

Published February 13th, 2013

## Lafayette's College Admissions Advisor The Common Application: Change Remains the Same

By Elizabeth LaScala



Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. is a Lafayette college admissions advisor. Dr. LaScala draws on 22 years of higher education experience to help guide and support the college admissions process for students and their families. Dr. LaScala is a member of NACAC, WACAC and HECA. She can be contacted at (925) 891-4491 or [elizabeth@doingcollege.com](mailto:elizabeth@doingcollege.com). Visit [www.doingcollege.com](http://www.doingcollege.com) for more information about her services.

When a high school student starts to apply to college, the first application he or she will probably encounter is called the "Common Application," produced by a nonprofit organization called "Common Application" ([www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)) that serves members and students nationwide by providing a single application to streamline the college admission process. Students may submit this 'common' application to any of the organization's nearly 500 member colleges.

At the annual meeting of the National Association for College Admission Counseling last October, Common Application announced that the fourth-generation Common Application would be launched this summer and the new version would incorporate several important changes. Since the announcement, a multitude of voices weighed in on the proposed modifications, but the one change that caused the most discussion was the fact that the original six essay questions were going to be totally revised. No one knew what the new prompts would be and concerns were raised by both college counselors and admission staff since both sides are well aware of the importance of the college essay.

The prior version of the application required a short response describing one activity in which the student is involved. In addition, the student was asked to write a longer personal essay that responded to one of six possible prompts. One of the six was 'topic of your choice' which Common Application decided to remove as an option. This change alone prompted much discussion in the college admission world and thousands upon thousands of words flew back and forth on the pros and cons of excluding this alternative. Another flurry of pens accompanied the word limit to be placed on the essay.

Now the wait is over-the 2013-14 essay prompts debuted Feb. 5. The short-response question about one activity has been deleted entirely, and the previous prompts have been replaced by five brand new ones. They are:

1. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
4. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there and why is it meaningful to you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

The minimum word count is still 250 words, and the maximum count has been increased to 650 words; that limit will be strictly enforced. Although it is true that the new set of questions do not include the open option, the first prompt is quite broad and easily gives students enough flexibility to write about virtually any topic of their choice. The remaining four prompts offer ample opportunity for students to distinguish themselves. Take for example prompt two: all students experience failure—a concussion that ends your participation in sports for a season, a poor grade that lowers your overall grade in a class you struggled in, a debate lost. Later as you move past the disappointment, you can reflect on how you coped and lessons learned.

Young people challenge ideas, take risks, regret actions taken or opportunities missed to act. With luck, each of us has a place where we are at peace and feel contentment. For many that place is concrete, like your room or atop a childhood tree house, and for some it could be a transcendent state of mind, that when reached brings calm

to the soul. In each family and many cultures, events mark adulthood, whether formal like a bat mitzvah or quite informal, as when a young man's father accepts his son's revelation, even though he disagrees.

With these thoughts in mind, and as much for fun, as to allay undue concern about new questions, I went back to each and every essay my senior clients wrote for the Common Application during the last two admission cycles. That represented nearly 100 unique essays. I found that each student's essay could be used to respond fully and well to one (or more) of the new questions. Despite all the discussions about how the changes in the Common Application could harm the application process or diminish opportunities to develop a personal, creative essay, my conviction is that relatively little has changed. The essay remains the place on the application where the student can respond using his or her own voice in a personal, unique and insightful way.

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA