped students with below average grades and low class ranks gain entrance to prestigious universities like Berkeley. (www.essayedge.com/college/editing)

In addition to the services available for students to purchase, Essay Edge offers an article on *Tips on Writing the Admissions Essay*. Similar to the services page, the *Tips* article has the potential to invoke anxiety in students with the following statement “it may be only 500 words, but the admissions essay portion of a college application can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection” (EssayEdge, 2006). As the article suggests ways to come up with an appropriate topic, it also encourages students to select a topic of their choice. In doing so, it attempts to settle Brown’s “inherent balance of knowledge” (p. 243) by telling students that the personal essay gives them a chance to stand out from all the similar test scores and activities. They share with students that the topic is theirs to choose, and can be about anything, as long as it “captures the reader’s attention and shows that you are exceptional” (EssayEdge, 2006, p. 1). However, while giving the student freedom to choose, EssayEdge warns the student to create “mystery or intrigue” because “most admissions officers spend at most 2 minutes reading your essay”.

Similarly, The Cambridge Essay Service (CES) (2007) website has the potential to provoke student's anxieties. The first page of the CES website posts a picture of an essay with a large red "F" scrawled across the front of it. The visual represents a service that provides a free appraisal of a Harvard Business School application essay. Another section, Testimonials, lists page after page of students hailing their success after using CES and recommending the service to students seriously interested in improving their chances at admission. CES's article *Seven Great and Unexpected Tips about College Entrance Essays* provides sound advice to essay writers regarding the essay writing process. They address one of the primary concerns expressed by essay writers when they tell the writers to "relax." McGinty (2002) writes that students respond with a cynical "I've never done anything like this before!" to such advice. CES attempts to rectify this "test of emotional literacy" (Paley, 1996) by providing the following advice to students:

The application people love to tell you to [just relax and be yourself] but the truth is that you have about as much chance of relaxing and being yourself while writing a college application essay as any untrained person would painting a mural or acting in a movie. Painting and acting are things that anyone can "sort of" do but which require practice and training to do well. So is writing. You have to earn relaxation. You'll relax when you start to feel secure. That usually means you have written several drafts (www.hbsguru.com/College.html#2).

CES further contradicts McGinty's advice to "relax and be yourself" by reminding students that they have several "selves" and that the challenge is making the decision regarding which self they want the admissions committee to see. CES (2007) recommends "you should be a considered and well executed version of one of your better selves...The self which is best able to get the job done--the self which can

present you as unique and passionate about something important”. According to Paley (1996), this selection of the “best self” reflects the creation of a persona that is less emotionally tested by the admissions process. She argues that, for some students, the product of the struggle to relax and open up while simultaneously being self-revelatory results in a watered down version of the self.

SparkNotes.com demonstrates the best example of angst in the admissions process, not by way of professional advice but in the message boards that serve as sounding boards for students in the midst of the essay writing process. Students on the *Application Essays Message Board* within SparkNotes bemoan the essay and reveal several examples of student angst as they struggle through the process. (Grammar and emphasis is original to text in all examples shown.)

“I’m drowning,” writes Jordan (2007) as he struggles to find information regarding the application essay on his chosen university’s website. “Lost and Confused,” writes TJ (2007) as he/she searches for help selecting a topic. Danielle (2006) writes, “can anyone read over my essay and give me suggestions? it sucks and im freaking out and ten seconds away from bursting into tears.” Rita (2007) exclaims, “I would owe my life to someone who could help me edit my college essay. PLEASEEEEEEEEEEE.”

These students turn to each other to try to settle Brown’s (2004) “imbalance of knowledge” (p. 243). What they can’t glean from the admissions officers, view books, or college websites they ask of each other. Surprisingly, while the competition

for space at an individual institution may be cutthroat, students don't hesitate to share ideas with perfect strangers on blogs and message boards.

How to Write the College Application Essay

Rhetorical literature suggests that the college application essay is a genre of writing for which most students are unprepared (McGinty, 2002; Paley, 1996).

McGinty argues that students are comfortable writing about the lives of literary and historical figures but struggle when asked to turn that critical eye upon themselves.

They are prepared to analyze others but are unprepared to do the same with their own lives. As the larger *how to write* code was explored, three axial codes were identified: (a) power statements, (b) voice, and (c) clichés.

Opening Power Statement. The SparkNotes message board is not short on message threads centered on the creation of the college application essay.

GratedCheese (Advice, 2006) provides advice on how to write a strong paper:

Remember that there are multiple ways to begin [sic] a paper. If the story doesn't work, maybe a relevant quote will introduce your topic well and grab the attention of your audience. You could also start with a startling fact or statistic...Start with an engaging question...State a strong position on a controversial topic...All of these are good openers. (GratedCheese, Advice, 2006)

The importance of a strong opening "power statement" resonates throughout the advice literature. In another post, GratedCheese reiterates the point of a strong opening statement in order to grab and keep the reader's attention.

Sometimes, a personal anecdote is a great attention getter. If there is a story that you can tell briefly at the beginning of your paper, and if it is a story that will grab the attention of the admissions officer reading your paper, and it is relevant to the rest of your work, then go ahead and lead with that story. If you can't find one to fit, then don't worry about it. The important thing about the

beginning of your admissions essay is that it is interesting. You want the person reading it to WANT to read the rest of your paper. (GratedCheese, Opening, 2006)

The Penn group (2007) stops short of telling students to lie on their essay, but in an effort to secure a great opening sentence, they do suggest to students “that you better have a first line that jumps off the page.”

Voice. As the advice literature makes suggestions to students regarding the appropriateness of a realistic powerful opening statement, it similarly urges students to maintain their “voice” throughout the writing process. The *Tips for Writing the College Application Essay* article produced by The Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM) tells readers that

The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college. In the essay, you can speak your own voice and personalize your application. Here’s your opportunity to show something about you that doesn’t really come across elsewhere in your application. So, step back and be reflective. Think about who you are as an individual. How do you see the world? What do you care about deeply? What experiences and people have been important in shaping you as a person? What are your aspirations in life? It is in such reflection that you find your own, unique voice. That’s the voice that will help you write an interesting essay that only you could have written. (ACM, 2007)

ACM makes the point that the college application is full of information about the student. But only the essay gives the student an opportunity to speak for himself or herself. Grades, class rank, letters of recommendation, test scores, etc. speak volumes about the student, but all from the perspective of other people. The application essay is the student’s chance to say what they want to say and how they want to say it, all as a reflection of who they are and why the college or university should want them on their campus.

A significant amount of time is spent helping students figure out who they are, or at least helping them define what “who you are” means. Peterson’s (2007) *Best College Application Essays Do’s and Don’ts* tells students, “Do be interesting: but more important, be yourself. Convey your true and genuine thoughts and feelings; don’t try to portray yourself as someone with interests, values, and opinions that aren’t really yours” (sect 5). In the same vein as “being yourself” also comes advice to be your age. Peterson’s writes

Don’t try to sell yourself or prove anything by convincing the reader how great you are, how smart you are, or how accomplished you are. Your definitive theories and brilliant solutions to global problems will not impress the reader. Admit it: you have many more questions than answers at this point in your life. (www.west.net/~stewart/beste.htm, sect 11)

EssayEdge (2006) is similar to other sites as it suggests to students that it’s necessary to think of the essay as the face of the application. EssayEdge takes, perhaps, a bolder approach by advising students that the essay should cater to the emotions of admissions officers:

An application with a poorly written essay does not give admissions officers the chance to care about you. Use simple psychology: make them feel that they know you and it will be harder for them to reject you. Make them know you AND LIKE YOU, and they might accept you despite your weakness in other areas [emphasis original to quote]. (www.englishclub.com/writing/college-application-essays/index.htm, p. 4)

English Club suggests that the “you” that students are imploring the admissions officer to like is best demonstrated through the creation and maintenance of the student’s own voice or rather for students to simply “be themselves, [...] you must develop your own voice and tell YOUR story, not the story you think the reader wants to hear” (p. 5).

Clichés. Advice regarding the use and avoidance of clichés is rampant in the advice literature. Specifically, the advice centers on the need for a student to “show don’t tell” (EssayEdge, 2006). This mantra calls for the student to provide details and imagery rather than “generic statements and platitudes” (Accepted, 2006).

SparkNotes.com explains that applicants’ essays must appeal to the emotions of admissions officers, while simultaneously telling their story. However, while doing so, students need to “avoid the cliché trap.” Writes EssayEdge:

Entertain them with vivid, clear writing and original ideas, and you’ll win their hearts. Bore them with yet another essay about how an Outward Bound trip allowed your inner strength to blossom, and in their minds you’ll merge with all the other students who wrote about that topic. What’s worse, if another applicant writes a Pulitzer Prize-worthy essay about Outward Bound, yours may pale in comparison.

Admissions officers have read thousands of essays about the exhilaration of scoring the winning touchdown, lessons learned from volunteering in impoverished areas, and the new perspectives gained while traveling abroad. If you want to write about one of these topics, leave in a little texture: Admit that things still aren’t perfect. If your story is about flawlessly perfect behavior or sober lessons learned, the admissions office will let out a collective yawn. Being flawed but lovable is more interesting than being a charitable cheerleader with perfect grades. ([Sparknotes](#), 2006)

The writers of SparkNotes.com suggest that the topics that students choose will not be particularly unique. As a result, the details should provide the uniqueness that students seek when writing their essays. EssayEdge concludes that “clichés make your writing appear lazy, your ideas ordinary, and your experiences typical” (EssayEdge, 2006). They suggest that students eradicate the following from their writing:

I always learn from my mistakes; I know my dreams will come true; I can make a difference; ___ is my passion; I no longer take my loved ones for

granted; These lessons are useful both on and off the field (or other sporting arena); I realized the value of hard work and perseverance; ___ was the greatest lesson of all; I know what it is to triumph over adversity; ___ opened my eyes to a whole new world. (EssayEdge, 2006)

To Whom Is the Applicant Writing?

Concern and turmoil about using powerful opening statements, grabbing the reader's attention, finding a unique voice, and applying the writing process all suggest what Brown (2004) contends is an "imbalance of knowledge" (p. 234). In short, students "must write in an unfamiliar genre for an audience they do not know nor will likely ever meet" (p. 234). The advice literature addresses this imbalance as it tries to make students aware of whom they are writing for and, ultimately, for whom they are *not* writing.

Your essay is not graded by Olympic judges. [...] The essays are not read by tyrants with red pencils, they are read by harassed admissions officers who are looking for an impression. (www.world.std.com/~edit/tips1.htm)

Similarly, EssayEdge tries to point out to students that essay readers are more like them than they might realize. EssayEdge takes questionable liberties in explaining the methods for reading essays in admissions offices.

Contrary to popular belief, all admissions officers are not old men with bowties and English accents. In fact, the first people to read your application are often people not much older than yourself. At most colleges and universities, recent graduates of the college serve as assistants, conducting the first read on all of the essays. If they like your essay, they will pass it on to the associate directors who only read what the assistants pass along. Then the associate directors choose which essays to pass along to the director, who makes the final decision. So essentially, the mysterious group that holds your future in its hands is composed of a few recent grads of the college, a couple of associate directors, and a director who must evaluate thousands of applications in a month or two. The moral of the story: Don't write your essay for an old British guy. Be yourself. Write in a relaxed tone. (EssayEdge, 2006, p. 4)

“Not quite,” responds S. Kearns, Associate Director, of the University of Texas at Austin (2007), who explained that UT Austin trains all of its readers to give a final decision regarding the essay. She also explains that many other schools use two readers for essays, and if there is disagreement, a third, perhaps an associate director, senior reader, or director, serves as the tie breaker. “They’re right, we’re not all old men with bowties and English accents, but they’ve oversimplified the process, so much so that it might make students too relaxed in their writing. I’m not their best friend, I’m their admissions officer” (S. Kearns, personal communication, October 17, 2007.)

SparkNotes represents the admissions community more fairly to students portraying them as normal people trying to admit the best class for their institution.

The truth is the admissions officers are just people. The difference between them and everybody else is that they are trying to create the best freshman class possible—strong students who are likely to graduate and who will have a positive and fruitful experience at their school. They are looking for young people who will enrich the dynamics of campus life with their thoughts, passions, and personalities. They don’t expect perfection. They are, after all, looking to fill their class with human beings. [...] All admissions officers are not the same. Here are some potential characteristics: some are recent graduates, others have been in the profession for thirty years; some are a laugh-a-minute, while others are humorless; some are sticklers for structure, while others are suckers for creativity. You get the idea. Attempting to target a particular reader is a waste of time. (SparkNotes, 2006, p. 7)

This type of advice mirrors other recommendations made by the websites in which students are advised to be themselves (EssayEdge, SparkNotes, [College Board](#), Accepted). Attempting to write to a particular audience, particularly one that they really do not know is a futile exercise, one likely to result in cliché and loftiness. On

the other hand, students who do not try to write *to* their audience are more likely to maintain their voice, make more powerful statements, and stand out from the crowd.

At this point, students are armed with a collection of advice on dealing with the anxiety associated with the essay, about how to approach writing the essay, and about the audience for whom they are writing the essay. The next task, the point of it all, centers on the writing of the essay itself. When students sit down to write, they are not likely to ask themselves about the "voice" that they will use, or to concern themselves with the color bowtie that the reader might be wearing. Instead, they are likely to pull their hair out or to stare blankly at the screen wondering...

What to Write: Choosing the Essay Topic

The SparkNotes message board (<http://mb.sparknotes.com/mb.epl?b=2421>) shows multiple examples of the anxiety students fear when confronted with actually beginning to write the essay. Romin cries, "HELP!!! I need a great topic for an application essay," and whimpers, "help...anything." Jamae implores, "how do you choose?" Is "Harry Potter" ok?, asks Aphis about an appropriate topic for her essay. Finally, Tearnly summarizes the confusion students feel when trying to address essay prompts:

So, my essay topic for almost all my colleges is generally the same. I need to write about a significant person who has influenced me and/or impacted my life. What, though, if I do not have one single person who has done so? Any ideas on what to do? Would it be corny to write about my best friend or my teacher? (Tearnly, 2007)

The Prompts

What is it that drives some of them to beg for help from complete strangers on message boards or to pay hundreds to thousands of dollars to companies who specialize in the college application essay? McGinty (2004) believes that the frustration comes about because the essay asks students to reveal themselves in unfamiliar ways. Specifically, it reveals student's choice. She writes that big and small choices alike, define who a person is. Moreover, she explains, colleges and universities gain insight into the applicant by observing the process of choosing. The essay provides a window into that process. McGinty (2004) asserts that "how to write the essay will reveal your writing abilities. What you write about will reveal you" (p. 65). McGinty writes that the prompts, in order to elicit these revealing accounts from students, may be direct and leave the choice to the student regarding what they write about or may be indirect and ask students to write about tangential experience related to the admissions process. Examples of prompts from a variety of small, private, and selective institutions to large state colleges and universities follow:

Columbia University: Write an essay which conveys to the reader a sense of who you are.

James Madison University: Complete a one-page personal statement. You can use the personal statement to highlight special interests, talents, goals, or unique experiences.

Bentley College: Describe an achievement, significant experience, or challenge that you feel has been important in strengthening your personal values.

University of Pennsylvania: Recall an occasion when you took a risk that you now know was the right thing to do.

Common Application: Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

Gettysburg College: Describe a situation in which you have made a difference in your school or community and what you learned from that experience.

Bryn Mawr College: What do you think you would gain from the education experience at Bryn Mawr and what would you contribute to the community?

Georgetown University: Briefly discuss a current global issue, indicating why you consider it important and what you suggest should be done to deal with it.

Common Application: Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

University of Pennsylvania: You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.

Lehigh University: Step out your front door and tell us what you would have to change about what you see. (McGinty, 2001, p. 69)

These prompts illustrate the variety of topics from which students might have to choose when applying to colleges and universities. Some prompts require students to speak about their own experiences; others require students to think about the world around them and how they relate to it. The challenge for the applicant is selecting the topic.

College Board.com tells students that the topic they choose matters because it reveals their preferences, values, and thought processes. The site also reveals that the topic does not have to be earth shattering; indeed topics are not likely to vary much from student to student. The more unique and memorable essays, however, are just more focused. Because the lives of seventeen-year-olds are, essays about a student's family, sports teams, divorce, and summer mission trips are common. The key to a unique essay is to focus on a specific incident: "a single Christmas eve church

service, a meal of boiled tongue in Grenoble, or dipping ice cream on a summer job” (www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay~skills/109.html, para. 6).

SparkNotes writes that essay prompts are often daunting to students and leave them perplexed. They recommend that students write about something that is special to them. However, selecting that special or personal topic is no less daunting. To help students with this task, EssayEdge offers an exercise designed to help students select a topic: a series of Do’s and Don’ts written to help students narrow down the topics that they are considering. Students are instructed to ask themselves the following questions. If they find themselves answering “no” more frequently than “yes,” they should drop the topic and move on to another option:

Have I selected a topic that describes something personally important to my life?

Am I avoiding a gimmicky topic?

Does my topic stay away from information listed elsewhere on my application?

Will I be able to offer vivid supporting paragraphs to my essay topic?

Can I fully answer the question asked of me?

Will my topic keep the reader’s interest from the first word?

Is my topic unique?

Am I being myself?

Does my topic avoid hot-button issues that may offend the reader?

Is my essay honest?

Will an admissions officer remember my topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays?

If you are writing about something unfortunate that has happened to you, ask: Am I able to highlight my impressive qualities under difficult circumstances without sounding pathetic?

Does my essay fit well with the rest of my application?

Does my topic avoid mentioning my weaknesses?
(www.englishclub.com/writing/college-application-essays/index.htm, sect. 3)

These questions reiterate points that have already been raised in the course of this analysis. They remind students of the importance of personalization, honesty, self-revelation, storytelling, uniqueness, appropriateness, and the ability to be straightforward and focused.

The primary question of this research remains: what do students write about when presented with all of these options and questions? The websites analyzed for this research indicate five primary areas that students might explore in order to reveal themselves (Accepted; EssayEdge, 2006): (a) events, (b) passions, (c) people, (d) places, and (e) religion. These areas serve as the axial codes through which the application essay samples are analyzed in Chapter Five.

Accepted, ACM, and Cambridge Essay Service most thoroughly discuss the selection of the essay topic and expand on these five topic areas. They suggest that writing the college application essay is about discovering what the applicant has to say. Moreover, they explain that exploring these five areas helps applicants discover what has made them who they are and allows them an opportunity to relay that observation to the admissions committee.

Events

The advice literature suggests that the events in a student's life, regardless of their scale and size, shape the student's life. Consequently, these events form the basis of a story that students can share with admissions offices. However, the literature warns that the shared story must be vivid and imaginative. "Show, don't tell" is a popular mantra (Accepted, College Board) reminding students to prove their points rather than just state their point. Accepted.com reminds students that "your experiences don't have to be massively life-altering (not all of us have huge turning points in our lives), but can be one of the many little events in our lives that makes us see ourselves and our world a bit differently" (Accepted, p. 4).

Passions

Similarly, the advice literature recommends that students show who they are: what makes them tick, what concerns them, how they spend their free time. Accepted.com suggests that topics reflecting a passion are particularly powerful if they resulted in action. A subject, even as seemingly inconsequential as a childhood Lego hobby, can result in a successful essay if used to demonstrate that the Lego hobby "was a springboard to [a student's] building robots in national competitions (Accepted.com. p. 5). The Cambridge Essay Service, www.hbsgurus.com, tells applicant to "write about a passion, not a doubt. Teen anxiety and cynicism are pretty tiresome to admissions officers. If you love something, and you can convey that love with detail and conviction, do it" (sect. 6). On the other hand applicants are warned that "if you write on a topic about which you have little interest or knowledge, your lack of sincerity and enthusiasm will show" (Peterson's, 2007, para. 7).

People

Writing about people runs the risk of being sentimental and hokey. However, Peterson's reminds applicants that "we are defined as individuals largely in terms of our experiences with others, and acknowledging this through your essay will help ensure that you don't appear overly self-centered" (para. 8). This advice reminds applicants that colleges and universities are interested in seeing how they relate to the world around them. A thoughtful, personal, and specific reflection of the applicant's relationships with others contributes to their ability to demonstrate to colleges and universities their own personal growth and change (The Penn Group, sect. 4).

Places

Trips, vacations, and family visits can evoke memories of special times in students' lives. According to Accepted.com, these memories can serve as the backdrop for telling a vivid story that reflects upon the place that was visited as a transformative experience in a student's life.

Religion

The advice literature warns applicants about writing about religion in the application essay. EssayEdge (2006) suggests that students "stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions" (sect. 9). Similarly, Accepted.com suggests that "[admissions officers] may consider religion a 'touchy' subject" (p. 5). However, both sites admit the importance of religion and spirituality in some applicants' lives. Given that importance, they advise that applicants who take care to convey honest stories and reflections on the influence of religion and religious

experiences utilize the opportunity to demonstrate their growth and maturity involving this area to admissions officers.

Summary

This chapter examines the website advice literature, the types of advice offered on eight websites that applicants might encounter when searching for guidance on writing the college application essay. The results of this analysis demonstrate that applicants encounter four concerns when facing the college application essay: (a) angst, (b) how to write, (c) for whom the student is writing, and (d) what to write. The website analysis also demonstrates that when applicants encounter the question of “what to write” that they focus their essays on five topics: (a) events, (b) passions, (c) places, (d) people, and (e) religion. These five topics are used as the open codes to guide the essay analysis in Chapter six.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE ESSAYS

This chapter reports the results of the analysis of 150 college application essays submitted to The University of Texas at Austin during the regular freshman admissions process. The researcher analyzed essay responses to Topic A of the 2006 ApplyTexas application which reads: “Describe a significant setback, challenge, or opportunity in your life and the impact that it has had on you” (www.applytexas.org, 2006). The previous chapter describes the analysis of the advice literature which demonstrates that applicants encounter four concerns when facing the college application essay: (a) angst, (b) how to write, (c) for whom the student is writing, and (d) what to write.

According to the advice literature students must work through their concerns before they proceed with the essay. The websites suggest that applicants consider five areas for the topic of their application essay: (a) events, (b) passions, (c) places, (d) people, and (e) religion. These areas of focus translate into the five open codes used in phase three that guided the researcher’s analysis of the application essays provided by UT Austin.

As one would assume from a research sample containing 150 essays, each essay considered in this study is unique and specific to the story that the individual applicant tries to convey to the admissions committee. Nonetheless, these 150 applicants did largely select topics that follow the open codes identified in the advice literature, and the researcher sorted them according to their relevance to the five open codes. Further analysis drew axial codes from within the essays identifying the topic

topics on which applicants wrote addressing research question two. These axial codes represent the topics on which students wrote to describe their setback, challenge, or opportunity: (a) academic opportunities, (b) careers/jobs, (c) travel, (d) religion, (e) moving, (f) activities, (g) family, (h) coping with adversity, (i) coping with illness and death. The following sections report the findings of the analysis of the college application essays. All student names are pseudonyms selected by the researcher.

In addition to addressing the selected topic, applicants also consistently use their essays to demonstrate why they are a good candidate for admission to the institution. The topic is merely a vehicle for revealing a trait or strength that the student wants to convey to the admissions committee. These traits, analyzed as selective codes, which are interwoven into the student stories and are as important as the topic they have chosen, are identified as follows: (a) perseverance, (b) willingness to take risks, (c) educational and personal growth, (d) maturity, (e) leadership and service.

Events

Applicants submitted a substantial number of essays about events that significantly impacted them, whether they occurred in their schools, their homes, or between friends. Many of their stories had to do with moving and extracurricular activities.

On the Road Again...Moving

Based on the samples in this study, teenagers are not fond of moving. The applicants in this study approached packing up their lives and moving to an unfamiliar location with varying degrees of maturity and humor (or lack thereof). They wrote of adaptability and instability, of being forced out of their shell and hastily retreating into it, of refusing to speak to their parents and of accepting their parent's fallibility. Each applicant's experience was unique, but within all the essays were attempts by the applicants to convey their adaptability. They had learned to roll with life's punches, so the challenges awaiting them in the transition to college will only test the skills that they had already perfected.

Adaptability. Connor wrote that he was no stranger to moving. "My family always moved for one reason or another. We moved from home to home, then eventually from city to city." He adjusted, "through the instability I learned to be stable, and from the change I learned adaptability." Connor used his essay to recount his first move when he was in the first grade and he was enjoying life. But after his stepfather was arrested, he and his mom moved across town. Connor wrote that at first he believed that "this change wasn't too dramatic for me; I would just be sleeping in a different bed; I never really cared much about that house." He felt differently after learning that he'd have to change schools, but he accepted the inevitable and moved without complaint. Connor described changing elementary schools as a nightmare.

Entering my new classroom was nothing short of an inescapable nightmare. I tried my best to put on a hint of a smile, but inside I was screaming at the top of my lungs, asking anyone, or anything, to save me. I felt all these eyes moving across my frightened little body...The feelings of despair and anxiety

slowly ebbed away, just as my mom told me they would. She knew everything. The new school never felt quite right. The faces were just a little too unfamiliar, and the friendships were a little too unreal.

Connor's mom eventually moved him back to his first elementary school, although still to a different bed. His moves continued in the 6th grade when he accompanied his mom and her new boyfriend to Mobile, Alabama. He admitted that he grew angry at this move and that the anger turned to hate. But he also learned a valuable lesson, "I grew wiser. Life will change, with or without my permission." This wasn't the last of Connor's moves; he returned to his original hometown with his mom after she grew weary of Alabama; his new step dad soon followed. Another job opportunity for his stepfather moved him again out of state. But he wrote that this time "as I watched my belongings being placed in a box destined for a place I'd never heard of, I didn't feel hate. I didn't feel angry. I didn't hate my mom. I was changing along with life."

Mason also moved several times in his youth, and he too wrote that he learned not to grow attached to the places in which he lived but to focus his energies on learning. He wrote that his most "recent" challenge involved a move to Singapore. His moves cross-country paled in comparison to what it meant to move from "country-to-country."

The house goods are moved by ship: three to four months to arrive. Usually one crate is fast-tracked, maybe 4 weeks. Live in a hotel for 3 weeks to find a house, then drink tap water and sleep on the carpet until the bed frames and computer arrive. For a month, we lived out of a suitcase.

For Mason, the inconvenience of moving to another country afforded him the opportunity to develop his mind. He chose to share this development with the admissions committee.

There is a certain freedom that comes with a lack of possessions...Moving has made me aware of how much baggage people cart around. Not just in clothes and records, but shoddy use of time...I've become attached to the concept of a simple life: cut out all the degrading extraneous complexities and concentrate on three or four spheres. I want to determine what those are.

Mason used his essay to convey to the admissions committee that his pursuit of higher education allows him an opportunity to research those spheres and settle down to complete the journey that began for him with his inconvenient move to Singapore.

Lindsay's first move took her across Korea where she was left with her grandparents while her parents traveled to America. She soon reunited with them in California, but she wrote that she never had a permanent home.

Growing up, I learned to grow accustomed to the interior of my parent's small, 1993 Toyota Camry and felt more in place there than in what lay past each new constantly opening doors of my multiple homes. Ever since I was young, I was forced to constantly move from place to place, wherever my father's occupation called him after a short period of time in yet another new neighborhood.

Her challenge was not the act of moving; she grew accustomed to that. Her challenge was adjusting to the new schools, the new churches, the new social groups. She realized, after a move to New York, that she had turned into a recluse. And yet, she didn't know what to do about it. She wrote of an instance when the youth group leader of her church forced her out of her shell.

I was sitting in my usual corner at church, staring out the opaque window when someone [...] came up to me and dragged me into the crowd. The sudden and unexpected blow that hit me as he began to persuade me that I should not suffer such loneliness was a first for me. With his help, I began to warm up to new people and ideas.

This incident changed her life. From that point forward, She wrote that from that point forward she “woke up and started becoming me.” Her “new me” was ready for the next move, the move to college.

Maturity. Brian admitted that he was “slow to come around.” He wrote that “for nearly three weeks I refused to talk to my parents in protest of this move. I was absolutely irate with my father’s decision to move our family 1000 miles away.” He was resilient, however, and was willing to show this to the admissions committee in the following statement:

With a new mindset and positive attitude, I attacked this new challenge as best I could. I had never done anything like this before, but was determined to overcome this life changing experience. On May the 22nd, I said my goodbyes and embarked on the journey of a lifetime; like Columbus I lunged forward step by step, out into the cold dark world of uncertainty. ‘Feet don’t fail me now!’

Just as he assumes the admissions committee might be laughing at (or with) him, he admits that looking back, he laughed at himself. Brian made a successful shift in his essay to demonstrate that not only did he take a momentous step in “getting over it,” in the first place, but that since then he has matured enough to know that he made a very big deal out of a minor step in his life.

One year later, I look back on the experience and laugh. If only I had known then what I know now. Not only was I capable of accomplishing the task, I conquered it. Within days I had made new friends and things were beginning to look up. Using the skills I had learned all throughout my life, I sailed through moving like a hot knife through butter.

Like other applicants, Brian translated his moving experience and subsequent maturation into a positive experience that he believes correlates well with his readiness for college. “Throughout this life changing journey I have taken on

challenges and adversity and have come out on top. I'll have to move one more time, but maybe this time won't be so bad."

Games People Play...Extracurricular Activities

Applicants covered the spectrum of activities when they wrote about their most significant experience, challenge, or obstacle. From chess to football, dance to eagle scouts, band camp to volunteering after Hurricane Katrina, these applicants were busy. Sports dominated the activities-related essays, but volunteering and other extracurricular activities were also well represented. At first glance, it appeared easiest to categorize the essays based on the activity that students were engaged in. However, after more careful scrutiny, it was apparent that three themes crossed all of the activities: perseverance, altruism, and the need to find balance in their lives.

Perseverance. Applicants willingly wrote of experiences in which they persevered and overcame seemingly insurmountable odds. Essays, predominately sports related, read of overcoming sports injuries, overcoming personal rejection, and resiliency in the face of difficult odds.

Rebounding from sports related injuries was a common topic. Jackson broke his foot at the beginning of his junior year of football. Shortly after returning from eight weeks of rehabilitation, he broke it again. As he put it "my breaks and repeated ankle sprains had totaled my junior football year and I was unable to participate in the bulk of it." He lamented that prior to his injuries he had been a starting free safety and receiver, but upon his return for his senior season, he wrote that he had lost his starting positions. Jackson expressed to the admissions committee that he realized that

“life doesn’t always give you what you want. I learned humility and perseverance from this challenge and although I didn’t come out on top I do truly feel like I gained something from the experience.”

Adrian wrote of the challenges that he endured for weeks after breaking both his wrists:

The next few weeks were rough. At school, I could not write for four weeks, and I had to do my tests orally. My mother even had to write my French homework. Some of my peers offered support and assistance, while others supplied derision and taunting. At home I could not even hold a fork...Many times I woke up in the middle of the night because of the discomfort of having heavy, clay casts on my arms. During this time the NFL Experience was being held in [my hometown]. Because of my handicap I could not participate in the drills. Instead, I had to watch my brother catch passes and return punts.

Adrian did not consider his experience to be entirely without benefits. In the end, the pain of resetting his bones and being spoon fed at dinner paled to being able to cut in the lunch line and take the elevator at school. Even more important to him was that because he was forced to slow down and sit down, his study skills improved dramatically.

Because I could not do much else, I spent most of my free time studying, I developed study habits that were a monumental improvement over the habits I used prior to the accident. I am proud to say that the habits I developed during my ordeal have stayed with me.

While some applicants wrote of surviving and rebounding sports-related injuries, others wrote of surviving rejection on the playing field. Joseph first picked up a tennis racket the summer before his freshman year. He knew that it would take some time for him to be good enough to make his high school tennis team, so he practiced for most of that year. By his sophomore year, he felt that he was ready to try

out. Nonetheless, he admitted that realistically “the chances of getting a spot on the team would be small.” Joseph wrote that he surprised himself initially during his tryout match.

I walked tensely back to my position and prepared to serve. I bounced the ball twice, went through the motions and hit a great serve. My opponent didn't even get a racket on it! I felt pretty good after that point, though I was still cautious. Then came the second point, serving at 15-Love. I hit a good serve. He hit it back and I hit a clean crosscourt winner. I felt a lot better, and my confidence grew even more.

However, reality soon set in and his nerves got the best of him, “my opponent beat the socks off of me!” Joseph wrote that he didn't make the team that year, but accepted the manager's position. He wrote that being manager “let me stay close to the game. I wanted to be a part of the team; I was not ready to give up.” Joseph considered the lessons that he learned transferable to the rest of his life and hopefully, in the eyes of the admissions officers, transferable to college.

Cody experienced a similar rejection when he was denied a space on the varsity swim team. Rather than admit defeat, he wrote that he took private swim lessons, swam for hours each day in the summer, and worked out in the gym to increase his muscle mass. Eventually his hard work paid off, and he won a spot on the varsity squad. Cody does not appear to use his essay to recount the story of persevering through swimming and winning a spot after initially being rejected. Instead, it appears that he wrote his essay to indicate that he recognized the impact that his hard work and determination had on other aspects of his life and that his newfound skills would benefit him in college.

I started to work harder at all the things I did: playing the guitar and drums, doing school work, and swimming (even though I finally made varsity). Even though juggling school, extracurricular activities, and hobbies is not very easy, I find time every day to do each...I feel that the transformation that I have undergone since I have started swimming will be beneficial to me when I start college...I believe that I am well prepared for the challenge because I have developed a sense of discipline and work ethic that will make me successful in any endeavor in which I engage wholeheartedly.

Applicants who wrote their essays about sports recounted those experiences in the context of lessons learned on the field, in the training room, or from the stands. They told stories of grit and determination that oftentimes ended in failure or disappointment. Nonetheless, they reported that they recognized that these adversities allowed them to grow and to achieve in ways that are important to the next phase of their lives.

Willing to lead. In actuality, Isaiah wasn't initially willing to lead, but he was willing to substitute JROTC for PE! "The biggest challenge in my life was afforded me by my entry into my school's JROTC program, which in one of life's ironies, I only joined to avoid PE." What Isaiah didn't expect was that his JROTC experience would transform him into a mediating, crisis managing, fundraising, delegating, motivating leader. He wrote that he only stayed in the corps, after half of the unit left after the first year, out of stubbornness and a beginning realization that being a member of the corps was having a positive effect on him. His role in the corps changed shortly before writing his essay; he became Corps Commander.

Running this is like running the Congress: soul crushingly hard and sometimes, to little end. Between mediating competing interests between cadets and instructors, fixing crises both between cadets and during events, and oversight over all our regular activities, my time and energy has been taxed to new levels. Yet, it has tempered and forged me into a character 10

times better than I was when I entered...The challenge of leading my corps is preparing me to become one of those adult leaders like nothing else available to one my age, and I am eternally grateful for it.

Isaiah's experience in the corps transformed him from the student seeking refuge from gym shorts, dodge ball, and laps around the track to a competent leader who thrived on the ability to influence his peers through his own attitude and behavior.

Lucas, on the other hand, easily recognized the relevance of his leadership experience to his future success in college. He wrote that his leadership development began when he was six years old and he joined scouting. As he approached "the ultimate goal in scouting," his Eagle Scout rank, he recognized how scouting helped him to develop and mature into a proven leader and a morally rich individual. Lucas' completed his scouting career with an Eagle Scout project that allowed him to simultaneously build on his ability to lead others and his love for building, designing, and assembly. For his project, he provided forty Hingeless Nesting Boxes to the Texas Wildlife Rehabilitation Coalition; but from the project he achieved far more than he expected.

Becoming an Eagle Scout has opened my world to new opportunities and higher levels of success. At UT I will be able to apply myself in order to achieve even greater opportunities and a life-changing education. At UT my leadership and personality will prove to be powerful catalysts in inspiring students to achieve outstanding success.

Willing to serve. Just as Lucas and Isaiah were willing to lead, they were just as willing to serve. Both young men acknowledged the importance of reaching out to help others: "anybody can make a difference," Lucas pointed out in his essay.

Applicants recounted their acts of altruism, heroism, and the value of giving to others in multiple ways.

Kevin wrote that he too, understood that “anybody can make a difference” after participating in a volunteer effort at a local relief center after the Hurricane Katrina disaster. He commented that before this volunteer activity he “had few chances to get involved in the community”; afterwards, he firmly believed in the ability to participate in miracles.

Honestly, I never believed in a ‘miracle’ before this experience. But this special event taught me how the power of a few people can change the world. From my freshman year through my junior year, I had few chances to get involved in the community, but this event let me know the power of communities can conquer everything...It also let me know that I should perform more service to my community because I realized that if I help others when they are in need, others will always help me when I am in trouble.

Other applicants wrote of altruistic experiences that demanded leadership and quick thinking. Jack wrote of a situation that required him to make quick and decisive decisions in order to help someone in peril.

We heard the awfully loud screeching of someone’s tires...then we heard a huge crash and we all turned around. A van had rammed 2 stationary cars, went onto the sidewalk and into another car in the parking lot. I had to get the car out of the van’s path, and then we jumped out and ran to the van. My friend and I jumped into the van to put it in park and turn off the car while my other friend called 911. This elderly lady was trapped between the steering wheel, dashboard, her wheelchair, and the front seat.

Jack wrote that he didn’t have much time to think and that he acted on his instincts. After removing the woman’s wheelchair from the van and helping her out of the van and into her wheelchair, he stepped back and surveyed what he had just accomplished.

This incident gave me one of the greatest feelings I've ever had. Helping a person in need and using courage I didn't know I had. I feel more confident in a lot of things I do now. I feel like someone willing to take more risks. I think bringing this into my life after high school will be one of the most unexpected events that will help me succeed.

Whitney described her sense of purpose as a "call to activism." She passionately described this calling to the admissions committee.

I believe in honesty, justice, equality and fairness in government, in helping those less fortunate than ourselves, and in the voice of the People. Although my political views and opinions are strong, they are not concrete; I enjoy discussing them with anyone. Being an activist has taught me that there is no place for close-mindedness if you want to make a difference in a rapidly-changing American society...Organizing protests and meetings to increase awareness for my cause has given me a sense of purpose and strength. Most high school students believe their efforts would be futile or insignificant; I know that this is not the case. One person can change the world: look at Gandhi, Stalin, or Jesus of Nazareth. Margaret Mead once said, "A small group of thoughtful people [can] change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Activism has made me realize that it is up to individuals to change the world for the better; if we do not, who will?

Aidan was no less passionate in his description of a life-changing service activity.

After our prayer [the prayer leader] asked us to mentally leave the current state of life we have been living and for the few days of service at the mission center to open a brand new chapter in our life. As other missionaries came from other parts of [the state], we began to introduce ourselves and meet new faces. As we introduced ourselves, inside I began to cry and thank the Lord that I had this opportunity. After we introduced ourselves, we split into three groups, which were assigned different tasks, the group I was assigned was asked to clean up an elderly couples' home.

But Aidan admitted that his spiritual and altruistic resolve was more than tested. In short, an unexpected challenge nearly sent him running for the fences. He wrote,

As we were cleaning their garage, the grimy, moldy atmosphere was unpleasant and disgusting. When I first saw their house I felt like going home and started to regret ever coming to the mission center...I never thought I would be stuck cleaning someone's garage and inside I was complaining. Towards the end...I felt like I had just entered the show FEAR FACTOR!!!

There were roaches, spiders, ants, wasps, and worse of all MICE!! I was probably the worst one of all the members and I'm supposed to be some big bad football player. Well, they thought wrong, even I was scared of rodents.

But he did not run off. He stayed and completed the project. He wrote that he shared a meal with the family, cried with them as they expressed thanks for cleaning the garage that hadn't been stepped into for over twenty years, and read and taught the gospel to the children. Aidan admitted his vulnerability, the extravagance of his ego, and the humility he felt in his heart at the end of the weekend at the mission center. The event that challenged his greatest fears, rodents in the garage, was well worth the life-changing "feeding of his soul" that occurred over the course of the weekend.

Other applicants performed their services more grudgingly. Cole wrote that "volunteering didn't really mean much to [him] at all. The thought of not getting paid for my work and working so much, gave me the feeling that I would not be able to have an active social life." Cole admitted that he never recognized the value of service for its nobility, he wrote, "Volunteering at the hospital was my duty, not my choice. Waking up early and working from 9am-12 pm during the summer, I would sometimes just sit and stare at the clock and watch my summer waste away." As time went on, however, he did come to realize that volunteering in the hospital provided him with valuable information that he could use as he developed career interests. To that end he wrote, "many times I would day dream on what type of career I would like to accomplish someday, and by volunteering at the hospital I had come to realize that being a doctor would be a perfect career for me."

Cole's admission was one of few that did not seem to fit the mold of the typical applicant. The typical applicant who wrote about sports, volunteering, or a trip to Europe, wrote the "I've done, I've learned, I've grown" type of story. Every other essay related to service was written in the context that the event or service was life-changing. Cole wrote that essentially, he really could have cared less. His saying so was quite the risk to take with the admissions committee, but a risk that was perhaps well worth taking. His essay stood out for its boldness, for its unconventional admission.

Passions

Applicants described a variety of passions and motivations in their lives; recounting everything from the passion to travel, passion for sports and activities, and passion for life. Yet, when winnowing the essay elements to the five axial codes, applicants most fervent about their passion addressed the connections between their academic pursuits and their personal motivations. Some connected their early academic success with more current academic opportunities while others connected their academic passions to their desired career field.

School Daze...Academic Opportunities

When applicants wrote about their academic experiences, they focused on opportunities available to them and on the challenges faced in pursuit of those opportunities. Each presented a unique story within which they attempted to reveal to the admissions committee personal traits that they hope will be received favorably.

Perseverance. Julie wrote about graduating from high school a year early and of her anxiety to get on with her life: “I was anxious to start my life, become the young adult my parents were always telling me to be, and go into a field that, I believe was created just for me.” As she continued her essay, she explained that initially the excitement of the concept “blinded me of the roller coaster ride I had laid in front of myself.” Her essay, however, is not a happy story of graduation to college entry. Julie, instead, used her essay to demonstrate the missteps that she took along the way. Soon after graduation she realized the challenge that she had taken on. Far beyond just being able to leave high school behind, which for her “had served its purpose,” Julie realized that with her action came the adult decisions and consequences that she hadn’t considered:

Of course, as with all life altering decisions, there were many setbacks. My family was not ready to support a second child in college [...] Money was one of the aspects I overlooked when deciding. I could not get started right away due to this hiccup, so I went to work full time to raise money for my education. Yet when fall rolled around, money was tight and neither me nor my family were ready to support that. So I made plans to attend in the spring. I faced slight problems with working situations as well as living conditions. This set my plans back further. I began to believe that I would never make it to college, I would never have the opportunity to pursue my career, and that I would fall into the towering percentile of kids who try to raise a family on a high school diploma.

And yet, she persevered. Julie wrote that she refocused her goals, stopped allowing doubt to invade her confidence, and applied not to the community college that she had relegated herself to, but to UT Austin, her first choice, located in the “live music capital” of the industry in which she hoped to work.

Kristen approached her story of perseverance and determination through academic opportunity a bit differently. Her essay focused on her decision to apply to the International Baccalaureate program at her high school and the journey she took to arrive at that decision.

I used the envelope labeled 'IB Diploma Candidate' as a butterfly net to capture all of my slippery dreams and aspirations and sealed it with a tongue that vowed never to give up. The envelope clung to my sweaty palms and contradicted my past.

That past, Kristen wrote, included elementary years spent in India. She recalled how her passion for learning was scarred by an insensitive teacher who humiliated and embarrassed her in front of her classmates for getting a math problem incorrect. The torment from her teacher led to teasing and ridicule from her classmates. Her story continued to her introduction to American education, in an ESL classroom.

My mind swirled and drifted into a room whose walls were tattooed with sparkling posters that were screaming with creative ideas. "I'm sorry, you're in the wrong room", said the lady. "This is GT (gifted and talented), I think you are looking for ESL (English as a second language)." Why ESL? I thought to myself, because I knew how to speak English better than [language], my native language. I dragged my body into the ESL classroom even though my mind was held captive by the hypnotizing artwork of the 'gifted.' The ESL room's atmosphere was like an itchy sweater: everything irritated me, from the teacher's obnoxiously loud, clanking earrings to the way she said "How are you Himani?" as if my feet were dangling from a booster chair.

Kristen does not write of rebounding from her placement in ESL; instead she wrote of her failure. She asked her teacher why some students were considered gifted and why others were considered regular. The dismissive answer that she received led her to give up. As she put it, "I didn't care anymore." She began to believe that she was intellectually inferior and stopped trying. "I didn't pay attention in class and allowed

the devil to leave its imprints on my report card.” She allowed herself to spiral downward until the end of her 9th grade year when she made her first hundred, became the student she had previously envied, and felt academically successful. Early minor successes fueled her desire to be a better student, and she wrote that she was rewarded for her effort.

That semester was my first time to make the A honor roll. I decided to enroll in two AP classes during my sophomore year. The classes were more challenging and interesting. I began making great grades and people began to refer to me as the ‘smart girl.’ One day, there was an announcement on the school announcements about the IB program. I knew this program would suit me. ‘Only two AP classes all your life?’ and ‘you wouldn’t fit in’ were the comments I bounced off with a shield of confidence. I realized all my life I’ve been hiding my talent because I thought what I had didn’t compare to others. I was too scared to voice out my opinions and allowed people to brainwash me into thinking there’s an imaginary caste system between GT, AP, and ‘regular’ students. It never occurred to me that I was making the same grades as the top 10 percent in the two AP classes I was taking. So what if I fail the IB program? So what if all these AP/IB classes are a shock to my system? Maybe a shock is what I need to awake myself from stupidity and ignorance.

And with that, she mailed the envelope containing the application to enter the IB program. In telling that story, Kristen took a chance with the admissions committee by commenting on her weaknesses and failures. The essay writing websites advise against showcasing failure and weakness, (EssayEdge, Peterson’s), but Kristen obviously felt that those failures were an important part of her maturation and showed a determination and grit that she hoped would translate into a positive trait for a college applicant. Given that, she didn’t hesitate to highlight her failures, but more importantly to demonstrate how she overcame them.

Educational Growth. Two other applicants that focused their essays on academic opportunities chose to portray their educational growth and development.

Christopher, like Kristen, had his epiphany near the end of his ninth grade year. He had spent much of that year “being stretched and shaped by the awe and intimidation of the new high school environment.” He wrote that his life changing moment came in an envelope sitting on his desk one day when he returned home from school. In that envelope was an invitation to apply to the Texas Academy of Math and Sciences, TAMS, a selective residential high school housed on the University of North Texas campus. He applied and was accepted. His essay went on to describe his initial experience.

When I first began school here in August of 2004, I was naïve, narrow-minded, and as one of my college professors states, ‘culturally retarded.’ I was intimidated by the many scholarly buildings on campus and by the seniors who had survived what I was about to experience. I felt that every hall teemed with intellectual growth and meditative thought. I worried that my abilities were not enough to overcome the challenge of college.

Christopher, however, did not falter, and he chose to demonstrate his maturation to the admissions committee. He wrote, “in actuality, my intimidation was only an illusion. After the first few weeks, TAMS seemed manageable, my awe of the seniors diminished, and I gained confidence that I could overcome the challenges TAMS offered. My confidence catapulted me to where I am now.” The “now” that Christopher wrote of, includes leadership positions that he sought and won, communication and study skills that he acquired and attributed to the residential high school experience, management of a demanding college curriculum, and most importantly to him, a cultural awareness that he believes he never would have encountered in his home high school.

The dormitory atmosphere has probably impacted me the most. Living in a dorm brought me face to face with several different cultures ranging from Chinese to Hindi to Muslim to African-American. [...] I have seen native Indian dances, heard the tongue of several different languages, smelt and tasted the fine cuisines of many different cultures, and felt the rice and curry between my novice fingers as I ate a traditional meal with an Indian friend. At TAMS I am constantly immersed in culture and never in danger of being dubbed ‘culturally retarded.’

Christopher’s writing shows his desire to portray himself as an applicant who was not only willing to take risks but also as someone who had taken one and had grown from the experience.

William wrote of educational growth as well, but he entered his challenge much less enthusiastically. “When I was in the 5th grade, my mother took me out of private school and took it upon herself to educate me. For many people, even me at first, this was devastating news.” William went on to write that, while others considered the disadvantages of home schooling, he finally came “to realize that home schooling was the best thing that could have happened to me.”

William wrote of experiences similar to those that Christopher encountered at TAMS. He wrote of the flexibility and the opportunity to design his curriculum that home schooling gave him. In particular, like Christopher, he wrote of the necessity of learning to manage his time. Both young men expressed to the admission committee that they were, perhaps, ahead of their peers, in their ability to manage their time, as would be needed in college. William stated the connection very clearly: “Learning to manage my time wisely is a skill that will be very useful in my future at college and in my career.”

William also acknowledged the diverse experiences that home schooling has provided for him. He wrote of being in classes with younger and older students at the community college where he took some of his courses. In particular, he wrote of the opportunity to interact with students from different backgrounds that he likely never would have encountered in his neighborhood schools. “In public school, you are only in class with students your own age and who live in the same area of town as you. This kind of diversity to which I have been exposed is similar to what I will find in college and in my future career.”

William attempted to make connections between the skills he garnered within a non-traditional school environment and his future on a college campus and beyond. In his case, as well as in the essays submitted by Julie, Kristen, and Christopher, the mantra of “show don’t tell” that was repeated in the advice literature seemed to ring true. These applicants demonstrated through examples and connections just how their experiences would translate onto the college campus.

Working 9 to 5...Careers and Jobs

Applicants who wrote about their future careers or entrepreneurial experiences approached their essays from several different perspectives. Several, with varying degrees of success, wrote about how their likes and preferences relate to their chosen careers. Jessica, an aspiring businesswoman in the fashion industry said simply, “my first love is and always has been the arts.” She went on to describe working on theatrical productions and how costuming while in high school fueled her interest in a future in the fashion industry. However, she admitted an interest in how people think

and mentioned an interest in studying the academic connection between economics and psychology to learn “how and why people buy the things that they do.” Unable to focus on her connection, she continued to express a desire to “study international and Italian studies to receive a global perspective. My further goal is to study abroad, in Italy, not only to learn about my area of study but also to see the opportunities available in other places. I feel fortunate to have a direction towards a career.” Jessica’s struggles to write about a future and a career that she really does not understand is not unusual in the college application essay. S. Kearns, Associate Director of Admissions, confirmed that “students have trouble talking about things they don’t know anything about. They seem to want to impress us with how well they’ve thought out their future, but instead leave us shaking our heads at their naiveté.” (S. Kearns, personal communication, October 17, 2007)

Jessica further revealed her inexperience when she marketed herself to UT Austin. Trying to make the connections that would make her case for admission, she failed to distinguish how UT Austin was better suited for her to pursue her academic goals than any other large university in a big city.

The University of Texas at Austin has all the programs that I would like to pursue. With one of the best business programs in the country and inspiration for my fashion future, I looked to a large city with many different types of people. I hope that in Austin I can learn about different people. As someone who hopes to see products all over the world I would like to meet people from all over the world at the University of Texas. A college campus is the best place to meet completely different people from myself. At Austin I hope to find those people and learn as much as I can about economics and marketing. I think that the University of Texas at Austin can do that for me.

EssayEdge warns students about focusing on the institution, reminding them that the admissions officers know more about the institution than the student ever could.

Jessica made the mistake of telling the institution too much about itself to be able to distinguish herself as an ideal candidate.

Learning from others. Other applicants made more successful connections.

Some applicants recognized that their experiences in their work lives or in their families shaped their passions and career pursuits.

Nicholas recognized that “[his] opportunity is one built on the dreams and success of my family.” Nicholas was born into a family of successful publicists with lineage in Hollywood and major New York publications. From them, he wrote that he learned a valuable lesson:

[They] showed me that the great opportunity to do something that I wanted to do in life was available. I just had to do it. Their example in achievement has profoundly affected my life. I feel it my duty to carry on the tradition of developing your own sense of self and goals in life, and then realizing them. I never took my own dreams seriously until I saw members of my own family attain similar aspirations...this seems to make success seem more plausible. It makes it more like real life and less like a fantasy.

Aaron, like many kids, spent “many evenings of [his] childhood watching television.” However, unlike most, he wrote that he spent those evening watching court dramas trying to understand “why the lawyers, such seemingly honest characters, could defend such foul miscreants or how they could be so anxious to prosecute the charged offender, who may or may not be guilty.” Aaron wrote that his passion for the law was born out of trying to make sense of those TV dramas. But, in order to demonstrate a sense of maturity and sophistication, he seemed to recognize

the importance of connecting that childhood enjoyment to a more tangible experience to justify his interest in the law as a viable career choice.

He made that connection in his essay by writing of his high school internship at a local law firm. After days spent filing documents, Aaron wrote of finally being able to accompany his employer on business visits.

I was invited by [my employer] to spend a day at court and any other place that required his attendance. I put on my most presentable attire and left with him to visit our first courthouse. On the way, he explained to me that being a lawyer is a lifestyle for an adrenaline junkie, because he or she is always in a constant rush preparing for a trial...By the end of the day, I had accompanied [my employer] to two courthouses, a jailhouse, and a police station. Ultimately, my mentor introduced me to the world of law.

If Aaron's goal was to appear mature and thoughtful, he was successful in doing so. By demonstrating the impact his mentor had on solidifying his career choice, Aaron successfully connected a trivial childhood activity to a passion for a career in law. His understanding of the law was no less far-reaching than Jessica's understanding of the fashion industry, but he provided the admission committee with an opportunity to evaluate him based on his ability to make those mature connections and to allow others to influence his direction.

Educational Growth. Other applicants wrote of defining moments in their lives that pointed them in the direction of a particular job or career. Katrina wrote of being an aspiring herbalist. By the 8th grade, she considered herself well read and well practiced on utilizing herbal remedies. For her 14th birthday, her best friend gave her an herbal pouch that she used at the slightest hint of sickness. She wrote, "I believe my herbs and vitamins created a strong immunity. Everyone around me was always

sick. I wasn't." But then, she wrote, "I caught the flu virus." Katrina wrote that getting the flu was a defining moment for her in her career goals because it transformed her childhood fascination with "play herbs and medieval characters" into a desire to seriously understand the mechanism of natural versus conventional medicine.

I relied on herbal teas and vitamins but I grew sicker by the day. I had no choice but to take strong antibiotics prescribed by the doctor. It removed the virus; however, the side effects were stomach irritations, headaches, and a sore throat which led to an ear infection. It took three months to completely recover from the flu and the effects of the series of antibiotics I was prescribed. Even though I had gotten sick, my knowledge and faith in alternative medicine and herbal remedies has grown. In turn, my confidence in conventional medicine has diminished.

Katrina described to the admissions committee how she turned that experience with illness and questioning into an intellectual pursuit transforming the essay from a story on alternative medicine to one in which she portrayed herself as intellectually curious, willing to take risks, and open to influence. In doing so, she wrote that getting sick, despite her preparations, drove her to become more knowledgeable on nutrition and alternative medicine.

In 10th grade I met a nutritionist and herbal specialist. Under her supervision, I worked with herbs for some time and read many notable herbal books. From her, I absorbed not only knowledge of herbs, but also how to apply science, math, and even history into the balance of herbalism.

Katrina passionately described the connection between her experiences, her personal convictions, and her academic pursuits.

I cannot condone the use of something that has the potential to harm someone more than benefit, especially when I know there is an alternative that is safer and more affirming. So, ever since I experienced the potential side effects of antibiotics, my professional motivation has shifted from promoting herbs for

personal use to helping find a balance between herbs and conventional medicines. My first step in achieving this dream is to major in pre-pharmacy.

Perseverance. Other applicants wrote of making early career decisions and the impact that the decision had on them. Emily wrote of making a career decision in the 8th grade to become a plastic surgeon; that decision led her to apply, albeit late, to a magnet high school gearing students towards a career in the health professions. Rather than write her essay on the joys of making the connection between her career choice and a high school experience shuttling her towards that career, Emily chose to show her fears, anxieties, and weaknesses to the admissions committee, and most importantly, to show how she overcame them.

When I first enrolled, the strict rules and dress code were almost enough to send me running for another school; one with sports, less challenging courses, more students, and less dress code. My first semester at [the school] drained me completely; I had never been so stressed in my life. Furthermore, I had never struggled so hard in my life to keep my grades up. It seems like nothing was ever enough.

Emily admitted to the admissions committee that she was jealous of her friends at “regular” high schools. “All of my friends from middle school would tell me of how much fun they were having at their high schools. They had football games to attend, parties to go to, and it seemed as though they never had to worry about their school work.” She lamented that her freshman class lost one hundred students after the first semester and that “with all the schoolwork, studying, and fair-weather friends, school had never been so difficult in my life.”

But Emily’s story did not end with her disappointments. She used her essay to describe her rebound from this difficult situation—a characteristic that she believed

would be beneficial to her application. Emily told how “school got progressively easier and [she] finally began to get the hang of things.” As evidence of her evolving maturity, she professed an appreciation for the dress code because she no longer had to worry about what she would wear each day. She embraced her small high school community. Most importantly, she embraced the opportunity to explore her career choice. She admitted that her high school “not only has given me the four most difficult years of my life, but also the four most enlightening.” Emily was forthcoming with the admissions committee about her doubts and fears, but obviously felt that her successful navigation of that difficult time in her life made her a better person and ultimately a more appealing applicant.

Places

Applicants made many references to places that had an impact on some facet of their lives. They wrote of visiting grandma during the summers, of specific high schools that impacted their career choices, of dividing their lives between the homes of divorced parents. However, as relevant as those essays are to the use of “place” as a starting point for developing a topic, the most relevant of the essays are those written to describe travel to a place unlike their normal environment. Applicants struggled with generalizations and stereotypes as they described their experiences in foreign lands. But they were generally successful in portraying themselves as having benefited from their travels.

Around the World...Travel

Many students wrote of their travel experiences: mission trips to Honduras, El Salvador, and Japan; family trips to Poland and East Africa; study abroad in New Zealand; and a student trip to Australia. The purpose of their travel was similarly varied. Luke spent a year living with his uncle and sister in New Zealand while going to school. Travis, inspired by Jane Goodall, traveled to east Africa to journal and photograph African wildlife with the support of his parents. Tyler, during a seven-week European tour, visited Auschwitz and wrote of being stunned by the intensity of the emotion that he felt. Lauren, Jamie, Julia, and Dominic visited Central American, European, and Asian countries as part of organized mission trips.

Despite the variation in topics, all the essays show an obvious attempt by the applicants to convey positive traits to the admissions committee. Specifically, applicants who wrote of travel experiences appeared to be trying to convey evidence of maturity and personal growth.

Maturity. Jamie wrote of her experience during and after a mission trip to Japan. She wrote of traveling from her small town of less than 500 people to Tokyo, Japan and of the impact that the experience had on her.

Going to Japan gave me the opportunity not only to observe another culture, but to actually be a part of it, and to experience the rich beauty of human diversity firsthand. The trip also gave me a greater sense of appreciation for my own lifestyle and country.

Jamie observed the differences between her country and Japan and particularly the differences in how people interacted with one another. These observations led Jamie to share with the admissions committee that “the Japanese seemed to be more materialistic, and seeing the great emphasis on the superficial turned me away from

materialism and made me concentrate more on the heart of a person. The trip really gave me an overall appreciation for my life and how I live.”

Jamie also thought it was important to share her willingness and desire to be culturally diverse. For her, the trip solidified a fervent desire to travel and learn about different people.

I would love nothing more than to be able to experience the lifestyles of every other culture on the planet, and now I know that I will pursue this dream for the rest of my life. I intend to continue to travel to foreign lands, and soak up as much of the different cultures as I can for as long as I possibly can.

Jamie’s essay took a rather abrupt turn when it described an incident involving her mother when Jamie returned home. Because her mother didn’t want her to make the trip, the incident left Jamie bewildered and hurt. She wrote of this incident to bring the experiences that she encountered during her trip to completion. Returning to face her mother put the entire trip into perspective for her. The fact that Jamie chose to write about that realization seems to indicate her desire to demonstrate to the admissions committee her evolving maturity.

Even though the results of the trip were not all happy and wonderful, I am still glad that I went. I learned so much from my journey to Japan and I have no regrets. The trip helped shape me, and played a part in my development as a person. It opened my eyes to another culture, gave me an appreciation for my life, showed me what adventure was, and changed my relationships with people.

Similarly, Eric wanted to share the way in which his travel experience led to his maturation. In order to portray his development, Eric offered his initial feelings regarding the three-week trip to Europe and admitted that that it took some time after returning for the lessons learned from the trip to set in.

The year before when I signed up for the trip, I thought it would just be a fun summer vacation with some friends from school, nothing more. After arriving back in the U.S., I realized that it was in fact the way I thought it would be, but it was also so much more. I was introduced to so many cultures and countries in a short period of time that it was a bit overwhelming while I was there, but once I arrived back home, I could finally appreciate what I had experienced and all I gained from this unique opportunity.

Eric continued making the connections between the trip to Europe and his evolving maturation by recounting ways in which he grew on the trip. He deliberately tied the maturation he experienced while on his trip to his pending transition to college. In doing so, he attempted to demonstrate to the admissions committee his readiness for the next phase in his life: a college experience that requires an independent, mature applicant.

I learned so much not only about myself, but about the world I live in as well. I quickly learned how to be independent in Europe. [...] I grew up quite fast there and learned to be responsible for myself and others. It was an invaluable lesson that I have been able to apply in many other areas in my life and I am sure it will be very helpful in the college setting. [...] The significance of the trip is immeasurable. It not only impacted me and helped me to mature, but it also allowed me for the first time to really be sure as to what I might want to do upon entering college and after graduating. [...] I plan to go back this summer [and] I hope that in going there again, I am able to mature more once again and renew the independence and responsibility I gained from the trip in order to help with my transition to college.

Personal Growth. Two applicants in particular took the opportunity in their essays to demonstrate personal growth achieved through their travel experience.

Tyler submitted an essay that described how his trip to Auschwitz, Poland impacted his life, and of how his experiences upon arriving at the concentration camp contradicted his initial expectations.

As we traveled to Auschwitz by bus from Krakow, my impression and thoughts about the area were quite different from my expectations. The camp

was surrounded by the most beautiful farmland I had ever seen. It came to my attention that, ironically, one of the most horrible factories of death in history was surrounded by farms, which represent life and prosperity.

The visit to the concentration camp was difficult for Tyler. He explained the difficulty he had walking in the footsteps of those who had been executed and that “the nauseating feeling was unbearable after a few minutes and left me in shock for the rest of my trip.” At one point in his essay Tyler naively wrote that “I never would’ve accepted the treatment that the Jews experienced.” But he recognized his naiveté and wrote of his growth, of his realization that he could have done no more than they did, but especially that he really had no place from which to make any judgment. He realized “that as a white, middle-class American, I have been in a cultural bubble all my life. Although I knew such hatred and discrimination existed, I had never personally experienced what it feels like to be discriminated against, or hated, just because of my race, nationality, or religion.” This revelation allowed Tyler to speak to the admission committee regarding the personal growth and maturity that he experienced on his trip.

Julia, wrote of a mission trip to Honduras. Like Tyler, she admitted that she prejudged what she would experience on the trip: “On the onset of the this trip, I braced myself for the unparalleled poverty I was soon to witness, readied myself to stand aghast at the squalor of the street people, and comforted myself with the hopes of cheering the despondent I would surely meet.” She continued that she was not entirely wrong in her assumptions.

The poverty was evident from the first moments of the trip. [...] As we rode along a pot-hole laden road we saw many ramshackle, unfinished houses

lining the road up to a public park [...] I visited the city dump, a home to hundreds of jobless people who ate the remnants of meals prepared in more wealthy houses and by digging through the mounds of trash.

However, Julia also noted that the Honduran people were happy. Regardless of the dire nature of their situation, they went on with their lives. She wrote that this experience changed her perceptions and helped her grow as a person.

The last assumption that I made, however- the assumption that these unfortunate people could benefit from my group's high-spirits-proved to be the most inaccurate of my assumptions. I found myself surprised at the intrinsic happiness which flowed from people who had nothing compared to the materialistically rich life so many Americans live. [...] This opened my eyes to the sheltered life of Americans, for even the poorest in America have some possessions if they seek aid.

The change caused by this realization remained with her after she returned home and became the central focus of her college admissions application. Julia did use broad generalizations in her essay that confounded the ability of the essay to showcase her maturity. However, the motivation behind the essay that she offered to the admissions committee did, in fact, center, on her desire to showcase her growth and personal development. As an example of that development, Julia wrote that the experience altered her perception of happiness.

Whenever I start to pity myself because I have to clean my room or finish hours of homework, I often remind myself of the self-sacrificing people of Tegucigalpa who may never even have a house the size of my room or the opportunity to finish school, but are still content with their lives. I learned that it does not take a newer, bigger house or a better grade on one's report card or even an acceptance letter from a prestigious university to create happiness, for true happiness comes from within oneself.

Applicants who wrote of their travel experiences sought to demonstrate that through their experiences they learned something about themselves and learned

valuable lessons from others. The fact that they were able to learn these things seemed to them to have improved their personal worthiness and thus made the topic and the experience a worthy one for the application essay. Even in their attempts to appear mature and worldly, applicants appeared to struggle with conjecture and generalizations. Nonetheless, they did focus their essays on the personal growth and development that they experienced while on the trip.

People

The influence and importance of family and friends in the lives of applicants were evident in this study. More than 65% of the essays contained some reference to people in the applicants' lives. Fully one-third of the essays were written specifically about family and friends. A small sampling of those essays is presented in this section.

When applicants wrote essays about their family and friends, the realities of personal relationships were woven into their stories. They wrote of good times and bad: the pressure to live up to expectations, divorce and family dysfunctions, influence and role models, and health concerns and death.

Finding Their Way

Personal Growth. Applicants wrote essays that told stories of their personal challenges to find their own way under the influence of their family. Melissa struggled to escape the shadow of her brother.

By the seventh grade I had become pretty accustomed to receiving the [brother] stereotype from my teachers at the beginning of the year. He was a very active, loud, obnoxious, young boy who didn't like to be told what to do, didn't like to follow rules, and didn't like school much at all.

She recounted what had become a typical beginning to her school year.

There is no possible way of describing the way...my seventh grade English teacher looked as she read my ever so familiar name from roll call the first day of school. It was as though she had just entered a horror show; her face turned bright apple red, her eyes glared at me from across the room, and I swear, I saw some strands of her orangish-gray hair stand up on top of her head. [She] quickly asked me the six words I dreaded hearing every year: "Are you related to [brother's name]."

Melissa wrote that with a bit of hard work she usually didn't have much trouble getting her teachers to recognize that she was very different from her brother. This particular teacher proved to be a more formidable challenge for her but she wrote that, while it took a bit longer than usual, eventually her English teacher came around as well. Melissa felt that much of her middle and high school life was clouded by presumptive judgments made on the basis of her brother's disruptive behavior.

Brandy presented an essay that told the opposite story. Her older sister was the "golden child; she had done everything right." Brandy wrote that she wasn't bothered by this; she looked up to her sister and strove to be just like her. However, she soon found that trying to be like her sister presented its own challenges.

My sister played the flute in band, so I gave that a try. One day I had an epiphany and the following year I enrolled in art instead. It did not take long before I fell in love with it...Like my sister, I enrolled in honors classes. I did well from the start but found it difficult. After all, I had to get good grades because that's what my sister did. Eventually, I put the pressure aside and started looking at my classes differently...Instead of taking Spanish [like her sister] I wondered off the path and took French for seven years.

In time, Brandy found the activities that were important to her and that represented who she was. She wrote, "I volunteered at the hospital (my sister would have fainted at the door)...I also got an 'in' at the local radio station (how many teenagers can say

that they carried the drums for Los Lonely Boys?)” She was clearly proud of her ability to love and admire her sister while recognizing that she was her own person and deserved to be herself.

Like Brandy, Seth found someone in his family on which to base his aspirations. He wrote that he considers himself an “intelligent, outspoken, and steadfast” student. He gave all of the credit to his mom for these traits. However, he did not write the expected essay of the mom who pushed him to be his best by helping him with his homework and pushing him to take the more challenging path. Instead, he wrote that her influence was subtle, much less direct. She showed him how to achieve, rather than just telling him.

She earned her masters degree when my brother and I were still very young. I can still remember going to the University in the evenings while my mom was in class. My brother and I would do our homework at desks that my mom would place outside her classroom door...She’s taught me that anything is possible if a person puts his or her mind to it. If my mom could earn a masters degree with two small children, then I can earn a degree with ease.

Seth made a very strong connection between a short time in his life when his mom was in school to his positive outlook on education and achievement.

Coping with Adversity

Adversity was a common theme in many applicants’ essays, often in the context of relationships in their lives. Two applicants in particular recounted their experiences in a family impacted by divorce.

Maturity. Elijah wrote that his “life began right as my parents’ marriage was ending, launching my brothers and I into a unique lifestyle.” The emotional turmoil created by this lifestyle created an emotional hurdle that he had to learn to overcome.

From the beginning, he engaged in an emotional limbo. He lived with his dad and brothers and saw his mom infrequently. Ironically, Elijah recounted, “it was never that one parent was better or worse than the other, or that the two different households collided on occasion, because neither was better and they didn’t collide.” Instead, he found himself living in two different worlds and responding by living as two different Elijah’s.

As a young child, I felt forced to play both sides. Two different [Elijah’s] roamed through two different homes. I talked differently. I thought differently. I even dreamed differently. There I was: the nine-year-old double agent eluding parental disappointment.

Elijah admitted that he does not look back on those years with fondness but that he did develop an understanding for change and a flexibility that will benefit him in the future. He wrote, “Where others become prideful in the face of change or certain defeat, I, like water, mold myself to every environment...Nothing outclasses maturation.”

Chelsea faced a similar challenge: “As I was growing up, I only had my Mom’s support because my dad was hardly around.” Chelsea displayed a sense of maturity as she wrote that “They wanted the best for me. They weren’t getting along anymore and didn’t want me growing up in that kind of environment.” But she acknowledges that she didn’t always act quite so mature.

When I would go visit my dad I would cry because I was not used to being around him. I remember one time my mom dropped me off at my dad’s house. ...I started to cry a lot. My dad tried everything to stop me from crying but nothing worked. Finally he called my mom to come get me. I remember my dad’s face, he looked so upset and sad, like he was about to cry. Now that I think about it I feel really bad, I could just image what he was going through.

She struggled in her relationship with her father. Because she rarely saw him, she felt that she barely knew him and resented his attempts at parenting or friendliness towards her. "I wanted to show my dad that even though he's not around I am smart and strong without him being there to support me." While learning to live without him, she also learned to accept his role in her life and her future. "He's kept calling, even when I was difficult. My dad has made an agreement with my mom to pay half my tuition. I am glad he even thought of that because it lets me know how much I mean to him even though I barely get to see him."

Natalie's essay focused on the after effects of her family sending her younger brother away to boarding school to help him with his bipolar disorder and anger management issues. She wrote:

The constant dribble of the basketball, so overused that the grip had almost completely worn off, is silent now. The television downstairs no longer blares ESPN at every waking moment, and when we set the table, we set four places, not five...The room is empty of life. Most of his 'stuff remains, but his favorite possessions are gone, sent with him to his next destination. The bed is always made, clothes are always folded, and the floor always has the vacuum lines along it...no teenager lives here. They talk about him, but they pretend like its nothing. They try to talk in normal tones with normal facial expressions while making normal conversation...my house is quiet these days.

The yelling has stopped. I sit in my room and hear not the repeated slamming of a door, but the click of the air conditioner shutting off. Dinner is no longer a verbal wrestling match, but a humdrum clicking of forks and knives. No, he's not dead. Some days it seems that way, though...my house is quiet these days.

Natalie doesn't offer any explanations or excuses, just this poetic representation of her family's challenge. For her, this challenge has been a learning experience. "I

know one day my brother will be back, and we'll be whole again. Until then, all we can do is learn from our experiences.”

Coping with Illness and Death

Twenty-three of the essays studied, by far the greatest number on a single topic, recounted experiences with illness and death: suicide, personal injuries, and the death of friends and family. The applicants who shared these emotional narratives revealed personal details regarding the impact of these experiences on their lives.

Personal growth. Three young ladies wrote essays that told of the experience of their mother battling cancer. Each struggled with the disease, its impact on their mothers, and to a greater degree, how the disease interrupted their own lives. Shannon wrote that she was the typical awkward adolescent, “tall, skinny, and lanky...My one desire was the approval and belonging of my peers. I only wanted to fit in.” Shannon felt that during this difficult social time in her life that she could only count on her parents. That stability was shattered when her mother was diagnosed with cancer.

Throughout my sixth grade year, my mother was never available for me. She was either receiving chemotherapy or radiation therapy...She was never there when I needed her most. She was never accessible for her awkward daughter who just wanted to feel a ‘mother’s love’. My mom was struggling with her own survival.

Her mother beat the disease through radical treatments and multiple surgeries.

However, Shannon wrote that while the disease spared her mother’s life, it still got the best of her.

She was no longer the same mom whom I could laugh with...or cry with. She became hardened to the world and hardened with society in general. [She was] no longer concerned with the small joys in life that some individuals treasure. Instead, she felt only pity for herself and envy for others more fortunate.

For Shannon, losing the ‘rock’ that her mother was for most of her life, was traumatic; it changed her outlook and her perspective. Her essay suggests that Shannon is still struggling with the impact of her mother’s disease and survival on her life and that she really hasn’t come to terms with the gravity of the experience.

What I learned from my mother is that I don’t want to be like her. Yes, she did have a terrible burden to bear, but we all have our own personal hardships that we must each carry. I also realized that we can change our entire perspective on an event just by our attitude. The world is not a perfect place nor will it ever be. But, rather than pity ourselves and complain about the burden fate has set, we should instead focus on the positive attributes of life and the wonderful opportunities we have. Instead of weeping at our sufferings, we should be thankful for our blessings.

Kayla wrote of her rebound from her mother’s illness. Kayla’s mother was diagnosed with cancer when Kayla was in the 8th grade.

I screamed at my mom on the telephone. If she wasn’t home tonight I couldn’t go to a movie with my friends. I’d be stuck at home again with my two sisters, two people who really killed my social life. And then it hit me. My mom screamed back in anguish, ‘I have cancer [Kayla].’ The waves of tears crashed down my face as my sister and I held on to each other for the first time in months. The phone rang over and over because I had hung up on my mother in shock. And of course I thought the usual question – why me? In the following months I finally learned the answer to that question.

Unlike Shannon, Kayla wrote of how the experience of her mother’s near death made her better: a better student, a better daughter, and a better sibling. She wrote that the experience made her grow up a little bit faster and become less selfish.

After helping her after her surgeries, taking care of my baby sister, riding back and forth from the hospital with my grandfather, and completely giving up my social life without a problem, I grew up in 3 months. Family became my world...My mother’s cancer, at first a huge dilemma, became a blessing.

Hannah's essay brought the applicants' experiences full circle. Like Shannon and Kayla, Hannah's mother began her battle with cancer when her daughter needed her most: "I was thirteen, how can an adolescent, maturing girl deal with something like that?" She watched her mother battle cancer, lose her hair, and undergo surgeries and treatments. But through it all "I still saw her as the same, beautiful mom that I knew. She fought, not for her life, but for her family. She knew we'd be lost without her."

These three young ladies all recounted experiences of losing the support and availability of their moms at a vulnerable time in their lives. They rebounded from those experiences with varying success but identified the experience as a challenge that was difficult for them to overcome.

Learning from experience. Applicants also wrote of the changing roles in their lives as their families dealt with illness. Brittney's little brother likes to tell strangers who stare at the hundreds of staple scars on his abdomen that "[he] got attacked by a shark last year." In fact, her younger brother battled a life-threatening disease that left the scars following the surgery that saved his life. Her brother's illness required her parent's full devotion. His medical care was halfway across the country, and his parents alternated their travel with their work. Brittney responded to their lack of attention by giving them what they needed most from her, a helping hand.

The thought of a ten-year-old taking over a household sounds limiting and impossible, but somehow it is the way things ended up. My natural instincts, along with things that were out of my control were shaping me into the woman that I am today. Making lunches every morning, doing the basic cleaning and laundry, and keeping my brothers and sister well looked after

became my focus...My younger siblings demanded and deserved patience, compassion, and consistency during my parent's absence

Her younger brother has recovered from his illness, but Hannah notes that he has now become another of her responsibilities. She welcomes it, welcomes that he's with her. She also welcomes how she grew from her experiences eight years earlier. Those experiences still resonate in her life today and they have made her all the better for it.

Things are still the same today. I still make lunches every morning, go to little league games, and drive a suburban full of kids to and from activities. [My brother's] illness has helped me realize that my contribution to others is through my leadership. [His] illness gave me a foundation of confidence and leadership that I have been able to build from through each experience I have encountered thus far.

Brandon wrote of rising to the occasion for his family as well. His father was diagnosed with cancer when he was 15. He admitted that initially, he could only think of the impact that his father's illness was having on him and his life. But, after hearing the strain in his mom's voice over the phone while she tried to comfort and shield him, he realized his selfishness.

From that point on, I knew that I had to be the rock for my family. This role was my choice and mine alone...Most of my mom and dad's friends have offered to help, but my parents have been strong throughout this process. However, they too have their weak moments, and I take on added responsibilities around the house and with our small business...This experience has made me the person I am today. It has helped me to be a leader in and out of school. My dad's cancer made me realize what it means to have an actual real life obstacle to overcome, and I am a stronger person for it.

Learning from others. Applicants also wrote of death and the impact of the death of someone close to them. Astin wrote of the inspiration his grandmother's death provided for his development.

I spent most of my young life with me grandmother. [She] provided me with emotional support as well as providing me with basic educational skills. She nurtured me and groomed me into a polite and respectful young boy. So when my grandmother died when I was at the tender age of seven, that loss moved me into a depressive state.

After his grandmother's death, Astin admitted that he fell apart. His school work was mediocre and he lacked drive and focus. He found himself thinking of his grandmother often. It was thinking of her that was preventing him from moving forward, so he chose to engage in extracurricular activities and his studies to help him recover from her death. He wrote that he didn't forget about her, but that he uses the positive lessons that she gave him rather than dwelling on her death.

Although her untimely death crosses my mind from time to time, I'm grateful that I was able to know her and learn from her while I could. I am also overjoyed that I was able to put her death behind me through hard work and dedication.

Charles admits that he was relatively unmoved by his grandmother's death.

I searched my soul for any hint of sorrow or grief for the loss of my grandmother, but the only emotion I had was concern for how my father was feeling. Somewhere deep inside of me I knew that I had tears saved for a moment like this, but no matter how hard I tried, I could not conjure them. I did not know my grandmother very well. She lived 6000 miles away and visited [city] once or twice every few years.

He was haunted by his lack of feelings and struggled to try to figure out why he felt so completely detached. A year or so later, his grandpa was diagnosed with cancer and passed away shortly thereafter. His death elicited the response that Charles lacked at the death of his grandmother.

I could not comprehend what death meant [until Grandpa died]. He was no longer there to offer words of support before my tournaments. He was no longer there to encourage me to be the man that I could be. I felt utterly alone at the thought of losing him and finally, my emotional barrier broke. I finally

understand why I did not feel much when my grandmother died. It wasn't because I didn't care about her or love her...I now know that confronting life and death and all of the emotions that follow are part of maturing.

Like the ladies whose mothers were diagnosed with cancer and the applicants who took on greater responsibilities in their families, these two young men learned to cope and accept death and the emotions it entails as part of life. All of these applicants were willing and able to share these essays as a way to display their vulnerabilities, their recovery, and their growth.

Religion

The advice literature repeatedly warns applicants about the inappropriateness of writing about religion in the application essay. EssayEdge, suggested that students “stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions” (sect. 9). Similarly, Accepted.com suggests that “[admissions officers] may consider religion a ‘touchy’ subject” (p. 5). However, both sites admit the importance of religion and spirituality in some applicant’s lives. Given that importance, they advise applicants that it is possible to convey honest stories and reflections on the influence of religion and religious experiences as a way to demonstrate their growth and maturity.

Despite this, applicants generally avoided the topic. Woven throughout many essays were hints of spirituality and religion, particularly those essays focusing on mission trips and family turmoil, but only three applicants chose to write specifically on the topic. Even these three focused less on the concept of religion and more on the benefits afforded them by their involvement in their church.

Learning from experience. Nathan chose to write of the opportunities that he had because of his involvement in church activities and how it helped to form the type of person that he is. As he made his case for admission, he attempted to convey traits generally considered positive: tolerance, adaptability, virtues of hard work, and caring for others.

From mission trips, to youth camps, to just being around other church members, these experiences have shaped who I am. They have developed my beliefs, my morals, and my attitudes to those around me...Mission trips broadened my knowledge, tolerance, and adaptability, and taught me valuable lessons about the virtues of hard work and caring for others. Mission projects included building brick houses in Mexico for those not fortunate enough to have a roof over their heads, and teaching bible school to young children in Belize. All of these trips have been both fulfilling and enjoyable.

Learning from others. Similarly Carter wrote of growing up and developing through his church involvement, joining the leadership team of his youth group when he was 15. As he described his leadership development, Carter used more specific religious references in his essay than Nathan did in his saying that “leaders are encouraged to ‘love others into a responsive and maturing relationship with Jesus Christ.’” To accomplish this mission, he wrote of exhibiting a strong faith in Jesus Christ and of knowing and understanding the Bible. Beyond his religious development, his essay primarily focused on the skills the leadership opportunity provided for him and how those skills have equipped him to begin his college education. Carter wrote that

Three years of mentoring students in my small group have given me an empathetic heart towards my peers and the confidence to advise and counsel them. Being a student leader has not only allowed me to impact others but also allowed me to grow as a person. It has taught me to overcome my shy

nature and be more outgoing...I have learned how to work with adults in order to achieve common goals. Working alongside my youth pastor has shown me how to incorporate humor into situations to convey a message more clearly. Lastly, helping to plan student events and small group discussions has refined my organizational skills.

Personal growth. Jesse's essay was the least sophisticated of the three. He appeared to struggle in the ways that EssayEdge and Accepted indicated that an applicant might when writing on religion and spirituality. In his essay, Jesse discussed his relationship with a new friend and his relationship with God. He struggled to convey his dissatisfaction with his church as he approached Confirmation.

Finally the day came for me to make my Confirmation, and it felt like I was receiving a real cleansing. My life was going to change for the better and my faith was going to grow. Immediately after that day, I looked into joining the youth group, but there was no effort from the youth leaders to encourage people to join. At least hold an event or two for the youth to come and see what the program is all about, but there was nothing. I didn't feel like that was my calling from God, it felt like he wanted me to do something else, but I didn't know what.

Jesse went on to describe leaving his church at the urging of his friend and joining another.

For once I felt like I was going to be a part of something to my church. It was one of the best experiences I had that really opened up my heart to God and life. It changed me as a person and now I feel more content with my life. Most of the focus of the class was on seriously considering our relationship with God, and I did just that...I was glad to receive this opportunity.

Jesse's essay did not attempt to link his experience to his readiness for college.

However, he successfully portrayed the importance of religion in his life and perhaps that's all he meant to do.

Summary

This chapter reports the results of the exploratory analysis of 150 college application essays. The research indicates that applicants select from five primary topics for their college application essay: passions, events, places, religion, and people. Within these few areas, however, applicant stories are as varied as the GPA's and major interests they represent.

Applicants submitted narratives that discussed academic perseverance, educational growth, and overcoming personal and academic odds. They recounted defining moments in their lives and moments when they recognized that they had matured into a new and better person. They wrote of becoming leaders and serving others. Applicants wrote about how much they disliked moving and how much they grew from it. Lastly, they wrote about the people in their lives and the moments that tested their emotions, their sanity, and their willingness to be themselves.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

“The instructor said, Go home and write a page tonight. And let that page come out of you---Then, it will be true. I wonder if it’s that simple? [...] It’s not easy to know what is true for you or me” (Hughes, 1951). In his poem *Theme for English B* Langston Hughes gives poetic beauty to the questions and concerns raised by university applicants as they sit to write essays for their college applications (McGinty, 2004). Hughes considers whether the class writing assignment is actually just a poem or whether it is, in fact, two contextually different works; one understood in the context of his experiences and the other understood in the context of the instructor’s (the reader’s) experiences. He ponders what this parallel context says about the validity of the poem and specifically communicates with the reader the very act of wondering whether such communication is possible.

So will my page be colored that I write? Being me, it will not be white. But it will be a part of you, instructor. You are white---yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.[...]As I learn from you, I guess you learn from me---although you’re older---and white---and somewhat more free. (Hughes, 1951)

Obviously, poetry analysis is not the focus of this dissertation. Nonetheless, it is fitting that Langston Hughes captures the essence of the focus of this research. Hughes captures the dichotomy between black and white but the poem also represents the conflict between young and old, rich and poor, highly educated and those less so, rural and urban, and all of the other potential differences that could exist between the writer of the college application essay and its reader. *Theme for English B* reflects the battle that applicants face when writing the application essay. This battle, encouraged by a multi-million dollar application assistance industry, the unfamiliarity of the

application essay, and the importance of personal credentials such as the essay, suggests an area of research deserving of more. This study extends the research that exists on a similar genre of writing, the personal statement, and enters into a relatively new discussion of the college application essay. Understanding what applicants choose to write about and how they are guided to write their essays is an important administrative concern for the field of college and university admissions. This final chapter provides a summary of this study's findings, recommendations for practice, and recommendations for further research.

Statement of the Problem, Research Questions, and Method

This study has previously reported on the increasing selectivity of college admissions and on an increasing reliance on a multitude of credentials to inform the selection process (Fitzsimmons, 1991; Hawkins and Clinedinst, 2006; Kilgore, 2004). Applicants are likewise seeking to increase their value to institutions through these personal credentials (Kilgore, 2004; Paley, 1996). Traditionally college applicants have turned to their high school counselors for help with the college application (Cohen, 2006). However, the literature and volume of out-of-school sources indicates that some applicants are now looking for help with the application process outside of their high schools and are turning to private consultants and Internet resources (Cohen, 2006).

Among the credentials being considered by many colleges and universities is the application essay. Paley (1996) suggests that the application essay is unfamiliar territory for high school writers and as such it stymies them as they try to determine

how to approach the essay and what to write about. Popular media has swelled bookshelves and the Internet with guidebooks and advice on how to write the essay; but the Academy has not seriously considered the essay in a scholarly way. Three studies have informed the literature, and are described in chapter two, but none examined the undergraduate application essay from the applicant's perspective. These studies examined the personal statement from a rhetorical perspective, addressing the essay from the reader's point of view (Brown, 2005; Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993, Paley, 1996). Vidali (2007) began the discussion of the essay from an applicant's standpoint but focused her study on the essay as it relates to students with disabilities. Conversely, this study evaluated the essay and the advice literature that sought to inform it from the writer's perspective. To do so, this research asked three research questions.

RQ1: What advice is available to applicants on the World Wide Web regarding college application essays?

RQ2: What are college applicants writing about in their application essays?

RQ3: What is the relationship between what applicants write in their essays and the advice that is available to them?

To examine these questions, this study employed a three-part interpretive research methodology in which the researcher combined elements of meta-analysis (Noblit & Hare, 1998), qualitative content analysis (Smith, McLeod, & Wakefield, 2005), and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987). The meta-analysis restricted the number of popular websites that were produced on a Google search to a manageable number for data collection. The qualitative content analysis examined the eight resulting websites for themes and trends regarding advice on writing the

college application essay. The third stage, an ethnographic content analysis, examined 150 college application essays for themes in applicant writing.

Summary of Findings

The following section summarizes the findings of this research. This study was divided into two parts, an examination of websites (advice literature) and an examination of a sample of college application essays. Initially, the researcher performed a meta-analysis of the World Wide Web looking for references to the college application essay. A search on the string “college application essay” resulted in tens of thousands of sources. The researcher restricted the examination to the ten most popular sites as determined by Google’s popularity ratings. Two were later removed due to redundancy.

Just Tell Me What To Say...: The Advice Literature

The eight websites examined revealed a range of services offering application assistance to applicants. These services ranged from not-for-profit entities offering assistance on the college application essay to service-for-a-fee consulting and editing services. The services offered include student message boards allowing students to converse with one another, downloadable guidebooks, and information relating to the college search, admissions process, financial aid, and college life. Several sites offered sample essays, excerpts from essays, and ways for students to share their essays with one another for critique. These sites also actively displayed their for-profit services and their desire to gain the student as a client.

Sites such as *Cambridge Essay Service*, *Essay Edge*, and *Spark Notes* lauds their student and success credentials as their best selling feature: “created by Harvard students..., we ‘know’ elite business schools..., the best and biggest editing resource...” Similarly, they highlighted the “millions of users and tens of thousands of customers that they have served (www.EssayEdge.com)” In exchange for their expertise, these sites offer editing, consulting, and writing services ranging in cost from \$85 for a scholarship essay review from *EssayEdge* to a 10 hour consultation package for \$2,340 (for rush service) from *Accepted*.

After identifying the context of the advice literature, the researcher returned to the websites in search of themes regarding concerns the applicants face when writing the essay. In chapter four, the advice literature revealed four issues that applicants face when writing their application essays: (1) angst, (2) how to write, (3) to whom is the applicant writing, and (4) what to write. These issues served as open codes that guided the advice literature analysis. Data emerged within the advice literature on the four themes and are summarized below.

Angst: creation and resolution. In offering applicants advice, it was difficult to delineate where the advice ended and the pitch for the product being sold began. The two were impossibly intertwined. The marketing strategy by many of these sites appeared to be designed to both create anxiety in the applicant and to assuage their fears by offering a “solution”...for a fee. The sites informed applicants, just as Brown (2004) and Paley (1996) suggested, that they were ill prepared to write the college application essay. The sites suggested that applicants must compete with

tools that are beyond their current capabilities and that regardless of the strength of their application, only the essay, the perfect essay, can ensure success. Anxiety provoking phrases such as the need for an essay “compelling enough to catch the attention of a busy admissions officer” were followed by solutions to the applicant’s problem:

Essay edge will give you an advantage in the ultra-competitive college application process by editing your admissions essays to perfection, while at the same time maintaining your unique voice. (www.essayedge.com)

While advising applicants on how to select a topic, the sites further promote anxiety by informing applicants that the topic can be about “anything” as long as that “anything” “captures the reader’s attention and shows that [they] are exceptional” (essayedge.com).

McGinty (2002) reported on the cynicism that applicants experience when they are told to “relax and be themselves” when it comes to their application essay. *Cambridge Essay Services* demonstrates this cynicism by telling applicants that they have several “selves” and that the challenge involves picking the right one!

The message boards on *SparkNotes.com* fully reflect what the literature reports on the anxiety faced by applicants. Applicants, in a chat room focused on the application essay, plead for assistance, critiques, topics, secret tips, and camaraderie. The anxiety reflected in the threads on this site raises concerns for further study into the emotional impact of the application essay. Examples such as “lost and confused”, “...I’m freaking out and am ten seconds away from bursting into tears [grammar original to quote]”, “I owe my life to someone that can help me...”, and “I’m

drowning...” give credibility to Paley’s suggestion that the essay is a “test of emotional literacy.”

How to write. The literature reports that applicants are unfamiliar with a writing assignment like the college application essay (McGinty, 2002, Paley, 1996). They are taught to analyze poetry and are comfortable writing about the lives of historical figures but struggle when turning the pen towards themselves. The advice literature attempts to help applicants approach the writing process by informing applicants of the importance of a powerful opening statement and of maintaining their “voice” throughout the writing process.

The advice literature also tells applicants that colleges and universities are trying to get to know them and that the essay is the conduit for that personal connection: “The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college [...] speak your own voice and personalize your application (www.ACM.com)” and “...make them feel that they know you AND LIKE YOU, and they might accept you despite your weakness [...] (Essay Edge, 2006).”

Beyond a great deal of advice regarding opening and voice, the advice literature also informs applicants to avoid the use of cliché’s. “Show don’t tell” says *EssayEdge*. Avoid “generic statements and platitudes” recommends *Accepted*. The advice literature also warns applicants of the dangers of clichéd topics and to avoid “yet another essay about how an Outward Bound trip allows your inner strength to blossom” (*EssayEdge, 2006*); as well as to avoid any topic that began with or contains phrases such as “I always learn from my mistakes; I know my dreams will

come true; ___is my passion; I no longer take loved ones for granted; and I know what it is to triumph over adversity,” etc.

To whom is the applicant writing? Concerns with power statements, voice, and turmoil over the writing process all support Brown’s (2004) theory of an “imbalance of knowledge.” A second focus in this imbalance, beyond the question of “what to write,” is “who they are writing to”. The advice literature aims to inform applicants of this as well. The analysis of the sites revealed that they tend to tell applicants whom they are probably *not* writing to, specifically: Olympic judges, old men in bow ties with English accents, tyrants with red pencils, etc.

This topic in the advice literature revealed contradictory and questionable information. Several sites take liberties to explain admission file review processes. These explanations of how files are read, report in generalities, might improperly inform applicants of the process in place at the institution to which they are applying. Some website’s suggestions that files are read by committee or referred by inexperienced readers to more experienced readers do not demonstrate complete knowledge of just how varied admissions processes are. Conversely, some sites provide a more holistic evaluation of the audience that receives application essays. SparkNotes informs applicants that “admissions officers are just people [...] some are recent graduates, others have been in the profession for thirty years; some are a laugh-a-minute, while others are humorless...” and properly suggests to applicants to not attempt to target their application to a particular type of person.

What to write? McGinty (2002) writes that the application essay frustrates applicants because it asks them to reveal themselves in unfamiliar ways. She tells applicants “how you write...reveal[s] your writing abilities. What you write about will reveal you” (p. 65). The advice literature similarly tells applicants that the topic they select reveals their preferences, values, and thought processes. Further, it tells them that unique and memorable essays are so because they are more focused not because they are written on earth-shattering topics. To that end, the advice literature reminds applicants that the lives of seventeen year-olds, their lives, are more similar than varied.

To assist applicants with selecting a topic, the advice literature offers questions for personal reflection, do’s and don’ts, and points to ponder. These questions and points of reflection remind applicants of the importance of personalization, honesty, self-revelation, storytelling, uniqueness, appropriateness, and the ability to be straightforward and focused. Beyond this general “what to write” advice, the research identified five primary topics for college admission essays. The five topics identified are as follows: (a) events, (b) passions, (c) people, (d) places, and (e) religion. The literature suggests that exploring these five areas helps applicants discover what has made them who they are and allows them the opportunity to share that reflection with the admissions committee.

In regard to these five areas, the advice literature reminds applicants to take care to “show, don’t [just] tell” when acknowledging the role that events played in shaping their lives. Similarly, the literature suggests that reflecting a passion in life is

particularly powerful if it results in action. When writing about people, the literature reminds applicants that colleges and universities are interested in seeing how they relate to the world around them. Further, it suggests to applicants that essays about places and trips have the power to demonstrate how a physical space or a travel experience had a transformative effect on an applicant's life. Lastly, applicants are universally warned to be careful with writing about religion as it may be considered by some to be a "touchy" subject (Accepted, 2006, p. 50). Nonetheless, the websites acknowledge the importance of religion in some applicant's lives and advise that they take care to convey honest stories and reflections on the influence of religion and religious expression on their growth and maturation.

And I'll Tell You Who I am...: The Essays

As previously reported, the analysis of the advice literature revealed four concerns that applicants encounter when writing the application essay. These four concerns were examined in concert with the five topics suggested by the advice literature as topics applicants should consider for their application essay. The five topics became the open codes for the essay analysis. This section provides a summary of the analysis of 150 application essays in relation to the open and axial codes that emerged in the website analysis. The essays examined were submitted to The University of Texas at Austin by applicants for the class of 2006. The analysis was guided by the five axial codes that emerged from phase two, the advice literature analysis: (a) events, (b) passions, (c) places, (d) people, and (e) religion.

The 150 application essays that were analyzed did, by and large, represent topics that followed the themes reported in the advice literature. After sorting the essays according to the five open codes, they were further analyzed to determine selective codes that represented the specific topics on which applicants wrote. The axial codes that emerged are representative of the setbacks, challenges, or opportunities that applicants faced. The research revealed that applicants wrote essays that focused on: (a) academic opportunities, (b) careers/jobs, (c) travel, (d) religion, (e) moving, (f) activities, (g) family, (h) coping with adversity, and (i) coping with illness and death. A combination of the axial codes with their corresponding selective codes enabled the researcher to examine the context of the essays.

As reported by the literature, applicants use the college application essay as a mechanism to demonstrate their appropriateness for selection to attend an institution (McGinty, 2002; Paley, 1996). McGinty suggested that the essay *topic* was not the point of the essay. In a relatively small sample of essays, the analysis revealed that applicants chose a variety of topics to showcase their strengths. Applicants wrote essays on such topics as home schooling, early graduation, theater performance, defining moments in their lives, career aspirations, mission trips, church participation, moving, extracurricular activities, working, scouting, sports injuries, volunteering, divorce, death, and a host of other subjects. This study found, as McGinty suggested, the topic was secondary to the traits and characteristics that the applicant sought, consciously or not, to express. For example, in the process of describing the impact

of moving multiple times or of caring for a sick relative, applicants provided a snapshot of a moment in their lives, but more importantly they demonstrated fortitude and strength, traits that they and the advice literature suggest are important to admissions offices. In that regard the analysis revealed five traits that consistently emerged from the essays. These selective codes, the vehicle through which applicants reveal their appropriateness for admission, are as follows: (a) perseverance, (b) willingness to take risks, (c) educational and personal growth, (d) maturity, (e) leadership and service.

. These traits were *repeated* across the essays but were portrayed in such unique ways that the repetitiveness became insignificant to the researcher.

Perseverance. Applicants demonstrated their perseverance and fortitude through a variety of topics. Some told stories of academic failure and recovery. Julie thought she was accomplished to have graduated a year early from high school. But, she floundered and struggled with the realities of adulthood. “I began to believe that I would never make it to college. I would never have the opportunity to pursue my career.” But she continued fighting and within a couple of years found herself submitting an application to her first choice college.

Others wrote of a lack of support in their lives that gave them the resolve to be better than they imagined they could be. Still others wrote of defeats on the playing field and battling back from those disheartening moments. Jackson wrote of his repeatedly broken foot, injuries that robbed him on his junior football season: “life doesn’t always give you what you want. I learned humility and perseverance from

this challenge and although I didn't come out on top I do truly feel like I gained something." Similarly, applicants told tragic stories of family turmoil, from which they emerged if not victorious, at least, unscathed.

Through the essays, applicants displayed characteristics to the admissions office that they felt were beneficial to the evaluation of their application. Whether they consciously brought forth these aspects of their persona or were simply responding to the prompt needs further research. Nonetheless, some consideration appeared to be given to demonstrating the strength of their resolve. Perhaps they wanted to make the connection between the challenges that they had already faced and the resolve they felt was necessary to navigate college life.

Risks. Applicants also demonstrated their willingness to take risks. Through stories of cross-country and cross-state and cross-city moving, applicants wrote of the challenge of uprooting again...and again. These applicants did not necessarily consider themselves to be risk-takers, but the stories they told of their adaptability and flexibility indeed demonstrated their ability to "go for it," even if they didn't have a choice. They seemingly wanted to convey their ability to "roll with life's punches" just as they would when they encountered obstacles in their college career. Brian, admitted that he approached his move to another state with child-like immaturity. Looking back, however, Brian recalls that "[L]ike Columbus, I lunged forward step by step, out into the cold dark world of uncertainty [...] and I sailed through moving like a hot knife through butter [...] I'll have to move one more time, but maybe this time wont be so bad."

Others wrote of travel experiences in which they stepped out of their shell. Several applicants chose to participate in mission trips to countries with which they were not familiar. For some, the willingness to participate in the trip was risky. For others, like Julia, the risk was in the outcome. Julia was not at all hesitant to participate in the mission trip to Honduras, but she did “expect to find only poverty and sadness.” To her surprise, she did find poor people and destitute people; happy and peaceful poor and destitute people. For Julia, the risk was not the trip, but the willingness to learn that she was not the bearer of peace and happiness. Julia’s eyes were opened on her trip and she was willing to let them be opened. It was risky for her. She didn’t expect it to happen and was humbled by her experiences.

Educational and Personal Growth. The essays contained many examples of applicants demonstrating the ways in which they had grown or changed because of a challenge or setback. These examples were portrayed most often through stories of academic struggle and turmoil in personal relationships. Applicants wrote of choosing to take the harder path when faced with academic decisions and the benefits they gained from their choices: time management, independence, cultural interaction, and others. They wrote of these challenges and gains in the context of their benefit to them later in life, particularly once they go on to college.

Two homeschooled applicants wrote of their educational and personal opportunities to grow. Perhaps aware of the unique nature of their academic background, these applicants wrote about the educational opportunities availed them through homeschooling. William entered homeschooling kicking and screaming.

After he came around, he wrote of the opportunity to be more involved in the selection of his curriculum and his educational future, and of the time management and study skills he acquired. William made the connection between these experiences and the challenges that he would face in college, for which he now feels confidently prepared.

Others turned setbacks into intellectual opportunities. Katrina, an aspiring herbalist and naturist fell sick. Her initial disillusionment with the power of herbs to keep her immune to all illness was replaced by a more rationale pursuit of the study of alternative medicine. She conveyed to the admissions committee that her goals, to study pre-pharmacy, were not grounded in irrational beliefs. Instead, while her professional pursuits are non-traditional they are well thought out and balanced with realistic expectations

Religion, while not often discussed in the essays, was discussed within the context of personal growth. Jesse grew in unexpected ways. He struggled, as the advice literature suggested applicants might, to convey the role of religion in his life. Evidence of his growth was conveyed through his struggles with his Church. His acceptance of his needing a change in church home renewed his faith in himself and his God and gave him peace and contentment. Jesse admitted that this event changed him.

Tyler and Julia wrote of their travel experiences to convey evidence of their personal growth. Tyler, after visits to concentration camps in Auschwitz, Poland recognized that he lived his life in a “cultural bubble.” Julia, as well, wrote of her

cultural isolation. On a mission trip to Honduras, she expected to experience abject poverty and sadness and was surprised to find Honduran people, while poor, happy and content. Julia wrote that the trip changed her perspective on happiness.

Maturity. Applicant's best demonstrated their maturity through essays that focused on relationships with others and their adaptability and flexibility as they encountered life's hurdles. In many cases, some made strong connections between their interests and abilities and their career choice. Aaron wrote of his TV addiction, particularly to court dramas, and consequently, his desire to become a lawyer. But, demonstrating his sense of maturity and sophistication, he connected his childhood enjoyment with a more tangible experience to justify his interest in the law. It wasn't the glamour of the television show but rather his experiences interning with a lawyer and seeing the law in action. That internship provided him with a mentor who taught him much more than he ever saw in television dramas and grounded his belief that a future in law as the best choice for him.

Other applicants wrote of travel experiences and the impact that had on their maturity and sophistication. Without her mother's blessing Jamie traveled on a mission trip to Japan, determined to experience a culture and people different from herself. She wrote that the trip gave her "an overall appreciation for [her] life and how [she] lives." The encounter that she knew she would face with her mother put the trip in perspective for her. But she wrote of having no regrets and of appreciating how the experience shaped who she is and her personal development. Similarly, Eric wrote of his evolving maturation while on a trip to Europe. He wrote, "I grew up

quite fast there and learned to be responsible for myself and others. It was an invaluable lesson that I have been able to apply to other areas in my life and I am sure it will be very helpful to me in a college setting.”

Even though applicants who wrote of their experiences moving across the state and across the country didn’t necessarily write of fond memories of those moves, they did demonstrate a sense of maturity about a decision that was not theirs to make. They learned to be flexible and to roll with life’s punches. Some even grew to accept their parent’s fallibility. From it all, they recognize that what they learned through their tumultuous instability would benefit them in their next transition to college.

Applicants further displayed their evolving maturity as they discussed their religious beliefs. Nathan wrote of being willing to and learning from others. His church experiences taught him tolerance, adaptability, the virtues of hard work, and caring for others. Similarly, Carter wrote of learning to work with the adults in his church self-confidence, and development of skills through his church involvement.

Leadership and service. Applicants seemed to make easier connections between their experiences and their leadership potential and they often did so with grace and humor. Isaiah admitted that he joined JROTC only to avoid PE. To his surprise it transformed him into a mediating, crisis managing, fundraising, delegating, motivating leader. He recognized and wrote about his transformation from a student seeking refuge from the gym to a competent leader who seeks to influence his peers through his own behavior. Lucas, on the other hand, planned his leadership growth.

He recognized early on that scouting would help him develop into a mature, proven, morally rich leader and for those traits he pursued his Eagle Scout distinction.

Throughout the essays that focused on leadership or leadership potential, applicants were not always direct nor did they always make the connection themselves. But for an admission officer, recognizing leadership potential is part of the responsibility of evaluating applicants. To that end, more subtle reflections of leadership also emerged from the essays. They wrote of volunteer service, emergency rescues at accident scenes, political activism, and facing their fears. From these stories emerged examples of their leadership potential through their willingness to serve. Applicants wrote of life-changing service work. Whitney describes to the admissions committee her fervent belief that change occurs with an open mind, thoughtfulness, and dedication. Kevin learned that “anybody can make a difference.” For some, their service instilled passion for service; for others, it instilled a calling for a life’s work. Cole, unmoved by his volunteer service, did become fervent in his desire to become a physician.

Of course, the traits and motivations that emerged from this analysis are interpretations made by this researcher. The literature suggests that applicants ‘stage’ themselves in their essays as a means to their desired end. Vidali (2007) found that students with disabilities both in their essays and in interviews admitted to revealing personal and risky aspects of themselves only in an effort to “stand out” among the many applications that admissions officers are reading. Therefore, this research supports prior studies that indicate that the writing of college application essays (or

personal statements) is in fact as Paley (1996) argues, an exercise in a rhetorical paradox. Applicants emerge from the angst and confusion of how to approach and what to write about in their college application essay to produce a work that reveals personal characteristics that they think are important to college admissions officers and that they hope, will ultimately result in an admission to their institution of choice.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of these findings, the admissions industry should look inward towards their practices in regard to the application essay. Four primary concerns emerged from this research that the admissions profession should address. First the “angst” associated with the college application essay and the questions of how to write, what to write, and to whom they are writing are driving a frenzy of commercial activity in the “how to” industries. Instead, the profession and admission offices at individual institutions should address these same questions and inform the applicant population of what’s important to the admissions community. Popular guidebooks and websites have proven to be a viable resource for students and the application industry will undoubtedly continue to grow and applicants will continue to spend millions of dollars for commercial help. This is strong evidence that applicants are not being helped by the websites of their institutions of choice nor from guidance counselors in their high school. Admission officers continue to be the true experts in regard to application to their institutions and should be more directive about the admission essay

With these certainties, admissions offices are an equally, and in this researchers opinion, the most important resource for a college applicant. However, the utility of that office is dependent on the information that they provide for applicants. The results of this research indicate that applicants need to be informed of what's important to the institution. What makes an ideal candidate? What are they looking for in essays? This research suggests that applicants may need to simply know that the admission office is aware that seventeen year olds are more alike than dissimilar and they that are not expected to have changed the world in those short seventeen years. Mission statements should be unique and candid and truly reflect the mores of the institution and the types of students they seek to enroll.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focuses on beginning a discussion regarding the college application essay from an applicant perspective. Because this was yet unexplored, this study limited the data collection to a small sample: advice literature from a limited number of sources and a controlled number of essays from a single institution. Others have studied similar genre's but this study focuses on the essay from the applicants perspective and begins where they begin, with an analysis of the topic and how they might choose to write on a certain topic. There are several studies that could extend from this research and that could continue this discussion of the application essay.

Focus Group Study

This study would benefit significantly from a parallel study that engages in a think-aloud protocol with a group of college applicants. As Brown (2005) and Vidali

(2007) found, walking side-by-side with an applicant provides an opportunity to truly test and determine their motivations. This study makes assumptions regarding what applicants might have done, but a study involving applicants could more closely study what actually happens in the application process. This study lays the groundwork from what is available to applicants; follow-up research should witness their process. A process that enables a researcher to question student's choices and their motives, witness their visits to the Internet and other assistance services, listen to their actual frustrations and their struggles and to apply that information to an analysis of the resulting essay would greatly expand this research.

Cross-Institutional Research

A limitation of this study is that it focuses on a single institution. There are a variety of types of institutions, depending on whose designation is being considered: public vs. private, research vs. teaching, small vs. large. This study considered only applicants from a large Research I institution. As explained in Chapter three, the researcher does not doubt the relevance of this study to a larger population given the nature of the institution, the restrictions imposed on selecting data for this study, and the nature of the admissions process at the research site. However, it is not unreasonable to believe that different applicants choose to apply to different institutions for different reasons. It is certainly plausible that a subset of teenagers who never consider applying to an institution like the site institution might respond differently. A study of this type, performed within- and across-institutions would be useful in generalizing the results of this study to the applicant population at large.

The benefit of a study of this nature is that it can be replicated by colleges and universities around the country to examine the development of the essay amongst their own applicant pool. This research, while useful to the Academy, is infinitely useful to administrators within admissions offices and student affairs programs.

Future research should use the four open codes as a beginning point for evaluating the college application essay. The applicant's voice is often missing in the development of admissions policy and research focused on gaining insight into their experiences, anxieties, and emotions would be beneficial to policymakers as they seek to do what's best for their applicants and for their institution.

Internal Research

Colleges and universities should also examine their own processes. This research indicates that the essay writing process is an emotional test of endurance for applicants. Schools should question their intent in requiring the essays and be forthcoming to students regarding the purpose of the essay in the application process. Brown (2005) wrote of the "imbalance of knowledge." Informing applicants of what the admissions office is seeking, what the mission is of the university and admissions office would go a long way towards settling some of that imbalance. Applicants will likely continue to strategize, seek outside assistance, and the application industry will likely continue to blossom. And yet, no matter the path taken to get there, the process still results in a class of eager freshman beginning the next stage of their lives on a college campus. This fact, doesn't lead the researcher to bother questioning the motives of the assistance industry or to question the integrity of the applicants essays

but rather to focus on institutional knowledge that can be influenced by this and similar research. The admissions community will continue to evolve with the Internet and with today's teenagers. Research of this nature helps to inform our community and to provide other opportunities to further dialogue regarding the issues that we face together.

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