

Published November 5th, 2014

It's Not Enough to Say You Are a Good Match for a College: Prove it!

By Elizabeth LaScala



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Many colleges include a prompt that asks the question "Why do you want to attend our college?" You will see this item in different forms, such as "How did you first learn about our college and how did your interest develop?" or "What are the unique qualities about our college that make you want to attend?" These essays range from short answers (perhaps 100 words or so) to longer essays (usually 500 words or sometimes even longer).

Many admissions professionals say that they read the "Why our school?" essay first. They want to see if you truly know why you want to attend the school other than its excellent reputation, outstanding location, or world-renowned faculty. So how do you go about doing this?

Learn all you can about the college's educational program. Is there a quarter or semester system? Why does that system appeal to you? Is there a highly structured core curriculum or greater flexibility to define your course of study? Why does that type of educational program attract you? What is the academic culture on campus? Does it lean more toward collaboration or competition? How does that work with your learning style and what you have achieved in high school?

After you have done complete research, describe how your academic interests developed and how you will pursue your interests at that particular college. If are interested in mechanical engineering because you worked in a bike shop each summer and enjoyed rebuilding older bicycles and doing repairs, be sure to include this in your essay. Connect that experience to the college's

engineering curriculum. If you learned two programming languages using open courseware online to prepare for an AP computer science class offered at your high school, be sure to include this information, and link it to the programming languages required to take certain classes in your major. The more specific you are, the more convincing you will be.

If you have room after you discuss your academic goals, you can discuss the college's social climate. For example, if you are looking for a closely knit college community, it helps to know what proportion of students remain on campus over the weekend. If you've visited the school or spoken to current students, admissions counselors, or professors, infuse those experiences into the essay. It's great to include those encounters and explain why they helped you confirm the match.

Above all else, avoid restating the college's mission or what is in the college brochure. They know that information backwards. Go well beyond the marketing of the college's website to glean information. Check out special seminars and guest speakers; read an issue of the school's

newspaper to get a feel for the student body's political and social orientations. Find clubs on campus that give you the opportunity to continue passions you pursued in high school or try something new.

The key to responding well to the "Why Our College?" essay is specificity and sincerity. Do your homework and write a thoughtful, personalized essay that convinces the college that you have put effort into researching the school, understand what the college offers and how the school can meet your needs.

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