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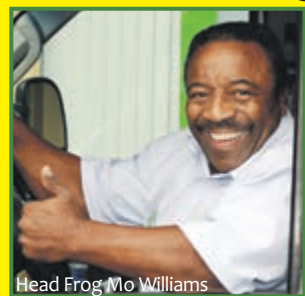
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## Progressive Groups Organize in Lamorinda

By Sophie Braccini

The outcome of the presidential election has left many progressive Lamorinda residents in a state of apprehension. Many, however, have moved past resentment and looked to regroup for action. From simple conversations to beginning organized actions, Lamorinda is engaging the dialogue about what to do in a post-Obama area.

Maura Wolf remembers the days after the presidential election when she had been watching two conversations on social media that seemed to her very negative and destructive to the community environment. She offered to facilitate a face-to-face exchange, a forum where people would listen to each other. Being on the faculty of the Leadership Department at Saint Mary's College, she contacted her employer to get their permission to house a community dialogue on campus, and called on her friend Edy Schwartz to reach out to as many people as possible. The first meeting took place at the beginning of December and 45 people showed up. This group of people is now meeting monthly.

At the same time in Orinda, Rebecca Verity and her friends created the Orinda Progressive Action Alliance.

At the Thursday Jan. 12 meeting organized by OPAA over 50 people gathered at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Orinda. Everyone was invited to indicate one issue they were interested in discussing. People listed tens of topics including gerrymandering, religious equality, poverty, women issues, health, diversity, homelessness, the Supreme Court, education, the electoral college, justice, environment and many more. The desire in the crowd was to organize to do something positive.

Some members of OPAA will organize "diversity dinners" where people of different opinions and origin will be invited to discuss diverse topics. Letters to the editors will be sent to local and regional media, people will subscribe to independent media, and educate themselves on specific topics of interest and share the results of their research on the group's website or blog.

The group has started to pro-

pose to the participants different action meetings such as a phone banking training session on Jan. 27, or gathering to call representatives on critical issues. Information can be found online at <http://orindaprogressives.wixsite.com/opaa>.

Meanwhile in Moraga, the conversations continued and on Saturday Jan. 14 people gathered at Saint Mary's College. Wolf was pleased to see that the audience was very diverse in age, with about 33 percent of attendees being either high school or Saint Mary's students.

"The objective is not to lead to action," says Wolf, "but to offer a space for people of all ages and opinions to debate and listen to each other."

This group will continue to meet monthly on Saturday morning. The next date is February 4th, location to be announced, registration: <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/lamorinda-community-conversation-tickets-31202321985>.

Meanwhile, calls to conservative organizations found no local activities surrounding last week's presidential inauguration.

## How Do Colleges Evaluate Applicants?

By Elizabeth LaScala

There are many factors that play a role in successful college admissions, and sometimes the decisions of admission officers are puzzling. One student with a very strong academic record may be turned down, while a classmate with less impressive grades is accepted. This article sheds light on the important factors that colleges consider as they review applications.

**Academic Record:** The academic record is the heart of the college application; academic courses taken and grades achieved show evidence of the student's ability to handle the demands of college. Going beyond the minimum recommended for admission to a particular school is always viewed favorably.

**AP Exams:** Colleges look to see if the student took advantage of additional challenging coursework offered at their high school, such as Advanced Placement and Honors classes. Strong performance in these classes indicates that a student is prepared to do college-level work. Admissions officers are familiar with the high schools located in the regions to which they are assigned and they know which courses are tougher. They also know some teachers are more generous with grades, while others are less so. That is why I recommend students who are up to the added rigor of AP coursework also be sure to take and do their best on the nationally administered AP exams as well.

**Standardized Testing:** The SAT and ACT play an important role in admissions. These tests are often viewed as objective measures of readiness for college, because they are independent of the grading standards of high schools. But the tests are not without their critics and there are concerns about what the tests are really measuring. The recent revamping of both the ACT and SAT exams this year has not quelled this debate over the predictive power of these exams for college success. Nevertheless, most schools still rely heavily on test scores to make admission decisions, as well as assign merit aid to students. Strong test preparation

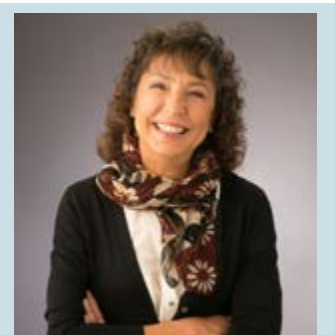
from providers who keep up to date with content and strategies often can help a student elevate scores significantly, but the price tag is usually quite steep. I continue to believe the best test preparation is doing well in high school coursework. When a student has content under control, they can limit test prep to test taking strategies, like building stamina for the long test and careful attention to timing during the exam.

**Extracurricular Record:** Schools today try to admit a well-rounded freshman class, rather than well-rounded students per se. Colleges look for students that are fully engaged in a few significant activities beyond the classroom. Just as an employer is not impressed by an applicant who bounces from one job to the next, acquiring minimal skill-sets along the way, most colleges are unimpressed by a student who presents a long list of short-term activities. I suggest you create "depth rather than breadth" in your extracurricular activities. Participating on the school debate team is good. Winning local, regional, and even national competitions is valued even more highly. The same is true for music, sports, the sciences and the arts, as well as employment.

**Leadership:** There is little doubt that selective schools like to see evidence of leadership; this level of participation often signals a student who is intellectually curious, independent and enthusiastic; someone who adds vibrancy to a campus. President of a student club or editor of the school newspaper are high school level leadership positions, while leadership that extends beyond to local, regional and state organizations is even more notable. I have noted a disturbing trend toward students setting up a clubs at high school, and then do little or nothing with them. Both the founder and the members suffer in this case, because the lack of substance in the activity will at some point come out in the admission process. Whether it is through the counselor or teacher letters of recommendation, in the essays students must write about their activities and/or in the interviews

they have, superficial involvement will take its toll. Join clubs that have a proven track record of accomplishment and step up as an officer of the club, if the opportunity presents itself. If you create club, be sure you are fully committed to it and its mission.

**Put Things In Perspective:** There are many good colleges in the US and every high school student who puts in their best effort academically will be offered admission to college. Not every student is cut out for managing several AP classes each term, nor should they try to do so. Many students have not participated in any leadership role. After all, there are far more students than leadership positions! In this case you can highlight your support role in activities, or a record of employment or community service that distinguishes you as an applicant. Students with substantial responsibilities in the home are exhibiting leadership qualities as well. Finally, spend time writing carefully thought out essays that highlight your strengths. Following these guidelines will enhance your chances for admission to any college. And with a well-balanced, well-matched college list, you will get your share of positive responses.



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD, brings decades of admissions expertise to personally guide each student through applying to well-matched colleges, making each step more manageable and less stressful. She has placed hundreds of students in the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. Reach her at (925) 385-0562 (office) or (925) 330-8801 (mobile), or online at [www.doingcollege.com](http://www.doingcollege.com) or [Elizabeth@doingcollege.com](mailto:Elizabeth@doingcollege.com).