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COVID increased the importance of diversity essays on college applications: Four questions to help you brainstorm

By Elizabeth LaScala PhD



Elizabeth LaScala, PhD personally guides each student through each step of selecting and applying to well-matched schools for undergraduate and graduate school study. Over the past two decades, Elizabeth has placed hundreds of students in some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the U.S. The number of clients taken is limited to ensure each applicant has personalized attention. Contact Elizabeth early in the process to make a difference in your outcomes. Write elizabeth@doingcollege.com; Visit www.doingcollege.com; or Call: 925.385.0562.

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Diversity statements are an increasingly common requirement on college applications. These questions are going to become even more common in upcoming cycles because of the ways the COVID pandemic has changed college admissions. With more colleges offering test optional admission, a far greater number of historically underrepresented individuals are applying to more selective and highly selective schools. Since schools are using this opportunity to expand racial and ethnic diversity on their campuses, diversity prompts are expected to increase in both number and importance.

For some of you, talking about diversity might be easy. For others, it is often much harder. Here are four questions to ask yourself when brainstorming your diversity response:

1) What exactly is diversity?

It's easy to get stuck on a single definition of diversity. But diversity is, in a word, diverse. Sure, it includes traditional personal types of diversity, like race, ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual orientation. But it also goes well beyond these personal attributes to include academic ability, physical ability, mental health, neurodiversity, cultural background, citizenship status, veteran status, adversity, and socioeconomic barriers. There are many other categories. Make a list of things using my recommended categories as jumping off points, and then go beyond as needed to consider how you might add to the diversity of the college. Go beyond the list you develop to write about how each category specifically applies to you.

2) How have I supported, advocated for or otherwise helped others who are diverse?

While this is important for all applicants to consider, it is particularly important for people who have low measurable personal diversity. For example, do not be tempted to claim hardship when you have largely experienced privilege; instead, acknowledge your

position of privilege, and talk about how you have used your advantages in life to promote/support diversity. Colleges are interested in knowing that applicants accept others who are dissimilar to themselves and advocate for those who may have less chance to advocate for themselves due to systemic biases prevalent in our society.

3) How does a cause I am passionate about relate to diversity?

This is a helpful question for applicants to ask themselves if their service projects or other endeavors do not directly align with promoting diversity. If this is the case, think about how your acts of service could be used to promote diversity goals. For example, you may not think that climate change and environmental causes are obviously aligned with diversity. However, climate change disproportionately effects minority groups and environmental justice is a current issue of importance. Deeper reflection and some targeted research can help you make connections between causes you care about and how they may promote or at least relate to diversity.

4) What actions will I take going forward?

Diversity statements should not just state who you are and what you have done, but also what you will continue to do. Do some research into the service and other types of programs offered by the school you

plan on attending or community-based organizations nearby the college that have similar missions. Explain how you will continue promoting equity, diversity, and social justice by getting involved as you earn your degree.

Drafting your diversity statement: After brainstorming, pick one or maybe two clear themes that ring truest, fit the prompt and, if given, fit the university's definition of diversity. If you are unique in many ways, it may still be easier to explain one or two aspects of your diversity in detail instead of spending a limited word count essay describing your many attributes.

Examples of Diversity Prompts:

"How does equity, diversity, and social justice shape an issue that is of interest to you. How does this issue relate to the field or major you are applying to at our university?"

"Tell us about a life event you personally experienced or that you witnessed another person or group experiencing that changed your viewpoint about social justice, educational barriers or other societal inequities?"

"How do you see yourself contributing to diversity at our college?"

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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