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The College Essay

By Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D.

Seniors all over the country are busy writing their college application essays. Juniors will be doing the same task next year. Students applying to the University of California (UC) are required to write two personal statements (essays) that respond to what are called the "UC Prompts." As a college admissions advisor, I offer my clients guidance in the selection of essay topics, recommendations about how to personalize essays, and editorial assistance. Here are some tips and strategies that work well for all students applying to the UC campuses.

Do understand the purpose of the UC personal statement. The UC does not ask for letters of recommendation. Therefore, each campus relies on the personal statement to add clarity, depth and meaning to the student's application. Put simply, the essays help the university to know and understand you better.

Do fill out a hard copy of the UC application. Then review it critically. Pretend to be an admissions officer. What questions may come up in the reader's mind? Have you attended different high schools? Have you been employed many hours a week? Did your grades fluctuate? For example, if a student's grades dipped during junior year and she worked many hours during the same time period, a reader might reasonably wonder: "Why did the student work so many hours at the expense of grades?" A student may work to supplement family income because a parent has lost a job. That is something an admissions reader needs to understand, and you can find a way to weave this information into your essay.

Do be yourself and use your own voice. Choose a topic that highlights your strengths. This is not the time to be modest about your accomplishments. On the other hand, if you have had some problems that affected academics, you may be able to craft a personal statement to tell what you have learned and how you have grown from your experiences.

Do be certain your essay clearly responds to the question being asked. Get feedback, revise your work and ask someone (a trusted advisor or English teacher) to proof read. Submit work that is free of spelling and grammatical errors, and uses good writing conventions.

A key component of success in college is your ability to write. For this reason, colleges want to know you as a writer. Colleges assess your writing in several ways-for example they look at your coursework and grades, especially in subjects that require a good deal of writing. If you are a senior, you probably have already taken the SAT or the ACT. The essay section of these standardized tests represents another way colleges evaluate your writing skills. However, the essay section of these tests is time and topic limited. In contrast, the UC personal statement provides an opportunity to compose a personal narrative on a topic of your choosing. It is well worth the time and effort to develop essays that you are proud to submit with your application.

Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. works as an independent college advisor in Lafayette. Dr. LaScala draws on 20 years of experience in higher education and research to customize the college search and admission process for students and their families. She has 3 daughters one a graduate of Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo), one a sophomore at MIT and the youngest, a junior in high school. Dr. LaScala can be contacted at elizabeth@doingcollege.com or (925) 891-4491.

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