

Excerpt from “Being Admittable: identity, meaning-making, and the presentation of self in personal statements of the college admissions process”

Senior thesis in Sociology

CONCLUSION: Who is this for?

In 2008, Patty Rust Kovacs, a college counselor at the University of Chicago Laboratory school, wrote an article for the Journal of College Admission titled “Effects of the College Admission Process on Adolescent Development.” According to Kovacs, pressures endured by applicants during the admissions process “can trigger regressions back through the previous developmental stages, thus creating its own kind of psychosocial crisis.” Kovacs attributes this pressure to heightened and uncertain expectations, to social pressures, to accelerated formation, “the testing crunch,” and college-related fatigue and burnout often felt in an applicant’s junior and senior years of high school. On the subject of the Personal Essay of the Common App, the author places value on the essay as a means “to reveal the applicant’s personality,” but criticized the essay for making students self-conscious, requiring students to employ a style of writing not widely practiced or appreciated academically, calling students to make decisions about identity at a time when an identity may not be fully formed, and opening up space for the feeling of ridicule when students are rejected from a school after sharing a piece of their life with a strange and faceless authority.

On November 5, 2010, the New York Times ran a story titled “Application Inflation: When is Enough Enough?,” which revealed that application numbers to highly-selective institutions had reached record highs. The author, Eric Hoover, suggested that more people applying for the same number of spots means higher selectivity, and that “measuring quality is difficult; measuring quantity is as easy as counting. The more apps a college receives, and rejects, the more impressive it seems.”

The story focused specifically on the University of Chicago, whose applicant numbers had jumped 43% in a year. This change was attributed to the university’s switch from their distinct, school-specific, “Uncommon Application” (including essay prompts, like “If you could balance on a tightrope, over what landscape would you walk? (No net)”) to the familiar Common Application in 2006.

The application was criticized for narrowing the scope of the college’s applicant pool, enforcing the stereotype that U of Chicago is “a place for nerds and social misfits who shun sunlight and conversation,” but former dean of college admissions Theodore A. O’Neill said that was, in part, the point: “If understood properly, no given college will appeal to everyone — that wouldn’t be possible,” O’Neill said. “It’s important to signal

something true and meaningful about yourself. The more signals, the more honest you're being, and doing that does limit the applications."

Early in this thesis-writing process, I met with David Borus, the current Director of Admissions and Financial Aid at Vassar, to contextualize myself in how the current admissions process works and how personal statements play a role in the process. I combined information from my interview with Mr. Borus to what I already knew about the history of Vassar admissions.

Richard Moll, inventor of the Your Space section of the Vassar application and former Dean of Admissions, emphasized in his book that the Common App essay was one of the most important parts of the application (in the case of some institutions, the most important part) and suggested that the essay could often serve as a determining factor in an applicant's acceptance. He states that "in fact, a near-reject can be pulled from the "out" drawer if the essay is sterling - it happens often." David Borus, on the other hand, is very clear that in Vassar's current admissions environment, the essay isn't such a crucial piece of the application, and will only help a student if he or she absolutely qualifies academically. In an interview, Borus mentions quite a bit that the more qualitative portions of the application are only considered once applicants meet a certain academic bar, determined on a 12-point scale. According to Borus, "an essay helps if it's really good and you're, academically, really good. If you don't have the academic numbers and credentials, the essay doesn't make a difference." Borus credits this to the fact that the college is increasingly becoming more selective due to a higher number of applicants while the student body is unchanging in size. "Eight thousand apps for 660 places - we admit 22%. That's not a lot of room." He does note that the essay, at one time, was a more crucial piece of the admissions puzzle. "[The essay] used to play a bigger role," said Borus. "We weren't as selective - we could take more of a chance on students. Our ability to make decisions based on those more personal, subjective decisions was more than then it is now. You can only say no to a valedictorian so many times." Borus mentions that after academics are concerned, other sections matter in terms of diversity of the student body. "We're looking for a diverse class," Borus says. "That's really where things that come out in the essays and Your Space make us prefer one student over [another]."

Borus explains that there are two important factors in a good admissions essay. First of all, the student needs to display "verbal faculty." Second, they should make the reader learn something that she doesn't already know from the rest of the application. In evaluating essays, Borus says that they are seldom spectacular or awful - "there are a half a dozen essays at most that knock our collective socks off." Borus is adamant that there are some topics about which the admissions officers get tired of reading. "I think we're

just about done with the *Harry Potter* essay,” Borus says. “Please Lord, no more. I have to keep remembering that every year there is a new group of students who have read *The Great Gatsby*.”

Borus notes that when it comes to essays about personal experiences, there are some that have become clichéd, such as “my trip with the band” or “the day we won the state championships”, or “when I first worked at a soup kitchen.” The office often reads about service trips – “Costa Rica must be a massive latrine from all the kids who have dug them on service trips,” – though admissions officers do try to look at these experiences from the perspective of the writer. “It’s cliché, but it’s very real, and we know that for a 17-year-old, that could be a powerful experience. Is it an original topic? No, but it can be a good essay.”

“There’s one topic we all hate,” Borus says. “I don’t know what to write about so here’s the process of how I chose my topic’... at the end you still don’t have an essay.” Borus is adamant that the topic an applicant chooses doesn’t have to be an “important topic” – it only needs to be something that is important to the applicant and should give a reader further context into the student’s life.