Reflecting Back: A Narrative Inquiry of the Experiences of

Creating College Application Essays and Videos

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Annette Demer Hoopes (1941-2013) and Ronald Demer.

To my wife, Shiraz Demer. Without your love and support, I would never have thought I could complete a project such as this one. What a lucky pleasure to have a life with you.

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And to Harper, my youngest daughter. What joy you have brought to our family! May you stay forever young.

ABSTRACT

High school students often find the college application process daunting and stressful. One area of concern is the application essay. This study examines the feelings of students who recently completed writing college application essays and videos. This study explores the experiences of students at a diverse high school near Atlanta, Georgia, during and after the process of creating college application essays and videos. The experiences of students during the application process were important to study because (1) there was a gap in the knowledge base related to the evolving role of essays and videos in the college application process, and (2) acquiring a better understanding of student experiences will augur ways to both diminish the stress of the process and encourage teachers to better assist students during the process in the future. The work of nine participants was analyzed, and then participants provided feedback about their experiences during the process of creating the work. The study found that the iterative process of working on meaningful essays and videos often has a powerful effect on students, helping them to better understand the meaning of their life experiences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION 1
Overview of the Problem 3
Problem Statement 6
Purpose and Scope of the Study 7
Research Questions 8
Theoretical Framework 8
Status Quo 8
Personal and Professional Interest 9
Participants' Theories 10
Pilot Research 11
Existing Theory and Research 12
Organization of Remaining Chapters 14
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW 16
Process of Admissions: From Class Perpetuation to Meritocracy 16
Admissions Requirements Serve Admissions Offices 20
The Intractability of Unequal Outcomes 21
A Broken Process 23
Place of the Essay in the College Admissions Process 25
Implicit Demands 28
Advantages and Disadvantages are Cultural 32
Recent Changes to Admissions 34
Benefits of Alternatives to the Essay on Admissions Process 36
Videomaking as a Learning and Assessment Tool 36
Conclusion 38
CHAPTER III: METHODS 39
Theoretical and Methodological Foundations 39
How a Narrative Inquiry Methodology Provided Answers to Research Questions 41
Research Questions 44
Research Relationships and Ethical Issues 44
Setting and Participant Selection 47
Data Collection 49
Forms of Research Data 50
Informed Consent 60
Data Analysis 62
Conclusion 73
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS 74
Mark's Story 74
Maya's Story 84
Kevin's Story 92
Emily's Story 99
Nate's Story 107
Donna's Story 114
Taylor's Story 123
Mary's Story 130

Conclusion 140
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS 141
Individual Analyses 141
Collective Themes 159
Conclusion 176
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION 178
Key Findings 178
Findings in Context: This Study's Relationship to the Literature Review 181
Unexpected Results 186
Limitations 187
Implications for Future Research 190
Implications for Practice 191
Conclusion 194
REFERENCES 197
APPENDICES 204
Appendix A: Common App Prompts 204
Appendix B: College & Career Project Instructions 206
Appendix C: IRB Approval 210
Appendix D: Informed Consent Form 212
Appendix E: Video Project Instructions 217
Appendix F: Interview Questions and Topics 220
Appendix G: Sample Page of Google Meet Transcription 224

Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

Eve lost her mother suddenly a month into the school year. She returned to class a week or so later, just as the class began writing drafts of college application essays. One CommonApp prompt was especially germane: write about an obstacle you encountered and how it affected you (see Appendix A). Eve wrote many pages about the experience of her mother's passing in her essays. She was still deeply *in* the experience. Her essays were raw and cathartic. They did not need to be or do much else. A few months later she converted the essay into a video, and a new way of communicating opened up. Her video combined a narrated voiceover with images from her life. It seemed a standard and straightforward discussion of the charmed life of an upper-class teenager – pictures of the sprawling home where she lived, the neighborhood pool, shopping with friends. But after a few minutes, the narrator announced what had happened to her earlier in the year: her mother had passed suddenly and unexpectedly. She was no longer a regular teenager, or so she felt. Her world changed forever. The rest of the video detailed her challenges and how her friends attempted but did not know how to be supportive.

Haley was the lone senior in my junior Advanced Placement Language & Composition (AP Lang) course. By the time the college project commenced, she had already been accepted at every school to which she applied. She was among the best writers in the class, so while I absolved her of the now-pointless organizational tasks of the project, I still wanted her to write the essay and make a video. Haley's video is simple. A barefoot girl, about 18 years old, in a

flowing dress, walks a forest path, bathed in dimpled sunlight, turning and observing, almost dancing, as the camera follows. This is the video's only shot, and it has no cuts. As the viewer follows the girl through the forest for three or four minutes, Haley narrates a rumination about this crossroads in her life and the big changes she both anticipates and fears. She looks back, as well, considering how she arrived at this place, a few weeks from high school graduation, and the people and circumstances that brought her here. The narration had itself been her application essay, but the written essay lacked the performative power inherent in the visual text of the video, an essay transformed into a different, more ethereal yet more grounded, powerful thing.

West wrote a great essay based on the type of deceptively simple concept that I love: a jar of coins she keeps in her room. Like Proust's madeleine, the jar of coins sets West on a rumination about the stories held by the journey of each coin. Thinking about the journeys of the coins leads West to describe her family's history -- and then her own. This essay was ready-made for the transformation to video, since the text overflowed with imagery. The video version enhanced the written essay in new ways. Not only could we see on-screen the jar of coins, West also inserted images related to each point she made about the coins. She needed to tell less, since she showed more. The text of the narration was a third as long as the original essay, exemplifying one of the skills I find most necessary in the process of converting written essay to video: reducing a text to its essence.

Juan, whose second language is English, struggled with writing. His sentences were disjointed -- when they were not lifted straight from internet sources. He worked at the local Wal-Mart and saved his money for two years so he could buy a car. So when it came time to write his essay, I knew he needed to write about something he felt passionate about. I suggested he write about his car. He was pleased with the topic, if not the writing. But then he made a

video – and he did not have to worry about writing at all. The video demonstrated the pride he feels in taking care of his car, about the places it takes him, and about the questions he gets from people suggesting the car was bought with drug money rather than earned through hard work.

These stories demonstrate the range of powerful, interesting stories within my students, waiting to find a venue for expression. One venue for such expression is the college application essay and video. Transforming a written essay into a video opens new possibilities for student engagement, self-expression, and creativity, and is especially useful for students who struggle with writing.

Overview of the Problem: Context and Motivation

The college application process causes stress and confusion to high school seniors. An increasingly competitive environment of limited admits combined with an increasingly competitive job market makes a teenager's attempts for admission to a selective college feel increasingly dire, like the hinge upon which all future success swings.

Historically, selective colleges existed to educate the children of elites and perpetuate class stratification (Ornstein, 2019). But for the past fifty or so years, elite colleges have become, according to their stated missions, exemplars of meritocracy (Markovits, 2019). Nevertheless, elite schools still perpetuate class distinction while professing an openness to all comers (Ornstein, 2019). The admissions process is the crucible where American bootstrap-pullers duke it out with old money.

But even in this ostensibly meritocratic realm, some applicants have more merit than others, because the criteria of merit are based on the ruling class's cultural values (Jayakumar & Page, 2021). Low socioeconomic status (SES), first-generation, and underrepresented

populations are still at a disadvantage. The opacity of the admissions process, and the high-stakes, zero-sum outcomes inherent in it, increase the applicant's frustration.

Exceptional students whose parents are neither rich nor alums of elite schools often neglect to even apply to elite schools (Holzman et al., 2020). The application essay, in which students attempt to enhance with a human touch the cold data of grades and standardized test scores, is not the most important aspect of an application, but, all other things being equal, can determine acceptance or rejection (Beseda, 2014; Rigol & College Entrance Examination Board, 2003). For students steeped in academic writing, producing a high-stakes narrative as their first "real world" writing task is daunting (Dobson, 2018; McGinty, 1995; Patterson, 2005;). The essay's audience is largely unknown, and the audience's expectations are likewise vague, as the wording of the essay prompt rarely explicates the essay's implicit purposes (Todorova, 2018). Students who have been taught in academic settings to write without a personal "voice" now have to figure out how to express the nuance and complexity of their developing, often-nascent personality in words (Patterson, 2005), in addition to convincing admissions officers that they are exceptional recruits poised to lead at elite schools, while simultaneously exhibiting humility. These issues are exacerbated for low-SES, first-generation, and underrepresented students, who lack the cultural capital that is the birthright of their elite peers (Bourdieu, 1986; Jayakumar & Page, 2021); nevertheless, low-SES students have to play, and win, on the elite team's home turf.

But just as colleges moved away from their role as educators of the children of the elite to educators of those exhibiting merit, the traditional methods of applying to colleges have changed as well (Gray, 2016). A process that was once completed on paper and conveyed by mail trucks from door to door is now entirely digital. Some recent applicant-centric changes especially benefit low-SES, first-generation, and underrepresented populations. At many elite schools,

applicants can now submit in place of a traditional essay a "video essay," a form with an inherent immediacy of the "voice" that is so elusive in student writing (Gray, 2016; Quillen, 2010). For students lacking the types of "cultural capital" valued by the status-quo, such as social connections and highly educated relatives (Bourdieu, 1986), the video offers new opportunities to break down the doors of one very exclusive clubhouse.

Although the literature provides insight on a broad variety of issues related to admissions, my searches have found no studies on any aspect of the video in the application process. This gap in the literature presents an opportunity to explore the experiences of students who convert essays into videos as part of their application preparation. I seek to understand what happens to the frustration and confusion that attends the writing process when students instead work in the genre of video. Additionally, I want to understand how the video benefits applicants during the process, rather than benefiting the admissions officers who make rules to serve their own needs, often at the expense of students.

The implications and findings of the study could herald positive social change for many high school students preparing to apply for college – in particular those who are of low-SES, first-generation, or underrepresented populations. Further, a deficiency exists in the literature related to how teachers can better equip their students in using videos as part of the application process, and this study can provide strategies for teachers.

The scope of the study will be limited to the experiences of 11th-grade students at a school in metropolitan Atlanta, with a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse student body – who created essays and videos in preparation for the application process. To protect the privacy of participants, the school will not be named in this report. These students had completed the application essay and video as required assignments in my AP Lang course, although their

recollections will be gathered as data after the school year ends, when they are no longer students in my class. All juniors at the school are required to complete a College & Career Project (see Appendix B), and my study proposes to examine the experiences of a subset of students who have completed the required project. My goals in better understanding student experiences are to build student confidence and skills in the creative process of essays and videos; to give students ownership of the creative and learning processes as they work on their application preparations; to level the playing field for low-SES, first-generation, and underrepresented students who may struggle in writing but whose videos may be highly expressive or powerful; to improve my own program of teaching application essays and video, because that knowledge may be useful to other teachers; and to fill a gap in the research.

Statement of the Problem

A current problem in education is the stress, frustration, and confusion high school juniors and seniors feel as they approach and complete the college admissions process. One particular area of the process that causes frustration and stress for applicants is the application essay. The problems of the application essay are exacerbated for low-SES, first-generation, and underrepresented populations, who often lack the cultural capital and the familial educational experience that has guided many of their peers. This study explores the experiences of high school juniors at the school in which I teach, near Atlanta, Georgia, during and after the process of creating college application essays and videos. The experiences of students during the application process are important to study because (1) there is a gap in the knowledge base related to the evolving role of essays and videos in the college application process, and (2) acquiring a better understanding of student experiences will augur ways to both diminish the

stress of the process and encourage teachers to better assist students during the process in the future.

Purpose & Scope of Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand the student experience of writing a college application essay and what happens when students convert that essay into a video. This project further endeavors to explore the tension between the constructed, inauthentic, artificiality of the college essay task and the creation of more authentic, original, natural written and video works, and to analyze how video as a form may be more transparent than the essay. A tertiary purpose is to provide other teachers strategies for teaching the process of college essay to college video, to assist future students in navigating the college admissions essay and video, and even to assist admissions officers in understanding the role of essays and videos in college admissions.

Related to these purposes is Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Narrative Inquiry framework, in which the narrative inquiry method is "both phenomena under study and method of study" (p. 4). Kim (2016) builds on Clandinin and Connelly's methodology in narrative inquiry and provides specific research design strategies. Understanding students' stories – those told in their essays and videos as well as those told about their experiences during the creative process – is essential in understanding how to best engage and teach them, and likewise essential in understanding their experiences.

The study will focus on student experiences while working on the college application essay and video and after they have completed them. The students taking part in the research process will be those students who completed my Advanced Placement Language & Composition course at the school in which I teach, a Title I and Magnet School for High Achievers in the immediate suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. The data collection will focus on

students' experiences and feelings before, during and after the process of creating application essays and videos, in an attempt to understand how the process affects students, and how the process affects the works they create. The student-created works and their contemporaneous reflection papers will also be included as areas of study as they relate to student experiences of the process. A secondary focus will be the process of teaching and learning, in an attempt to create a methodology for other teachers who want to prepare students for the application process in the same way. The study will not attempt to determine the effects on admission of an applicant's inclusion of the video versus the essay, nor will it inquire about admissions officers' perspectives on video versus essay. Student experiences of the actual application process or whether they included a video or essay as part of their application will not be included. The students in the study will be high school seniors or college freshman, with data created or gathered from their junior year of high school through their freshman year of college.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences and processes of high school juniors as they create written college application essays and convert them into videos?

2. What themes are found in the videos? Data that can answer the above questions are (1) Student interviews; (2) Student-created videos and essays; (3) Student memos or reflections created during the process; (4) Student and instructor feedback dialogues created during the process.

Theoretical Framework

Status Quo

The college application essay is a high stakes writing situation for which few students are prepared (Dobson, 2018; McGinty, 1995; Patterson, 2005;). The essay is an integral part of the

application (Beseda, 2014; Rigol & College Entrance Examination Board, 2003). The application process is changing, due to technology (Gray, 2016). New methods intend to make the application process more fair and less stressful to applicants, but sometimes add new stressors (Feeney, 2016; Gray, 2016; Jones, 2017; Quillen, 2010).

Personal and Professional Interest

I was raised by a family that valued education highly, whose experience exemplified the power of education to move an individual from the lower to middle or upper class. My father was raised by a single mother in a $37/month 4th-floor walkup on Manhattan's west side. His overworked mother had little time to impress the importance of education on her son, but she did have time to convince the local public elementary to take my dad at three rather than four years old, since she had no other option for childcare. My dad absorbed the values of his more well-off classmates. He worked hard and did well in school. He applied to Cornell and, as his safety, the neighborhood university, Columbia. He went to Cornell and had a transformative experience (he retired to Ithaca many years later). He attended Harvard Business School as well. My father's experience there affirms Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital. Even though he was a poor kid with little in the way of social capital, he tells me that the most important thing he got from Harvard was not what he learned in the business school but the network of HBS grads in the business world he could now access as a fellow grad. (On the other hand, that my father even broke into the halls of elite education from that $37/month walkup goes against Bourdieu's theory, which argues that social capital exists in order to keep class stratification intact and more or less inviolable.)

My mother was raised in similarly penniless circumstances, but in a large Italian-American family in an Italian-American enclave of Yonkers, a few miles north of my dad's

neighborhood. My mother had a baby at sixteen and dropped out of high school (she earned her GED decades later). My mother was intelligent and educated herself by reading voraciously, even though she suffered from dyslexia, undiagnosed until well into her middle age.

I benefitted from my father's hard work and American dream striving. But I did not follow his path, as open as it was to me. I took my time in finishing college and only set out on a career after my first child was born, when I was already 31. But the pressures of college admissions that my students face were not a reality when I was a high school senior in 1987. To wit, Yale accepted 1 in 5 applicants then, while recently that number is closer to 1 in 20 (Bruni, 2015).

As a teacher of high-school juniors, I have mixed feelings about their college admissions anxiety. On the one hand, I believe that any kid who is diligent and seeks out opportunities will be well-served by nearly any college, whether Ivy League or community. On the other hand, as a teacher, I have to grapple with the reality of the situation: our culture believes that elite education is the entry ticket to success in life, the door that opens every other door. My students believe that elite/selective/exclusionary schools are "better" than others, and they act accordingly.

Participants' Theories

My students do not believe me when I tell them that they can learn and prepare themselves for a successful future at nearly any school. They are certainly correct that our culture judges an individual's intelligence or worth based on one's alma mater, regardless of how unrelated the place of one's schooling is to one's abilities, character, or contributions to others. Whether I agree with the culture's valuation of elite schools, or whether elite education opens doors any more than hard work does, is not really the issue. My students believe these ideas

about elite education, and their beliefs are affirmed relentlessly in our culture, and thus they act upon these beliefs.

In the college-admissions preparation project I undertake with my juniors each spring, their most consistently challenging area is completing the admissions essay. To be fair, most of the other work in the project is organizational rather than creative. The project's tasks require students to research some schools they do not know about, find some scholarships they might apply for, create a resume, and write a teacher a letter asking for a recommendation. The essay causes many of the students a great deal of stress. They do not know what to write about. They do not know how to write narratively. They do not know how to express their personal qualities through their experiences. That the essay may be used in a zero-sum game of admissions increases their anxiety about doing it well. For many ambitious students who sail through calculus or Advanced Placement German, the college essay presents a task they cannot seem to get right. And for low-SES, first-generation, or underrepresented populations, the essay is just one of several hurdles presented by the admissions process, for which they have no mentor such as a college-grad parent. These hurdles often result in no completed applications at all.

Pilot Research

I conducted and recorded informal interviews with nine students who later agreed to allow me to use their stories and work in my research. The study used data from eight of the nine participants; one participant's data was not used because the data's themes were similar with the those of another participant. The interviews were conducted at the end of their senior year, after they had all applied to colleges. The interviews were conducted partly to determine whether their experiences were worthy of further study. The interviews surprised me in a number of ways and

provided a wealth of insight into their experiences with their essays and videos. The interviews affirmed my suspicion that the topic was worth examining more formally.

Existing Theory and Research

Bourdieu's (1986, and as noted in Claridge, 2015) theory of social capital and Yosso's (2005) critique of Bourdieu's theory and her attendant theory of community cultural wealth are two theories in play among my population. Social capital theory asserts that individuals rich in social capital have access to resources or to those in power who control resources, and that this access is not consistently or equally available to all members of a society. Social capital is typically passed to an individual through family ties, thus maintaining social class stratification. For those lacking social capital, education is the typical means through which one may attain capital (Bourdieu, 1986). My own father is a classic example. Although he was born to a poor, single mother, he attended two prestigious Ivy League universities and gained access to social capital, as described earlier in this paper. Yosso (2005) noted that Bourdieu's theory lacked an accounting of types of social capital inherent outside the status quo, and thus formulated a theory of community cultural wealth, which posited that every culture, regardless of standing in a society's stratification, maintains certain types of cultural wealth such as linguistic, aspirational, or familial. For example, Latinx students in the U.S. are often bi- or multi-lingual and also attuned to the primacy of storytelling traditions inherent in their cultures. These two qualities tend to be less developed or even nonexistent in many White American teenagers' cultural traditions.

The school in which I work is both a magnet school for high achievers, drawing ambitious students from the entire school district, and a Title I school. The school's 2021 enrollment of 1,755 students consist of 8% Asian, 21% Black, 29% Hispanic, 32% White, and

10% other; 34% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The school's attendance zone includes three distinct zones: a rapidly gentrifying city of 30,000; a tony enclave that abuts Atlanta's wealthy Buckhead neighborhood; and a working-class international neighborhood lining a highway corridor. Thus, the school has significant populations of Asian, Black, Latinx, and White students, a true melting pot of ethnic, religious, racial, and socioeconomic diversity.

Within this diverse population, I recognize three broad categories, a likely oversimplification that nevertheless may hold some truths about the situation and the theoretical lens through which the situation can be analyzed. The first group comprises students rich in what Bourdieu (1986) terms cultural, social, and economic capital. These are students whose parents are college-educated, upper-middle-class, and speak Standard English (and usually only Standard English). These students will go to college; it's in their blood. They are mostly White.

The second category is students better described by Yosso's (2005) theory. They have a great deal of cultural capital (strong family bonds, multilinguality), but not necessarily the type of cultural capital valued by the status quo. These students may be first-generation immigrants from Bangladesh or Latin America, or Black Americans, or poor Whites. This second group, who embody Yosso's (2005) definition of cultural wealth, views a college education in ways more various and complex than their social-capital-rich peers. For some, the cost alone puts a college education beyond their reach. Some students do not know anyone outside of their teachers, who rarely look or speak like they do, with a college education. Lacking a mentor such as a college-educated relative makes the process itself challenging, and many first-generation students never make it to college simply because the application process is a barrier.

A third group of students are persons of color but from college-educated families. Qualities from the two groups described above are inherent in this third group. The parents of these students are typically professionals and middle class or upper middle class. These students are often first-generation Americans of Chinese, Bengali, or Indian parents. This group may also contain Black children of upper-middle- or upper-class parents. Students of this third group may be excluded from some of the traditional social capital benefits enjoyed by the first group while they may enjoy the cultural capital of the second group.

This proposed study will seek data from a range of student demographics. It is hoped that from the small number (n = 8) of participants in the study, a diverse range of information-rich examples will be included.

A further consideration is the question of authenticity in the essay or video. College admissions officers often note that they are looking for authenticity in the essay. The problem is that college admissions is a high-stakes, zero-sum game, in which ambitious students are extremely motivated to win at any cost. These factors likely diminish one's ability to be authentic, instead presenting oneself as whatever one suspects the admissions officers value. For low-SES or first-gen students, authenticity presents other challenges (Jayakumar & Page, 2021).

Organization of Remaining Chapters

Following this introductory chapter are the Literature Review, Chapter II, which describes recent studies and writing related to the topic's status quo; Methods, Chapter III, which describes the processes used to collect and interpret data; Results, Chapter IV, which presents participants' narratives; Findings, Chapter V, which analyzes participants' narratives individually and then for common themes; and Discussion, Chapter VI, which discusses the study's key findings, the relationship of the study's findings to the literature review, unexpected

results, the study's limitations, potential areas for related follow-up studies, and the implication of the study's findings in practice.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

This literature review primarily seeks to understand the place of the essay in the application process, and how the evolving process of the admissions application can accommodate, as a benefit to students rather than admissions offices, new forms of student expression such as the video. This literature review focuses on a series of interrelated topics. First, the review discusses the admissions process historically and describes the change toward a meritocratic admissions system. The review then shifts to the essay's role in the application, and the specific challenges students face in writing an essay that makes an impact on an admissions officer. Finally, the review examines digital-age and COVID-19-era changes to the application process.

While there are thousands of examples of student application videos on YouTube, and some general-readership articles on the topic in magazines such as *TIME*, I have found no research on the topic. Thus, this review only cursorily engages the question of the role of the video, since that work will be done with future original research.

The Process of Admissions: From Class Perpetuation to Meritocracy

Historically, what are now called *selective* or *elite* or, less charitably but possibly more precisely, *exclusionary* schools were founded to educate the children of the elite class in order to perpetuate and sustain their cultural and political power, as Ornstein (2019) noted in a critical

article. As selective colleges attempted to serve a broader range of students beyond just the children of the elite, a number of concurrent changes occurred in the college admissions process: *meritocracy* became the guiding principle of the college admissions office. But even as the idea of academic merit supplanted the idea of preserving the power and position of the elite class, Ornstein showed that merit created a new conflict for elite schools.

In an opinion piece in *Time*, Markovits (2019) analyzed in a contemporary context the conflict between legacy and merit noted by Ornstein (2019): "Universities hope that doubling down on meritocracy will square unequal outcomes with equal opportunities, so that they can become more economically diverse without becoming less academically exclusive." Markovits argued that rather than making colleges open to exceptional students of all classes, meritocracy became a cover for elite schools to further the interests of the ruling class while appearing egalitarian. Even in a supposedly meritocratic college admissions system, Markovits noted, elites spend enormous sums of money on private schools, extra lessons, camps, and tutoring preparing their children for acceptance to elite schools, thus maintaining the advantage historically enjoyed by the elite class. Markovits concluded that selective schools should double enrollment numbers and spread resources across a far greater number of students. In effect, Markovits claimed, equality can only increase if schools decide to become less elite.

But exclusivity is the calling card as much as it is the business model of elite institutions, and Markovits's (2019) remedy – doubling enrollment – diminishes exclusivity in equal measure. One way that schools burnished their exclusivity bona fides in recent decades was to increase application numbers for a static number of spots, thus decreasing their acceptance rates, a low acceptance rate being the clearest measure of exclusivity. Hoover (2021) noted the pointlessness – to students, to learning, to a school's mission – of the recent increase in

application numbers, spurred by college outreach and advertising in order to increase applications, whether applicants were qualified or not, as well as by the ease of the application process due to the Common App and similar platforms that make applying to 20 colleges as easy as applying to one. In the era of Covid-19, many colleges even suspended the long-standing requirement for standardized test scores, and then feigned surprise when applications from underrepresented populations increased (Hoover, 2021) – exactly the effect critics of standardized tests long suspected. Colleges crave the increase in applications, Hoover noted, because their subsequently diminishing acceptance rates makes them appear ever more selective, which, in college culture, is a proxy for quality.

So, while meritocracy became an admissions office's guiding ethic, seeking "exceptional" students became its mode of operations. But researchers and critics found that just as meritocracy often further entrenched class distinctions, the search for "exceptional" students did little to make elite schools more egalitarian.

Jayakumar and Page (2021) showed in a quantitative study analyzing the admissions practices of four elite schools that selective colleges indeed sought "exceptional" students regardless of socioeconomic status, in a professed effort toward meritocracy and diversity, but the authors also found that colleges' views of exceptionality skewed toward an applicant's participation in sports. In particular, colleges saw "exceptionality" in students who excelled at "country-club" sports such as golf or fencing – endeavors that are often expensive and rarely offered at high schools that serve primarily middle-class or working-class students. Thus, exceptionality was more easily attainable, Jayakumar and Page found, for students in wealthier school districts or for the children of wealthier parents. For the children of high-SES parents, the road to exceptionality is paved from toddlerhood onward with expensive private lessons and

travel teams. Thelin (2019) likewise found that "country club" sports conferred an advantage for applicants. His review article was inspired by the "Varsity Blues" scandal, exposed in 2019, in which wealthy parents bribed coaches for spots on sports teams for which their children were not qualified, thus gaining "backdoor" admissions while denying an actually qualified athlete one of the very limited spots. But rather than focusing on the illegality of such admissions, Thelin reviewed the inequities inherent in admissions practices that favor athletes, finding that the correlation between wealth and elite admissions is stronger than ever, and because an entire industry burgeoned in the wake of meritocratic admissions, obtaining a coveted admit for one's child has never been more time-consuming or costly. Thelin's conclusion, relating an anecdote of the rare parent who rejects the rat race of admissions in favor of less-stressful teen years for his child, is ambiguous about remedies, since elite schools seem constitutionally unable to square exclusivity with egalitarianism.

Pretz and Kaufman (2017) found some agreement with Jayakumar and Page's (2021) work when they showed that traditional admissions criteria were weakly correlated to creativity, even though creativity is often denoted as the apex of intellectual and academic mastery in influential, ubiquitous instructional models such as Bloom's taxonomy. Pretz and Kaufman explained that while creativity was an important component to exceptionality in academics, the college application and admissions process was poorly attuned to recognizing or ranking creativity, and better attuned to simplistic metrics such as grade point averages and standardized test scores. Their quantitative study collected data on 610 college applicants' abilities in several creative tasks, and then compared that data to the same students' data in traditional admissions criteria such as class rank, SAT score, and GPA.

Holzman et al. (2020) showed, in a quantitative study that analyzed publicly-available data for race- and income-based gaps in completing the steps of the college admissions process, that although colleges in recent decades have created admissions policies aimed at increasing enrollment of historically underrepresented students, the same historical gaps – race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status – persist. Holzman et al. also found that the application process itself presented significant challenges to low-SES students. A lack of familiarity with the process caused some low-SES students to avoid applying altogether.

The studies by Holzman et al. (2020), Jayakumar and Page (2021), and Pretz and Kaufman (2017) bolstered the arguments made by Ornstein (2019), Markovits (2019), and Hoover (2021) that meritocracy as a foundational framework for admissions processes tended to reinforce class distinctions rather than increase access for low-SES students.

Admissions Requirements Serve Admissions Offices

Feeney (2016) argued from a parent's perspective, in a New Yorker article with the scathing title "The Poisonous Reach of the College Admissions Process," that the admissions process itself is to blame for many ills plaguing young Americans (as well as older ones – their parents). Feeney saw little good in the current admissions process, but plenty to reform, and he reserved special scorn for the admissions practices of the most elite schools, whose policies trickle down to colleges reaching for similarly rare air. While Feeney cited influential educational philosophers such as Dewey and Ravitch, his thesis was more analogous to a literary character who wakes up one morning to find himself in an absurd and seemingly intractable situation, but one in which he must nevertheless persevere. Thus, the Kafkaesque realm of college admissions is one wholly created by admissions offices, increasingly made more obtuse by admissions offices, whose remedy for increasingly pitting teenager against teenager through

ever more esoteric evidence of authenticity is to require more, and more granular, evidence of authenticity. Feeney questioned whether the admissions offices' requirements of students supported any pedagogical purpose and noted that the methodology of admissions was entirely institution-centric rather than student-centric. Feeney's animus toward elite schools focuses on the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success, a Common App-like application platform created by a number of elite schools, whose name belies its methods. Instead of having students engage in the application process for a few months of junior and senior years, the Coalition app allow students to begin the application process as mere freshmen. Thus, a process which used to bedevil students, parents, teachers, and counselors for a period within junior and senior years can now torment them for a full four years. It should be noted that Feeney is neither outsider nor interloper: he received a Ph.D. in political philosophy from an elite institution – Duke – and has taught at the high school and college level. His wife is a counselor at an elite California high school (mattfeeney.com, 2022).

The Intractability of Unequal Outcomes

Just as colleges desperate to be labeled "elite" warp their admissions practices to mimic those of the Ivies and their ilk, as Bruni (2015) noted and Selingo (2021) affirmed, an entire realm of private high schools fashion their programs to make their graduates more appealing to admissions officers, as Callcott (2022), a student at Stanford University, showed. An admitted beneficiary of a system that can be "gamed" by those with resources and knowledge of the system, Callcott argued that the concept of meritocracy is a mirage, creating the impression that those who gain admission to elite schools are more worthy than those who are rejected. The best way to ensure a future of wealth and status, according to Callcott, was to have rich parents. The private California high school that graduated Callcott prepared its students for admission to elite

schools by building a “club period” into the regular school day, something unheard of among public high schools, but certainly an insurance policy for overbooked teenagers whose extracurricular resumes need to be packed with bullet points.

O’Connor (2020), like Callcott (2022) a student at an elite university, argued, in a *Daily Princetonian* opinion article studded with publicly available data, that his peers at Princeton who had access to the broad range of Advanced Placement courses offered by elite private schools fared better than those who first learned, say, statistics as high schoolers. O’Connor’s thesis should come as no surprise. Klugman (2013), in a mixed-methods study that analyzed datasets from California public schools between 1997 and 2002, analyzed some seemingly intractable causes for O’Connor’s suspicion: even when schools serving mostly lower-income students expanded their AP course offerings, schools serving upper-middle-class students offered still more AP courses. Klugman refers to the theory of Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI), which posits that educational -- and thus class – inequalities are furthered when elite high schools offer more AP courses than do schools serving mostly middle- or working-class students. AP courses earn students what Klugman calls “marks of distinction,” which appeal to admissions officers. When low- or middle-income students lack the opportunity to even enroll in an AP course that confers such marks of distinction, they are at a pronounced disadvantage, regardless of their work ethic or any other measure of merit.

In an effort to solve the problem of the disadvantages of a student’s socioeconomic status, Zwick et al. (2021) created and tested at more than 50 colleges a model intended to increase diversity while maintaining high academic standards for an entering class. Zwick et al.’s model was a data analysis system in which admissions offices could input desired factors, such as the percentage of under-represented minorities (URMs) in a pool of acceptees, a percentage of

acceptees from low-income ZIP codes, or a range of desired GPAs or SAT scores. Zwick et al. found that while GPAs or SAT scores for URMs were lower than those of admitted applicants from wealthier communities, the URM students' first-year GPAs matched those of richer students. The implication here was that admissions officers' fears of admitting students who may not succeed due to lack of high school preparation were unfounded. Zwick et al.'s findings temper those of Callcott (2022), O'Connor (2020), and Klugman (2013).

Thus, the concept of meritocracy is a double-edged sword for low-SES, underrepresented populations. While elite schools are admitting underrepresented populations as well as publicly educated populations in greater numbers than ever, these students tend to be unfamiliar with the types of preparations the children of college-educated parents participate in from toddlerhood. In other words, elite schools would love to admit more, say, Latinx students, if only they could find enough Latinx students whose stats measure up to those of students steeped in college culture at private prep schools. Further, some "race-neutral" policies appear to further entrench the status quo, as Santos et al. (2010) found in a quantitative study that compared publicly available admissions data from the California university system before and after laws requiring race-neutral policies were implemented. Selingo (2021) noted that colleges' $183 billion loss during the Covid shutdown of 2020 and 2021 exacerbated competition for applicant yield (the number of admitted students who then attend an institution).

A Broken Process

While the concept of the meritocracy is indeed attractive for young strivers, as well as for anyone who values fairness, the admissions process itself seems to students more random and capricious than predictably logical. To that point, and furthering arguments made by Feeney (2016), Selingo (2022), in an article for *The Atlantic* titled "The College-Admissions Process is

Completely Broken," decries the "illusion" of the "holistic" method of considering applicants, in which schools integrate an assessment of less-quantifiable factors such as essays and extracurriculars against the more directly if imperfectly quantifiable factors such as GPAs and test scores. Selingo showed that the process might be as random and capricious as students think it is, but offered a number of reforms, such as eliminating early-decision applications, requiring schools to publish straightforward admissions criteria, and diminishing the number of pieces required for application. Selingo, like Feeney (2016), stressed that the admissions process is engineered to the benefit of the school rather than the student. He applauded recent forays of the Common App and some colleges to offer "direct admissions," in which schools send acceptance letters to students simply due to their high school grade point averages, the student needing to take no action whatsoever to apply for such an offer. In another, earlier article that discussed the effects of the Covid shutdowns during 2020 and 2021, Selingo (2021) quoted an Emory University admissions officer who called reporting a standardized test score on an application a "deterrent" to many otherwise qualified students. Selingo noted that the admissions officer was only partly correct, since the admissions office created such a deterrent in the first place.

The opacity of the admissions process is exacerbated by its high stakes: while the numbers of applicants to elite schools increases every year, the places available have remained static for the past forty or so years, as Bruni (2015) showed in his general-readership book *Where You Go is Not Who You'll Be*. Bruni argued that the idea that an elite school was the route to financial and professional success was simply not true, and he provided list after list of highly successful individuals in realms of art, politics, business, and media who thrived at schools lacking the brand-recognition or status of the schools my high school students think will somehow elevate them into the stratosphere of success. Unlike Callcott's (2022) argument that

the path to success is linear if one, or one's parents, masters the chess table of academic mobility, Bruni showed that the path taken is rarely the one imagined in its nascent state.

The College Board itself, inspired by parent and applicant complaints about the complexity of the admissions process, produced a research report (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2010) with the notable title "Complexity in College Admission: Fact or Urban Myth." College Board Advocacy & Policy Center's research was completed with 600 student and 300 parent surveys, with a response rate above 80%. The study focused primarily on parents' and students' perceptions of completing the application but did find that the most confusing aspect was "Knowing how admissions decisions are made," of nine possible survey choices on the question. However, the mean rating for the question remained low: 3, on a scale of 1 (very clear) to 10 (very confusing).

Place of the Essay in the College Admissions Process

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found in a 2011 survey that 60% of four-year colleges surveyed placed "considerable" or "moderate" importance on the application essay (Clinedinst et al., 2011). NACAC's data also showed that the number of colleges ranking the essay as "considerably important" nearly doubled between 1993 and 2011, a period also noted by Bruni (2015) as one in which admissions rates at elite colleges consistently diminished, simply due to ever-increasing numbers of applications for a static number of slots. And in a comprehensive study of the admissions practices of US colleges, Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board (2003) found that the essay, "integral" (p. 23) though less important to the application than the student's academic record, intended to provide admissions officers with a measure of a student's ability to write at the college level and a more personalized view of a student's passions, personality, or thought processes. Rigol and College Entrance

Examination Board's study was based on self-reporting from admissions offices of colleges and on publicly available data. Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board's work showed how admissions officers viewed the essay in the context of an application, even if Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board neglected to look below the surface of status quo admissions policies. Their work was intended to identify common practices across an industry rather than determine effects or make suggestions for improvement. More recently, Davis (2021) noted that the essay's importance increased as admissions dropped the requirement for applicants to submit SAT or ACT scores. The increasing number of applicants to competitive schools means, according to Davis, that the essay is used to parse differences among students whose grades and test scores are identical. Further, giving the essay more weight and making test scores optional allows colleges to increase diversity.

Feeney (2016), Hoover (2021), McGinty (1995), and Patterson (2005) might all criticize Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board (2003), and the admissions officers who completed their survey, for eliding the fact that the essay prompts avoid mentioning but instead assume that one of the essay's main objectives is to judge a student's writing ability, such writing ability acting as a proxy for a presumed measure of future success in college classes. Indeed, while Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board showed the relative importance of the essay in the application process, whether the essay is fairly tasked to students by admissions offices has long been debated.

McGinty (1995), experienced as both a high school English teacher and a Sarah Lawrence College admissions officer, argued in a journal article that a major complication for many students writing the essay is that, still being children, they have not necessarily developed enough intellectually or emotionally to properly complete the task. McGinty's article cited

educational theorists, psychologists, novelists, and her own experience in offering teachers new ways to teach students to overcome the challenges of writing an essay for which they have had no preparation but is nevertheless expected to demonstrate personality, intellect, and creativity.

Dobson (2018) concurred, lamenting the acute challenge facing students in writing a high-stakes essay such as the application essay, as application essays require knowledge of writing genres that students have never been taught to do in school. Her article focused on the high number of essays many seniors write when applying to eight or twelve schools, as many applicants now do. In Dobson's accounting, the number of essays many students wrote in applying to college exceeded the number of schools to which they applied, showing that many schools request multiple essays. Common App administrators might argue that point, since one of the time-saving hallmarks of the Common App is that students write a single essay for any number of applications. Dobson, who at the time of writing her essay was employed by the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), commended some schools, such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), for including explanations for what they are looking for in an essay response. MIT's note tells students to be "authentic" and "honest" in order to "connect with us," but also advises students not to overthink the task. If students are "stressing or strategizing" about how their essays might stand out among other applicants' essays, they're "doing it wrong." One might complain that these words hardly provide a rubric for fair judgement, and that MIT's admissions office is fooling itself if it thinks its applicants are not strategizing about how to gain admission to a school with a Class of 2026 admission rate under 4%.

Implicit Demands

Warren (2013) countered Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board's (2003) magnanimous reading of the admissions officers' view of the essay, denouncing the application essay as trickery: while colleges claim that they would like to read the essay to know a student better, the essay is instead an implicit argument about a student's potential success in college, and the audience's agenda in reading the essay serves the reader more than it does the applicant. Warren noted the dearth of studies on college application essays generally and particularly on how the essays of low-income and minority students fared with admissions officers. His research study provided explicit instruction to 42 seniors, at a low-performing public high school, in application-essay writing strategies and the expectations of admissions officers, while a control group of 47 students at the same school received only general instructions on completing the essay. Students in both groups responded to a prompt from the application of 61 University System of Texas schools, one very similar to a Common App prompt: tell us about a person who has made an impact on your life (Anderson, 2022). Warren's college students reviewed the experimental group's essays and provided feedback before the high schoolers completed a final draft. The drafts of both groups' essays were finally evaluated by admissions counselors from a University of Texas school, who were not aware of the specific instructions any student received, nor were they aware of which students belonged to the control or experimental group.

Three of Warren's (2013) findings were relevant to applicants and readers. First, students who have never been given explicit instruction in the rhetorical situation, and in particular the implicit demands of the college admissions officer as audience and judge, tend to revert to an academic style of writing that they have been taught throughout their schooling. This academic style of writing sees the goal of a written work as an "ideal" text, usually one that finds what

students might call the “hidden meaning” of a work of literature, and one free of grammatical errors. This conception misses much of the purpose of the application essay, even if students’ texts literally answer what the prompt asks. These students tend to follow directions but lack facility in adapting to various writing situations. Warren’s second relevant finding concerned the use of open-ended prompts in application essays. The open-ended prompts put few limits on the style, topic, or structure of student essays, apparently giving students freedom, but even though the college provided an open-ended question, the colleges’ raters used a strict rubric to score the essays. In other words, the open-ended prompt is only as good as the rater’s openness toward accommodating diverse responses among the rubric’s limits. The third of Warren’s relevant findings was derived from the first two. Students who were steeped in college culture, such as those who were the children of college graduates, were better able to infer and act on the implicit demands of the essay, although Warren noted that the type of acculturation these students absorbed from their college-educated families was somewhat resistant to the type of formal training typical of high school curricula. Warren urged more transparency from colleges about what they wanted in an application essay, but also exhorted high school teachers to embed rhetorical analysis in writing lessons, since understanding one’s audience benefits every writing task.

Paley (1996), at the time a lecturer in English at Boston College, presented a blistering critique of the application essay. Paley argued that the self-revelation required of essay prompts caused students a great deal of anxiety, and that the powerful admissions committees to whom they addressed their essays were handing students “just enough rope for a hanging.” In only slightly more tempered language, Paley suggests that the request for a personal narrative from a committee that has a great deal of power of the possible outcomes of such a narrative on a

student's future (in the minds of the student, anyway) was akin to coercion and possible embarrassment for the student. Paley came to such a conclusion after working with four students ranked in the top 17% of their class at a high-performing suburban public high school. She documented the students' perceptions about the rhetorical situation of the college application essay before and as the students completed their essays. She then sent the essays to admissions officers at four selective US universities, and then tape-recorded and analyzed their responses to the student essays. Paley compiled the advice for writers from several admissions officers and showed a pattern that aligned with that cited by Dobson (2018) for students to write authentically, relax, and not overthink the task. But the high stakes of the task cause, as Paley and Dobson both hypothesized, students to manufacture just the right kind of authenticity, while also making students stressed as they think and rethink each aspect of their writing. The admission officers who participated in Paley's study mostly confirmed her suspicion. One especially revealing case involved an essay a student wrote for a prompt asking for "Page 103 of your future autobiography." While three of the four officers noted that the essay failed at self-disclosure, an implicit imperative of apparently every application essay, one officer noted that the essay showed enough characteristics of the student – creativity, interest in and knowledge of biology, diligence – that implied the student had the qualities prized by the officer's school. Paley stressed, though, that the other officers seemed tied to the idea of explicit self-disclosure. According to Paley, these officers demonstrated the paradox of the college application essay. They implicitly asked students to self-disclose, but the officers themselves failed at identifying or valuing an implicit self-disclosure from a student. Later in the study, Paley described the reaction of an officer to an essay riddled with spelling and grammar errors. Paley noted the officer's disdain toward the essay due to its mechanical problems, which she suggested betrayed a class

bias on the part of the officer. Further, she noted that the essay's subject matter, which concerned the student's reaction to witnessing and trying to stop an incident of bullying at his school, focused on self-disclosure and the student's personal values, but these positive qualities were overlooked due to the essay's apparently inadequate mechanics.

Aukerman and Beach (2018) drew on the work of Early and DeCosta-Smith (2010), Paley (1996), and Warren (2013) in a qualitative study of 51 high-school seniors that examined three "domains" of the application essay experience: first, how student writers conceptualized the college application essay as a task; second, how they perceived their audience; and third, how they perceived their own preparation for college-level writing. Aukerman and Beach worked with a teacher of high school seniors and obtained essays from all 51 participants, 41 of whom completed a survey. A subgroup of survey respondents was interviewed for more thorough responses to the survey questions. Interview responses were coded thematically, such as "identity-centered communication" or "experience-centered communication" (p. 322). Students in the study were more confident in identifying goals for their essays than they were in understanding the implicit demands of the task. For example, most students clearly identified a goal related to what they wanted their audience to think about them through their essay. But fewer felt confident about using narrative to create an argument. A significant group (n = 15, p. 323) emphasized that simply writing well was enough to satisfy their audience's demands. Aukerman and Beach made a number of suggestions for high school teachers of application-writing students and for admissions officers. They noted that teachers should provide students with explicit instruction in narrative as argument, as well as in the implicit demands of the topic. Admissions officers, they noted, should be more open to perceiving as admission-worthy students whose essays depart from more traditional examples of the task. Throughout their study,

Aukerman and Beach noted critically the "gatekeeping" practices of college admissions as a barrier to underserved populations. Such a barrier, they argued, is traditionally enforced by the essay, among other things, but could also be demolished by new approaches to the essay.

Advantages and Disadvantages are Cultural

Todarova (2018) cited the findings of Warren (2013) and Paley (1996) as foundational to her research and found that first-gen and other students who had little experience with college culture tend to avoid openly revealing their personal qualities in their essays, instead focusing their essays on their academic experiences, and thus misinterpreting the implicit standard of the essay: to reveal to the admissions officer one's personality. Todarova's study analyzed the application essays of 35 college students, 17 from a small, private college, and 18 from a large, state university. Todarova employed the institutional documents of college preparation guides like those published by Princeton Review and Khan Academy to identify the values expected by colleges when judging application essays. Students who best understood the implicit values of the audience often produced the essays most closely aligned to institutional values, and many of these successful essays focused on the author's personal growth as evidenced through a narrative. Todarova found that essays about a student's challenges were more often written by a first-generation applicant, while narratives of personal growth were more often written by one already steeped in college culture. Todarova noted that the participants of her study wrote on a broad variety of topics that revealed a diversity of thought and experience among the participants. Todarova suggested that admissions officers broaden their frames of reference for their essay expectations in order to accommodate the array of approaches seen in the essays.

Patterson (2005) seemed to concur with Todarova, and showed that students misinterpret, or simply do not know, to whom they are writing, and therefore confuse which aspects of their

lives their audience wants to read about. Warren (2013), as discussed previously, likely agreed, arguing that the implicit question in the essay prompt is the true question, the question about which admissions officers actually want to read. To withhold clear criteria on which their essays will be judged was a grave disservice to students not ensconced in college culture as a matter of course. Warren cited two studies that showed that the application essay pretends that it is a friendly game among sympathetic players, when the situation, especially for underrepresented populations, is more like a zero-sum conflict among adversaries. Staking his position on the battlefield, Warren enumerated steps low-SES students can take to improve their chances for a well-received essay.

While Warren (2013), Patterson (2005), Todarova (2018), and Paley (1996) found much to fault in the essay's implicit purposes and vague judgement methodology, Farah (2012) saw the role of the essay as an important tool for applicants and argued that when the numbers -- such as SAT score, grade point average, class rank -- of two applicants are identical, the essay becomes the determining factor for admission or rejection. In contrast to the bland data presented by the numbers on a student's application, the essay adds dimensionality, and helps admissions officers determine a number of factors at which GPAs and test scores merely hint: maturity, values, passions, struggles.

Beseda (2014), an enrollment officer at Willamette University, concurred and showed that admissions officers are deluged with too many formulaic essays that suggest the mark of outside hands. Citing his own experience as an admissions officer and those of his colleagues, Beseda claimed that the essay was rarely the decisive factor in an admit or a rejection, and noted the power of the rare creative, risk-taking essay to give an applicant an edge. The officers surveyed in Beseda's article claimed that a revelation of a unique personal identity in an essay,

or a smart, quirky take on an otherwise dull topic, made those applicants increasingly competitive.

Jones (2017) explained the powerful emotional connection he felt to the students he got to know by reviewing their applications to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he worked for many years as an admissions officer, and how heartbroken he felt when he could not admit all the applicants he felt were worthy of an MIT education. Jones, an insider to the admissions process, put a sympathetic and human face to an admissions process more likely seen by students as bureaucratic and cold. Nevertheless, Jones's essay examined a pill bitter to Jones, but more bitter to students: much higher numbers of worthy students were rejected than were admitted.

Recent Changes to Application Processes

Gray (2016) noted that applicants' obsession with perfection causes myriad problems. First was the emotional and physical fatigue of the process, and second was that the schools' focus on test scores and GPAs alienated promising but low-SES students from applying to elite schools altogether. Feeney (2016) furthered the same sentiment, arguing that colleges' remedy for the emotional toll extracted by their own obsession with data is to ask students for more data. Dobson (2018) furthered Gray's finding of student burnout, enumerating the many types of essays seniors will write for applications, internships, volunteer positions, and scholarships – not to mention those they write for their regular high school classes. Gray quoted an admissions consultant who argued that the college admissions game was once relegated to a few months of a student's junior and senior years of high school, but now its machinations begin in middle school – or earlier.

Gray (2016) also noted the increasing prominence of the Coalition for Access, Affordability, and Success, the consortium of elite schools, noted previously, that offers a web-based application platform similar to that of the Common App. The Coalition's objectives, it says, are to increase access to elite schools for underrepresented populations. But the site includes, for example, a "digital locker" that students can start filling up as high school freshmen, for the supposed purposes of diminishing the madness of the admissions process, a nonsensical response, according to Feeney (2016), to a process that nearly all stakeholders regard as unnecessarily stressful for students. Feeney questioned the idea that the Coalition app will make things less stressful for students, since now they can essentially begin applying to elite schools as ninth-graders. Thus, an application process that once consumed one or two years of a student's life now obsesses a student for four. Feeney stressed that the Coalition's stated purpose was access for worthy students who might otherwise not apply to elite schools, but the form of the Coalition application was skewed to give elite schools access to students, and not the other way around. In one of Feeney's most trenchant and simple critiques, the worst part of all of the data-gathering in response to a broken and biased system was that it augured no pedagogical benefit. Further concurrence is found in Dobson (2018), who quoted an admissions officer who noted that in effort to be fair to all and to manage the stress caused by the application process, colleges, paradoxically, have exacerbated the problem by asking for more data and more work from already-overworked teenagers. Dobson noted that holistic review was a worthy methodology in admissions, but that the lack of balance the admissions process caused in a student's senior year of high school should be deeply troubling to all involved.

Benefits of Alternatives to the Essay on Admissions Process

Gray (2016) offered an overview of how a video or digital portfolio may help students – or make the process even crazier. Gray quoted one college president, whose school pioneered the video as a standard part of the application, who argued that the video was one among many ways to expand access but cautioned that the video could become just another platform for high-SES kids to dominate by employing their inherent financial advantages. Team-produced films, like essays edited by hired professionals, Gray noted, diminished the effort of expanding access. Another university president quoted in Gray concurred that an authentic student work was naturally imperfect, and thus a decent barometer of creativity and uniqueness.

In the early days of the social media revolution, Quillen (2010) noted the power of a video as part of an application, especially for students whose entire lives grew concurrently with cyberspace. Quillen quotes an admissions officer who summarizes the unique value of the video as revealing things about the applicant that nothing else in the application can reveal. The same officer maintained that the inclusion of a video showed that admissions offices were tailoring their practices, by listening to students' expressed desire for a more direct channel to admissions officers.

Videomaking as a Learning and Assessment Tool

Jorn et al. (2019) argued that the ubiquity of video in the lives of young people suggested that student videography become as standard an assessment tool in a university education as exams or essays. As video increasingly dominated the communicative world of young people, colleges were slow to adapt. They noted that internet traffic was increasingly dominated by consumption and creation of video texts rather than word-based texts. Further, they showed, video texts can communicate a great deal of information quickly and concisely. Many

educational systems throughout the world already embed video-based work in curricula, Jorn et al. showed, and students who create videos employed many of the skills teachers require students to practice in written works, such as organization and editing, but video also allowed students to practice skills they do not use in writing, such as speaking, acting, and musical performance in the service of communicating an idea or argument. Jorn et al. suggested that video, as a tool employed by higher education teachers, move beyond its limited utility as a capture device, one that simply records lectures or student responses, and that video be used in a broad variety of learning and assessment practices. They also noted that video as a collaborative communication tool can synthesize cross-curricular skills for participants to create new types of creative work. While the authors did not mention video in the context of college application essays, they did note the democratizing potential of video as a medium for schoolwork. They argued that not only are students more excited about collaborating on and sharing their video works than they are about creating and sharing written texts, they also can use video works as teaching tools, effectively diminishing the hierarchy of student and teacher, while also allowing student creators to share works far beyond the walls of a university.

Jorn et al. (2019) study was not related to college admissions, or even high school students. Their study used clinical scenarios in the medical field to bolster problem-solving among students in disparate medical fields who often had to work together to solve patient issues. They used video to promote, analyze, and assess teamwork. 70% of the 1,220 participants found the creation of their videos useful for learning.

Vick (2021) likewise argued that video become a common medium for student work, noting that a video reinforces the structure and organization of a written essay. Student videos

also reinforce, Vick wrote, the pedagogical objective of student choice and control in learning, and videos can be useful for student learning and assessment equally across disciplines.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here showed that the college admissions process presented unique challenges to students. While the process of applying to college evolved, the process maintained many vestiges of its earliest incarnations, often disguised in new forms or repackaged in updated vocabulary. Many of the processes related to admissions were more beneficial to the work of admissions offices than to the pedagogical or psychological benefit of the applicant. The recent option in some applications for students to submit alternatives to the essay such as a video were one step toward a process more meaningful and less stressful to students whose relationship to contemporary technology was forged early in life.

Chapter Three

Methods

This study employed the narrative inquiry protocols established by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Kim (2016). Narrative inquiry, which examines the experiences of individuals through their first-person accounts, best fit the needs of the study because the study itself focused on narrative works – the college application essay and video. In order to understand the experiences of students creating these works, participants presented a narrative about that experience. First-person accounts are direct and unmediated, offering the essence of a participant's lived experience. The created works themselves were also a part of the data and data analysis, as analyzing the content and formal qualities of the works assisted in understanding the process and effect of the student experience. Data texts included students' essays and videos, reflective journal entries on the process as it was conducted, contemporaneous student and teacher commentary on the works, interview transcriptions, and survey responses.

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pioneered narrative inquiry as a relevant and appropriate methodology in social science and especially education research. Their work was predicated on the idea that "experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (p. 2). They refer to *continuity* as the idea of making narratives from experiences (p. 3), and later termed their method *narrative inquiry* (p. 4). For Clandinin and Connelly, narrative inquiry refers to "both the phenomena under study *and* the method of study" (italics

theirs, p. 4). Humans, they argue, make sense of their world in narrative terms, so using narrative to analyze the meanings of experiences and to show how narratives connect the many seemingly disparate strands of human experience is a logical method of inquiry (p. 17). *Relational narrative inquiry* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) describes a shared research relationship between participant and researcher, or between storyteller and storylistener, that benefits each in a quest for increased knowledge and personal growth.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provided a relevant insight into the way narratives work when they identified the "four directions" in any inquiry (p. 50). The inward direction refers to one's emotions, desires, ambitions, or temperament, while the outward direction refers to context or circumstances beyond the individual's control. Backward and forward refer to one's past, present, and future. Clandinin and Connelly's four directions were relevant to this study because all four were not only naturally present in just about every student's essay and video, but because they provided a simple but potent portal into how the various elements a student's work synthesized to create a complete narrative of an experience. In other words, the four directions provided the researcher with a foundational methodology for understanding or interpreting the events of a narrative essay or video. Even if one or another direction seemed to be missing in a narrative, such an omission provided grounds for further inquiry. For example, if no elements of one's past were described in a narrative, one might reasonably ask why. If, as Clandinin and Connelly noted early in their days as researchers, experiences beget experiences, a narrative that omits past experiences may be disassociated from its origins, and an analysis of such a narrative might note such an omission.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) built upon their "four directions" concept by adding that narratives also exist in a space or a situation. Clandinin and Connelly's directions of inward-

outward and backward-forward are affected by the space or situation in which they exist, thus exhibiting what they term a "three-dimensional narrative inquiry space." The four directions and three-dimensional narrative inquiry space refer to, in simpler terms, the interaction of the personal, social, time, and place in a phenomenon. The interaction of the personal, social, time, and place was the guiding concept for the study's interview and survey questions.

For Kim (2016), whose work built directly from that of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry synthesized the realms of art and research. Kim's contribution to the narrative inquiry methodology borrowed liberally from genres of art, especially literature (p. 121), but she noted that visual, photographic, and digital storytelling are realms ripe for use in narrative inquiry (p. 143). Germane to this study, Kim described *bildungsroman* as an emerging genre for narrative inquiry (pp. 127-131). A bildungsroman, as Kim notes, is a narrative, common in fiction and more casually termed a coming-of-age story, that emphasizes

> the idea of an inner or spiritual journey of personal growth; tension between the ideal and the reality; the importance of the context in which the protagonist's journey takes place; the role of enhancing the *bildung* [formation or education] of the researcher and reader; the importance of questioning, dialogue, and doubt in the personal journey; and the elements of striving, uncertainty, complexity, and transformation. (p. 129)

These elements of the bildungsroman align neatly with the state of being a teenager, and, accordingly, participants' college application essays and videos often dealt with such personal growth.

How a Narrative Inquiry Methodology Provided Answers to the Research Questions

Two primary strands of narrative data provided answers to the research questions in the study: 1) the narratives in the students' essays and videos; 2) the narratives students told about

the process of creating the essays and videos. The types of data included in the study were as follows:

- Existing data: the essays and videos produced by students as part of the college/career projects; my feedback to them and their responses to my feedback (this data exists on the Google Docs they submitted as assignments on Google Classroom).
- Written student reflections on the process of creating their essays and videos (as above, this data exists on the Google Docs they submitted as assignments on Google Classroom). All participants submitted with their completed video a reflection on their work. For the reflection, students were asked to discuss their feelings about their completed video, which aspects work best and which aspects might have been differently employed to better effect, and how their feelings about the admissions process were affected by completing this work.
- Pilot research interviews with students after the completion of their projects (and after the school year has ended, when they were no longer my students).
- Surveys in which participants provided written answers to four broad questions.

The sources noted above provide evidence about the participants' experiences during the process of creating their college application essays and videos as well as retrospective recollections. Thus, the data track a participant's experience over time, providing a rich and triangulated knowledge base from which answers to the research questions can be generated.

Table 1

Matrix of Research Questions, Data Sources, and Related Interview and Survey Questions

Research Question	Data Source	Related Interview and Survey Questions
What are the experiences and processes of high school juniors at a suburban Atlanta high school as they create written college application essays and convert them into videos?	Primary: Survey responses and interview transcription. Secondary: Students' contemporaneous notes and commentary as they worked on and completed their essays and videos.	Your essay focuses on [subject matter]. What made you decide on this topic? In what ways did your topic allow you to express aspects of your character effectively? What were the challenges in writing the essay? Which parts came easy to you? Did you feel prepared to write this type of essay? Is it easier to express yourself in the video format? What was the easiest thing about creating your essay and video? What was hardest? What advice would you give to your younger self (or to a student about to apply to college) about creating the essay or video?
What themes are found in the videos?	Primary: Videos. Secondary: Interview and survey responses. Students' contemporaneous notes and commentary as they worked on and completed their essays and videos.	What qualities about yourself did you want to express through that narrative? When you thought about the audience for your [essay, video], who did you imagine? Did you worry about how they might perceive [a certain aspect of the narrative]? What role do you think your essay and video will play in your application? Do you think your work will make you stand out among applicants with a similar GPA or SAT score? Do you think essays or videos should play a significant role in admissions? How did you craft the essay or video due to what you know about admissions?

Research Relationships and Ethical Issues

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explored the seemingly fraught ethical issues of a researcher embedded deeply in the lives of their research subjects. The partnership inherent in narrative research complicates any sense of the objectivity sought in most valid research. But to Clandinin and Connelly, the tensions caused by the researcher's close involvement with their subjects in narrative research is a strength, one that can produce data impossible to produce in studies that prioritize objectivity. In narrative inquiry, the researcher is experiencing at the same time the subjects are experiencing. The experiences of both parties, then, are possible data sources. Clandinin and Connelly repeatedly noted the "relational" aspect of narrative inquiry as a strength when it served to develop trust and cooperation between researcher and subject, both of whom they regularly term *participants* to democratize the research process. Clandinin and Connelly also noted the paradoxical nature of a researcher being deeply involved with their subjects and also removing themselves from the research relationship when necessary. Both stances, they argued, are necessary in producing rich, nuanced data and analysis. In the case of this study, the benefits of being deeply embedded with the participants are many. Because I had worked with these students daily for an academic year, I have intimate knowledge of their strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, personalities, and quirks.

Kim (2016) further considered the dilemmas occurring when a narrative inquirer embeds themselves in a narrative inquiry. She discussed *reflexivity* as a necessary tool for the narrative inquirer. Reflexive research, as defined by Mason (1996, as quoted in Kim, 2016, p. 248), requires the researcher to "constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their 'data.'"

Kim (2016) also noted the dilemma of "backyard research" (p. 247), which may occur when a researcher uses readily available data sources. This study indeed uses readily available data sources, as the participants were recently students in my own classroom. However, as noted by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Kim, research conducted by a group of participants who already have an established, trusting relationship can produce richer results than those conducted with traditional objectivity in mind. Kim even called such a relationship an "essential feature" of narrative inquiry (p. 97). Rather than the traditional objectivity of quantitative research, narrative inquiry treats study participants less as subjects than as co-researchers. Kim describes "relational narrative inquiry" as one in which all participants exist in a "dynamic relationship that promotes learning and growth for both" (p. 98). Such a dynamic existed in this study and engendered the collection of rich data.

It should also be noted again that the student-participants in this study were not my students during the data-gathering process. During the data collection process, all of them were high school seniors or college freshmen, and I no longer had any official, grading-related relationship with any of them. No participant had any personal interest that might be attained through their participation in this study. I offered them nothing except gratitude for their participation. Valdosta State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved data collection methods prior to data collection (see Appendix C).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) examined the "problem of the influence of the observer on the observed" (p. 87). As my students' teacher, I am constantly shaping events in the classroom as well as in student work. Over the course of the academic year, I teach them what I consider useful and appropriate methods for constructing sentences, paragraphs, and essays. I teach them the codes and qualities of the college application essay. I make suggestions about

what to expand or delete in their essays. I suggest directions, topics, or motifs for their videos. All these events are the requirement of my job in helping them to hone their skills and produce the best work they are capable of producing. While I am in the business of teaching students skills and offering useful feedback on their work, I am simultaneously hyperaware of the ethical requirement that the student's work is indeed their original creation. This is an endless challenge in the classroom, and one made more acute by the high-stakes nature of college application products. My goal is to stay firmly on the side of offering feedback rather than that of doing actual revising.

My suggestions and discussions with my students during the creative process also produce field texts in the form of commentary and conversations recorded on their documents in Google Classroom. These texts were useful for this study in two ways. First, as sources of data, and second, as interview and survey question prompts.

Kim's (2016) ethical protocols for narrative inquiry research were adapted from the ethical protocols for research in education published by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2011). This study followed Kim's and AERA's ethical standards. The use of an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D) is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Kim (2016) noted that there are ethics related to research in general, and then further, specific ethical practices related specifically to narrative inquiry. Reflexivity is one way Kim noted to engage ethically. The difference between reflection and reflexive practice is that reflection takes one step back from the objectivity of the research in order to consider the ethics involved, while reflexivity takes one more step back to consider the reflection.

Mahoney (2007), as quoted in Kim (2016), noted that narrative inquiry is collaborative, and that the methods of shared narrative inquiry promote a more democratic way of doing

research and of constructing knowledge. In my study, the idea that the methods are democratized was fitting since students tended to feel that the admissions process itself was not democratic, and that they played a subordinate role in the hierarchy of admissions relationships. Such a democratization diminished participants' feelings of powerlessness toward the admissions process. Mahoney also noted that the collaborative methods of narrative inquiry require a researcher to be on guard for vulnerabilities that may negatively infringe upon the study's integrity. One might guard against ethical issues by keeping a self-reflexive fieldwork journal and sharing methodological considerations with research collaborators (Kim, 2016).

Setting and Participant Selection

The natural setting of the school in which I work and in which students completed their essays and videos was the appropriate site for this study. The school was (and is) a true melting pot. At the time of data collection, the school's demographics were neatly 30% each Black, Latinx, and White, with about 10% Vietnamese, Chinese, Bengali, and Indian. The city in which the school resides is likewise economically diverse, and the school's residence zone includes the city as well as a tony and mostly White and wealthy neighborhood, and thirdly a residential corridor that is metro Atlanta's international epicenter. The school is also both a magnet school for high achievers, drawing ambitious students from across the county, and a Title I school.

A small (n = 8) number of participants, all of whom were over the age of 18 at the time of IRB-approved data collection, were selected for diverse and information-rich cases. Purposeful sampling, as described by Patton (2002, p. 230), selects for information-rich cases which provide depth rather than the generalizability desired in quantitative studies. This study's population was selected from the 100 students who took my AP Language & Composition course during the

spring of 2023. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this document to protect the privacy of participants.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym of Participant	Gender (Self-defined)	Age at time of data collection	Racial identification (Self-defined)
Mark	Male	18	White
Maya	Female	18	Asian
Kevin	Male	18	White–Asian
Emily	Female	18	White
Nate	Male	18	Black
Donna	Female	18	White
Taylor	Female	18	White
Mary	Female	18	White

The creative task analyzed as part of the study was completed by all students as a regular part of the course. As has been the practice for all juniors at my school for the past 18 years I have taught there, all students complete a project called the College & Career Project (see Appendix B), which requires students to research careers and required training; to research colleges with programs they may be interested in; to research financial aid and scholarship opportunities; to create a resume; to write a letter to a teacher asking for a recommendation for a college or job application; to write an application essay; and to discuss these matters with parents or guardians. In 2022, I added a video version of the essay to the list of project requirements (see Appendix E).

Participants were selected to provide information-rich and diverse examples. For the limited purposes of the study, I selected from this broad group eight students whose work represented information-rich examples of the written-to-video process. By “information-rich,” a diverse set of examples was sought. This included particularly creative videos, or powerful

videos based on lackluster essays, or videos that particularly exemplified “authenticity” or a student’s personality. An information-rich source was also one in which a vivid essay flatlined in its conversion to video. Additionally, the sample included diverse examples. Such diversity was based on the content or topic of the video or essay; the originality of the work; or the demographics of the participants. I included work that represented the broad range of types of students: high- and low-socioeconomic status; Black, White, and Asian; nonbinary or LGBTQ students; or first-generation. Some of the participants did not focus their works on a particular aspect of their socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic identity.

The quality of the student-created product was just one consideration in the process of choosing the limited participants to study. Participants were also chosen based on the power or effect of the experience of the essay-to-video process. Thus, a student may not necessarily have created an artistic masterpiece in the process, but the student could have made a personal breakthrough during the process. Such a student was also included as a participant.

Data Collection

As noted previously, this research project was based on work that every student in my class was required to complete as a regular part of the course. The participants of the study were not my students during the data collection phase. By that time, they had long ago completed my course and received final grades. Although the study analyzed work they created while in my class, study participants were chosen, interviewed, and surveyed after their junior year had ended, when the researcher and participant no longer had a teacher-student relationship. The school’s curriculum for all juniors included a College and Career Project (see Appendix B), which I have completed every year with my juniors since beginning work at the school in 2005. This research project used that required student work as the foundational data for study.

Forms of Research Data

As described earlier in this chapter, the study collected and analyzed three major types of narrative data in this study: 1) The narrative expressed in the student's college application essay; 2) the narrative told in the student's video essay (which in some cases was the same story told in the written essay, albeit in a different form); and 3) the story told retrospectively, via pilot study interview and later in survey responses, by the participant about the process of creating the essays and videos.

Student Work Samples

The first source of data was student work samples. The initial narrative data were the stories told in students' college application essays and videos. Students generated these primary data sources as part of their regular coursework. Every student in my AP Lang course completed two college application essays and one video. These student works were the initial narrative data for the study, providing a foundation for the data generated as described in the following paragraphs. These student work samples were by nature narrative, and likewise described through narrative some important quality or defining experience of the student-author.

Kim (2016) noted the richness of visual data as a source for narrative inquiry and urged researchers to capitalize on the increasingly prevalent visual data produced in contemporary cultures (p. 143 and p. 178). Students' college application videos were a type of respondent-generated visual data, which is visual data made "*with* and *by* participants as well as *of* them" (p. 179). In the context of this study, this visual data was not the end-product that answers the research questions, but, as Kim noted (p. 179), an interposition that enables further examination through interviews or surveys.

Student work samples, as referred to throughout, were not simply one essay and one video. Students wrote an initial college application essay in the fall of their junior year, and then another, on a different topic, in the spring. Each of these essays was produced through a documented process from brainstorming lists of possible topics, to answering questions about life experiences, to rough drafting, to final edits. At each stage of the process, I provided feedback to students. We also read, as a class, a number of examples of application essays, as published in the New York Times (Lieber, 2018), as found on the *Inside Emory Admissions* blog of Emory University (2016), and some by former students of mine. The video project was similarly scaffolded. Students began by watching example videos; then finding and sharing a student-made video that they liked and writing a paragraph on what elements they found particularly compelling; then writing a concept paper for their own video-in-progress; writing a script or drawing a storyboard; shooting the footage; submitting a rough edit; and, finally, submitting their final edit. Each step of this process existed as an individual assignment and was organized to break down a complex and long process into several smaller, more manageable pieces. So, when "essay" or "video" are referred to here, the works themselves consist of many pieces, with each often containing feedback from me and revisions by the student.

The primary advantage of the student work samples described above was that the samples provided the foundational data for the study. They provided a record of the student's best abilities in crafting a narrative in written or visual form. Presumably the topic of each work was meaningful and important to the student's sense of identity or their passions.

The main limitation of this student-generated data was a problem noted repeatedly in Chapter 2: while colleges repeatedly tell applicants to "be authentic" in their essays and videos, the admissions game is perceived as so high-stakes by applicants that "authenticity" is an

impossible standard. Instead of authenticity, students sometimes attempt to present themselves as a person tailored to their perception of an admissions' officer's values. This limitation was explored in student interviews and survey responses, venues in which the stakes were decidedly low and students felt little pressure to impress an admissions officer or the researcher.

The procedure for collecting student work samples was through the Google Classroom platform as regular assignments throughout the course of the academic year. As of this writing, many student work samples exist on my course's Google Classroom site. At the end of the school year, all student work was automatically archived and saved by Google Classroom, where I accessed it later with the permission of the county school system. Pilot study data was collected through participant interviews. Interviews and a later survey documented participants' lived experiences and provided explicit data to answer the research questions.

Interviews

Seidman (2013) noted that interviews especially serve research questions that relate to topics difficult to observe. Here, the experiences of students navigating the college admissions process was difficult to observe, since an observer cannot observe the mental processes of the participant nor the meanings they retroactively ascribe to such experiences. Further, observations record the researcher's subjective point of view, while interviews record the interviewee's subjective point of view (Seidman, 2013, p. 17).

Seidman's (2013) interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives of an individual's life experiences both broadly and specifically. Such a protocol intended to elicit focused, in-depth responses to the life experiences of the subject (p. 14), in which the interviewer provides foundational, open-ended questions that evolve during the interview to follow the subject's responses. Seidman's three-interview structure was modified by employing a single interview of

approximately 45 minutes, which nevertheless employed the three interview foci as defined by Seidman.

The first section of Seidman's protocol attempted to contextualize the participant's experience by asking the participant about their past, and how their past experiences brought them to the topic or purpose of their essays and videos. This section relates to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) backward and outward directions. This section often revealed the foundations of a participant's inward qualities such as ambition or temperament.

The second interview section dealt directly with the topic of this study and asked participants about the experience of creating their essays and videos. This section related to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) timeline directions, since it encompassed recent past, present, and conception of the future. As in section one, this section divulged aspects of the inward direction, as it revealed one's emotions, desires, or ambitions.

The third section focused on the meaning of the experience of creating their works. This interview section focused on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) timeline directions, since it attempted to synthesize the contextual elements of section one, the experience elements of section two, and the conceptualization of a participant's future. Section three illuminated the inward, as it endeavored to synthesize a participant's emotional life with the works created to represent the individual's character, passions, and growth.

Kim's (2016) "two-sentence format" (p. 170) for interviewing was employed here. The format calls for a statement followed by a question. The statement portion provides context upon which both interviewer and interviewee agree; the following question is formatted as a single question that repeats some of the wording of the statement portion. This format enhanced collaboration and rapport between interviewer and interviewee. An example of Kim's method

used for this study was as follows: “Your video focused on an event that occurred last year and caused you to change your values. Tell me about your childhood and how your learned about values.” The interview protocol described above provided direct answers to the research questions because the interview data contained answers in the participants’ own words to specific questions. Survey data rounded out interview data and provided information lacking in some of the interviews.

However, one challenge inherent in employing Seidman’s (2013) method of using a script containing the same broad questions for each interview subject, and then extemporaneously asking follow-up questions based on the participant’s answer, was that the interviews for this study sometimes had only the flimsiest commonalities upon which to base a set of common questions. The common qualities for each subject were age, which is 16 or 17 at the time they created the works, and a year or so older at the time of the interviews; grade level, which was 11th grade when creating the works, and 12th grade at the time of the interview; that each planned on applying to college during their senior year; that they wrote a college essay or two based on a CommonApp prompt, or one provided by a school to which they would likely apply; and that they made a video as part of a project for my course. So, while the broad experiences were common to all potential participants, the specifics of the essay and video topics, their structures and approaches, diverged, and examining these specifics were the main purpose of this study.

Another challenge that moderated a common set of questions, or one that required writing unique questions for each interview, was the aspect of the interview that deals with the participant’s move from a written work to a visual work. How participants navigated the genre-hopping aspect of the task was inherent to understanding the experiences of several participants.

Some participants' essays were ready-made for a visual treatment, as if the essay were a script for something that could be more potent in visual form. Others' videos contained no element from the original written work. As a teacher, I advocated both methods. I asked students to consider how an essay might fare as a movie. Did it already contain lots of imagery, lots of visual descriptions, lots of concrete language that could be simply and powerfully expressed using video images? Did the essay contain a unique personal voice that could be even more powerful or humorous if the writer became an on-screen or voice-over narrator? Or was the essay so abstract as to defy easy translation to a different medium? Even so, might its abstractness make it a candidate for a unique video treatment, one that might stand out in a sea of a hundred videos that play like resumes on film?

A third challenge in the validity and utility of the interview data was that participants, being teenagers, were still in the development phase of their lives. That is, their history is brief compared to that of adult subjects. Further, they sometimes lack insight into the meaning and significance of their experiences. Thus, asking them about significant childhood events sometimes elicits little useful data, since they are still experiencing childhood events.

Seidman (2013) also noted that the main limitation of gathering data via interviews was practical: interviews are time intensive. This study limited participants to a maximum of $n = 8$, thus limiting the time spent on pilot interviews with subjects. The study also modified Seidman's three-interview protocol into one interview divided into three sections rather than Seidman's method of one interview per section. This study's limited scope allowed for in-depth interviewing with a single interview. A few interviews required a follow-up interview or email exchange for clarification of a point.

Interview questions depended on the participant but were broadly guided by Seidman's (2013) sections of life history, specifics on the topic, and meaning of the event, and by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) concept of directional narrative inquiry as described previously in this chapter. But because a goal of this study was to provide diverse examples, each interview required questions specific to each participant. Further, to produce useful, rich data, the interviewer followed the participant's narrative by spontaneously asking follow-up questions. The interview questions (see Appendix F) were divided into three broad areas. The first area focused on contextual information, such as a participant's family history, educational experiences, and significant life events. The second interview area examined the topics and narratives in the participant's work samples. The third area focused on the meaning participants ascribed to their works.

Interviews were conducted and recorded via Google Meet, a video-call platform. The platform provided a transcription of the interview. Google Meet's transcriptions were full of time stamps, participant names, and nonlinear chronology (see Appendix G), so I organized them prior to coding.

Contemporaneous Teacher – Student Correspondence

Another data source was contemporaneous teacher-student correspondence. Correspondence in the form of teacher feedback and student responses was naturally generated as students completed their projects. Feedback provided by me to students as they crafted their essays and videos appeared directly on their Google Docs and Google Classroom uploads. Such feedback provided one source of researcher-driven data as it documented my reactions to students' work and documented the evolution of their creative processes over time. Their reactions to my feedback were documented as direct replies in the Google Classroom chat boxes.

Their reactions were also documented via changes in the work itself, which, when completed in the Google Classroom platform, was time-stamped. These student-teacher dialogues were also integrated into each participant's narrative profile.

These researcher-generated and student-generated notes were often not directly useful in answering the research questions, but they were useful as sources to reference during data collection interviews. I referred to these notes when conversing with an interviewee about their process and what they were thinking and feeling as they worked on the project. I was also able to refer to what I was thinking about their works in progress.

My contemporaneous commentary on student works documented my responses to student works in progress. Such documentation was used to produce interview questions about how students progressed during the iterative process of creating their essays and videos. But one possible problem to address here is how my feedback alters the students' own work. Due to the inherent nature of the student-teacher relationship, in which they trust me to help them produce their best work in genres they were just learning about, they naturally revised their work based on my suggestions. A more pressing problem here was that they desired a high grade, which was based on some measure on my subjective interpretation of the quality of their work, even when a detailed rubric was involved. More directly, students possibly altered their work to impress me to earn a higher grade, rather than revising their work to make it more "authentic" or of higher quality.

Further, I guarded against molding student work to fit into this study while still providing them the regular feedback they needed to produce their best work. It is true that as instructor I attempt to mold student work, but I see that task as a necessary and positive requirement of the job, and my objective is to help each student produce the best work they can produce. This

objective often requires that I show students other ways to think about their work or other ways to approach a problem inherent in the task. For example, a student wrote an essay about her experience as a gymnast. She told how, as a little girl, she loved going to the gym for hours each day, but as she got older, the joy diminished, and it just became work. She quit for a time, but then at some point tried again and re-discovered the joy she experienced as a child. The essay was a straightforward but dull exercise seen often in students' "growing up" essays. The student may not have known it, but her essay was like any number of her peers' essays. She did recognize that it was lackluster. I suggested she see the essay not as a story about gymnastics but instead to think of it as an illustration of a quality she wanted to express, such as perseverance. I told her that no one really cares that she loved gymnastics, didn't love gymnastics, and then loved it again, but people do care that she perseveres. She understood immediately and revised the essay into a much better one that encompassed a broader and more generalized experience of perseverance. Thus, instructor feedback strengthens the student's work and assists students in deciding exactly what they want to express in their work, while maintaining the originality of the work and avoiding the teacher's hand in its expression.

It may be that a student such as the gymnast described above would tell me in an interview about the experience that she revised her essay in that way because I suggested she do so. But she also might be able to see how the new essay is both richer and truer to her experience. The example here illustrates one of the inherent problems in examining the experiences of young people: they sometimes lack the ability to articulate their often amorphous and conflicting, if nevertheless powerful, feelings and experiences. This study attempted to mitigate such deficiencies by using multiple data sources and by asking probing interview questions.

Participant Surveys

A short answer survey was then created to provide answers to broad questions. The program used to operate the survey was Qualtrics, and surveys were emailed from the Qualtrics platform to potential participants. The questions were 1) The audience for your essay and video were college admissions officers. In what ways did you think about them as you created your essay or video? 2) In what ways did your topic allow you to express aspects of your character effectively? 3) What was the easiest thing about creating your essay and video? What was hardest? and 4) What advice would you give to your younger self (or to a student about to apply to college) about creating the essay or video?

Before the pilot study interviews were conducted, there already existed a mountain of data in the forms of participants' work samples and correspondence between participants and researcher. The pilot study data provided data related specifically to the participants' experiences of creating their work. As each participant's profile emerged through the organizing of existing data, a number of gaps in the data also became evident. New questions arose. A survey was then created to broaden and enrich the emergent narratives. The survey questions noted earlier in this section were devised so participants could comment freely on specific topics that may have been only briefly noted in other data sources but were nevertheless essential in creating a full understanding of the study's research questions. For example, after I began drafting profiles based on participant data, I recognized that participants were making decisions about how they portrayed themselves in their works, but I had very little information regarding their perceptions of their audience and how such perceptions may have colored their works. The first survey question asks broadly about the participant's perception of their audience: In what ways did you think about [your audience of college admissions officers] as you created your essay or video?

Such a question was intended to allow participants to comment on a topic that had been only minimally addressed by prior data. The data produced by the survey was then integrated into the emerging narrative profiles.

Once survey data were collected, the researcher then transformed the student work samples, contemporaneous student-teacher correspondence, interview transcript, and survey responses into a narrative profile, emphasizing the words of the interviewee and according to the protocols of Seidman (2013). For continuity or clarity, the researcher added contextual commentary or summary. The finished narrative profiles sought to connect four elements: 1) the act of creating the work; 2) the subjects and themes of the works; 3) the meaning of the works and of the creative process in the context of the author's life; and 4) the significance of the works in the context of the college application process. Connecting these elements related to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) "four directions" (p. 50) theory discussed previously in this chapter. The profiles were provided to the interviewee to correct any errors, clarify misstatements, or add new thoughts. No participants suggested changes or corrections.

Informed Consent

Participants were furnished with an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D). The form explained in plain language to participants the following:

- That the purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of high school students who write college application essays and create college application videos as part of the college application process.
- That participants will be asked to take part in an interview via phone or video call with the researcher to discuss your experiences regarding the college application essay and video; that such an interview will likely take 45 minutes.

- That a participant will be asked to take part in a survey consisting of four short-answer questions; such a survey may take 15-30 minutes to complete; and that participants do not have to answer any questions they prefer to not answer.
- That there are no known physical or psychological risks for participating beyond the risks of normal, everyday activities.
- That there are few if any direct benefits for your participation, but that their participation may assist others in the future in their college application processes.
- That there is no incentive, financial or otherwise, offered as an enticement to participate.
- That taking part in this research project is voluntary.
- That participants may withdraw from the study at any time.
- That participants may choose an appropriate level of confidentiality.

Additionally, the Informed Consent From detailed who can participate, the number of expected participants, the lack of financial compensation for participants, the lack of conflicts of interest for the researcher, the protecting and sharing of participant data, a participant's right to review their interview or survey data, and contact information for the researcher and faculty advisors. The Informed Consent Form was based on forms publicly available from Valdosta State University (2023), with minor modifications suggested for narrative inquiry studies as described in Kim (2016, p. 159). Data was collected after IRB approval.

Data Analysis

The purpose of narrative analysis is to reduce a vast amount of data into a streamlined and unified narrative of events, which one might call a plot, to understand the meaning and significance of such events. As in all types of analysis, narrative analysis views the parts and the

whole as working in concert. Thus, to understand the significance of the phenomenon it is necessary to understand the relationship of one part to every other part and to each part's role in creating the whole. The analysis of data in this study concerned chiefly the intersecting of the four main data points, which were a participant's written essay, video, interview transcript, and survey responses. The participant's interview and survey responses produced data for a narrative that describes the significance of their experience in creating their essay and video. The meaning participants attached to their experiences were the primary drivers of this narrative analysis. Foundational theories for this type of analysis included Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space mentioned previously in this chapter, Maxwell and Miller's (2008) categorizing and connecting strategies, Seidman's (2013) inductive data analysis processes, and Kim's (2016) narrative analysis methodologies.

Categorizing and Connecting

Maxwell and Miller (2008) described two independent and sometimes complementary modes of qualitative data analysis: thematic analysis, or categorizing, and narrative analysis, or connecting. A thematic or categorizing approach examines how things, such as the experiences of five high school students, are similar. A connecting approach, which Maxwell and Miller also refer to as contiguity, looks for relationships among the parts of a text or the influence of one condition or event upon another. A narrative approach is by nature a connecting approach because a narrative connects events in an individual's experience to find some meaning or pattern in the relationships among such events. In other words, similarity coding endeavors to find common themes among the experiences of individuals, while contiguity produces unique narratives in the form of profiles or vignettes. A limitation of coding for themes is that it decontextualizes data from their origins. Contiguity favors context but may inhibit

generalizations useful for practical applications. While this study emphasized narratives, thematic analysis was also a useful tool in presenting suggestions for teachers of high school students navigating the admissions process, and for the students themselves. A mix of both approaches corrected for the limitations of each. This study favored contiguity and narrative over categorizing but employed categorizing analysis strategies to offer broad suggestions for teachers and students working on college application essays and videos.

Connecting Contextualizes Unique Experiences

After transcribing an interview, Seidman (2013) wrote what he called a *profile* (p. 121-127) of the interview participant. A profile is a narrative crafted by the researcher, based on a reduced version of the interview transcript, using the exact words of the interviewee, in the first person. In other words, a profile is the subject's story in their own words. Such a method removes the voice of the interviewer and emphasizes the immediacy of the teller's story, the teller's personality as reflected in their voice and word choice, and the idiosyncrasies of their story. Johnson-Bailey (2000, as excerpted in Merriam, 2002) provided a powerful example of such an approach in "Cathy: The Wrong Side of the Tank," which described a poor woman's challenges in simultaneously navigating higher education, parenting, and employment, as told in the subject's voice. Johnson-Bailey added contextualizing notes that tie together the sections of Cathy's story, and sometimes summarized events, although the bulk of the work is in Cathy's voice. A similar profile approach was appropriate for this study, because each participant's narrative provided unique data. Further, Seidman's profile approach relates directly to Maxwell and Miller's (2008) contiguity approach. Both emphasize the juxtaposing, connecting strands of events in a meaning-making narrative. Here, the approach was modified so the profile was built

using not only the interview transcript but also teacher-student correspondence and participants' survey responses.

Categorizing Suggests Practical Applications

While connecting strategies were appropriate for analyzing the unique qualities of participant narratives, a thematic approach to the interpretation of data revealed generalizations useful for future practical applications for teachers, students, and even college admissions officers. Seidman (2013) created a protocol that integrated Maxwell and Miller's (2008) strategies of connecting and categorizing. The profile for each participant employed connecting strategies to form a cohesive narrative of events. But then Seidman showed how a number of such profiles, as this study produced for its group of participants, can be mined for themes. Seidman suggested marking each profile for significant passages and then comparing the group of profiles for thematic commonalities. This study employed Seidman's protocols for thematic categorization.

Some narrative analysis categories were predetermined for this study because certain categories are paradigmatic to the context of college admissions (Kim, 2016). For example, one category of inquiry in interviews and surveys was the students' feelings toward the application process. Another was participants' sense of their audience's expectations. Predetermining categories in this way was not a limitation of the interview or survey, but instead delineated a common category. The data generated by these categorical questions led to common themes among participants. However, this study was not specifically focused on these common themes but instead among the unique experiences of a small number of participants. While some data across participants led to generalizations, the sample was too small to produce necessarily valid generalizations. By employing categorical questions early in the interview, the participant often

implied a more specific and unique direction for the interview. The researcher was then attuned to such direction and followed where it led. Thus, unique narratives unfolded. Survey responses bolstered themes.

Coding the Data for Analysis

Participant texts were printed and coded by hand. No coding software was used. After reading through all participant profiles several times, I created a list of broad codes, mostly inspired by or adapted from Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) and Kim's (2016) analysis protocols, to apply to each text. Table 2 below shows how an initial set of broad codes was applied to one participant's profile text. Most texts contained examples of each of these initial codes.

Table 3

Initial Codes and Examples

Code	Symbol	Example
Backward (4 Directions)	B	[After writing the first essay] I just realized that people don't want to read that much, and I started looking at my own writing. I paid more attention to the essays that were shorter and crisper than the essays that kept dragging on forever.
Character	Ch	The view from atop an elephant is unique. I am only 15 feet above the ground, but the journey has been more fulfilling and rewarding than any other. I look down at the spot where I fell and notice the scratches on my skin. My skirt is blowing peacefully in the wind.
Conflict, Dilemma	CD	Thud! I fall to the ground. I'm covered in dust. There goes my beautifully embroidered skirt, I think to myself.
Context	CX	Majestically poised like a maharani in my pink, embroidered, Jaipur skirt atop a 15-foot elephant, I take a long, sweeping look at my surroundings. The rolling hills, luscious, green trees, and clear blue skies dotted with pristine white clouds render me speechless. How on earth did a 5-foot-tall girl from Chamblee, Georgia, end up here?

Cultural	CU	…it'd be interesting to show that aspect in the video and show that I come from a pretty traditional South Indian family. I should also say that we're like traditionally religious. We are really active in our community. Our temple, we go every Sunday we spend like four or five hours there every week. We do a lot of stuff outside of the temple and in the video I kind of showed how we grow a lot of the traditional Indian plants, and we use all of that in our cooking and skin care and [for so many things]. The Indian culture and religion is really tied into our [daily] lives.
Doubt	D	[After writing the first essay] I just realized that people don't want to read that much, and I started looking at my own writing. I paid more attention to the essays that were shorter and crisper than the essays that kept dragging on forever. And I thought of what I could do to bring my point across better without just adding useless words and making the story drag on.
Epiphany	E	And then after I made the video I looked back over and I [thought], okay, what if I made this my Common App essay? It satisfies the prompt and describes who I am. [So, the essay was actually based on the video, not the other way around.]
Feelings	F	Initially, I was like, this seems like a long assignment. It might be time-consuming. And then I looked at the assignment and all the descriptions and it was kind of overwhelming to see how many options there were.
Forward (4 Directions)	F4	Out of the 50 people in my tour group that day, I was the only one to climb an elephant's trunk. The experience was thrilling, exhausting, and nerve-wracking, and something I'll never forget. When life presents opportunities and challenges, only a few choose the hard climb. The hardest climbs offer the best views and the most fulfilling journeys.
Inward (4 Directions)	I4	For all of my extrovertedness, spending time in nature is how I like to unwind after an eventful day. Walking barefoot on damp grass, literally smelling roses, watching birds, watering plants, and taking long walks make my heart happy. When I see the tiny yet mighty cumin, I realize that the simplest aspects of life carry some of the greatest joys.
Outward (4 Directions)	O4	…living here my whole life, I've learned to adapt to my surroundings.

Social	S	So, I thought it would be nice to incorporate that into my video because even though there's a lot of Indian Americans, I don't know if everyone has the same experiences I do coming from the type of family I come from.
Tension	T	I inch forward – my heart beating fast.
Values	V	I speak my mind. Underneath my five-foot stature, you'll find a ball of energy and enthusiasm always up for a challenge and ready to brighten someone's day, whether it takes a few rounds of Bollywood karaoke or a game of garden badminton.

Once a profile text's initial coding was completed, a secondary set of more specific codes was applied to attain a more focused, granular analysis of the data. In this secondary coding, I created subcategories for each initial code. These subcategories were often unique for each participant and followed the evidence in their texts. Table 3 shows secondary coding for one participant's profile. In some cases, multiple secondary codes were generated from a single initial code, or multiple examples were generated from a single secondary code. These multiples often indicated a complex issue or experience for the participant, or a pattern that led to a theme.

Table 4

Secondary Coding and Examples

Initial Code	Secondary Code	Example
Outward	Forces beyond one's control	Both my parents were drug addicts. My biological dad spent most of my life in jail, while my mom was always in and out of jail. She would always promise it was her last time in jail, and that she would always be there for John and I.
Outward	Forces beyond one's control	We spent about one year in foster care, and in that one year, we had 16-18 foster families/parents. Every foster parent told us that they would care for us and love us but would end up just giving us the next foster family.
Doubt	Security	Every time I was in the air after he threw me, I always had this belief or feeling that maybe, just maybe, this could be real this time. I could

		actually have parents that would love me. But every time he caught me, the feeling of loneliness would cave in and take over. The memories of all the people who promised to love us and care for us washed over me. How were these guys any different from the rest of the family/parents? How are they any different from my biological mom and dad?
Doubt	Trust	It was hard for me however to let go of my control over my life and especially John's life. My mind and soul couldn't trust that they would protect him and me and care for us.
Inward	Struggle to face past events	I had always had the idea writing about my adoption. It was always in the back of my mind, but it wasn't something that I felt super comfortable with, that I really wanted to show the world at that moment.
Inward	Struggle to face past events	I just knew it was time. Like I never really told anybody before that. And so I knew if I wrote that then that was going to go out to a lot of people. And at that time, I didn't know if I wanted that many people to know about it.
Inward	Struggle to face past events	Just knowing you're different, there's always a fear of somebody making off comments about it or people not really understanding. And so that was really what held me back from telling people.
Inward	Accepting past events	But as I started writing the essay,] I kind of knew in that moment that it was probably time. Like when you said that was kind of a signal for me to start opening up about it. I definitely was super glad that I was finally writing about it, but there were times when writing about it, I was kind of sad. Just like remembering what happened. But it was worth it. It was sad in the moment, but I knew that in the long run it's going to be worth it. I was processing the feelings, bringing back old memories and some of them weren't so good. But at the end of the day, I knew that it was for a good purpose.

In some cases, a single text example related to multiple initial codes and multiple secondary codes. Table 4 below shows how one example from Table 3 above produced overlapping codes. Such cases often delineated a complex issue or experience for the participant.

Table 5

Overlapping Codes in a Single Example

Example	Initial Code	Secondary Code
Just knowing you're different, there's always a fear of somebody making off comments about it or people not really understanding. And so that was really what held me back from telling people.	Inward	Struggle to face past events
	Inward	Feeling different from peers
	Outward	Fear of judgment of peers
	Forward	Fear of unknown consequences
	Backward	Safety of status quo
	Context	Feeling different

Four Modes of Data Provided a Rich, Kaleidoscopic View of the Phenomenon

A strength of this study was that participant data was presented in four disparate forms, which were essays, videos, interviews, and survey responses. While the topics and themes often recurred in each, the form of presentation provided richer insights into such topics or themes than had the data been collected only through, say, interviews. A variety of forms of data allowed a natural triangulation of the data, where one form reinforced and enriched the others. Alternatively, one form sometimes conflicted with the others, and such a scenario also provided a rich vein of inquiry. Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that inherent in any phenomenon is a variety of influential and intersecting factors, and thus a "holistic" (p. 182) approach to participants' experiences is necessary for thorough analysis.

Disparate Data Cohered into a Unified Whole

Seidman (2013) noted that the vast amount of data that interviews and surveys produce should be reduced inductively rather than deductively (p. 119). In other words, researchers should follow the data on its own terms and pay attention to what is important and significant to the participant rather than to what seems significant to the researcher or to some preconceived idea about the study. At the same time, the researcher's judgment plays an important role in analyzing and interpreting the data. Seidman's suggested process synthesizes with that of Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Both emphasize the storyteller as the primary driver of meaning. Both processes are designed to diminish traces of the researcher's hand in the finished product. This study followed these suggestions.

Finding a Story's Significance

Kim (2016) synthesized the narrative analysis methodologies of several previous practitioners to offer a unified approach. Most germane to this study was Kim's treatment of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) methods of *broadening, burrowing,* and *storying and restorying* (italics Kim's, p. 207), three analytical tools this researcher used to analyze and cohere seemingly disparate narrative data. Broadening refers to the context beyond the immediate situation. Here, a broadening strategy was to consider the societal forces that affected a student's work, or the impact a student's family history had on their work. Burrowing, on the other hand, focuses on the details in a participant's story. Kim suggested that researchers follow details to better understand the specifics of a participant's experience or feelings. Burrowing concentrates a phenomenon to find its essence. Storying and restorying are inseparable in a narrative analysis. Storying refers to telling the story, but restorying suggests that storytellers work recursively, retelling the story to emphasize or identify its most significant parts. The four

modes of storytelling in this study, which were essays, videos, interviews, and survey responses, emphasized such a recursive telling.

From Codes to Themes

The purpose of coding for analysis was to discover meaning for participants in each profile and then to determine themes common among multiple or all participants. Tables 2, 3, and 4 earlier in this chapter showed how individual profiles were coded. Chapter 5 analyzes each profile individually, based on close, repeated readings of the profile text and on initial and secondary coding. Then a collective analysis was performed to identify common themes found in multiple or all profiles. This collective analysis and a discussion of such themes begins on page 158, in Chapter 5.

Examining initial coding was only partially helpful in identifying common themes. Some codes led directly to a theme, such as the code *epiphany*. When analyzing the events or examples coded *epiphany* across participants, I tried to next identify similarities and then determine a theme that encompassed a common sort of epiphany. Thus, I came to the theme I termed *Process to Epiphany*, because the common feature of the epiphany was that the recursive process of doing the work led to some realization that brought about an epiphany.

But other codes were less helpful in leading directly to common themes, and I had to review and reconsider the profiles to find common themes. For example, one broad category I noted upon review was *family*. Every participant's work or interview contained something related to family, although I did not use *family* as an initial code, since I was instead looking for analytical codes such as *inward* or *conflict*, which for each participant attached to a specific event or detail. After I identified a broad marker such as *family*, which is not a theme but a topic, I considered how such a topic was reflected in participants' experiences, and here my notes

became more specific than *family*. My possible thematic terms here included *ideas of home*, *character is passed down*, and *parental guidance*. After brainstorming many such lists based on textual evidence, I whittled the array of terms into categories and settled on four thematic ideas that encompassed the most significant and common themes: *Family Matters*, *Emphasizing Difference*, *Seeking Identity*, and *Process to Epiphany*. Each of these themes is discussed in Chapter 5, beginning on page 156.

Limitations

Kim (2016) noted some inherent challenges to interpretation and analysis of narrative inquiry when attempting to determine meaning in a participant's story. Because the storyteller was the vessel of data, the researcher relied on the possibly imperfect recollections or introspection of the storyteller, rather than from observable data or quantitative data. Further, because this study dealt with the interplay among video images, written essays, and personal experiences, the interpretation of such interplay was in some ways difficult to examine. But because videos, essays, interviews, and survey responses were four unique modes of data, the synthesis of the modes nevertheless provided a rich, kaleidoscopic view of a single phenomenon, as described in the previous paragraph. In considering these challenges, the researcher attempted to be highly attuned to the implications and nuances of the narrative data.

A related limitation was the time elapsed between the participants' creation of their works, the interview, and the survey response for this study. While my initial impulse was to interview participants as they worked on their essays and videos and immediately after completing the works, I later decided that student recollections would be more insightful and richer if the interviews took place some months after the work had been completed. Likewise, the survey, which occurred some months after the pilot interview, allowed further distance from

the original event. This elapsed time provided participants an opportunity to be removed enough from the experience to be able to examine it more objectively and with more maturity.

Conclusion

The methods employed in this study were well-established and especially suitable for the purpose of this study. Narrative inquiry protocols produced information-rich profiles for each participant. Such profiles revealed common themes among participants. Ethical practices were strictly followed. The data produced and analyzed in this study may help teachers better understand the student experience of college admissions practices, thus enabling better assistance for students navigating the process. The data may also assist college admissions counselors in understanding the student experience of admissions practices.

Chapter Four

Results

This chapter presents profiles of each participant. The profile consists of data from survey responses, my pilot study interview with the participant, their written and visual works, and the feedback I provided them while they worked on their essays and videos. Using such data, a cohesive narrative was created.

Names and other identifying information have been changed to protect participants' privacy. Participants were at least 18 years of age at the time of IRB-approved data collection. Typographical errors in participants' work have been corrected for Standard English, but participants' syntactical and grammatical errors have been left intact. To make each profile cohesive and readable, I have in some places engaged in what Kim (2016) calls narrative smoothing, in which certain words or phrases are deleted or moved. Occasionally, words like *it* have been changed to reflect their referent, or phrases were modified for clarity; such changes are indicated by brackets. After each narrative profile was created, the participant received a copy via email for review. Each participant was encouraged to read their profile and offer clarification or additions wherever necessary. None proposed changes.

Mark's Story: Swimming in the Sea Change

Mark embodies the all-American stereotypical athlete: blonde and blue-eyed, muscled and lithe. Indeed, he is the fastest swimmer on his school's team and has broken several school

and county records. Mark is a somewhat indifferent student, and his mother scheduled a conference with me a few months into Mark's junior year. His grades had slipped in multiple classes, but she felt that it was time that she stop babying him and instead allow him to make his own mistakes. Mark is the oldest of five children. It was clear that his mother cared a great deal for him but also struggled with how or how much to let him go on his own in that strange teenage terrain between child and adult.

But it was not until a few months later, when Mark turned in a draft of his college essay, that I learned some important facts about his life. His essay was typical for the genre of college application essays that focus on sports. The conventions of this genre tend to revolve around loving a sport, then hating the sport, then learning to love it again. Often these genre stories involve a single game in which the writer-athlete fails and then by some stroke of luck comes back to succeed or perhaps learns an important lesson from the failure. That these essays are so common suggests that many students feel that this is the only subject they know well enough to write about. Mark had a lot to write about – he just didn't know it yet. Later, when it came time to produce a video, Michael avoided the topics he discusses in his essays and instead presented a cursory slideshow about recent family events.

Mark's first essay draft, submitted on January 26, 2023, contained mostly abstract boilerplate about what he learned from swimming:

> Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall. We learn more from failure than we do from our success. If you never fail, you never grow, and if you never grow, you never become the best person you can become. This lesson will take you so far in life and will help you reach goals that others may say are impossible. You can

> use this lesson in all aspects of life. When it comes to my life however, I use it in one aspect the most…swimming.

The essay continued in that vein for another long paragraph. Then a short narrative section focused on a coach who had made an impression on Michael:

> During the Winter of 2022, my swim coach got fired. I had had him for 3-4 years and we had a very close relationship. He taught me how to become a better swimmer, but more importantly a better man. I really struggled emotionally when he left. On top of that, my 2 closest buddies moved groups in the club and I had to swim in the group with new people. Coachless and peer-less, my swimming career performance started to drop. I gave up. My buddies were getting faster and I wasn't. One day though, I had this random surge of "swimming energy". I realized that I could use this failure as something to push myself. I started attending almost every practice and gave my 100%. I was doing it for me, but also for my coach and buddies. My times started getting faster and my mindset was changing. It really helped in my swimming career.

But then the essay shifts:

> Another aspect [where] I used [failure] in was my past. I grew up with abusive parents that constantly drank and used drugs. They were uncapable of taking care of my brother and I, so I had to learn how to be a guardian for my brother and I. Taking care of him taught me everything and I failed many times. But all those times I failed, it taught me important life lessons that I carried with me to this day. It helped me become a leader and look after people who need assistance. It also helped me think quick and avoid conflicts, and if conflict can't be avoided, it taught me how to handle the conflict. Thankfully, in

2012, I was adopted into the Smith Family. I love my family and they have taught me so many things in life.

I asked Mark to see me privately. I asked him to tell me the story in more detail, which he did. I suggested that he avoid dropping this enormous bombshell in the essay without explaining it further, and that the story he tells in that final paragraph is the real story he needs to tell in his college essay, or at least in an essay for himself, as a means of documenting his experience or even for working through his feelings about it. I told him that college admissions officers will read lots of sports essays, but it is unlikely that one would read a story of two little boys who are placed in foster care due to their parents' drug problems and later adopted by a loving family. He agreed that he would write the story for his next draft.

Mark struggled to write the draft. A look at his Google Doc showed that he was stuck on a few mostly abstract opening sentences, so I offered him a guide to write the essay, based on the facts he had told me in our meeting:

> Mark, because this story is so emotionally powerful, you don't need to do much except relate the facts of the story. 1- discuss biological parents' struggles w drugs...discuss your memories of foster care for you and little brother, how you went to so many homes. 2- discuss the day you met the Smiths at McD's. Your impressions that it would be more of the same. 3- How did things change once you were adopted by the Smiths? When did you realize that THESE adults were different, that they would provide stability and safety for you and your brother? 4- discuss the new kids they adopted 5- discuss your whole family now -- what is the vibe in your house, how do they help you and your siblings grow and develop as young people? 6- tell us about your relationship with your brother (especially mention how you had to take care of

him if you didn't do it earlier). 7- discuss your feelings looking back on your pre-adopted life from your current perspective as a 17 year old about to embark on college etc.

The next day, he wrote this draft:

Every kid's greatest wish is to have parents and family that look after them and care for them more than anything. Many kids have that wish granted, but there are always kids that don't. Unfortunately, my brother and I were one of those kids. My mom was 15 when she gave birth to me, and she was 17 when she had my brother John. Both my parents were drug addicts. My biological dad spent most of my life in jail, while my mom was always in and out of jail. She would always promise it was her last time in jail, and that she would always be there for John and I. Time and time again though, she broke that promise. Since my parents were never there, it forced me to look after John starting as young as the age of 3. In 2010/2011, the government put us in foster care, since our parents couldn't care for us. This is every kid's worst nightmare. We spent about one year in foster care, and in that one year, we had 16-18 foster families/parents. Every foster parent told us that they would care for us and love us but would end up just giving us the next foster family. Was something wrong with me? Or John? Why did nobody want us or love us? I started to learn to read and "cook", so that I could help John and be there for him, since while in foster care, everyone ignored us.

One day, our case worker told us that they found 2 adults who wanted to meet us and that they could potentially be our new "mommy and daddy". They wanted to meet at McDonalds, so that John and I could play on the playground and wanted it to be a very casual visit. John and I played on the playground for about an hour with [the man]. He

would chase us around and throw us in the air and catch us. Every time I was in the air after he threw me, I always had this belief or feeling that maybe, just maybe, this could be real this time. I could actually have parents that would love me. But every time he caught me, the feeling of loneliness would cave in and take over. The memories of all the people who promised to love us and care for us washed over me. How were these guys any different from the rest of the family/parents? How are they any different from my biological mom and dad?

[They] knew right after the visit, that "we were the perfect children" and wanted us in their life. We were adopted in the summer of 2012. It was hard for me however to let go of my control over my life and especially John's life. My mind and soul couldn't trust that they would protect him and me and care for us. Every night, they would say our prayer and every night it would end with "and please never let John and Mark forget these 3 things: God loves them, we love them, and nothing will ever happen to change that". They said it after night one, after night two, night three, week 1, week 2, month 1, month 2, year 1, and continued it forever. Every time they said it, the meaning and feeling of love sank deeper and deeper into me. Not only did they just say it, they showed it… and they meant it. I started letting go of full control of John and my life, knowing that these were actually my "mommy and daddy" forever. I was part of the Smith family forever.

In 2015, we decided to adopt 3 more kids. It was a sibling group, with 2 girls and a boy. The eldest was Brittany (7). She was very independent, brave, and outgoing. Next was Marlow. Marlow was 4 and was a crazy little boy. He loved action figures and cars, and his energy level never seemed to get low. The youngest was Hattie. Hattie was 8

months old. She was just able to stand and start talking. She was the most precious thing. They were the perfect kids to add to the Smith household. Everyone got along and everyone loved each other. It made me feel good knowing that Brittany, Marlow, and Hattie were all now in a home that actually loved them and not in a house filled with lies and loneliness.

Having 7 people in one household can definitely be chaotic at times, but it's a good chaotic. Everyone has activities and everyone does sports. We always spend one hour of family time a day and always help each other if needed. Everyone loves each other and all of us care deeply about each other. My parents are the best people in the world. They introduced me to God and always helped me and my siblings grow and develop as young people. They nailed honesty and love into us and always showed it to us.

Looking back, I am grateful for the experiences and memories I have. The good and bad experiences are what made me, me. I have learned from my past, and that learning from my past allowed me to grow as a person.

During Mark's senior year, he told me about writing his essay:

I remember starting out [writing the essay]. I had always had the idea writing about my adoption. It was always in the back of my mind, but it wasn't something that I felt super comfortable with, that I really wanted to show the world at that moment. And so I kind of just stuck with the idea of [writing about] faith and just kept it broad.

Then as I made several edits to my writing, which ultimately ended up with me telling the story about my adoption. I just knew it was time. Like I never really told

anybody before that. And so I knew if I wrote that then that was going to go out to a lot of people. And at that time, I didn't know if I wanted that many people to know about it.

The essay I wrote about swimming and getting sick, I definitely do believe it was a lot better than a lot of stuff I wrote, just because swimming at that time meant so much to me. And it was basically made a big part of who I was. And so, it was a lot easier for me to write about it which in return made my writing so much better.

[I had the line in there about the adoption] and I remember my mom talking to me after reading it and she was like, "that was kind of a random line, your whole essay's on swimming and you have a little line about adoption." A part of me wanted to write something, just add something about it just to give people a little hint. But I didn't want it to be my full essay. I [wanted to] find a way to kind of sneak it in there without making it my whole essay.

[But then I realized that the adoption is also a big part of my identity.] I was five going on six [when I got adopted]. Thinking about it, the adoption is probably a lot bigger than swimming. Nobody ever knew about it, my teachers or anyone, nobody except a couple close friends. To be honest, I don't really know why [I didn't tell anyone]. It's kind of something you kind of grow up feeling insecure about. Just knowing you're different, there's always a fear of somebody making off comments about it or people not really understanding. And so that was really what held me back from telling people.

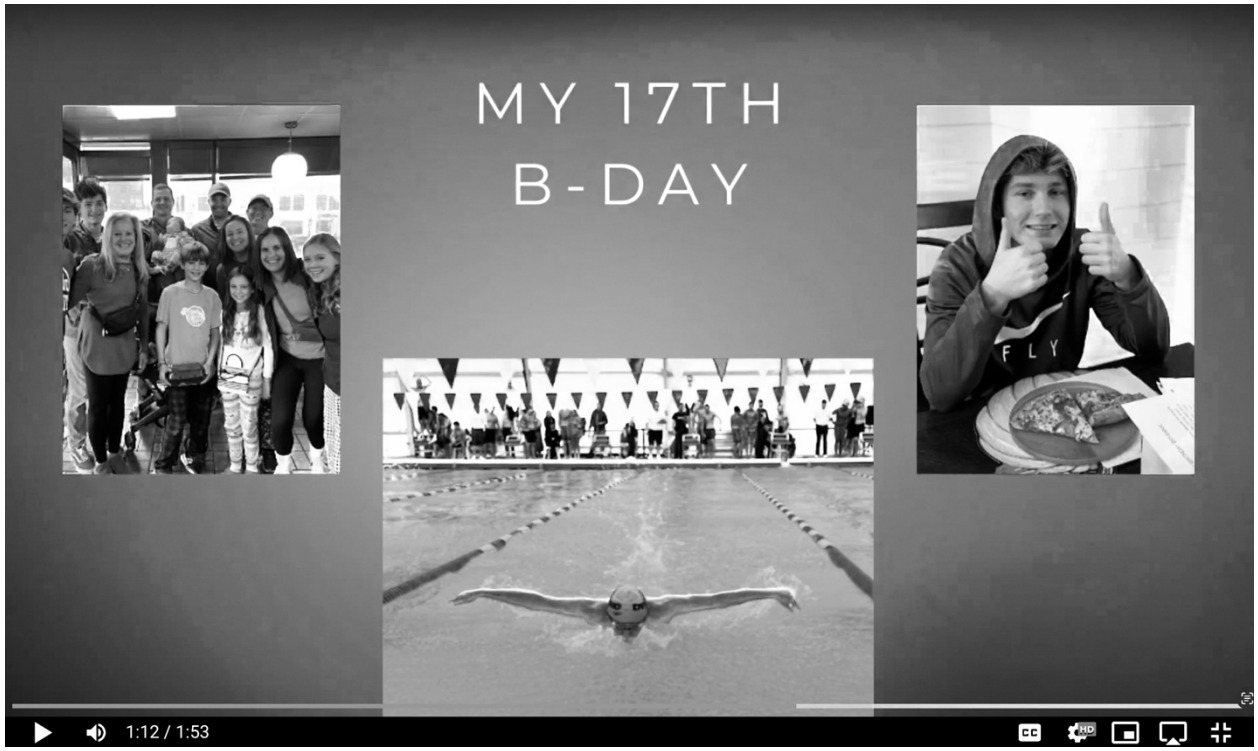
There's definitely a mix of both, [feeling part of the group and feeling different]. I know my parents, growing up, love me, my adoptive parents, and so it made the connection really strong. Being with them made it feel more normal. But there's always

going to be a part of you [that knows] you're adopted and knows what you went through, a little small part of you that doesn't feel so normal about it.

[But as I started writing the essay,] I kind of knew in that moment that it was probably time. Like when you said that was kind of a signal for me to start opening up about it. I definitely was super glad that I was finally writing about it, but there were times when writing about it, I was kind of sad. Just like remembering what happened. But it was worth it. It was sad in the moment, but I knew that in the long run it's going to be worth it. I was processing the feelings, bringing back old memories and some of them weren't so good. But at the end of the day, I knew that it was for a good purpose.

Figure 1

Screenshot of Mark's Video



Most colleges [I applied to] had a mandatory essay [topic] that they gave you, which I filled out, and then a lot of them had an optional essay. And for every school that

had an optional essay, I submitted my adoption paper. It was very, very similar [to the draft I wrote for class]. I think I went back a couple of times to edit like misspellings or grammatical errors. But the whole overall story was basically the same. I mean, there have been some times where my family, my dad and my mom, have wanted me to share the essay. Like after seeing my parents cry about it, and then seeing you tear up a little bit in class. I didn't know if I was fully ready for everyone's emotions to come out, but over the past year that I've sent out my essay to most of my family, they all loved it so much and they were all super glad I wrote it. My cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, all of them. The ones in state, [here] in Georgia, I read it to at family gatherings when they asked and then the word got out and my family in Florida and my family in Pennsylvania were all asking so I emailed it over to them.

[Their reaction] was a mix of a lot of different feelings. There's a mix of shock, of surprise, of happiness. But the story kind of just caught people off guard, which is kind of sad, but I don't think that a lot of my family really knew the whole story, and all the memories I have from it. And so, it was like an eye-opening moment for a lot of them. They know the [basic story but] they've never heard about the memories I've had from being in foster care before adoption. So, it kind of shook them up a little bit.

[I had never talked to them about it,] not before I wrote it. No, I'd never really brought it up. This is kind of a hard question to answer just because I know that my parents love me, and I don't think the essay really changed the fact of how they felt. I know they've always loved me. I know after writing that, it grew a bond that [I] didn't think could be grown anymore.

Maya's Story: The Spice Box

Maya speaks fluent English, German, Tamil, and Hindi, and reads and writes Sanskrit. All the application essays she wrote, from her first try through her final draft, focused on one or another aspect of her multicultural experience. Her parents are religious and traditional Tamils from southern India. Her attitude is perpetually sunny and can-do. She seems drawn to a challenge. Maya's writing is typified by its length and breadth. She has a facility for producing lots of words in a little time, a skill that will surely be useful in college.

> If it's an interesting topic, I like to write. I liked the [Common App prompts] because we could pick our topic, and I chose something that was important to me.

Maya's first essay focused on an experience she had in India as a child:

> Majestically poised like a maharani in my pink, embroidered, Jaipur skirt atop a 15-foot elephant, I take a long, sweeping look at my surroundings. The rolling hills, luscious, green trees, and clear blue skies dotted with pristine white clouds render me speechless. How on earth did a 5-foot-tall girl from Chamblee, Georgia, end up here?
>
> The magnificent giant with piercing, hazel-brown eyes and eyelashes as long as matchsticks is Hema, the 24-year-old female Asian elephant. She is standing 5 feet away from me, swaying her trunk, ripping leaves off branches, tossing sticks haphazardly around her, and gazing at me as if to assess if I am ready for the adventure I am about to embark on. The mahout from the Elephant Sanctuary of Hathi Gaon in Jaipur, Rajasthan, walks over to me and motions for me to come closer to Hema. I inch forward–my heart beating fast.
>
> On the mahout's direction, I place my hands on Hema's prickly and floppy ears and hold on tightly. I lift my right foot and place it at the base of her trunk. As I keep my

left foot a few inches in front of my right foot, I gain a little confidence. I turn around, beaming at my parents and grandparents who are looking at their 15-year-old, climbing an elephant's trunk with no safety equipment. I see the color drain from my grandma's petrified face, my grandpa beaming with pride and amazement, my dad making sure he captures every second on his brand new iPhone 13 Pro Max, and my mom reminding me to be safe as if that would make a difference. Mustering every ounce of energy, I continue to climb.

Thud! I fall to the ground. I'm covered in dust. There goes my beautifully embroidered skirt, I think to myself. A second later, I get up, dust the sand off, and resume climbing Hema's trunk. I remember the mahout's instructions to curl my toes and maintain my center of balance.

This time, I hold on tighter to Hema's ears and follow the mahout's instructions more closely. Deftly placing my curled feet one after the other on her trunk, I ascend slowly.

14 more feet, ok good, now 13 more, come on, you got this...

The journey to the top is long and arduous. My left hand slips more times than I can count. Hema's needle-like hairs pierce through my skirt and scrape my skin, causing a burning sensation to travel up my lower leg. Every two steps I take forward, I seem to be sliding down half a foot. Uncertainty, doubt, and fear tease me. Once every few minutes, I get a breakthrough where all the circumstances align perfectly for me: Hema stops moving, my fingers retain their grip, my ears tune out the crowd's noises, and I concentrate on my end goal; getting to the top.

I take a deep breath in and exhale slowly, just as I learned in yoga class eons ago, and look straight up Hema's trunk. I fix my gaze on the mound at the top of her head and carefully make my way up. Inching my way up, I reach the top and slowly swing my legs around.

Wow...

The view from atop an elephant is unique. I am only 15 feet above the ground, but the journey has been more fulfilling and rewarding than any other. I look down at the spot where I fell and notice the scratches on my skin. My skirt is blowing peacefully in the wind.

Out of the 50 people in my tour group that day, I was the only one to climb an elephant's trunk. The experience was thrilling, exhausting, and nerve-wracking, and something I'll never forget. When life presents opportunities and challenges, only a few choose the hard climb. The hardest climbs offer the best views and the most fulfilling journeys.

Later she told me about her work:

[After writing the first essay] I just realized that people don't want to read that much, and I started looking at my own writing. I paid more attention to the essays that were shorter and crisper than the essays that kept dragging on forever. And I thought of what I could do to bring my point across better without just adding useless words and making the story drag on.

To some extent [being able to write a lot] is good but then I think it's harder and maybe more important to learn to cut down from that and make the point easier to understand and [clearer]. I wanted something that was a little more unique because I feel

like everyone does some kind of sport or extracurricular activity and that's a common topic that people write about. I just felt I could do something a little more unique with a stronger message.

Maya began working on her video version of the essay:

I do have pictures of the elephant. But [as I started working on my video] I thought it would be hard to capture the whole journey in just a [short] video because I write so much about it. I don't know if you can like really see everything that happens in just the video. But I looked over the [topics for] the Common App essay [to get an idea for my video] and I tried to connect with each one of them and see which one mattered the most to me personally, to my culture, heritage, my religion.

All of those [things] are really important to who I am. It's what all of my extracurriculars have been centered around for years. So, I thought it would be nice to incorporate that into my video because even though there's a lot of Indian Americans, I don't know if everyone has the same experience I do coming from the type of family I come from.

I thought it'd be interesting to show that aspect in the video and show that I come from a pretty traditional South Indian family. I should also say that we're like traditionally religious. We are really active in our community. Our temple, we go every Sunday we spend like four or five hours there every week. We do a lot of stuff outside of the temple and in the video I kind of showed how we grow a lot of the traditional Indian plants, and we use all of that in our cooking and skin care and [for so many things]. The Indian culture and religion is really tied into our [daily] lives. Whereas for other Indian

families, maybe it's more like a side aspect that they only do on certain days, but for us it's a daily thing.

Figure 2

Screenshot of Maya's Video

Maya made the video, which is a visual tour around her home and yard. As she narrates, viewers see plants she and her parents grow for medicinal and culinary purposes; Maya in her kitchen making traditional Indian dishes; and clips from Maya's dance recitals. She told me about the process:

> Initially, I was like, this seems like a long assignment. It might be time-consuming. And then I looked at the assignment and all the descriptions and it was kind of overwhelming to see how many options there were, but then once I thought about an event in my life that I could talk about, [one] that had an impact on me or that was unique that I could also show some meaning to then it got a little easier.

And then once we did all the planning assignments, it got less overwhelming. Initially. I looked at the assignment and it seemed like a lot of work and I wasn't too excited about having to write a whole essay because we wrote essays every week in your class. But then I looked at the description and I saw how it was literally the same as the Common App prompts and how it could give me an idea of how I could proceed with my college application process and I was like, okay, well, this is pretty useful.

The theme [of the elephant essay] I think I was trying to say how it's important to enjoy the process of getting somewhere and how it's important to keep trying and not give up. I try to do that in my life. And how the hard work is worth it at the end because you get to see all the hard work you put in at the end.

I do think [one theme is a conflict between being Indian and being American] because living here my whole life, I've learned to adapt to my surroundings. When I'm at home, or when I'm at a really Indian cultural place or religious place, I know how I'm supposed to be and I just naturally go into that mode. It just feels really natural for me to be in that environment. But having lived here for my whole life [school is also] second nature. At home, we speak our mother tongue and do all of those [traditional] things. So I feel like it really ties in where I am.

So [I speak] Hindi, Tamil, and then I've learned German at school and [of course] English. I can get bits and pieces from other languages too, but that's not too fluent. And Sanskrit because I know how to read and write the script.

[The sort of theme of the video is] the spice box. I think as I made the video I realized how [the idea] really flowed together. [The concept helped me think of] a different way of looking at how [an object] can symbolize [a quality].

> I think in class you gave the example of a piggy bank or coins or something and how an object was used to represent someone and how that connection is pretty impactful. So, then I thought of things in my life that had the same impact, and I was like, okay this makes sense. So, then I made it into the video. And then after I made the video I looked back over and I [thought], okay, what if I made this my Common App essay? It satisfies the prompt and describes who I am. [So, the essay was actually based on the video, not the other way around.]

After making the video, Maya adapted the video into what became her final college essay, the one she submitted to schools:

> My mother's flowing handwriting reads, "Add 1½ teaspoons of chai masala and bring to a boil."
>
> I reach for our anjaraipetti, the family heirloom passed down four generations. Six spices–turmeric, tulsi leaves, cinnamon, peppercorns, cumin, and cardamom pods–neatly compartmentalized in a circular, metal box. As I open the lid, the fragrance of the spices wraps me in nostalgia. I feel a strange sense of connection with who I am. It's as if elements of my own personality are contained in the tiny cups of spices waiting to burst open and add flavor to my life.
>
> My varied interests and zest for life channel the versatile, deep-rooted turmeric. Be it music competitions weaving together a blend of ragas, intensive dance thillana workshops with intricate and fast-paced footwork, piano lessons exploring the soul-stirring notes of Beethoven's Sonatas, immersive German language classes abroad, or weekend Sanskrit and cultural classes, every experience introduces me to new corners of our world. Turmeric, my go-to remedy for everything from a sore throat to dry skin, is

the humble kitchen cure-all with anti-inflammatory properties, warmth, and vibrance that reflects my love of life and giving it my all.

The ringing of the large brass bell, followed by the ceremonial sip and sprinkling of sanctified tulsi water, is one of my favorite parts of a temple visit. The tranquil atmosphere filled with the scent of fresh tulsi leaves and the vibration of Vedic chants rejuvenate and comfort me. Tulsi leaves are integral to my Hindu heritage and remind me of everything that centers me: yoga, meditation, and mantra chanting. My everyday practices help me find my larger purpose and expand my worldview.

Subtleness combined with depth of flavor defines many Indian spices. A steaming cup of masala chai on a rainy day, aromatic pulav served with fresh yogurt, and rich, flavorful dal are all incomplete without one key ingredient: cinnamon. Nine years of watching Bake Off have taught me that the right pinch of cinnamon can get me a Hollywood handshake. The unassuming, yet distinctive, touch of cinnamon has taught me the spirit of serving without seeking attention, something I am reminded of when leading my temple's Annual Food Drive and youth yoga camps.

The peppercorn, however, is a completely different story. It's what my parents endearingly call me. Whether I'm critiquing my mom's culinary experiments as a self-appointed Michelin-star reviewer or being candid about my dad's latest haircut, I speak my mind. Underneath my five-foot stature, you'll find a ball of energy and enthusiasm always up for a challenge and ready to brighten someone's day, whether it takes a few rounds of Bollywood karaoke or a game of garden badminton.

For all of my extrovertedness, spending time in nature is how I like to unwind after an eventful day. Walking barefoot on damp grass, literally smelling roses, watching

birds, watering plants, and taking long walks make my heart happy. When I see the tiny yet mighty cumin, I realize that the simplest aspects of life carry some of the greatest joys.

Cracking open and crushing a cardamom pod reminds me of the layers of my own personality, and how I have learned to perform under pressure – juggling my activities and commitments while still finding time to experiment and whip up a new dessert. After all, nothing completes chai like a dash of freshly crushed cardamom.

Speaking of chai, mine is ready. I put my mother's recipe away and gently close my anjaraipetti. As I sit down with the steaming cup in my hands, I think: this little spice box is a life companion that holds so much more than a blend of spices. And no matter how far I go, my home is where my anjaraipetti is.

Kevin's Story: The Aftershock

Kevin was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and an American father. Shortly after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, he moved from Japan to Singapore, and then to the United States a few years later. Kevin was the school's salutatorian as a graduating senior.

Kevin's first attempt at an application essay focused on lessons he'd learned by playing tennis for most of his young life. It showed that Kevin was well-acquainted with the five-paragraph academic essay form: he had an introduction with a thesis, three body paragraphs each dedicated to a point supporting the thesis, and a conclusion. An excerpt:

> The swoosh of the racket. The pop of the ball. The twang of the strings. These three sounds are what I, a tennis player, have been hearing for the last 11 years of my life. While these sounds may mean nothing to the untrained ear, any long time tennis player will tell you these sounds awaken powerful memories of their lives on the court.

> Memories of loss, triumph, success, and struggle. During the 11 years I have played this sport, I cannot say that I have been the best moral example of sportsmanship, hard work, or talent. However, playing this sport has taught me three lessons that I will never forget.
>
> First is the value of patience. […] Second is the value of friends and teamwork. […] Last, and arguably most important, is to never give up.
>
> In conclusion, my lifelong love and refinement of my tennis game have allowed me to learn some very important values in life. The value of patience, friends and teamwork, as well as perseverance. I strive to be able to apply and use these values in my everyday life outside of tennis, so I can become a better man and make a mark on the world.

I wrote in a comment that "this is a solid and straightforward essay about 3 things tennis has taught you. Might you consider changing this essay up so it's not in such a standard academic form? You explain things fine here, but there is little in the way of creativity, uniqueness, or personality. I would like to read an essay on tennis that only Kevin could write. This sounds like an essay that most any tennis player could write."

In our interview, Kevin elaborated on that essay and my comments:

> The first essay I wrote was about tennis. [But] I realized a college essay has to be cool, right? And I realized tennis was not cool at all. Thousands if not millions of people play it in the US. My tennis essay lacked uniqueness. It wasn't terrible, it wasn't great, but I'm sure a lot of kids write their essay that way, like something you're passionate about, something you do every day, but not unique. That essay did not even touch on Fukushima. It talks about something I've done for 12 years, so I guess in a way that would have been a good summary [of my life] but I felt I couldn't write the essay without

Fukushima, thinking back now, because it's the most unique thing that happened to me for sure.

You definitely told me [that it was an ok essay but not a unique essay]. And that helped me for sure. I remember one comment you put on my tennis essay, something about dedication, or attention to detail, you asked if that quality was a uniquely Japanese value, if I could connect me being half Japanese to tennis, so I thought yeah maybe it is, but speaking of being Japanese, like that's the more unique part about me, it's not the tennis, so I could use the tennis essay and compare it to being Japanese but I could also go a completely different route and talk about being Japanese, and that's what I did, and I think your comment helped me do that.

[In a later draft I focused] more on my Japanese identity. And it ended up being my college essay.

An excerpt from that essay:

The most vivid memory of my childhood was the day a magnitude 9 earthquake violently shook the mainland of Japan. On March 11, 2011, off of the coast of Fukushima, the most powerful earthquake in Japan's recorded history occurred. At the time, a 6 year old me was living in Kanagawa, Japan, a place about 2 hours South of Fukushima by train. I was in the bedroom with my mother, about to take a nap, as it was around 3:30 pm. […] Then, the shaking started. I vividly remember the rattling of the house and windows, as well as my mother frantically running downstairs to protect my sister, who was 4 at the time. I remember half crawling to take cover under my sister's small wooden bed, in case the house caved in on itself and buried us alive.

> […] At age 6, I did not understand what a nuclear meltdown was. However, I knew something terrible had happened, and it was related to the earthquake, and it seemed like the whole of Japan was anxious, almost as if they were awaiting their fate. This was the first traumatic experience in my life.

In our interview, Kevin explained further:

> I had to leave Japan, which is where I lived when I was zero to six years old, because of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, and then we moved to Singapore for a couple years.

He continues the story in the essay:

> All I remember is my mother trying to hold back her sobs as we went up the elevator at the airport, after we said goodbye to her mother for what could have been the last time. I tried to console her, perplexed and confused as to why she was crying. In my mind, we were just going on vacation to a tropical country. This was the first time I saw an adult cry.
>
> It wasn't until many years later that I realized the true reason behind her tears. […] Being forced to leave your homeland and family behind and also having to hide your feelings and stay cheerful for your children must be some of the hardest things for a human being to muster. I hope I can be half as strong as my mother and able to make difficult but correct decisions as she did.

I asked him to describe his experience with moving among different countries and cultures:

> [Moving] was challenging because I didn't really speak English when I moved to the States, and we were uprooted truly, and I wrote about it in my essay because I guess it was my biggest hardship in my life and I was young. It was my parents' hardship as well.

Learning English for me was difficult. Adapting to new environments and meeting new people and seeing new cultures was cool but it was weird and difficult as well.

Had the disaster never happened, I would never be here, I would still be living in Japan. And I think things happen for a reason, and I probably would never be speaking English at the level I am today if that didn't happen, especially because it was a development stage at which you develop your language most fully. So yes, it was outside of my control, and it sucked for the time being, but now I realize without it my life would not be as cool as it is now. [It was a terrible disaster for many people] but I do also recognize the effect it had on my life and the opportunity it gave me.

Before I had to write [my college essay, I was] nervous. Nervous about college, nervous about writing a college essay, unsure of where to start, because I'd never tried to summarize my entire life in 650 words before. After you told us we had to write it, I think I went from trying to summarize my entire life in 650 words, to writing about the most impactful event of my life, [which was the Fukushima nuclear disaster], instead. So that was the difference that it made, I think.

At the beginning I wasn't even thinking about [including Fukushima]. I thought a college essay was supposed to be 'this is who I am,' and it didn't include Fukushima originally, but then I realized this *is* who I am and had to include that because that is my background.

[Writing the essay a number of times] did three things. One, I thought about it earlier than I would have had I not done it in your class, which gave me more time to draft different ideas. And the second thing is you steered me away from the general, generic sports essay, and the third thing you did was [push me to] highlight more

important or unique parts about myself, my Japanese identity rather than [settle for] a generic essay.

I felt better [submitting my final essay rather] than the tennis essay for sure. For Georgia Tech, which I got in [to], I felt confident, but I don't know if you can ever feel confident sending an essay to an Ivy League school. I know you can always improve, but I was 90% ok with the one I sent in.

[Thinking about the video,] when I'm writing about an earthquake or a tsunami, it's graphic in words, and you can imagine it even if you don't see it. It's not [as] devastating in words, but I didn't want to have my video have a lot of people dying in it, so I went with a more lighthearted approach. I didn't want to go full-on tsunami, so I went more about myself in that one, especially because a college would receive an essay and a video together. For that reason, I didn't want to do the exact same thing twice. I wanted to be a little bit more lighthearted after the death essay that I wrote about.

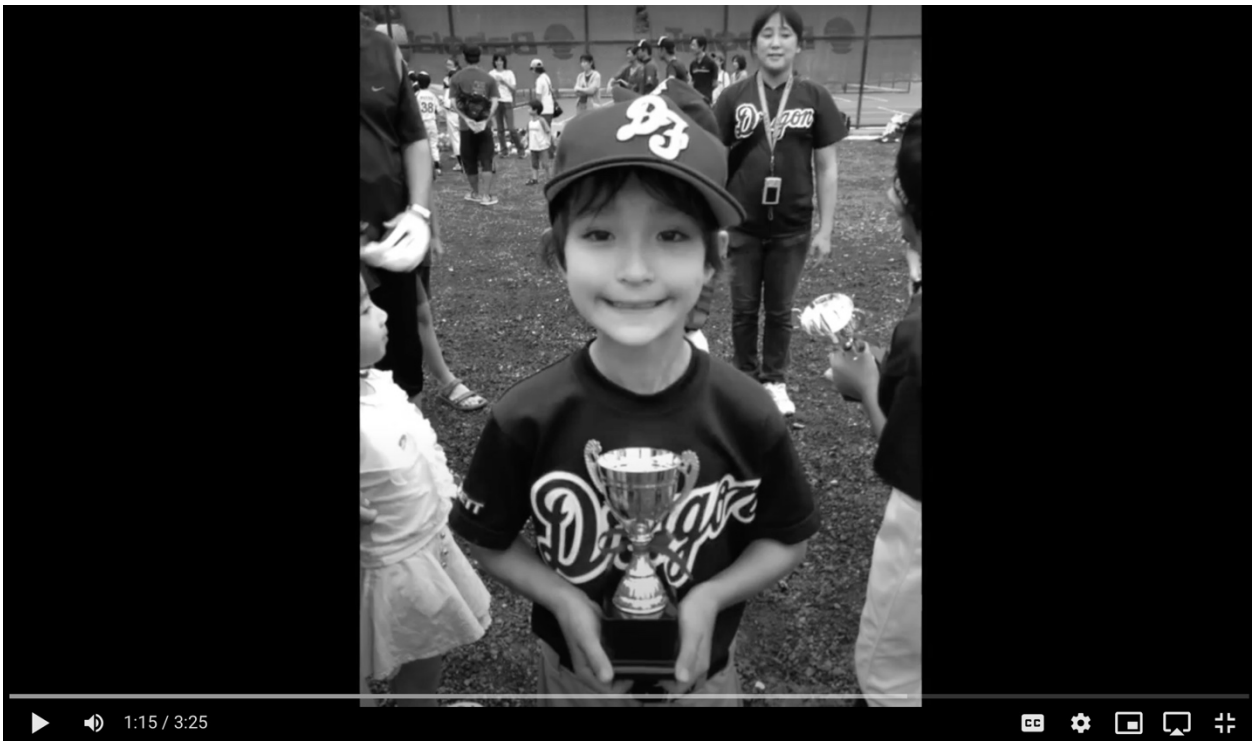
[The video was more successful] in telling the audience about myself. It was a better overview, but in terms of making an emotional impact on my audience, the essay definitely did a better job, because the video was kind of goofy. It was from perspective of my stuffed animal. So it was like yeah I'm talking about something that's actually happening but I'm also kind of making it fun slash funny. It tells a little about my personality as well, through the medium, but if I'm going on what made an emotional impact, it was definitely the essay that did a better job.

[To me,] writing is a medium that allows you to express more emotion, unless you're a master cinematographer, but I think writing is a medium where, I'm not extremely confident in my writing, but I'm 6/10, I'm an average writer, I think the

average writer can achieve emotional significance in their pieces whereas a video creator, maybe not as much.

Figure 3

Screenshot of Kevin's Video



Other people in the class complained, but it really wasn't that much work, and we had to write it anyway for college. It was like, we got a head start on our college journey. There was no one else that was preparing me.

I applied to five schools, two I got accepted, two I'm waiting to hear, and Tokyo University I didn't get in. Maybe part of not getting into Tokyo is because for American schools I wrote about Fukushima, but everyone in Japan experienced that, so I couldn't write about it. I wrote about some other topic, I don't remember, but it was not impressive at all. The thing that maybe set me apart in America didn't set me apart in Japan.

Emily's Story: Arts and Sciences

Emily was born in Canada and moved to Georgia as a middle schooler. Soon after, her mother passed. She has been diagnosed as high-functioning autistic. Between her love for writing and reading and her personal experiences, I looked forward to seeing what she would do with her college application materials.

> When I first knew I had to write [a college admissions] essay for class, my first thought was "well, that's good," because I'm good at writing. But my second thought was "Oh no, this is really serious. How am I going to do this?" And I remember when [my teacher] introduced the project, saying it would be interesting and fun, and I thought "this is horrible, I hate this, I hate writing narratives, this is the worst thing ever, oh my god, I can't think of something that interesting to write about." And then the first draft is due in like two days, and I was like "oh no!" And from the [essays] I'd seen, everyone was just trauma dumping. I was looking at the prompt, which said to write about something you like or what you think about, and then I did, and it ended up being trauma dumping also.
>
> But then I wrote my first draft and I thought, this is something. And when I actually got time to sit down and do my college admissions stuff, because all I'd heard about college admissions was "it's so hard, it's so time consuming, it's going to be like taking another class, senior year is going to be good after that but while you're doing it it's going to be horrible." And I remember looking at Common App in August [of my senior year], and I thought, this is not that hard, all I need to do is put in some information about my family and then have this essay which I'd pretty much already started in class, and I thought, I'm good, I'm chilling.

> I like reading a lot, so I can write a narrative because I read a lot of narratives, but when it comes to writing, in the past, pretty much all the writing I'd done was more like research and not stories. All the experiences writing fiction or narratives that I'd had were in ELA classes when they made us write about what you did this summer. I hated that so, so much. It was horrible.

In her essay, she elaborated:

> I was a frustrated kid. I was never able to enjoy the innocent freedom from responsibility that defines childhood. All I wanted was to be taken seriously, to have the freedoms responsibility brings. l felt held back by the capabilities of my brain, of my fine motor skills, which never seemed to match up with the level at which I thought, at which I wanted to deconstruct the world around me. All of this coupled with the realities of being a girl in a male-dominated world made me feel trapped in the insufficiencies of my physical manifestation. As such, I escaped into the world of books.
>
> My parents love to talk about how I slept with books instead of stuffed animals. I've always found solace in stories. So many books have played crucial roles in my evolution. I am a mix of every character I've ever loved, of Katniss, Hermione, and Annabeth. Through all of this, I've been searching for identity and purpose.

In an interview, she told me about her experience writing the essay and making the video:

> I was thinking my whole college app was going to be answers to [the same] questions they're getting from everyone, except for the essay. The essay's really the only part where I get to show them who I really am. I think if I had an interview with these colleges that might be better for me because it's hard to express who I am, what I think about, and why I would be good to go to any specific college, why they should admit me

without something that's not just answers to the questions they have, so with the essay I think what I thought was that I need to show them to the best of my ability, how I think, because I think that's what makes me a good applicant. And so I just started writing what I think about which ended up being about time and I just nerded out with that.

Here's an excerpt from her essay:

> Time: everything runs by it, the world relies on it, I'm always fighting against it. Since 1905, humanity has known that time is relative. But when we examine the universe with a closer lens, we discover that time may not exist at all. When people die, we say they ran out of time. When 14-year-old me was woken up in the middle of the night and told that my mom had passed away, time, in my mind, collapsed. I felt pulled apart and pushed together all at once. I was stuck in the same moment, but simultaneously, time kept tumbling forward.
>
> The progression of time, which I had previously taken for granted, became suddenly, disturbingly unnatural. I didn't know how to begin to comprehend this life-altering loss, and the only thing I could think of was the effect it had on everything else. What could I do to make losing her even the littlest bit less devastating? I tried to give my little sister the advice my mom had given me–this was harder than expected. How, with a sibling who's always joking and bickering with you, do you attempt to give them serious advice that you don't even know how to follow yourself? I knew I could never be my mom, but I tried my best to stand in the hole that she left in all of our lives, which, to this day, leaves me feeling tired and alone.
>
> When the world stopped spinning, I thought about the nature of time, specifically what it would be like to be aware of everything that had ever happened and will happen

> at a single point–could my mom see that now? Through the research I did trying to answer these questions, I found my passion.

Emily further explained in an interview:

> All my life I've been thinking about what I've been interested in, what am I going to do, what is my future going to look like? When I was really little, I wanted to be a writer because my mom was an English major and then as I got older, I got into more science-based things. I wanted to go into geology, I wanted to be an astronaut, I got into astrophysics, and then into physics itself and quantum physics. More recently as I've learned more about physics, I learned that I don't care about physics or any science for the sake of itself. I care about it in a more philosophical standpoint, like what does it mean for humanity? What do we do with this information moving forward? So the way I think is really tied to science and more artistic fields together, and I feel they should not be as separate as they are. Science doesn't matter if you don't put it in context, so I think in my essays that's what I tried to do. That's something I feel is something is strong about me, and I also want to double major in physics and philosophy, so I was trying to show them why [in my essay].

An excerpt from her essay:

> I've never been one to fit myself into boxes. My parents have always said that as a kid, whenever they gave me choices between things, I'd make up a third option that was some combination of the two. It should come as no surprise to anyone that what I love doesn't fit into any one field either. In kindergarten, I wanted to be a "songwriter, or geologist, or artist." Over the years, this became "scientist, writer, astronaut, or engineer (computer or aerospace)." I found myself leaning towards STEM, but I couldn't stand to let go of my

love for writing and language. I may think analytically, I've always been that way, but to me, thinking scientifically is a tool to understand the applications of complex ideas philosophically. The realization that science is not all-powerful but can be situated in the context of human experience, is reassuring. When we think purely scientifically, time may be relative, or maybe not exist at all, but it, or at least my perception of it, helped guide me when I felt the most lost. To me, that's reliable. To me, that's real.

At the time, I had an old t-shirt featuring a quote from Stephen Hawking: "1N73LL1G3NC3 15 7H3 4B1L17Y 70 4D4P7 70 CH4NG3." I remember thinking that I had to adapt to this change. This idea kept me going when it felt like I was drowning in the enormity of my feelings. During monumental times in my life, even today, my thoughts return to this: intelligence is the ability to adapt to change. Whether or not change feels beneficial, the resulting adaptation shapes my character moving forward. In every moment, there are infinite possibilities of what could be: electron configurations, particle interactions, states of being. But my consciousness is here, now. Despite everything, this feels beautiful. I get to choose how I react: I get to build the person I want to be. I am a sum of all of my adaptations from all the tiny and momentous changes that I have encountered throughout my life, and I am so grateful that I am here, now, in this iteration of the universe.

From our interview:

In many ways you don't get [science without art and vice versa], and in my video I was trying to say that words are like – I think I said boxes but meant vessels. The more specific shapes they are, the more specific the word, the more specific the thought you can express. Our thoughts before we can communicate them to others are like blobs or

clouds. And we want to try to get something concrete that can show their shape as much as possible. And so that's what I was trying to say and I think that in many ways the words couldn't exist without the shape or the vessel [that contains them and makes them concrete], because that's how I start my process of communication, and in many ways art couldn't exist without science and science couldn't exist without art.

I think my original essay was a good starting point. That essay was just kind of me writing exactly what I was thinking, and something I really [learned doing these essays] was how to write an essay and then refine it and edit it because I think in a lot of my ELA classes, you write an essay in the course of a week max, you write it, you edit it a couple days later, so for me it was a new process to write an essay over the course of months as opposed to a week. If I go back and look at the first essay, it feels like a world away from the final one. I know it's similar, but my thoughts were in a very different place.

So, it was good for me to work on the essay for a year. It was not only a benefit, but it was a new experience I hadn't had before. I was able to delve deeper into the original essay I had and it was a valuable experience overall.

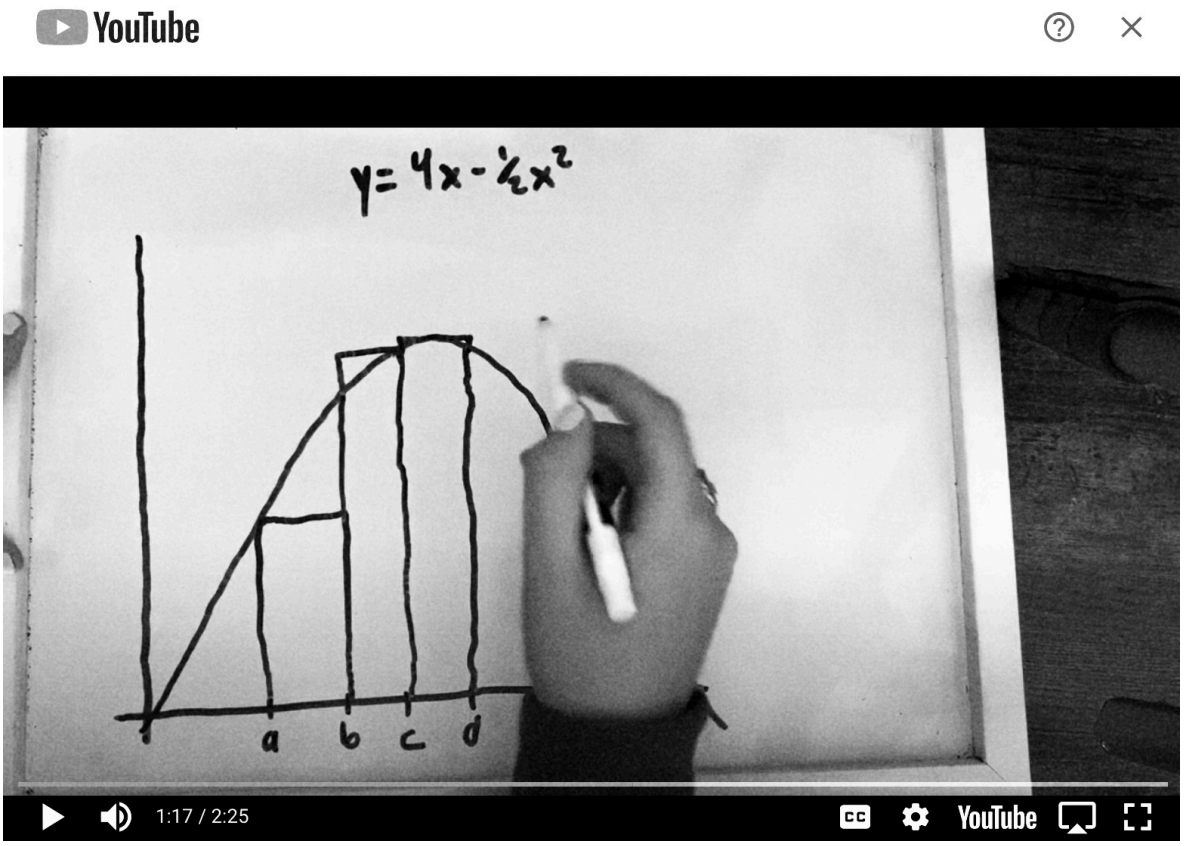
I do think I have changed [in the time I worked on the essay] in terms of what I think but not in the way I think. So that's why I think the stuff I originally wrote still works, because I tried to write about the way I think rather than my day to day goings on.

[You asked about my autism diagnosis, and] I'm not sure how much it affects me as a writer. It's more sensory things or sensory situations. Like, interactions in life are things that I had to learn or teach myself where most people didn't have to teach themselves. There are things I have to consciously think about, and I'm not sure that so

much affected me in writing as much as it affected the lived experience I wrote about. It makes me more pensive or thoughtful than I would be otherwise, but it just affected what I wrote about more than how it affected the actual writing itself.

Figure 4

Screenshot of Emily's Video



I was joking [earlier when I said trauma dumping]. I didn't want [my essay, talking about when my mom passed], to come across like this event defined me. I didn't want to come across that I wouldn't be the same person without it. I mean I think I am different than I would have been otherwise, but it didn't change who I am fundamentally so I wanted to show how it affected me and to show how I am now because of it, but I

didn't want it to come across like I wouldn't be the same person, I wouldn't like this stuff, I wouldn't like physics, and so on.

[My mother's passing] was a catalyst for me, but I think there would have been another catalyst had it not happened, so I didn't want to focus on it completely because it could have happened to anyone. I mean there's nothing special about me, about that happening to me. It could have happened to anyone.

Doing the video, when I first learned about it, I was like oh no! I was like just kind of flabbergasted because I had never made a video before. I thought this seems horrible, how am I going to do this? At least with the essay, I like writing things. But the video I was like what am I going to do? I have no idea!

Then I think it helped when [the class saw] the examples, because some of them, I was like, this is trash, so it doesn't have to be that good, and that helped a little bit. And some of the other ones, I was like ok, I can do something like this. And then, how I really entered it, I thought, what can I do with a video that I can't do with an essay? That's when I was like, oh I have a visual idea that I'm not really good at expressing with words, which is the thing about boxes and stuff, so I was like, ok, a video kind of opens itself up to that more than writing would, because writing I can't explain that in a good way. Then I just wrote what I wanted to talk about in the best way I can, I came up with a script, and then for my video elements I thought I need to show this so they can understand what I'm talking about here. What can I film that literally expresses this idea but also kind of shows a part of my daily life, so that they can understand where I'm coming from?

I do feel like it was successful, and I was really surprised it was successful, and I'm happy about it now. It was a good experience. I needed someone to just push me into the deep end there and say do this because otherwise I never would have done it.

Nate's Story: Capturing the Elusive

Nate transferred to the school as a junior. He quickly integrated with a new friend group. Tall and stylish, Nate integrates wry humor and often controversial stances on concerns of his peer group. His parents are engineers, and an older brother plays football professionally.

Nate often struggled in writing for his Advanced Placement English Language course. His essays were often filled with elevated and obscure vocabulary, but sometimes syntactically disorganized and often unclear. He grappled with big ideas but had not yet developed his skills in writing to effectively articulate such ideas. Over time, his work strengthened. He wrote three admissions essays and produced one video before writing the essay he would eventually submit with his applications.

Honestly, I was opposed when [I first learned we had to write the essay], and then when you added like three other essays we had to write, we had to answer all the different prompts rather than just a prompt we were comfortable with, I wasn't happy.

So my mom and I talked about it. And she said that it would help me in the future, and that changed my perspective. After that I definitely liked it.

[The first one I wrote was about being] in the hospital for severe lung issues induced by pollen. It's seasonal, and around this time of the year I take more medication. My lungs at the time were going to close, they were in the process of closing, and if I did not get to the hospital or urgent care I would've died or something very severe like that.

> [I wanted to show how] I've gone through adversity, other than being black, that's what I wanted to convey. I definitely wanted to play with the emotions.
>
> My doc at the time said I would grow out of it, and I have grown out of it now. I can play sports, but I keep my inhaler in my bag. Asthma is fickle. It depends on what you're doing. So regular [weight] lifting and doing cardio actually help it.

Here is an excerpt from that essay:

> The poking and prodding from nurses caused my mother's optimistic attitude to be burdened with tears as she silently mumbled bible verses, like I was underwater for my third dunk-tank baptism. The reassuring rhythm of the immovable heartbeat monitor at my bedside calmed my intrusive thoughts about death, as I rushed through the vibrant superhero-filled halls soaked with the screams of children that only brought my fear of needles to unprecedented heights. Something about struggling to breathe while glued to a frostbite-inducing hospital bed with the unfortunate addition of blood-curdling coughs fabricated a sequence of intrusive thoughts plaguing my adolescent mind concerning the possibilities of death.

Nate's second attempt answers the CommonApp prompt regarding an important event in the writer's life:

> The sight of my best friend Adam in an immobile state invited innumerable tears as I longed for my once-cheerful golden retriever to be returned to his former self. To watch him suffer and wait to die as I acted as a bystander haunted me while I drove his soon-to-be lifeless body to a vet that didn't deserve to lay a finger on my dearest friend, let alone dispose of his body on a bed unworthy of a dog of his caliber. The doctors guaranteed my Adam would feel no pain as they set up a gas chamber that invoked morbid images of

> Auschwitz. Thus forcing me to flee from the confrontation with death onto a beautiful spring day completed by the pleasant scent of daffodils in the distance.
>
> […] To be accompanied by someone that distracts you from the act of self-doubt and constant internal pressures brought upon by a society that welcomes conformity instead of self-expression should be compulsory in a continuous anxiety-inducing experience in which a human is compelled to live one paycheck away from the 66 percent, but I suppose when life is simplified, you grow to realize that you are in constant avoidance of only three things: death, hunger, and homelessness.

For his third essay, Nate attempted the prompt about an interest that defines him and wrote about black holes and time. Confused by his choice of topic, I asked what inspired the essay:

> [The third essay,] a few days before writing that I watched [the sci-fi film] *Interstellar*, and it had me going, and I was perplexed about…like, we're really just on a rock. There's so much out there that we could discover, that we may not discover, and like what really is time? It had me going. I wanted to write about it.

Here is an excerpt:

> Time is the most elusive object encompassing our universe. It's not something that can be purchased or unlocked, like an award within a video game. But rather something that signifies a guideline for how human life is lived. Moreover, the entirety of human life is structured around living up to the expectations of time. For instance, a psychological study states that the human psyche is forever in competition with both the ideal and feared self. To live up to the irrational expectations of others in regards to fulfilling their own dreams with the little time they have left is what pushes the psychological

> motivations of many trapped between the incestuous needs of fulfilling the dreams of others and resisting convention. Thus driving what they think is their ideal self.
>
> […] Black holes are feared because they embody the fears which structure our world. The idea that an object can operate outside of human understanding creates fear in the minds of a population taught to resist what they fail to understand. Einstein's theory of relativity only exacerbated our innate fear of the unknown by merely adding to what could be discovered. Einstein proved to the world that we as people operate in a state of fear only towards the things we fail to comprehend. Your spirit only waivers when presented with fears not understood. After experiencing what is peaceful in life you live for yourself not others.

Nate described the experience of writing the essays in an interview:

> I believe the first two essays I was just writing for a grade rather than to convey my emotions, and obviously the more you write and convey your thoughts they're going to change and develop and obviously, I became a better writer, and I wanted to try again and actually write to convey an issue I found meaningful and to portray me how I wanted to be portrayed to a college in the admissions process. [It took doing the first few essays to learn how to do the last essay.]
>
> [I ended up writing about something else for my applications:] Volunteering at the disabled center and seeing people and how they operate and how people with disabilities are misrepresented and often dismissed in society. I observed two people who were considered very disabled and couldn't live without aid from others, and they ended up falling in love, and they have a relationship no different from, say, my parents' marriage.

An excerpt:

Being a self-centered high schooler already encompassed my personality. Being overweight and bullied in school wasn't great either. Each weekend was spent dreading the following Monday, but Saturday was spent reluctantly driving to volunteer. Hi-Hope, a center for aiding the disabled, was where my mother decided to show me what it was like to care for others. Her method of choice was by dragging me into a car for a thirty-minute lecture which I ignored in spectacular Charlie-Brown fashion.

Eventually, we arrived at the sound of trees swaying in the wind and leaves scattered across the driveway. As my heart beat through my chest from anticipation I walked towards the porch like I was afraid of whoever might be inside, and with a few timid knocks the door swung open revealing a giant who filled the entirety of the door-frame. He asked for my name in a clamorous yet inviting tone, before locking me in the firmest handshake ever. "Hi, I'm Bart" was said repeatedly as I stood paralyzed running out of small talk in the first few minutes. During my freshman year, I was quite the introvert so naturally random encounters such as this one were a pain beyond belief. Even more so seeing that Bart had a way of forcing conversation with anyone he met, making his personality impossible to miss. As I continued into the living room to set up for lunch, a short woman poked me in the back complimenting my jacket before letting out a cackle while the nurses prepared to put my bland turkey sandwiches in empty McDonald's bags to give them the illusion of flavor. I later learned that woman's name was Mary. She loved banter oftentimes putting Bart at the center of her onslaught disguised as flirting to anyone who witnessed it. Their relationship was clearly built upon the occasional banter amongst friends who turned lovers. Coupled with the fact that I observed their inability to

be separated, waking up together, sleeping together, and eating together all while living with disabilities.

Seeing such a passionate bond between two individuals with such debilitating and thought-provoking, to say the least. I questioned my mother about how they were able to love each other seeing that their disabilities were far more than your friend's self-proclaimed ADHD. She glared at me before asking "If Bart and Mary are human, what makes them any less deserving of love?" Needless to say, I never brought up the topic again.

Each Saturday, Bart and I began to develop a close bond by discussing the Falcons' performance, praying for something to change. Our friendship was further cemented through action rather than through banter. Instead of only coming on Saturday I was there on Sunday, dismissiveness was replaced with acceptance as we got to know each other over the end of a sandwich. Learning to accommodate Bart's needs was such a small percentage of our relationship, and to others, my presence alone was cherished. Over time, my visits grew infrequent, as Hi-hope gave me the tools to converse with my peers. Just for me to disregard the very place that bestowed upon me the confidence necessary for life. I've always hoped that Bart abandoned me as I did him. Although, it seems that I'll never know after missing his funeral.

Since life is summarized with a list of regrets, and I seem to live with this one every day. Moreover, the friends that I've made going forward are made in hopes that I'll never revert to my former self, as I search for that same purpose again.

Nate's video was a departure from the subject matter of his essays. His video juxtaposes prosaic images of his life at home – waking up, making breakfast, cleaning his room – with voiceover narration examining his more existential fears and dreams for the future.

> When you initially assigned [the video], I loathed it. For at least a day I just thought about why do I need to do this? Can I take a missing [and have a zero in the gradebook]? But then, I'm going to do it anyway. I might as well make something I like, and I ended up liking it a lot. A few days before that I watched *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and I was looking at other short films, and I thought why can't I do this? I consume movies all the time and I tried and I actually liked it. I'm not sure if I like the topic but I like the process of getting there.
>
> [As for themes in the video,] well, throughout the day I have a thousand thoughts going through my head, on different topics, and I don't like therapy but sometimes talking to other people, or talking to a screen can help me convey my emotions. So that video was like let's see how many different thoughts can I display, and will anybody like at least one topic that I discuss in the video?
>
> At the time, I didn't have my [driver's] license, so I was restricted to what I can do, I remember talking about going to the museum, my parents' schedule didn't work out for me to do that, but if I had to do a short film again I would do that, I thought about [making videos] in college, as a hobby.
>
> I wanted to talk about some of the pictures [in the museum]. I remember I was looking at [artist Anish Kapoor's] "Mirror" and [wanted to] portray me talking to myself, because that's what I do in my head all the time. So that would be a way for other people to get to know me better.

> [During Covid,] I was talking to myself all the time, also I'm the only child in the house now. I have brothers but they're [older], it's just me and my parents, but whenever I'm going through certain things, now I've been journaling and reading books, and it helps.
>
> [Since junior year,] I've become more mature. I started understanding that the answers will come as you begin to live life, but you can't rush them. Junior, sophomore, freshman year, it was as if I was just living, waiting for someone to tell me what to do, like a checklist, eat, go to school, get grades.
>
> And then you realize that life isn't nearly as linear [as you think it is]. You told me this multiple times. Honestly, you can't apply that until you begin to see it, and the college admissions process, and going to college and living as an adult, tells you that because, my dream school I didn't get in but I got into a great program in another school, I'm going to go there, and obviously that's not what I planned to do but I'll end up fitting in over there and cherish that moment.

Donna's Story: The Seeker

Donna is outgoing and jocular. She anchors the school's daily newscasts and participates in filmmaking projects at school and on her own. Donna commented on the most meaningful work she did as a junior in this excerpt from the introduction to her portfolio of writing:

> On Mondays when I would walk into class and see the prompt of writing I would groan because it was usually something controversial, however I realized I liked writing on these subjects and found myself actually expressing my opinions through my writing. I am most proud of my college essays. I dreaded them the most as writing about myself

was really hard for me. However, now I can say even though there's room for improvement I am proud of my two college essays.

Her first attempt at a college application essay focused on how getting her first job, at a local eatery, provided a newfound sense of freedom and responsibility:

> Getting a job was the best thing I have ever done for myself. In freshman year- beginning of sophomore year, I was struggling socially, lacking confidence, and just really didn't like myself which showed in the way I interacted with others. The word that I can think of to describe it best was lost. I was lost.
>
> Then one day I was walking around the track at my school, when an old friend came up to me and asked me about life. We walked around the track talking about our lives, our families, how they've been, when she told us about where she worked: Newk's Eatery. She squealed with excitement and told me they were hiring and that I had to grab an application. So that's exactly what I did, and later that week I was hired. At first I was overwhelmed as I knew I had new responsibilities on my plate, but that feeling was overpowered by the excitement to be a part of something new and different.
>
> I picked the days I worked, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. To many those were just normal days of the week, but on those days I had purpose. It didn't matter that it was small, it didn't matter that I could be replaced, it mattered that someone wanted me somewhere at a certain time to do something that was productive. A job gave me a purpose, and suddenly everything else in my life changed, a job completely opened up my perspective. I'd come home from a late night of working to tell my parents about people making my hair turn gray. My family thought I took my job too seriously, but truthfully I took a lot of pride in my work, messing up a food order doesn't seem like the

biggest deal to many, but if no one cared about the quality in which they did things, where would we be?

I made friends with people from many different places, and we shared a bond over having to work harsh hours and deal with mean customers. It got to the point where I looked forward to interacting with rude customers so I could tell stories to make the people who worked in the kitchen laugh. I quickly became known as “guero divertido,” a (fair haired girl who was funny) and seeing as many people lack compassion and empathy with restaurant service workers, so I always had stories to tell. One person who really stunned me with her kindness was Lupé. She worked all the time and always had a smile on her face, she had a job as an expo, her hands were constantly moving: no breaks. She took so much pride in her work, if she ever made a mistake which was infrequent and I only saw happen once, she mixed a Newk’s Q sandwich in an order that was meant to have a Double Club sandwich, she ran out the door across the street to the mans car and swapped it out. She was so embarrassed that she messed up, her face was beating red, she had no idea that everyone was so impressed because most employees wouldn’t go to such extreme lengths to fix an error they made.

At Newk’s I was valued for things beyond my actions and my life. Seeing how I could impact someone’s day meant so much more that I believed. Newk’s helped me realize that I can have an impact, it doesn’t have to be big, or glorious but it can be meaningful.

Feeling that the essay did not quite capture her unique qualities, she wrote another essay on a different topic:

When I was 11 years old, my brother and I went over to my friend's house for a sleepover. For a long time, I had avoided sleepovers because I would typically pee myself at night. It was so upsetting and I tried everything to stop it, but at that age, I simply couldn't. I woke up at 4 in the morning next to my brother and our friend. We all fell asleep on his bed and I felt the dampness in my pants. I started crying immediately and grabbed the Mickey Mouse blanket I had been on and sat on the floor for hours, thinking of ways to clean the bed with no one noticing. I strategized how I could throw the sheets in the washer or wash them in the sink without waking anyone up. Finally, I sat on the desk in the room and wrote on a sheet of paper, "I peed in the bed, I am so sorry." By the time I heard someone downstairs, I forced myself to go down and handed my friend's dad the note. He didn't say a word, just went upstairs, woke up my brother and my friend and told them it was time to get up, and washed the sheets without them seeing. We never talked about it again.

He doesn't know how embarrassed I was, and how thankful I was that he handled it in such a kind manner. He received no benefit from that and didn't know how much his kindness impacted my life. For many, that may not seem like a big deal, but this illustrates how one small pure action can change someone's life for the better. I played out the most embarrassing scenarios in my head for hours, and they never happened because of the kindness of a single person who expected nothing in return.

As a society, we have grown accustomed to helping others for our own benefit. For example, most of the kids in my grade attend Beta Club as a star on their resume instead of having the true intent to help others. **I am guilty of this as well**. Colleges applaud the volunteer hours they see on one's application, and with good reason, but it's

far more heartening to see one's experience of helping another, expecting nothing in return. I do not intend to contradict the merit of volunteering and helping others, but to call attention to altruistic actions and people. To see someone do something just for the pure desire to help someone is rare to find today. However, rare altruism is something I implement in my life every day. August 16, 2023, a friend I met at a camp two years prior called me from another phone. At first, I was confused because I hadn't talked to her in months. She was in a bad living situation, and had no one else to go to. Immediately after school I drove two hours to a location to pick her up and get her out of there and help her restart her life. All she had was the clothes on her back and me.

Empathy, the trait that I have an excess of and that I used to despise, is now the strongest trait I possess. I stopped using empathy to take on others' emotions and transformed it to put myself in their perspective and help them out. I am here today because of all the altruistic actions, big or small, that have stuck with me and given me a sense of direction for my purpose, which is to give all the good that I have received. Actions big or small, cruel or kind, significant or negligible, have an impact.

As a student in our school's video and broadcasting course, I looked forward to Donna's video. Her first attempt at a video was a good effort, but we both knew it was not as good as it could be. When she turned in the video to Google Classroom, she commented, "How can I make this better?" I responded: "You have some stylish elements but as a whole the video doesn't cohere. You seem to have a few ideas but then none of them get followed to create a conclusive or controlling idea. So you might want to ask yourself what point you want to make. Cut out anything that's not in service of that point. I would also say that you should try to exploit your acting skills, or your facial expressions, like at :48 when you are struggling

with the stick shift. I can't tell if the video is supposed to be funny or if it just has a few funny moments...maybe you want to commit to humor and make it funny all the way through?" She agreed: "I want to make it coherent, I'm not sure how to do that. I know I want to show how I enjoy making an impact through selling popsicles as far as showing that I'm conflicted. As far as humor goes I'm not sure how to implement that and not sound un genuine, I want my video to show that I'm genuine."

A few weeks later, she scrapped her initial video altogether. She added this commentary to her assignment upload: "I realize that this is a completely different topic than what I talked to you about doing. I'd like to call this the Hail Mary of AP Lang. On my last video, you made a lot of comments, about a lot of things that I could change. And I kept wondering why this project was so hard for me to do, and I realized I was putting too much effort into a subject that I really wasn't overly passionate about. So I changed it to something I'm beyond passionate about, I'll gladly write a storyboard, script, and redo all that if necessary, but truthfully all of this really just came to me in a moment, so thank you. Your criticism brought me a project that I am proud of." As she noted, the video subject seemed to make all the difference. She narrated a story about her childhood interest in making videos with her brother and best friend when they were bored. As a tween, she got more serious, and made videos about getting her first bra and about her body image issues. When she got to high school, she signed up for the Audio-Film-Visual Tech Pathway, where she worked on the school's news broadcast. Later, she went with her classmates and instructor to a film festival in California that "changed everything" for her when she "hopped on a plane to LAX with a dream and a cardigan."

I watched the video and responded to her comments and concerns about doing something completely different that her first attempt: “Yup, this is a much better video! The point of doing all that preliminary work is partly to work through some ideas and scrap most of them. That’s how creative projects work. Great job!” She responded: “From doing this video multiple times and really dissecting its contents. I realized it’s a lot easier to do a project on a subject that you are passionate about. I realized that just being real and honest is a better approach to show who I am, which was the purpose of my video that I think I accomplished. I learned that you can’t just stick to the application process, you have to do something different, you have to add elements of yourself in a project if you are trying to show who you are. Next time I would give myself more time to make a rough draft and get feedback earlier in the process of making a project.”

Figure 5

Screenshot of Donna’s Video

A year later, she told me about her experiences writing these essays and working on her video:

[As for being vulnerable in the essay and the video,] it's kind of like, what do I have to lose by being honest? Like I'm honest with myself. So I don't feel like it's bad to be honest with other people. Like, yeah, I've pissed the bed before more than I'd like to admit. But I mean who was harmed? No one.

I just remember like my parents reading [my first essay] and just being like yeah, that's fine. And that just sucked. Because I didn't want it to be just fine, you know. Especially when your parents are reading it and something about that really threw me off. So I was like, all right. I have to like it. And it's also like you said very base level and yeah, it showed I have work ethic but did it really show me? But I knew, if I impress my parents, then I know I 100% have a good essay.

[Their reaction to the second essay] was better. My mom loved it and my dad's reaction was like this is too out of the ordinary, which a lot of people thought like [my senior English teacher] Ms. Harris. She thought some parts can be changed, which I did change. I think a lot of it showed that I'm funny. And like what a lot of people were telling me was you're supposed to make yourself look like a pretty little doll in these essays, right? So [the colleges] want to pick you. You're supposed to make yourself look great.

And in my essay, I just admitted for example joining Beta Club for the full purpose of because it looks good. My parents were like you don't need to admit that. I just feels like why? Why not? Like they come across all these essays that are like "I do Beta [Club] because I love helping people." I love helping people truly. That's what I want to do in life, but I don't think I'm helping people by giving them water in a marathon. That's just

not what I think helping people is about. [I didn't want to make helping people into a performance for the application.]

[As I worked on the various drafts] I kind of kept the first part [of one essay], but then I changed it to the power of empathy. The first one felt just like me talking about altruism, but then I thought about, for a couple months, I thought about empathy, and I thought that's more me than anything. And it's not like empathy is one of those things like a lot of people, you know have to learn it, but it's something that I've always just had, my [sense of] altruism and my empathy. They kind of [go together]: because I'm empathetic I want to be altruistic. Then I connected those dots [in my essay].

I've always seen empathy as [in a way] a bad thing. Like I shouldn't be as empathetic. But there's some great aspects to it, like understanding people and giving people a chance. They're going through some stuff, [but today] everyone's looking out for themselves.

[For the] first college essay, I had no clue what to write about. The words did not just start flowing out of me. Took me a long time to do. And I felt like I was pushing a subject too much that I didn't even really believe in, that I wasn't that passionate about. But when I was filming something, I had multiple ideas. So, I'd film one, test the idea and be like, I'm just not into it. And so, things that I really thought that I liked, or things that I thought are really like a big part of me, I just [started to question]. And you can't really lie on camera. I mean, [you can, but…]

There was a video that I submitted, the first one, that was not good. And then there was another one where at least I was authentic in it. Regardless of if it was edited well or a good concept. And then watching those videos we watched in your class, like [a student

submission to] Brown University, I think [watching those] was good and bad. It was good because you saw people who were more authentic, and you could tell and then you saw people who really weren't as authentic. But they're also in your head. You see that you're like, all right. So, there's a format of how you're supposed to do this when an actuality you just have to wipe that slightly because it's your thing and the whole thing should be about what you want to do.

[I included in my video some footage from when I was a kid making videos.] Like little skits [we made]. This is something I've always been fascinated by, filming me and [my friend Linda] and my brother. We were bored, so we'd create these stories of like, we're like kidnapping pets. Now I'm not going to sit here and talk to a stuffed animal, but I included that to show that this is something that I've always found cool. I've always found like film and photography or recording something, telling a story, I've always loved that. I've always thought that was cool.

[I've changed a lot since junior year.] I'm definitely a lot less naive. I think last year I was really naive with people, with situations. I pat myself on the back for not being oblivious and then I'll just go and be oblivious. I also think I really do the empathy thing. I really do choose to see the best in people. And that's hard because not everyone has the best intentions. And that's a lesson I had to learn. So, I'm a lot more guarded. Which is a good thing in my sense because I was not really guarded.

Taylor's Story: The Animator

Taylor is a top grade-earner who nevertheless has major struggles with ADHD. Although visual art is her passion, Taylor is strong across the curriculum.

The last few English classes I had in high school, I didn't exactly feel like I was learning anything or [that they were] beneficial. It was just kind of like a chore, and English and writing has always been one of my strong suits. I'm very right brain, I think that's what it is. But I was very happy that you were preparing us to do college essays. I mean, I didn't exactly want to do them, but I was very happy that at least somebody was teaching me how because I don't have older siblings and my cousins are all off at college right now. I was very grateful that you were making us go through this. I would have much rather [have written the application essays than] read some random book.

I'm just like a slow person in general, and it takes me a long time to do everything. But I enjoy writing. I enjoy the process of it, and I like getting like really nitty-gritty and writing like allows me to do that. I like to do the best I can do.

When I was in elementary school, I liked to write like novels and [stories]. I wrote a little fairy princess fantasy tiny novel with 12 pages in it in fourth grade. I remember every time I got a free period me and my friend would go and write our book. I don't know what happened to it. But I've always enjoyed writing. My dad is also a lawyer and it's definitely because of him because he's been critiquing my work forever. I got that interest from him, I think.

There's a lot of things to [my essay]. I'd say it's something that connects my childhood to my present, along with my struggles that have been present throughout my life just being not overwhelmed and easily distracted. And kind of synthesized it with my interests. So, it's just a lot about me. Just a big essay about me, but I have pretty major ADHD. I have a 504 [that provides testing accommodations] and everything and that has basically been the struggle. I have a pretty easy life. I have a lot of privileges. I'm very

> grateful for a lot of opportunities, but [ADHD] runs in the family and it just kind of takes me a long time to do everything and whatever pathway one of my classmates will take in their mind to get from point A to point B, I just [start going but] then I end up back [at the beginning]. And [so everything] usually takes [me] a longer time.

From Taylor's essay:

> I have never been an easy sleeper. Some of my earliest memories are of lying in a twin bed in the dead of night, waiting for fatigue to overcome me – giving me lots of time on my hands. To entertain my active brain, I imagined patterns of stars on my ceiling, dancing in a sea of color and far-away luminescence. They started as squiggles of magenta light, scurrying around my vision. If I strained my eyes a bit more, I found a kaleidoscope of shimmering spots and patterns, swirling and circling down from my ceiling to where I lay in awe.
>
> Every night, I was lulled to sleep by the fuzzy vibrance of this homemade light show, as lullabies played in the background. I began to look forward to my late nights. I would rush to bed and focus my eyes on my dark ceiling as hard as I could, waiting for the faint squiggles to brush my sight. I even named the performance the "Dance of The Sugar Plum Fairies." No matter how vivid my visions were, I just assumed I had imagined my experience.
>
> Interestingly enough, I didn't make them up. These moving dashes of color are a natural phenomenon called phosphene. In extreme darkness, retinas are still active and are searching to pick up light. To compensate, your eyes will mistake the grainy textures of objects in the dark for reflected light, thus creating the illusion of moving, highly saturated fragments of light.

I was thankful for the phosphenes. As little kids often are, I was wary of the dark and grew anxious of being alone. Focusing on the stars above me saved me from being isolated with my paranoid, infantile thoughts. They sheltered me from the complex disparities of my mind and gave me peace.

The security and inner peace that I found in watching the phosphenes, I also experience in creating art. I have been an artist since the day I could hold a pencil, and my style has evolved into works that showcase hyper-realism, with organized textures and fine details. I use art as a therapy to cleanse my mind of overwhelming feelings as I did in my bed, finding relief that I wouldn't be able to feel alone with my thoughts. Once I lay out the images in my mind, I find solace.

Just as lullabies relaxed me as a child, music and sound have the same effect on me as phosphenes. When sifting through my apprehension and overthinking, I use sound as a handle to hold onto. I'm able to focus on consistent sounds to separate myself from the nagging of my brain and pinpoint constructive ideas. The clinking and clanking of plates in cafes and the quiet chats of customers merge harmoniously in my brain and push down internal distractions. I'm also able to use music in the same way. I often overthink social situations, so I use the fluidity of music to distract me from my anxious thoughts. I will turn on quiet music in my headphones while walking up to a group of friends in the hallway. When I arrive, I'm not overcome by insecure thoughts. Instead, I feel confident in my abilities. Like my art and the phosphenes, music and noise help me to feel more at peace.

My journey of many steps in working around obsessive overthinking and anxiety has shone a new light on becoming who I am, all originating from the waking moments

> of my childhood. At the first stop in my journey, I excel and add purpose to my art through my entrancement with detail. At the next stop, I nurture my emotional connection to music and appreciation of sound. Even though I will be experiencing "The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies" in a new place, the comfort I find in the "noisiness" of life gives me the confidence to face any challenge.

In an interview, Taylor discussed her essay and video:

> For the past entire year, I've been writing for art just constantly because of AP and mainly for GHP [Governor's Honors Program, a state-sponsored summer school for high achievers] and applying for art. I was always, always, always writing, either for your class or for art and I just I got good at it. So, I'm not sure if it was completely conscious but I just settled on that because I knew it would turn out good because I've had a lot of practice at it and that is a big, huge thing in my life. That's what I'm doing in college, and it just makes sense to me.
>
> I was writing [about] my art. And that's also kind of what I did in this essay too. Just kind of applying it to real life and making it understandable to my audience, as well as I could and also applying not only my own art but my participation in the Arts and community service because I'm president of NHS [National Honor Society] and I had to synthesize a lot of that with my identity and why I chose to do those things. It was a very artful year.
>
> I think last year was too much. Like I got what I needed to get done and more but now this college application just really like the first semester kind of took up most of my time and I'm just kind of tired of it right now. It's just the senioritis extends in more ways

than one so I am taking like another year of AP art but it's way more slow and I'm [only] pushing out a piece every like three months.

I used [the essay I wrote in your class] as my Common App personal essay, like the whole thing. I went over it a lot with my dad and that takes forever. So, if I was going to have a good essay I wanted to go over with my dad and I was already feeling pretty good about that essay. We're going over it for like three hours, every single little phrase. I [also] got a college counselor to work on it with me to make it more college-like and then I refined it and submitted it. I've had many versions of it. I'm not sure which one, which version I sent you, but I was definitely working on that for [a while]. That's kind of how I write everything. It's painstaking but I usually like the results.

Taylor's video contained no actual video footage. Instead, she drew slides by hand on an iPad for a completely animated video. While many students think they will animate a video, they soon realize how much work it takes to produce even a few seconds of animation. Nevertheless, Taylor produced an original and striking video with animated characters, including herself, her dad, and a number of her friends.

[Around the time I made the video,] I had been watching these videos, technically the term is animatic. It's not [exactly] an animation, but it's [similar]. During Covid, I watched a ton of animatics on YouTube. I always wanted to make one and I didn't really feel like taking videos of stuff because that's not how I usually communicate my art. So, I just I drew it and it took me a while, but I actually really enjoyed doing it. It was just something away from my AP art. I still wanted to do art, but I didn't want to get stressed out with my assignment, I would just pull out my iPad and just draw a few slides.

I wanted to put emphasis on the visuals, but just write my own separate essay for the voiceover and [give them] an equal influence over the message I was trying to convey.

Even though the video was about me, I wanted to take the focus off me a little bit and turn it into a little biography about other people in my life and how they influenced me. So, my dad, my grandma, my friend Olivia [who I skate with]. I mean [anyone] can write an essay about themselves. It's more challenging to put other people in it and I thought that would be more remarkable.

I actually got into my dream college, Boston University. Technically I don't know if they saw my video, but I put my video in my additional information, and I saw the views did go up by like two so somebody saw my video. I don't know who, but I hope it was them.

I started researching [colleges], and [when I found Boston University] it was like, oh, I love this place. Then I looked at the acceptance rate, but I applied anyway, and I definitely put the most work [into that application], and I kept on adding stuff once I got more awards this year and they also had more content for me to submit. So, it seems the schools that I got rejected from, they really only wanted my test scores and my GPA and then maybe the supplemental [essay]. [They didn't] let me submit a portfolio. I did three supplementals and then everything else. [Maybe] because of my major but [I sent a lot more material to Boston].

There is one thing I'd like to add. I realized that my video counted for the Scholastic [Art Awards] in the Building Animation [category]. So, I submitted that, and I

got a Gold Key which [is the top award], so I'm so grateful that you that you assigned that.

Mary's Story: Essay to Epiphany

I remember very clearly that my first ever draft that I wrote for your class was actually about my bedroom, and I was like oh, because I didn't really necessarily want to talk about dance [her passion and longtime extracurricular].

An excerpt from Mary's first draft of a college essay:

> When people ask me what my favorite room in my house is, I almost always say my room. If you compare it to the rest of my house, you'd see that I actually live in the tiniest bedroom, originally the guest room. When people enter into my room, it is interesting to see their reactions. The dimmed reactions, most people acknowledging its miniature well-being. Almost in a selfish way, I love my room way too much. Obviously, I know a bedroom is simply a room to sleep in, but my room is so much more than that. Packed with accomplishments, hardships, and memories, my room is a reminder of who I am and choose to be.
>
> Serene, cold, quiet. My room is the enclosed cave that people wish to retreat to. That little place you think of to keep yourself tame. In addition, with its closeness to important rooms in the house, my room serves as a "hub" to my family. An area where they come to just invite themselves with no reason. To me, it's the one place I can be alone, indefinitely enjoying my own company. Even with colorful tapestries, patterned curtains, and a striped carpet, I still feel empty, walking into my cave. Moreover, I believe sometimes that, if I distract myself with things I like, I don't have to think about

my outside world. My room shields me from the problems and struggles that wait for me, so mostly I choose to stay hidden. For me, my room is a sanctuary.

Over the years, my room has evolved, changed, and has been rerouted. Items have shown themselves and disappeared, furniture shifted constantly. What once was a room taken up by stuffed animals and Barbies, now contains polaroids with friends and a Frank Ocean poster. As my room has adapted to me growing up, my social life has evolved similarly. Friends have come and go, school has become stressful. However, it's still the same schedule every day. Wake up. Go to school. Be at school. Go to dance. Come home. Go to sleep. Everyday, I wish for some miracle for my life to change, wishing for my life to not feel purposeless. The repeating schedule makes me lose a sense of myself, as my life start to merge into a continuous loop of school, sports, and friends. Throughout all of this, I realize I have never felt more alone. Although, I know I can always resort back to my room. Even with just four walls, four windows, and me, it's the only place I feel like I can escape to.

From what I have come to realize, my room is the only place I'm at my truest self. Not enjoying my friends' company or being around my family. Going into my room, and being able to just sit on my bed, helps me to find comfort. Unlike interacting in the outside world, I don't feel pressured to act or look a certain way. Usually, on a regular basis, I push my emotions and thoughts deep down into my head. Once I'm in my room, I can freely express my emotions and thoughts without worrying about the conclusions of other people.

It is hard to describe the significance of my room, knowing that there are probably hundreds of bedrooms that are way better than mine. With one word, my room is simply,

comfort. I feel comfortable with myself in my room resulting from the experiences that I have within it. It serves as my cave to hide in, a place to cry in, a reset from life, and so much more.

Mary told me about how she decided on a topic for her essay:

> Even though [dance is] the only cool thing I had going on in my life, I later realized that that was something great that I could talk about, I was a little overwhelmed because I was like oh, we're starting the whole college process super early, I don't know what I'm doing. Later I realized that it was super beneficial.
>
> The only cool or big parts of my life that I could talk about for a college essay were school and dance, and dance consumes so much of my life, I wanted to be able to distinguish myself from that and be able to write something of my own. But when I was really thinking about topics, I thought, what are some topics I can write about passionately? And dance was the one thing I knew I could write super passionately about so that's why I ended up choosing that topic, and it helped me in the end and I'm glad for it. But I wanted to try to be like oh I don't want to talk about that.
>
> [Dance] was something that I could easily talk about for a long time, [but] it was actually really difficult because my first draft was over 900 words but for Common App it can only be 650. It was also a rude awakening. I was having a lot of realizations coming into my junior year, starting to think about college, talking about dance, and talking about specifically the hard parts and the negative impacts of [dance] and how I overcome it and [writing the essay] actually helped me. Writing that essay through that process actually made me decide that I wasn't going to dance in college, which isn't a

bad thing at all. I will always have a love and passion for it, but it has helped me come to terms with myself, that that wasn't something I was going to do in the future.

An excerpt:

While other kids played soccer like normal, I was seen twirling at the end of the field, with not a care in the world. For soccer, my attention span was close to none. Nevertheless, that was the moment my parents knew to put me in dance.

What were once basic foundations classes, soon turned into countless hours of rehearsals and advanced styles classes. As I got older, I'd consider myself shy and mellow. I tried to pushed myself outside of my personal bubble, mainly for approval for my teachers, and the determination to better myself.

I sucked at dancing for a while. Didn't have outstanding technique like everyone else. Simply whacking your leg behind your head or doing multiple turns seemed impossible. Resulting from this, I was usually choreographed in the back of the dances I was in, and wasn't recognized as well as others. Staring at myself in a mirror inevitably makes me compare myself to others, or to think I don't fit the standard of the "ideal dancer". Hearing whispers, people talking behind my back, made me sink into the epitome of hopelessness. The one thing in my life that was supposed to save me, was draining me in every way.

After taking a step back from it all, I thought to myself, "What's the point?". What's the point of bruising yourself until your skin is purple, just to do it all over again? What's the point of dancing fifteen to twenty-five hours a week, if I was only recognized as mediocre? What's the point of spending a good majority of your time dancing around

the same group of girls, if they'll only dimunitize you mentally? All of these points swirled in my head constantly, making me go ballistic.

That's when it finally made sense. Being a dancer at a studio wasn't to necessarily go socialize with all of my dance friends, or gossip pointless small talk that would exemplify a toxic studio. I shouldn't be pushing myself to the limit, with only the purpose to seek attention from my teachers to consider myself a "good dancer". The reason I should go to dance is to better myself and my skills. Dance can be competitive and physically demanding in a way that makes you question your self-integrity but can be the most free-living and expressive way to enjoy yourself.

Once I approached dance with a new outlook, I saw improvement in my strength and technique over the course of a semester. No one thought my effort was going to pay off, until it did. At the 2021 end of year award ceremony for my studio, they gave out many awards to deserving dancers. The most grand award, Dancer of the Year, was given to dancers who showed characteristics of dedication, responsibility, and leadership. Surprisingly enough, I got the award for my company.

Nobody expected me to get the award, at all. Walking up the steps to take the certificate, I stood in shock looking into the crowd. As I took the celebratory bow and went back to my seat, I didn't know how to react, but I mean how was I supposed to? After spending months aggressively competing with myself, I finally understood that having a drive towards something can pay off in successful ways.

Following this achievement, I've become more involved within my studio. Instead of dreading to walk into dance and leaving class with tears on my face, I now go to dance excited to dance and leave feeling certain that I did the best I could possibly do.

> Habits and ethics I learned within dance also benefit me today. For example, having to show respect to adults, correct representation for dress code, and patience. These skills gave me the ability to pick up social cues of the people around me more efficiently. Moreover, this helps me to understand others, so others can understand me.

Mary explained further in our interview:

> It honestly made me come to some really hard realizations about myself and if I actually wanted to continue dance in college, because spring semester of junior year, that's something you're starting to think about. I thought to myself for a really long time. I didn't think I was smart enough to do anything else, like any specific career in college, and I was like, oh I can just fall back on dance, because it's something I'm good at, but then as I was writing my essay about all these difficult topics, I started thinking to myself, is this really something I want to have to endure and keep going through over and over and over for years on? It honestly helped me realize I wanted to do [something else] in college, so now I'm going on a completely different route.
>
> I thought that [I wasn't good enough], and still to this day I have always, for a long time I don't really know exactly what I wanted to do in the future. I've never had a super specific career set in my mind so for years I was like, dance is something I can do, dance I can do as a job because all my dance teachers are like "who's going to be a professional dancer?" And I always thought that's an option for me. And I don't know, I was so unsure of what I wanted to do but writing that essay and [thinking] about these topics and things I've been having to go through and still go through to this day, I decided that [dance] wasn't something that I wanted to pursue professionally. I started

taking interest in other things, which is now why I'll be majoring in marketing when I go to college.

[The writing made me think deeply,] 100% it did. There are things that no one outside of the dance perspective would normally think about. A competition dancer's standpoint comes with a lot more [work], there's a lot more you have to do. [My schedule this week, I go to dance] tonight from 6:00 to 9:30, and tomorrow 5:00 to 9:30, and Thursday 6:30 to 9: 30. Sunday, I have to be there from 8:00 [in the morning until] 3:30.

I would just hear my classmates, deciding on colleges, they're so set on the career they want to do. I know the field I want to go into, but I didn't know the career, but after thinking long and hard, and rewriting that essay, I rewrote that essay over and over and over. And that semester specifically was a really hard time for me with dance anyway. I'm going through a lot of the same problems [today that] I'm going through during that essay because that essay was based on a specific time I was at the studio. Spring semester of 2021 is what the essay focuses on, really the whole aspect of dance and the Dancer of the Year award [that I got], that was more focused toward that semester. But I was also going through a lot of those same things last year as well, so I was just wondering to myself if it was really worth it. It helped spark a completely different pathway, and I'm glad it did, because I will always have a passion for dance. It's not like I will hate it, but I realized there's so much more for me out there. I've been doing this since I was four and I wanted to see what life has for me outside of that, because pretty much my whole life I've been going to dance Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday for three to five hours every time. I don't [even] know what my life is like outside of those times, because that's been

my life for years and years. [Now] I want to be my own self. That essay also helped me realize that.

[Making the video] was definitely a challenge, now that I'm realizing it. I think through my essay, I remember something specifically that you told us was that we should think not so much on the topic but a specific value that we wanted to put into our essay, and the value I wanted to [convey] was commitment and sticking to what you're doing, if you stick to what you're doing and you push through, things will work out in the end.

So I wanted to bring other aspects into [the video]. I didn't want my video to be completely about dance. I can't make a whole video with just a bunch of dance clips, so I wanted to add other parts of my life, like school and how I have to commit to that. [Like for one class], even though I did make a 200 term Quizlet and I committed, and I tried even though I didn't do great on the exam, it still worked out, I didn't fail the class. [Or] with my family, [we] don't always get along, but we push through it no matter what.

[Thinking in terms of the value made it easier,]100%. I think that I would honestly be kind of lost with my essay and I would start talking about more the details of dance, and I would go farther away from the prompt which is to discuss an accomplishment or realization, and that was the basis of the essay and how dance helped with that but not flip-flopped if that makes sense.

[So as a senior I tweaked the essay a bit before sending it in.] The biggest thing I changed, and my dad helped me a lot because he read it multiple times, I changed the ending paragraph so many times because I wanted the last paragraph… it talked about how I moved on, and expanded on the level of commitment I've pursued from getting that [Dancer of the Year] award, I also changed the wording a lot, not the sentence

organization, but I changed a lot of specific words to make it more impactful and pleasing to a college admissions person who reads it.

My dad, I would send him a draft and he would get back to me and make comments and just say change this or he would give suggestions of what the sentence should be, I was 16 years old at the time, writing these essays, like obviously when I talk about something that means a lot to me it may not come off as super formal, if I'm really passionate about it, so he helped me put on the mindset of you're applying to colleges, this needs to be more serious, and it was serious, but he made it more pleasing to read.

[He brought] a dad perspective. He is very good at writing, he works in business, but he's been very passionate and supportive for me with the college app process and has been with me every step of the way. He wanted to make sure everything was perfect, even though my teachers helped me he always was the biggest person that was looking over my shoulder to make sure it was perfect.

I definitely think I have [changed since junior year]. There aren't enough words to describe how much I feel like I've changed, in some ways bad but in a lot of ways good, I feel like I've come more to my senses this year, not even just of the fact of I'm more certain about what college I'm going to, but every year of high school for me has been a really big [change] of personal growth and every year especially junior and senior year I've learned to become more of an individual and stand up for myself more. I think because when I was a junior there were always seniors in front of me and I was thinking of college and SATs and all this crap. I felt so closed in and scared but now I think I have a new mindset that I'm going to be the best version of myself and I'm not going to let anybody hold me down.

I put my heart and soul into my [University of Georgia] supplemental essay, UGA is the last college I'm waiting [to hear back from], and I'm really really proud because my first semester senior year grades were surprisingly better than any of my grades from all of high school, so maybe that will push me to getting into UGA, but if not, Clemson will most likely be the college.

An excerpt from Mary's UGA Supplement:

One memoir that had a significant impact on my life was "A Long Way Gone," by Ishmael Beah. I read this story in my World Literature class in 10th grade. The book describes the course of Ishmael's life as a child soldier, and how he adapted to new circumstances with acceptance and discipline. This eye-opening read analyzes what he went through during the civil war in Sierra Leone, and how he had to overcome dehumanization.

Now, I'm no child soldier, nor would I ever have the courage or willpower to pursue anything close to what Ishmael was capable of. However, I find familiarity with Ishmael's adjustment to a new life, struggling to identify who he was as a growing individual. This story reminded me of myself a fair amount, especially of my younger childhood. Over the course of my life, I have lived in four different states, almost five actually. Every couple of years, my family decided to pack up and leave everything behind. People always assumed I had a military family or something detrimental occur, when it was simply the fact that my dad happened to change jobs often. I lived in Oklahoma, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and almost Illinois in 2020.

It was sad to think it was almost routine leaving everything behind. I'd live in one place, make some friends here and there, and at least try to establish myself wherever I

was living. Since I moved almost every four years, I was considered the "new girl" a lot. In elementary school especially, everyone was so protective and cliquey of people they'd lean on, making it difficult for me to fit in. I'd learn to adjust how I'd perceive myself to kids around me, just so I feel a sense of inclusion. Somehow, someway, I found a way to keep going through it all, just like Ishmael did. The book "A Long Way Gone" reminded me of the importance of always pushing forward, no matter the circumstances.

Conclusion

This chapter presented narrative profiles of each participant based on their own words in writing, interviews, and survey responses. Participants' narratives exemplified the *bildung,* as described by Kim (2016) as an inner or educational journey often marked by a tension between ideal and reality, and a constant sense of uncertainty, transformation, doubt, and questioning. Because participants were on the cusp of adulthood, all existed in a state of becoming, not quite adult but not a child either. Some described such a state explicitly, while the narratives of others were contextualized by such a state. While each narrative was unique, and participants were chosen to show a range of differences rather than to support generalizable findings, their narratives also shared some commonalities. The next chapter will consider the meaning participants ascribed to their narratives.

Chapter Five

Findings

As discussed in Chapter III: Methods, the data analysis in Chapter V primarily employs Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) four directions concept, Maxwell and Miller's (2008) connecting and categorizing strategies, and Kim's (2016) treatment of the *bildung*, or story of personal growth. This chapter is organized in two parts: analysis of each profile as a discrete data source, followed by analysis of the themes, experiences, and processes common to the group.

In the first section, which analyzes profiles individually, the four directions – inward, outward, backward, and forward – provide an important tool for analyzing the story of growth each participant tells. Maxwell and Miller's (2008) connecting strategy provides an approach to understanding how one event affects or brings about another, and so on. The second section analyzes for common themes and uses Maxwell and Miller's categorizing strategy. In both sections, the concept of the *bildung* is also present and important, as each participant is in one way or another describing a journey of growth.

Individual Analyses

Mark

Mark's story deeply embodies the concept of the four directions and the elements of the *bildung*. His is a story in which, as a young child, the inward elements were almost completely at

the mercy of the outward context, but as he neared his high school graduation, the script flips, and the inward is more in control of the outward.

Mark was born to drug-addicted parents. He told me that they taught him to steal as a four- or five-year-old. They were both in and out of jail. He learned to take care of his little brother, since no one else did. As his teacher, I had no clue about any of these facts until he turned in his first draft for his college essay. Although Mark had been an indifferent student, sometimes making little effort in his work, I saw no signs of stress. Many of his peers show the stress of being ambitious students, worrying about which college will accept them, Mark showed little concern for how his schoolwork might affect his prospects. In more positive words, he seemed carefree, which is not a quality shared by many of his ambitious peers. His athletic career was strong in freshman year and kept improving. During junior year, he was the team's top swimmer, competing with the best swimmers statewide.

To use Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) terminology, the inward elements of young Mark's life were wholly created by and dependent on the outward elements. He was in survival mode as a preschooler. His inward desires and ambitions were the necessities rather than the comparative luxuries provided to many of his peers. When Mark and his brother were placed in foster care, a new type of unpredictability emerged. The possibility of a stable family life seemed at once real and just out of reach, as the boys' case worker introduced them to prospective parents. When the family who would adopt them finally appeared, Mark suspected for a long time that it was not a permanent situation. Such good fortune seemed beyond the realm of his experience. His prior disappointments had made him cynical toward positive developments in his life. The boys' adoptive parents told them every night that they were a family, that they were loved by their new parents, and that their love was forever. Finally, enough time passed, and

Mark believed that his new parents' love was real. The tension between the ideal and the reality dissipated.

As a parent of three children, and as a fellow human being, Mark's story made me weep. Although I have read a few thousand college application essays written by students I cared about, never had one made me cry.

Mark was apprehensive about telling his story, although he sensed that he should tell it. That he dropped the story almost as an aside in an essay draft is telling: the context was low stakes, as I would be the only reader. He did not have to send this draft to a college or even show it to another person. He trusted me with this information, even though I had not yet developed a particularly strong bond with him. I clearly remember our meeting to discuss what he had written. He shared with me then just about every detail later contained in his essay. I urged him to write the story even if he would later decide not to use it as an application essay. I told him that the writing of the story was necessary so he could document what I thought was an extraordinary life experience. Committing his memories to paper might help him understand the meaning of the events in his life and further help him to understand how he came to be the person that he is, the person he is becoming. "I just knew it was time," he told me later. "Like I never really told anybody before that. And so, I knew if I wrote that then that was going to go out to a lot of people. And at that time, I didn't know if I wanted that many people to know about it."

He struggled. He did not want to do it. Or he was being his typical self, an indifferent student. Or, as he says, he was apprehensive about sharing. "I didn't want it to be my full essay," he said. "I [wanted to] find a way to kind of sneak it in there without making it my whole essay." But the power of the adoption story would surely overwhelm any swimming triumph.

When he finally completed the writing, I praised his work in front of his peers as one of the most powerful essays any student had ever turned in to me. I did not reveal the subject or any details. His classmates seemed somewhat surprised, as Mark was not as enthusiastic or extroverted as many of his peers; he rarely volunteered his opinions in class discussions. I think he also felt like many of his classmates were his intellectual superiors.

Mark's senior year was transformative. He decided to quit swimming competitively, even after breaking several school and county records and receiving offers to swim at Division I colleges. He also became more direct in telling others his origin story. Apparently even some members of his extended family were unaware of Mark and his brother's life circumstances prior to their adoption, but they learned after reading his essay, or after he read the essay to them at family gatherings. As I write this, a few days after Mark's high school graduation, he is on a family trip to Europe, a very long way from his inauspicious beginnings.

Maya

Maya's work shows how she quickly grasps concepts and applies them to her work. In particular, she has a writer's understanding of the power of metaphor. Few of her peers integrated metaphor into their work as naturally and consistently as Maya did. In her essay about climbing atop an elephant, the climb is a metaphor for life. She is doing something scary, but she does it anyway. She falls; she gets back up. She has her parents and grandparents nearby and cheering her on. Few people attempt what she does, but she's not like everyone else. As a person who witnessed Maya's classroom and extracurricular activities, her topic struck me as authentic and an honest assessment of one of her dominant personality traits. She also lets the facts of the story do nearly all the work. A lesser writer would do more telling, but Maya mostly shows

through the images and the plot. She only explicitly connects the idea of climbing on the elephant to a life journey in a brief sentence at the end of the final paragraph.

Maya also employed a metaphor in her video. Here she showed how the spices and ingredients of her Indian culture were essential to her conception of her self. On the one hand, Maya is powerfully individualistic, determined, and in control of her destiny. On the other hand, her sense of self is deeply rooted in ancient traditions. This paradox seems at the heart of her experience: she is both an American teenager and a daughter of India. The American prizes individuality, independence, and the freedom to choose. The daughter of India respects tradition, the rules set forth by parents and grandparents, and community engagement. The outward direction or context of her life may be more powerful than the inward direction, but the interesting thing about Maya is that there are two contexts, American and Indian, that seem to be in opposition. Nevertheless, she persists in embracing both elements as equal, essential parts of her character.

There seems to be little tension between the ideal and the reality for Maya. Expressed in her essays and in her video is a relentless optimism. She actively embraces the journey, the uncertainty, and the complexity. Questioning and dialogue are welcome elements of growth rather than landmines to be tread cautiously. The future may be unwritten for Maya, but it will be glorious, she seems to believe.

Unlike most of her peers, Maya's video inspired a new essay, rather than the more typical sequence of the essay adapted to video. Her work in the video employed an important written component in the form of her script. The synthesis of voiceover narration and images created a powerful, new message that Maya recognized as one that could stand alone in essay form. Then she converted the video into an essay that would be accepted by any school to which she applied.

While I often teach students how to convert essays into videos, Maya's method shows that creating a video on a new topic could point to a nascent essay topic.

Kevin

Kevin is a strong student who pushes himself to improve. Indeed, he graduated as the salutatorian of his class. But he tends to avoid risk-taking in his work. This cautious approach is evidenced by his first essay, which focused on the lessons he learned from tennis. If better organized than essays by many of his peers, this essay is nevertheless the type of which I read dozens each year. Surely admissions officers read even more "what I learned from sports" essays than I do. That Kevin was born abroad was not particularly unique among his classmates, but experiencing the Fukushima disaster as a child was certainly exceptional. I suspected that he could write an interesting essay about such an experience. So, while Kevin may not push himself toward new creative realms in his work, he does not seem to mind being pushed toward such realms by his teachers.

Kevin's tennis essay displayed his strengths as a student: he had mastered the five-paragraph form. Whenever a student shows me that they know how to crank out an essay using this classic template, I urge them to stop using it and find more expansive, creative, and unique writing structures. Further, the classic five-paragraph structure is built for academic writing rather than narrative writing, which makes such a structure questionable for a college essay where narrative is the chief transmitter of emotional impact. So although Kevin's tennis essay displayed some narrative elements, it read like an academic exercise and was organized like most of the other essays he wrote for my course. But his Fukushima essay showed Kevin entering new, narrative territory as a writer.

Kevin's Fukushima essay brought about an epiphany regarding the point of a college essay, but more importantly it generated a realization about Kevin's identity: "I thought a college essay was supposed to be 'this is who I am,' and it didn't include Fukushima originally, but then I realized this *is* who I am and had to include that because that is my background." While tennis could certainly be an important part of one's identity, tennis is also as likely to just be something one does, even if it is something one learns lessons from. But for Kevin, Fukushima was an outward force that caused a major upheaval in the life of each member of his family. Kevin's sense of self surely changed as his Japanese childhood receded in time and his American teenagerhood took precedence. There exists for Kevin a tension between the Japanese and American cultures in which he has been raised. I asked him about this when he was in the process of writing his essays. More specifically, I asked him whether certain qualities he examined in his tennis essay were identifiably Japanese, but he could not pinpoint an answer, since many qualities overlap in the two cultures. But it could also be that he exemplifies the qualities of both cultures simultaneously, even if such exemplification is paradoxical or in conflict. Further, it may be some years before Kevin fully understands the impact Fukushima had on his life.

Like his tennis essay, Kevin's video took an academic approach to the task. He completed the assignment according to the rubric, but the product lacked risk-taking or creativity. Instead, the video did what he originally thought a college application essay was supposed to do: tell the applicant's life story. The video was narrated by a stuffed animal that Kevin has had since he was a toddler. This observer then told viewers details of Kevin's life as video clips and still images passed by on the screen. Kevin admitted that the concept was "goofy" but also that it presented a better overview of himself than did his Fukushima essay. He

further noted that writing is more emotionally powerful than video, “unless you’re a master cinematographer.” I disagree, but the subtext of Kevin’s statement, I believe, is that he is more comfortable with writing, since that is what he has been taught for all of his years of schooling.

Emily

Emily articulated something I hear over and over from students facing the college application essay: “Oh my god, I can’t think of something that interesting to write about.” This sense of having nothing to write about is acute for many juniors, and it makes sense that teenagers, who are still deeply ensconced in a state of becoming, have a difficult time looking back on that state from a mature, enlightened place, since they have yet to arrive at such a place. Of course, I also knew that Emily’s mother had died a few years earlier, so I was surprised that she did not immediately think of this major life event as a worthy topic. But her response to this event exemplified her maturity and her ability to already see her becoming state from an enlightened perspective: “I didn’t want to focus on [my mother’s passing] completely because it could have happened to anyone. I mean there’s nothing special about me, about that happening to me. It could have happened to anyone.” My mother did not die when I was a teenager, but I do recall that one hallmark of being a teenager is feeling that everything bad only happens to me, but here Emily seems to take a perspective beyond her years. She exhibits this quality of maturity implicitly and explicitly in her works.

In her interview, Emily also referred to what many writers of college essays do as “trauma dumping.” I sensed she was only half joking. But her response suggests a tension in her application essay quest: a person who lost her mother at age 14 seems to have an unimpeachable right to “trauma dump” but instead jokes about her peers who use their most readily available material to write mawkish essays intended to elicit a sentimental effect on an admissions officer.

Or her response could be her view about teenagers thinking the topic of the essay needs to be about something horrible they survived.

Nevertheless, Emily's essay did tell the story of her mother's passing, but only as a detail in a narrative about the meaning of time. Using time as her topic seemed perfect for Emily, since it is a topic of epic vastness, one that professional novelists and philosophers rarely conquer, a fact that Emily either disregarded or saw as an invitation. Indeed, she opens one essay with the idea that "I've never been one to fit myself into boxes," and tells us that as a child, when her parents, like parents everywhere, presented her with two options, she always thought up and presented back to them a third option. Such a refusal of the binary is indicative of Emily's thought processes. Even as a child, she seemed incapable of accepting simplistic reductions.

Emily wrote about the challenges of being a kid who wants to escape the becoming period and get straight to the adult stage, one who "was never able to enjoy the innocent freedom from responsibility that defines childhood." She also cogently articulated the complex idea that responsibility and freedom are paradoxically intertwined: "All I wanted was to be taken seriously, to have the freedoms responsibility brings." This idea of desiring responsibility in order to be freer exemplifies Emily's *bildung*. She precisely identifies the tension between the ideal and the reality. She knows that time – her subject matter – is the thing that will close the gap between ideal and reality. Until then, books will be her succor. Time is one external force, but she notes that another is "being a girl in a male-dominated world," which made her "feel trapped." While Emily recognizes that she is in a state of becoming, she also shows an enlightened and somewhat disassociated view of such a state, as if she is an objective observer of her own self.

As her teacher, I read her essays and offered little advice beyond clarifying certain ideas or phrases or tightening wordy sections. I recognized that the problem she discussed in her essays – existing in a state that lacked the capaciousness her ambitions warranted – was exactly the problem, albeit minor, with her writing: her ideas were slightly beyond her skills. This seemed to me a problem to be welcomed, as it would find an expression in a short time. Here was a kid who will seize every challenge a college professor throws at her. I was reminded that when I would ask the class some unanswerable question of human experience, Emily was never happier.

It seems that in essays such as these, the more abstract the idea, the more challenging it is to articulate. This challenge is clear in Emily's work. Unlike many of her peers, who write about, say, what they learned from losing a soccer game, Emily takes on major philosophical issues like time and identity, concepts whose amorphousness requires the writer to have a near virtuosic control of her writing tools. The opposite would be true in a case such as Mark's, where his story of drug-addicted parents and his adoption required only the facts of the story to be told using simple, concrete language. To make time concrete requires writerly experience that few teenagers, even preternaturally perspicacious ones like Emily, possess. It also appears that such a challenge was part of the appeal to Emily. The more surprising tack would have been if she had gone small.

The *bildung* is Emily's natural habitat, her home court. While tension between the ideal and the reality exist, as it does in any young person's becoming state, Emily's situation bears some uncommon qualities. Unlike many of her peers, she has a hyper awareness of her current state and the language to articulate what it feels like: "During monumental times in my life, even today, my thoughts return to this: intelligence is the ability to adapt to change. Whether or not

change feels beneficial, the resulting adaptation shapes my character moving forward. In every moment, there are infinite possibilities of what could be: electron configurations, particle interactions, states of being. But my consciousness is here, now. Despite everything, this feels beautiful. I get to choose how I react: I get to build the person I want to be. I am a sum of all of my adaptations from all the tiny and momentous changes that I have encountered throughout my life, and I am so grateful that I am here, now, in this iteration of the universe." This quote also exemplifies Emily's ability to synthesize ideas in her writing. Here, the synthesis is an abstract adage (intelligence is the ability to adapt to change) coupled to a concrete example (her own experience) with a side order of physics (electron configurations). But synthesis does not end at writing for Emily, since the synthesis she describes is also how she perceives the world and acts in it. This further synthesis is evidenced by her equal interests in physics and literature, or in science and the arts.

Evidenced in Emily's work and in her interview is also a certain rejection of the outward dimension. She tends to see her own self as the captain of her destiny, rather than being at the whim of outside forces: "I was joking [earlier when I said trauma dumping]. I didn't want [my essay, talking about when my mom passed], to come across like this event defined me. I didn't want to come across that I wouldn't be the same person without it. I mean I think I am different than I would have been otherwise, but it didn't change who I am fundamentally so I wanted to show how it affected me and to show how I am now because of it, but I didn't want it to come across like I wouldn't be the same person. [My mother's passing] was a catalyst for me, but I think there would have been another catalyst had it not happened, so I didn't want to focus on it completely because it could have happened to anyone." She seems to be saying that external forces exist, but that the things that make her who she is are all within her. She mentioned in the

interview that “the realities of being a girl in a male-dominated world made me feel trapped,” but this reality later seems to be one she simply refuses to accept. To accept such a reality would be to succumb to it. Like rights advocates, she can’t believe we still have to march about this stuff.

The evidence in Emily’s video further cemented these themes regarding her conception of self and her ability to synthesize disparate elements: “I thought, what can I do with a video that I can’t do with an essay? That’s when I was like, oh I have a visual idea that I’m not really good at expressing with words, which is the thing about boxes and stuff, so I was like, ok, a video kind of opens itself up to that more than writing would, because writing I can’t explain that in a good way.” Recognizing that the visual language of videos can do things that the text-based language of essays cannot was what separated Emily’s video from those of her peers. Such an idea is also what separates filmmakers from novelists.

Nate

The challenge exemplified in Nate’s works and in his interview is that he is deeply in a becoming state but struggles to articulate its essence. This struggle contrasts with Emily’s described above, as she had the ability to describe precisely in words what her state of being and becoming felt like. Nate seems to merely have sensed his state of becoming, if strongly, but articulating it was a repeated struggle. Nevertheless, Nate’s writing became stronger as he kept writing and rewriting his college essay.

Nate’s earlier work shows how his ambition toward poetic and elevated writing obscured the simple ideas he wanted to convey, as in this example: “Something about struggling to breathe while glued to a frostbite-inducing hospital bed with the unfortunate addition of blood-curdling coughs fabricated a sequence of intrusive thoughts plaguing my adolescent mind concerning the possibilities of death.” I was not sure what the story was about or what Nate was trying to

convey, and I commented, “I think you are in the hospital and scared of dying? But I don’t know why you are there, how old you are, or what effect any of this event has had on you since.” Nate later clarified that he suffered from a lung condition. A similar problem occurs in his second essay, which describes the death of a beloved pet: “The doctors guaranteed my Adam would feel no pain as they set up a gas chamber that invoked morbid images of Auschwitz. Thus forcing me to flee from the confrontation with death onto a beautiful spring day completed by the pleasant scent of daffodils in the distance.” Nate’s third try took on a concept – time – that was more abstract than a very real lung condition or the death of a pet. The essay was a meditation on time, and the language was somewhat less elevated than that in the earlier essays: “Einstein’s theory of relativity only exacerbated our innate fear of the unknown by merely adding to what could be discovered.” What Nate fails to mention anywhere in the essay is himself.

Nate’s fourth attempt mostly eschews the elevated but distracting language of the earlier works and finds a narrative with enough emotional heft and plot points to carry the tale for the required word limit. This is clearly a breakthrough moment for Nate’s writing, and maybe also for his self-conception.

Donna

Although Donna’s writing focused on the quality of empathy, the salient feature of her work is her vulnerability, or her fearlessness in facing and sharing things most young people would find too personal or embarrassing to share. I was surprised when I read her draft that opened with a scene of her wetting the bed as a child. I often ask my students how their essay will stand out in a stack of 100 essays on an admissions officer’s desk, and I sensed that Donna’s was one that would be memorable in such a stack.

Donna's essays and videos show her *bildung* in their focus on striving, questioning, uncertainty, and transformation. Her essay about how getting her job at Newk's Eatery showed the transformative effect of taking on new, adult-like responsibilities. The job gave her a sense of purpose she had never had before and introduced her to people outside of her typical social circle, thus widening her worldview. Her second essay was more ambitious, focusing on an abstract quality – empathy – rather than on events that transformed her. Here, Donna challenges herself to communicate ideas in her essay in a new way. She is attempting to illustrate the abstract through concrete examples, such as when her friend's father acts with loving kindness when she wets the bed, or when she responds to a friend in trouble. This essay also shows that Donna is not afraid to be honest where others might gloss over inconvenient truths, such as when she notes that she does certain things purely to pad her college application. Many of her peers to do the same thing, and surely admissions officers know this, but Donna just says it explicitly in her essay. That her work contains moments of self-criticism and reflection bolsters at least the appearance of authenticity.

But Donna's most personally transformative work may be in her videos. As noted earlier, she completed our school's Audio-Visual-Tech track and was an eager participant in our school's news broadcasts. Her experience with video went back much earlier than high school, as she made narrative and informative videos as a child and middle schooler. Her first video lacked a central theme or narrative through-line beyond showing a series of amusing if unrelated events that happened at her job selling popsicles, but it did show her ease on camera and her confidence with looking silly for amusing effect. We discussed the shortcomings of her good but not great video and how she might improve it. I did not suggest she scrap the video altogether, but she scrapped it. Scrapping it impressed me, since it showed that she was willing to do more work

than may have been necessary for a decent grade. Scrapping her work also showed that she could distance herself enough from her own creations to know when they were not good enough.

Her second video attempt solved the problem of the lack of a narrative and theme in the first. Now she focused on the importance of videomaking in her life. That she now had a narrative instead of a series of unrelated anecdotes seemed to allow her to quickly put together a video that was visually enticing, cohesive, and easy to grasp. She also capitalized on her own archive of childhood videomaking, and included scenes that illustrated her narrative voiceover. In the video's 2 ½ minutes, we see Donna grow up on camera. The video culminates with scenes of her Audio-Visual-Tech class's trip to a film festival in California, where we see her pluckily interviewing strangers on the street, who seem to be mutually enjoying a teenager's playacting as a newscaster. Of course, it's possible that she was not acting any more or less than a professional newscaster is acting. In the end, she looks like a nascent professional, ready to burst into adulthood.

One noteworthy aspect of Donna's experience in making these essays and videos is her constant questioning and striving. Unlike many of her peers, Donna commented critically on her work *before* receiving feedback from me. She did not always know how to articulate what was missing or what could be improved in the work, but she sensed that it was not what she wanted it to be, and she was unafraid of noting such awareness. This is typical of her self-conception. I noted earlier how she was not afraid to be honest toward herself in ways that her peers might not be, and this fact seems to be of a piece with the themes and ideas in her work. This is not to say that I think she has low self-esteem. Rather, I find her to be highly self-aware and willing to state directly her feelings rather than squash or hide them.

Taylor

Taylor took on the tasks of writing an essay and producing a video with aplomb. Unlike many of her peers, the works she created in the two genres were quite different from one another in subject matter, approach, and aesthetic. The through-line they did share was displaying Taylor's passion for art.

Taylor's essay used an interesting childhood memory – watching the phosphenes when she was trying to go to sleep – as a jumping-off point for a discussion about her later interests and thought processes. Often, the strongest college essays happen when a writer can use a metaphor or symbol as an entry point to a discussion about a concrete, real aspect of their life. Taylor did this, but her entry point, the phosphenes, was highly original. On the one hand, phosphenes are ever-present for all humans, thus making her initial imagery universal. On the other hand, of the thousands of personal essays I have read, none discussed such a phenomenon. While Taylor was able to connect the phosphenes to the two topics she discusses in the essay – her anxiety and her passion for art – there is not a natural connection between the two. That she finds the connection and makes it appear seamless and cohesive speaks to the artfulness of her writing.

Another interesting quality of Taylor's essay is her explanation of the calming effect of visual or aural noise. Typically, we think of noise as a nuisance, but Taylor thinks of it in the opposite way. That a positive and natural contrariness is inherent in her character makes her in many ways an ideal student, one who intuitively sees things in her own way and appears unaffected by the status quo's leanings. Taylor's video exemplified these qualities, as its originality resulted from an approach that eschewed the conventions of college application videos. Unsurprisingly, Taylor saw the video as an artistic opportunity, and her video was

created by drawing characters and scenes on her iPad, which were then animated for movement and visual interest. The time commitment required for animation means most students take an easier route, but Taylor embraced the process and produced a video about the influential and important people in her life. The work was light-hearted and informal but endearing and emotionally potent.

Mary

Mary's experience in creating her application materials illustrates the real-life impacts sometimes brought about by the process. For Mary, writing and revising her essay forced her to grapple with some major questions about her future: should she continue to commit to dance in order to become a professional dancer? Surely, she would have had to answer this question for herself at some point, but it appears that working on her essays and video hastened the process.

Mary's first essay focuses on her room, consciously avoiding dance: "[m]y first ever draft […] was actually about my bedroom, […] because I didn't really necessarily want to talk about dance." In the essay, she seems to repeatedly wish for some calm in her life, some free time, even though she only briefly mentions in this essay the major time commitment and extreme pressure that attended her dedication and obligation to dance: "[i]t's still the same schedule everyday. Wake up. Go to school. Be at school. Go to dance. Come home. Go to sleep." Avoiding dance as the main topic freed her from dealing with the big question of her future with dance, but her word choices are telling: dimmed, hardships, cold, quiet, cave, retreat, tame, alone, empty, cave, distract, shield, problems, struggles, hidden, sanctuary, disappeared, shifted, stressful, purposeless, lose, escape, pressured, worrying, cry, reset. On the one hand, these seem like words applicable to the state of being a teenager. On the other, she seems to be at an inflection point.

A few months later, she wrote the essay focused on her dance experience. Unlike the essay about her room, the diction in her dance essay is balanced between negatively and positively connotated words. As I try to do with many students to give them a sense of how a disinterested reader might understand the point of a piece of writing, I summarized what I saw in the essay in a comment on her doc: “So this is about loving dance, then it becoming a real challenge and not very much fun, but then you have an epiphany, and you decide you don’t have to be miserable while doing it, instead you can just do it for yourself. Which is what you do. Even though you don’t feel like you are competing as crazily as some of the others, your efforts are recognized, and you get the award over everyone else!”

But the real epiphany for Mary did not come until later, until she had lived with the essay for some months and had begun the process of revising it for her applications: “It honestly made me come to some really hard realizations about myself and if I actually wanted to continue dance in college. […] I started thinking to myself, is this really something I want to have to endure and keep going through over and over and over for years on? It honestly helped me realize I wanted to do [something else] in college, so now I’m going on a completely different route.”

Mary also noted in our interview her feelings of inferiority when compared to her ambitious classmates, whose long-term career strategies, it seemed to her, were clearly mapped out by the time college applications were due: “I thought that [I wasn’t good enough], and still to this day I have always, for a long time I don’t really know exactly what I wanted to do in the future. I’ve never had a super specific career set in my mind. […] I would just hear my classmates, deciding on colleges, they’re so set on the career they want to do.”

Collective Themes

This section will define four themes and show how each manifested across participant experiences. But because this study's participants were chosen to ensure a diverse data set, there is a natural resistance or difficulty to code the data for themes for a group of individuals chosen for their singularity; in essence, I took a "case study" approach in the previous section even though I examined multiple cases. In this section, I looked for common features across the eight cases.

Concepts in a few sources were useful in focusing themes as they related to Research Question 1: What are the experiences and processes of high school juniors as they create written college application essays and convert them into videos? For example, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) four directions concept was useful for categorizing broad themes common to the participants, just as it was useful in analyzing individual cases earlier. The inward direction focuses on an individual's emotions, desires, ambition, and temperament. Many of the Common App prompts (see Appendix A) are designed to elicit such inward-looking works. Even when the prompt is designed to elicit an essay about external forces or contextual factors, part of the prompt nevertheless asks how such an event or context affected the applicant.

Several participants' works hewed neatly to inward issues. Nate repeatedly analyzed purely personal issues that impacted his own growth. Donna analyzed the effect of empathy on her growth. Mary grappled with her commitment to dance. Taylor considered how early childhood experiences impacted her young adulthood. Emily wrote of the frustrations of having intellectual ambitions somewhat beyond her understanding as a young person.

Other participants' works dealt with the outward direction, and the impact of external forces beyond one's control. Mark's story of having drug-addicted parents and later being

adopted by a loving family is a narrative of how external forces can dominate a child's life. His story is a reminder that for the participants described in the above paragraph, writing about inward matters is a luxury that Mark could not afford. Children in stable homes are relatively shielded from the existential challenges Mark and his little brother faced as preschoolers. Although Kevin was raised in a stable and secure environment, the external force of the Fukushima nuclear disaster caused his family to unexpectedly leave their home and eventually come to the United States. Maya's work dealt with external forces differently. Her subject was the religious and cultural context in which she exists, a context that is at once heavily influenced by the Indian traditions of her parents and grandparents. But she is also an American teenager, and her inquiry squares these two seemingly oppositional forces. Her work may be better described as inhabiting a space that occupies both the inward and outward directions equally, since her ambitions and desires rest upon a foundation of contextual factors such as the traditions of her family.

The backward and forward directions of inquiry were also useful in examining themes in the participants' work. The Common App prompts explicitly ask applicants to write about past events, while the implication of the prompts is to find something useful about how the applicant might deal with future events or situations. The idea of the future is foundational and ever-present, if not always explicit, in the realm of college applications. Emily dealt with a variety of past events, from her frustrations with the binary choices offered to children to the event of her mother's death. But her work also looks forward: she presents herself as a person who cannot wait to accept the rigor and challenges that come with adult responsibility. Mary's work about her past with dance act as a prelude to her more pressing question about whether competitive dance will be a part of her future. Mark's essay has a happy ending, but the implication is that it

could just as easily have had a sadder or more tragic one, as is likely the case with many children born into similar situations. As might be expected from college application essays and videos, several deal directly with the question of what the applicant wants to do or be in the future. Donna's first essay discussed her first job, but by the end of the process, her final video concludes with her announcement that working in film and video production is her objective. Where Taylor's work is not explicitly about art, it is implicitly about art, since she uses her artistic skills to communicate her ideas, such as in the video she animated.

Another framework akin to Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) four directions is to consider whether a participant used a narrative or conceptual approach to their work and how such an approach might affect, bolster, or even manifest the work's theme. A narrative approach is marked by linearity in storytelling or discussing the impact of a major event, whereas conceptual works examine an abstract idea through real-life anecdotes or examples. Some participants stayed firmly narrative. Mark told the story of his early childhood's upheavals through his eventual adoption and stable home life, all in a straightforward, just-the-facts chronology. Kevin experienced the Fukushima nuclear disaster and wrote about the unforeseen changes the earthquake caused for his family, eventually returning them to the United States. Mary also relied on traditional narrative structures in her essay about her dance career. A few participants chose a concept first and then illustrated the concept with brief narratives. This conceptual approach was clear in Maya's work, where she used the concept of the spice box to examine the role of tradition and culture in the development of her identity. Emily's work similarly employed abstract ideas to examine her interests and thinking processes. The other participants mixed both approaches. Nate tried on abstraction in his early work but found clarity when he simply told a story. Donna and Taylor both excelled when combining elements from the

narrative and the conceptual. Donna was adept at identifying and analyzing personal qualities, which are by nature abstract, such as empathy or honesty, and tying them concrete events. Taylor used phosphenes – abstraction right before one's eyes – as the entry point for a story about her artistic journey.

Now analysis will shift to a discussion of four themes, based on Research Question 2: What themes are found in participants' essays and videos?

Family Matters

Issues related to family are common across participants, albeit in several ways. First, some participants' works include narratives about their families. That students write about their families should come as no surprise, as family life is essentially the main feature of childhood. All participants are experts on the topic of their own family experience, although some are better at articulating the features of their family life than are others. Many participants used experiences related to family as the context or subject of their essays and videos. The second way participants discussed family matters related to the guidance they received from parents about their works.

A few participants directly addressed the important bond they felt with parents or family members. Mark's heart wrenching story of his tumultuous early life had a thankfully happy ending when he and his brother were adopted by a loving family: "Every time they said [they loved me], the meaning and feeling of love sank deeper and deeper into me. Not only did they just say it, they showed it… and they meant it. I started letting go of full control of John and my life, knowing that these were actually my 'mommy and daddy' forever." He further discussed how sharing his essay with his parents and his extended family deepened their bonds: "Like after seeing my parents cry about it, and then seeing you tear up a little bit in class. I didn't know if I was fully ready for everyone's emotions to come out, but over the past year that I've sent out my

essay to most of my family, they all loved it so much and they were all super glad I wrote it. […] I know after writing that, it grew a bond that [I] didn't think could be grown anymore."

Maya's essay opened with the words "My mother," which emphasized the importance of family in her life and how she placed her parents before herself. Maya's essay focused on how her parents raised her in a traditional Indian culture that nurtured her aspirations and talents: "I come from a pretty traditional South Indian family. I should also say that we're like traditionally religious. We are really active in our community. Our temple, we go every Sunday we spend like four or five hours there every week. We do a lot of stuff outside of the temple and in the video I kind of showed how we grow a lot of the traditional Indian plants, and we use all of that in our cooking and skin care and [for so many things]. The Indian culture and religion is really tied into our [daily] lives." She ends her essay with another reference to her family: "And no matter how far I go, my home is where my anjaraipetti is."

Kevin's family experienced a natural disaster when a tsunami damaged the Fukushima nuclear energy plant, and his work described the life-altering decisions they then had to make. His work notes how different his life may have been had there been no tsunami: "All I remember is my mother trying to hold back her sobs as we went up the elevator at the airport, after we said goodbye to her mother for what could have been the last time. I tried to console her, perplexed and confused as to why she was crying. In my mind, we were just going on vacation to a tropical country. This was the first time I saw an adult cry. […] It wasn't until many years later that I realized the true reason behind her tears. […] Being forced to leave your homeland and family behind and also having to hide your feelings and stay cheerful for your children must be some of the hardest things for a human being to muster. I hope I can be half as strong as my mother and able to make difficult but correct decisions as she did."

Emily's work synthesized a broad array of topics and ideas but underlying it all was her family's role in her life. She did not dwell on her mother's death, though none of us would blame her if she had, but instead she analyzed the challenges of childhood's central conflict between autonomy and security, between freedom and the gilded cage: "I was never able to enjoy the innocent freedom from responsibility that defines childhood. All I wanted was to be taken seriously, to have the freedoms responsibility brings. l felt held back by the capabilities of my brain, of my fine motor skills, which never seemed to match up with the level at which I thought. […] My parents love to talk about how I slept with books instead of stuffed animals." When Emily did take on a sort of adult responsibility – taking over her mother's role with her younger sister – she learned that it was not what she had expected: "I tried to give my little sister the advice my mom had given me – this was harder than expected. How, with a sibling who's always joking and bickering with you, do you attempt to give them serious advice that you don't even know how to follow yourself? I knew I could never be my mom, but I tried my best to stand in the hole that she left in all of our lives, which, to this day, leaves me feeling tired and alone." These examples were not the primary topic of her essays, but that such examples recurred throughout her work showed how essential family relationships are to everything else that happens in our lives. The family-related details that Emily provides, like those above, were both poignant and funny: "My parents have always said that as a kid, whenever they gave me choices between things, I'd make up a third option that was some combination of the two." At the same time, Emily's perspective was uncommonly mature for such a young person: "I didn't want to focus on [my mother's passing] completely because it could have happened to anyone. I mean there's nothing special about me, about that happening to me. It could have happened to anyone."

In other cases, parents played an important role in assisting participants in completing their application works, usually in the form of feedback from their parents on their works. This detail was significant for several reasons. It suggested that participants were comfortable approaching their parents about work that was often personal and that they felt may have some impact on their futures. But such parental involvement also raised the issue of whether a participant's work was theirs alone or was created by committee, an issue that admissions officers must also consider as readers and viewers of application materials. On the one hand, parental involvement should be celebrated as a mutual, supportive effort. On the other hand, parents have an interest in their child's college prospects, an interest that as a teacher I do not share. Such an interest may cause parents to blur the line between an original work by the applicant and a collaborative effort disguised as one made by the applicant. Most participants noted that they shared their works with their parents and that their parents helped them revise the works. As seen from the following examples, participants describe parental involvement as overwhelmingly positive.

Nate noted his initial feelings about creating his application materials and then his change in attitude after a discussion with his mother: "Honestly, I was opposed when [I first learned we had to write the essay], […] I wasn't happy. So, my mom and I talked about it. And she said that it would help me in the future, and that changed my perspective. After that I definitely liked it."

Donna used her parents' reaction to her works as a yardstick by which to judge the quality of her materials: "I just remember like my parents reading [my first essay] and just being like yeah, that's fine. And that just sucked. Because I didn't want it to be just fine, you know. Especially when your parents are reading it and something about that really threw me off. So I was like, all right. I have to like it. […] I knew, if I impress my parents, then I know I 100% have

a good essay." But as Donna became more confident and passionate about her work, she became less concerned with what others thought, especially when trusted adults differed in their opinions: "[Their reaction to the second essay] was better. My mom loved it, and my dad's reaction was like this is too out of the ordinary, which a lot of people thought, like [my senior English teacher] Ms. Harris. She thought some parts can be changed, which I did change. I think a lot of it showed that I'm funny. And like what a lot of people were telling me was you're supposed to make yourself look like a pretty little doll in these essays, right? So [the colleges] want to pick you. You're supposed to make yourself look great."

Taylor's dad, or an animated version of her dad, played a starring role in her video, although her parents do not appear in her essay. She elaborated on her dad's influence in an interview: "I've always enjoyed writing. My dad is also a lawyer and it's definitely because of him because he's been critiquing my work forever. I got that interest from him. […] I went over [my essay] a lot with my dad and that takes forever. So, if I was going to have a good essay I wanted to go over it with my dad and I was already feeling pretty good about that essay. We're going over it for like three hours, every single little phrase. I [also] got a college counselor to work on it with me to make it more college-like and then I refined it and submitted it."

Mary noted the help her dad provided on her essay: "I would send [my dad] a draft and he would get back to me and make comments and just say change this or he would give suggestions of what the sentence should be, […] so he helped me put on the mindset of you're applying to colleges, this needs to be more serious, and it was serious, but he made it more pleasing to read. […] [He brought] a dad perspective. He is very good at writing, he works in business, but he's been very passionate and supportive for me with the college app process and has been with me every step of the way. He wanted to make sure everything was perfect, even

though my teachers helped me he always was the biggest person that was looking over my shoulder to make sure it was perfect."

Seeking Identity

As noted earlier, *bildung* refers to the idea of a young person's journey of personal growth. Participants' works are steeped in episodes of personal growth, which is by rule and by practice the lingua franca of the application essay, since high schoolers are at a peak moment of becoming, of moving from the world of children to that of adults. The Common App prompts (see Appendix A) likewise reflect such a moment in young people's lives. Although only one prompt employs the term "personal growth," all the prompts ask applicants to discuss events or experiences that caused them to question, to learn, or to change. Participants here dealt with identity in unique ways, but the topic is ubiquitous across narratives.

Mark originally wrote about swimming, because swimming was both his main interest and the activity he felt defined him. He was not particularly interested in his schoolwork or even his future in college, evidenced by his lackluster first draft. Maybe this attitude can be attributable to the many college swimming programs scouting Mark well before application season. He knew swimming would take care of college admissions. But when he finally wrote about being adopted, he discovered a more essential part of his identity as a member of the Smith family. And just before his senior year swim season began, he quit swimming and decided that the time commitment and attendant stress was just too much. Mark discussed with me his apprehension about opening up about his adoption: "[A]t that time, I didn't know if I wanted that many people to know about it. […] A part of me wanted to write something, just add something about it just to give people a little hint. But I didn't want it to be my full essay. I [wanted to] find a way to kind of sneak it in there. […] [But as I started writing the essay,] I kind of knew in that

moment that it was probably time. Like when you said that was kind of a signal for me to start opening up about it. […] [T]here were times when writing about it, I was kind of sad. Just like remembering what happened. […] I was processing the feelings, bringing back old memories and some of them weren't so good. But at the end of the day, I knew that it was for a good purpose." In presenting through his essay his life story, even to the select group who read it, Mark overcame the fear and shame that he attached to his early childhood. Breaking down these emotional walls positively changed his relationship with his family: "I know after writing that, it grew a bond [with my family] that [I] didn't think could be grown anymore."

Where Mark's story helped him work through the trauma of his early life, Maya's story neatly encapsulated a young person confident in all the colorful strands of her identity, and one skilled at describing who she is in written or video form. Maya's first college essay draft illustrated, through a story about riding an elephant, her adage that "The hardest climbs offer the best views and the most fulfilling journeys." But when considering concepts for her video, she thought about how to use visual objects to represent ideas. The spice box of Indian cuisine became a metaphor for her identity. The spice box metaphor compares the myriad and varied spices used in Indian cooking, religious ritual, and even healthcare to Maya's complex, multicultural identity and her wide-ranging interests and skills: "I tried to connect with each [of the Common App prompts] and see which one mattered the most to me personally, to my culture, heritage, my religion. All of those [things] are really important to who I am. It's what all of my extracurriculars have been centered around for years […] because even though there's a lot of Indian Americans, I don't know if everyone has the same experience I do." Each spice represents a facet of Maya's life, as in this example that encapsulates Maya's personality: "The peppercorn, however, is a completely different story. It's what my parents endearingly call me.

Whether I'm critiquing my mom's culinary experiments as a self-appointed Michelin-star reviewer or being candid about my dad's latest haircut, I speak my mind. Underneath my five-foot stature, you'll find a ball of energy and enthusiasm always up for a challenge and ready to brighten someone's day, whether it takes a few rounds of Bollywood karaoke or a game of garden badminton." When all the disparate spices come together, as in the best Indian cooking, a rich, complex, unified whole is created. Such is Maya's identity.

Kevin decided for his first draft that playing tennis was what defined him, but he later "realized a college essay has to be cool, right? And I realized tennis was not cool at all. Thousands if not millions of people play it in the US. My tennis essay lacked uniqueness. It wasn't terrible, it wasn't great, but I'm sure a lot of kids write their essay that way, like something you're passionate about, something you do every day, but not unique." I asked Kevin if he could somehow connect his Japanese identity to playing tennis. For his next draft, tennis was out, and his Japanese identity took center stage. In particular, he examined how his family's experience after the Fukushima nuclear disaster upended their lives and how different his life would have been had Fukushima not happened: "Had the disaster never happened, I would never be here, I would still be living in Japan. And I think things happen for a reason, and I probably would never be speaking English at the level I am today if that didn't happen, especially because it was a development stage at which you develop your language most fully. […] I realize without it my life would not be as cool as it is now. [It was a terrible disaster for many people] but I do also recognize the effect it had on my life and the opportunity it gave me. […] At the beginning I wasn't even thinking about [including Fukushima]. I thought a college essay was supposed to be 'this is who I am,' and it didn't include Fukushima originally, but then I realized this *is* who I am and had to include that because that is my background."

Like Maya, Emily is a person excited by the challenge of a creative task related to illustrating their identity. Emily seemed hyperaware of her identity as defined through personality traits at a young age: “I was a frustrated kid, […] never able to enjoy the innocent freedom from responsibility that defines childhood. All I wanted was to be taken seriously, to have the freedoms responsibility brings. l felt held back by the capabilities of my brain, of my fine motor skills, which never seemed to match up with the level at which I thought, at which I wanted to deconstruct the world around me. All of this coupled with the realities of being a girl in a male-dominated world made me feel trapped in the insufficiencies of my physical manifestation.” No surprise, then, that Emily’s essay and video use time, a topic only the most ambitious creators would attempt to tackle in a 650-word essay or three-minute video, as the concept that holds together work that covers a broad swath of experiences and interests. Her essay’s opening was a powerful descriptor of how her identity includes resisting such easy identification: “I’ve never been one to fit myself into boxes.” Her work then riffed on how she reconciled her love of being a polymath, and how philosophy and quantum physics and fantasy novels and songwriting are just some of the interests that make up her identity. Her work celebrated the idea that humans should seek out experience and knowledge in all of its multitudinous forms, and living her life by this ethos defines her identity.

Donna’s work showed that she was thinking deeply about the experiences in her life that had been meaningful, and how she could reconcile those experiences with her passions and how she saw her adult life. Her first attempt focused on the rite of passage brought about by the responsibility and independence of a first job. Her next draft illustrated the concept of empathy through her experiences, most notably, and courageously, through her opening scene describing a time she had wet the bed at a sleepover party. Donna’s work and my interactions with her were

marked by her refusal to make herself look good, like when she said, “I pat myself on the back for not being oblivious and then I’ll just go and be oblivious.” Such statements seem to me not a symptom of low self-esteem but a positive self-image typified by candor and fearlessness. She likewise takes a warts-and-all approach to her writing and videomaking that is refreshing in such a high-stakes arena like college admissions. While she did not explicitly state the qualities described above, her work implied that such qualities are an important part of who she is. She did note her desire to appear “genuine” in one of her written comments to me, and she also showed in her work that she could easily trash time-consuming work that she felt was not good enough. These qualities caused her to redo her video several times, the final version of which she called a “Hail Mary.” She wrote in a comment, “I realized it’s a lot easier to do a project on a subject that you are passionate about. I realized that just being real and honest is a better approach to show who I am. […] [As for being vulnerable in the essay and the video,] it’s kind of like, what do I have to lose by being honest?” The qualities of pushing herself and facing the unvarnished truth manifested when she worked on her video: “When I was filming something, I had multiple ideas. So, I’d film one, test the idea and be like, I’m just not into it. And so, things that I really thought that I liked, or things that I thought are really like a big part of me, I just [started to question]. And you can’t really lie on camera. I mean, [you can, but].”

Emphasizing Difference

One important aspect of the essay and video task is to emphasize one’s unique qualities, but having read few examples of others’ essays, students’ first essay attempts are often boilerplate. Requiring a second or third essay on a completely different topic pushes students toward originality. The themes of seeking identity and emphasizing difference sometimes overlapped, since identity often manifests in unique qualities. Some participants’ unique qualities

were obvious, such as Mark's childhood experience as a child of drug-addicted parents. Others employed original narrative techniques to otherwise standard experiences to emphasize their creativity or uniqueness, such as when Taylor used her experience with phosphenes as a unique entryway to her narrative about a fairly standard experience with an interest in artmaking. Participants here emphasized how they were different from their peers in several ways, as discussed below.

Mary often felt like an outsider: "Over the course of my life, I have lived in four different states. Every couple of years, my family decided to pack up and leave everything behind. People always assumed I had a military family or something detrimental occur, when it was simply the fact that my dad happened to change jobs often. I lived in Oklahoma, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, and almost Illinois in 2020. It was sad to think it was almost routine leaving everything behind. I'd live in one place, make some friends here and there, and at least try to establish myself wherever I was living. Since I moved almost every four years, I was considered the 'new girl' a lot. In elementary school especially, everyone was so protective and cliquey of people they'd lean on, making it difficult for me to fit in. I'd learn to adjust how I'd perceive myself to kids around me, just so I feel a sense of inclusion. Somehow, someway, I found a way to keep going through it all, just like Ishmael did [in the] book "A Long Way Gone," [which] reminded me of the importance of always pushing forward, no matter the circumstances."

Taylor figured out an original way to incorporate her current passion for art with a positive spin on the challenges of an "overactive" brain by discussing her childhood memories of closing her eyes and looking at phosphenes, those colors and patterns we see when our eyes are closed. I loved this concept for its singularity, and I was pretty sure that even a veteran admissions officer would have never encountered such an essay. Her essay is in many ways a

standard one about a young person's interest in art, but her approach is wholly original, as is her video. Of the hundred or so videos her classmates created, hers was the only one that was built by drawing. From the first frame, it stood out from the others, and she believes it had an impact on her acceptances.

Mark is the rare student whose story was so extraordinary that the mere telling of the story, free of embellishment or writerly virtuosity, was enough to produce a powerful effect. Mark's discomfort with his own difference kept such difference hidden from nearly everyone outside his immediate family, but when he confronted the facts of his own life, he produced work that was not only the best work he had done in my class but work that had effects well beyond the classroom walls.

As discussed in the previous section, Donna's identity was marked by an unbridled honesty, most notably when she examined herself. Such an approach marks her difference as well. While teens are often consumed by how their peers perceive them and inept at self-reflection, Donna's personality is embraces embarrassment and openly criticizes her foibles.

Process to Epiphany

The central phenomenon of this study is that participants experienced an epiphany caused by the work they did for their essays and videos. *Epiphany* here is used as a catch-all to mean realization, growth, or transformation. Such an epiphany was often related to the theme or content of the work, but the process of doing the work was often as important or more important to the epiphany as the content. In other words, the meaning participants ascribed to their works was specifically a result of the process of doing the work.

The themes and approaches discussed previously in this chapter, while important, seem merely tangential to bringing about the epiphany many participants experienced. Instead, the

process of creating the works, and then revising or altogether redoing the works, is the salient feature of the epiphany. So here the analysis will shift to an examination of the effect of the creative process on the participants. This section will be organized to first discuss common thematic elements, then common process elements, and finally how those elements related to the participants' epiphany.

The iterative process involved in creating the essays and videos meant that students were not allowed to produce a product, earn a grade, and move on to another task. Instead, they were pushed to improve a work over time, through revisions or new products altogether, and they had to live with one piece of work, or versions of one piece of work, for a period of weeks or months. Further, the work had a definite, real-world purpose: their college application. This work rose beyond the typical practicing students are used to in their academic work. Finally, something seemed to count. So, the final product here accumulated slowly, unlike most work in the English classroom, and very much unlike the work in AP Lang, which intends to prepare students to think and write quickly within short timeframes such as an exam period. Over and over, the participants' process of doing the work caused effects beyond the themes of the work.

Mary told me that her essay on dance caused her to rethink her future in dance and brought about an awareness of her desire to not become a professional dancer. She initially avoided including dance in her essay at all, even though that essay's theme was about finding a calm place to get away from the pressures of her experiences beyond the walls of her bedroom. Such pressures were caused by her commitment to dance competitively, even though she avoids saying that explicitly in the essay.

Kevin told me that he thought college essays should "sum up" a person's life, but his initial draft included nothing about Fukushima. After an essay about the lessons taught by

playing tennis, he rethought his approach. He realized that Fukushima was an essential part of his story and identity, and so he rewrote his essay. The process of writing and rewriting caused him to think about his identity and to question his initial conception of the essay as a "summing up."

Mark's adoption story has incredible emotional weight, but it took a great deal of pushing for him to realize that he should tell that story and not bother with another typical high school sports essay. Telling his story changed his relationships with family members and caused him to be more understanding of where he came from and how he got to where he is now. Previously, he feared that his history made him an outcast, and he did not know how to discuss the major events of his early life. After writing, he seems to have come to a new acceptance to facts that had previously made him bristle. Mark's case also reminded me of one of writing's great powers: our thoughts and feelings are amorphous and abstract when they are in our minds, but they take shape and become concrete when we commit them to words on paper.

Emily and Maya are both loquacious conversationalists and skilled writers, so neither were particularly fearful of writing the essays. In their work, they dealt with reconciling paradoxical aspects of the characters or cultures. For Emily, that meant learning and explaining how physics and novels share common ground. For Maya, that meant examining the roots of the multiculturality that manifests in her identity. For both participants, creating the video played an important role in their growth. Emily learned that video images can communicate in ways that words on a page cannot, and she learned how to exploit such communicative power in her video. Her video shows how complex ideas can be rendered simply in images, a nascent skill she did not know she possessed. Maya's video was not based on any previous work she had done, but she then learned that she could write an essay based on the video. The video essentially worked

as an outline or rough draft for an essay, which she then wrote and submitted with her applications. Forms, she learned, can be transmuted into other forms, or inspire new creations.

Donna's and Taylor's videos were key to their process experiences. While both wrote impressive essays, their videos seem to better capture their spirits and identities. For Donna, her longstanding interest in videomaking should have made the project easy, but quantifying or illustrating her identity in video form eluded her at first. Then she made her "Hail Mary" video, in which she focused on what she was passionate about (which was, after all, making videos). Now, her work seamlessly displayed her wit, vigor, and creativity. The epiphany here was first that when she focuses on her passions, the work is exemplary, but also that she realized, or the process affirmed, that her teenage passion should become her life's work. Taylor was similarly well-positioned for the video because she is skilled in the visual arts. Her work was a departure from that of her peers, since she did not actually film any footage. Instead, she made an animated video that exemplified several of her strengths, such as perseverance, succinct writing, humor, and humility.

Nate's epiphany was also the result of the process. Such growth was hard-won for Nate, as his early efforts were bogged down by an ambition that lacked technique or focus. But once he cast off attempts to sound poetic and stuck to straight storytelling, he was rewarded. He struggled with the process throughout, but finally reached the objective.

Conclusion

Thus, this study showed that the process of creating the application essay and video can spur personal growth in participants that might not otherwise happen, or happen as quickly, had the work not been undertaken. While it could be argued that assignments in science or math or history classes could also spur growth in high schoolers, it appears that the cumulative effect of

subject matter, iterative processes, and the high-stakes context of college applications make this type of assignment uniquely placed as a catalyst for positive personal or spiritual growth.

Chapter Six

Discussion

This chapter is organized into six sections. Key Findings discusses the key takeaways from the study for readers in terms of the research questions. Findings in Context examines the relationship of the study's findings to the literature review. Unexpected Results discusses, unsurprisingly, surprises in the findings, followed by a discussion of the study's limitations. A discussion of potential areas for related follow-up studies precedes a discussion of the implication of the study's findings in practice.

Key Findings

This study found that the process of creating college application essays and videos has an important, positive effect on students beyond simply completing a portion of their college application.

This study intended to study the problem of writing college application essays and making college application videos. The specific problem was the stress caused by the high-stakes nature of the task, which takes place in an opaque admissions environment with ever-increasing numbers of applicants for a static number of spots. Another problem of the college essay and video is the challenge of appearing "authentic" to admissions officers. Students are asked to create works showcasing their authentic personalities, but the genre is often completely new to them. They have been taught to write in an academic form, the classic five-paragraph essay. Now

they must write narratively, using a convincing "voice" that many professional authors struggle to manifest over the course of years of practice. Further, admissions offices offer no rubric, and only the barest of guidelines.

Inspired by the challenges facing my students, I designed this study to better understand their experiences and processes when they worked on their essays and videos. I chose eight participants to provide a wide range of working styles and subject matters, and for a variety of levels of "success." The data for the study included the essays and videos students made in preparing for their applications, the feedback I provided them during the process as well as our written conversations about their works, an interview with each participant about a year after they had completed my course and a few months after they had submitted their applications to colleges, and a survey shortly after that. During the interview process, most students had received admissions decisions from some of the schools to which they had applied, and when they completed the survey they were already college freshmen. The study was not designed to determine the impact of the essay or video on a school's admissions decisions.

The study's purpose was inspired by my work over many years with college-bound students. Year after year I helped my students in their junior years prepare for the college application process they would face the following fall. They were ambitious – and stressed. The opaque processes of admissions offices caused them to do seemingly anything in their power to gain admission. As an English teacher, the college essay was one area in which I could especially be in their service. I required multiple drafts of multiple college essays. I knew many of them would scrap these essays and write a completely new one for their applications, but I also knew that iterative process was essential in creating an essay good enough for submission to colleges.

Doing a bunch of essays a year in advance of their application deadline would make it easier for them to complete an even better one during senior year.

Few of them had written in the narrative and self-reflective mode asked of the college essay. Mostly they had been taught to write in academic forms. A five-paragraph essay had an introduction with a thesis, three body paragraphs that each explained one point related to the thesis, and a concluding paragraph that restated the thesis. Breaking the pattern they had been taught for years in English classes required a sustained struggle.

The Research Questions for the study were intentionally limited: 1. What are the experiences and processes of high school juniors as they create written college application essays and convert them into videos? 2. What themes are found in the videos? These questions allowed me to focus on how students felt about navigating the process of doing the work while excising the outward effects of the work, such as whether students thought the essay got them admitted to a school, since that was a purely speculative question. The data gathered for the study was itself narrative in nature. That is, participants told me a story about the process of doing the work and explained that experience to me. I edited all the various pieces into a single narrative and included portions of the participant's work for context and detail. Pieces of contemporaneous discussions between the participant and myself were also employed to remind both participant and researcher of our reactions to the works-in-progress. The data, in the form of narratives, were presented in Chapter 4: Results. The next chapter, Findings, analyzed the results individually, that is, by participant, and then as a group to find themes common to multiple participants.

The study found that working on the essay and video often has a profound effect on a student. Such an effect may not be an academic one but is often a result of examining an event in one's life or an aspect of one's personality and realizing something important about one's life.

Few assignments in high school have such an effect. Such an effect is also sometimes only tangentially related to college admissions, but the high-stakes nature of college admissions causes students to work iteratively and intently on creating their best work.

Findings in Context: This Study's Relationship to the Literature Review

This study's literature review examined historically the deeply flawed process of college admissions in the United States. While the process today attempts to be less exclusionary and more meritocratic than it was from the inception of colleges through the civil rights era, it seems that the process has continued to be exclusionary, albeit in different ways. Instead of de jure, race-based exclusion, there is now de facto class-based exclusion. While schools would like to admit more poor students, for example, rich students tend to be better prepared for college-level work due to the resources these students' parents use to better prepare their kids. Schools have become exclusive in other ways in recent years. As apps like CommonApp made applying to three schools as easy as applying to 20, elite schools have seen drastic increases in the numbers of applicants, while their available spots have remained static. Thus, where Yale's 1980s admission rate was one in five, it is now one in 20. Yale's reputation, like that of its competitors and aspirants, rests on its apparent exclusivity.

The literature review also showed that the practices of the admissions office are designed for the admissions office rather than for the applicant. Even when schools attempt to make applying easier for the applicant, such as with the Coalition app, an unintended effect is that the application becomes more work over a longer period for the applicant.

As previously noted, most four-year colleges placed "considerable" or "moderate" importance on the application essay, and such importance has increased since in recent years (Clinedinst et al., 2011). As admissions rates at elite schools diminished with ever-increasing

numbers of applications, as Bruni (2015) noted, the essay presumably became a tipping point factor for students who all looked very similar on paper. In other words, when faced with hundreds or thousands of students with perfect grade point avergaes and long lists of leadership positions, a powerful essay may cause a few to rise above the others. The participants in this study seemed to see the essay as an important data point in the application. They took the task seriously and were aware of using the essay to make themselves stand out, as Donna, Taylor, Mark, Kevin, and Mary all explicitly stated. Although this study did not gather data or analyze the effect of the essay or video on a participant's winning acceptance, the participants believed that it played a role. Taylor suspected that her video helped her gain acceptance to Boston University, as it appeared that BU admissions officers may have watched her video, while schools she was rejected from did not. Otherwise, all the schools she applied to received the same data.

While the literature reviewed here was all published before the United States Supreme Court's 2023 decision effectively banning the use of race as a factor in college admissions, that decision makes the application essay a more salient feature of an application, as it is now the appropriate venue for discussing the effect of race on an applicant's life. The participants in this study had completed my course a few months prior to the court's decision, but they applied to college in the first months after the decision had gone into effect. Three of the eight participants were Persons of Color, and two of those three explicitly discussed race, but not in a way that directly addressed hardship related to racism. Future researchers may study how the court's decision affects applicants' essays.

The literature review also discussed the possibility that teenagers are not emotionally or intellectually developed enough to write an inward-looking, reflective narrative such as the

college application essay (McGinty, 1995). While the participants here could surely write a more nuanced and mature essay about their childhoods ten or twenty years from now, if not as immediate an essay, the work they completed as teenagers still shows that they can complete the task successfully. A study with more participants might better analyze such an issue, and as a teacher I certainly had many students who could prove McGinty correct. A curriculum less focused on academic writing and skills that are conducive to standardized testing and more focused on creative tasks and narrative writing might obviate the issue of whether students are emotionally or intellectually developed enough to write high quality essays and produce effective videos. In fact, one of the reasons I make the essay an iterative, nearly year-long process is to acquaint students with the genre and give them time to practice and make mistakes before their senior year, when the deadline for turning in an essay to colleges becomes imminent. Participants in this study noted that the iterative process helped them submit an application essay of which they were proud. Further, the video component provides many lessons in creative problem-solving that they rarely practice through the more traditional reading and writing modes of the English curricula.

Dobson (2018) concurred that the college essay requires skill in a writing genre with which students have had little practice or training. The experiences of this study's participants certainly manifested their lack of familiarity with the genre, since they all wrote multiple versions of the essay and noted their dissatisfaction with their early attempts. Most participants' final essay had no common features with their first attempt. But all participants demonstrated that they took the essay seriously, that it was an important step in their academic lives. While the college-bound participants here take their schoolwork seriously as a general matter, it should not come as a surprise that they took their college application work seriously. Nevertheless, that the

essay is a high-stakes assignment, one they see as having some effect on their prospects, is one reason students work hard to do their best on it.

Dobson (2018) and Rigol and College Entrance Examination Board (2003) viewed admissions officers' readings of applicants' essays as magnanimous. Such a view contends that students will be rewarded by what their essays do right, or by presenting an "authentic" version of themselves. But Warren (2013) savaged officers for asking for one thing from an essay (the answer to the actual prompt) while covertly looking for another (how successful the writer will be at college *x*). Because I was well-acquainted with the participants before they completed their essays and videos, I had a sense of their "authentic" selves. Nevertheless, none of us know the specific values or thought processes of any particular admissions officer or how such an officer might respond to an essay's tone, details, or grammatical errors. I tried to steer my students clear of overthinking any part of the task and instead focus on producing works they and I felt were representative of their best work, works that could stand on their own as powerful narratives. But even by this rubric, applicants and teachers are in the dark when it comes to knowing what an application essay or video should communicate. Several participants here expressed some degree of bafflement regarding how admissions officers might view their works.

Warren's (2013) work also showed that students who received explicit instructions on the task and feedback on their drafts wrote better final drafts than those who received little to no instruction or feedback. This finding surely comes as no surprise to teachers. Several participants here noted the importance of such feedback in producing their works. But several participants also mentioned that they shared their work with a parent for feedback, and that in these cases the parent assisted with positively improving the works. On the one hand, I was glad to see students seeking help from both teachers and parents, especially since teenagers are historically suspect of

the advice of parents. On the other hand, to make the works authentic and ethical, the student needs to be the sole author. As a teacher who takes academic honesty seriously, I am cognizant of extending my own hand too much in a student's work. But I have little idea of a parent's sense of where to draw the line between helping their child produce finely-honed works and doing some of the honing themselves. Surely the parent's interest is different from mine, as they have a more immediate interest in their child gaining admission to elite college *x*. Further, admissions officers are surely inundated with essays written by committee. But one difference between an admissions officer and myself is that I have a better sense of which of my students' works were made by committee, since I know their writing styles and thought processes better than does an admissions officer who knows the student only or mostly through data in an application. Beseda (2014) also noted the onslaught of formulaic essays marked with evidence of many hands.

The issues noted above were studied by Paley (1996), who found that admissions officers valued "self-disclosure" in application essays but nevertheless had difficulty identifying self-disclosure that was not explicit. Further, the officers in her study were sometimes more offended by grammatical errors than they were moved by stories of emotional self-disclosure. For applicants, and for teachers advising applicants, the challenge of writing to please admissions officers' opaque and sometimes conflicting desires seems a fool's game.

Patterson (2005), Todorova (2018), and Warren (2013) all discussed how students misinterpret or simply do not understand admissions officers' expectations of the application essay. Several participants here showed a growing awareness of their audience's expectations as they worked through the process of producing their works. This may be partially related to me steering them in such a direction. For example, Kevin's first essay focused on what he learned from tennis. This essay seemed to lack consideration of just how many students write essays

about similar topics. In other words, the essay's conception did not consider the audience's perspective. Later, Kevin wrote about a topic he knew few if any applicants would write about. Beseda (2014) surveyed admissions officers and found that revelations of a unique life experience or a rote topic made interesting by an idiosyncratic take impressed readers. Kevin capitalized on such a situation by writing about experiencing the Fukushima disaster.

Gray (2016) feared that alternative application elements such as a video just add one more stressful task for applicants, but also noted that alternative forms may benefit some students. Although this study's scope did not include the effect of the essay or video on an applicant's admission or rejection to a school, several participants found that producing a video had positive benefits. Maya conceived of a video, produced it, and later realized that the same concept could be utilized in an essay, which became the essay she submitted with her applications. Taylor believed that her video was the factor that helped her gain acceptance to her dream school. Donna's video convinced her to follow her dreams.

One reason I require students to work throughout their junior year on their application essays and video is to mitigate the stress of the application process during senior year. Participants uniformly noted that they did not initially want to do the assignment of writing essay or making a video, but they also noted that they knew it had to get done, and better to have it done in advance than at the last minute.

Unexpected Results

Although I felt that writing college essays and making videos could be worthwhile as a creative practice, I did not foresee the effect that working on them would have on several participants. While this study did not endeavor to determine the effect of the participants' works on whether they were accepted or rejected from the schools to which they applied, the creative

process nevertheless often had profound impacts on the participants unrelated to the application process. At the same time, such impacts may not have occurred had the work not been done for the application process, because the high stakes (in the minds of the participants, anyway) of the application process may be the catalyst that causes participants to take the works so seriously.

The data showed that for several participants the creative process changed their outlooks or catalyzed personal growth. For example, in writing her essay and making her video, Mary thought through her feelings about her dance career. What began as amorphous, conflicted feelings soon changed into a certain path of action. Mark wrote about his early life and his drug-addicted parents and then his adoption by a loving family. Prior to writing his essay, he had spoken little to anyone about these events, but by writing his essay he found a vocabulary and a way to accept the monumental changes that had occurred. By sharing his work with his extended family, he found a new acceptance and deeper relationship with them. The effect of the creative process for some participants caused growth in their intellectual and academic skills. Maya learned how working in the video genre could lead to new ways of writing. Kevin broke his practice of safe if skillful academic writing to find new ways of expression in narrative form.

Limitations

That participants were former students of mine would traditionally be viewed as a hindrance to objectivity. Long before I interviewed participants or read their survey data, we had already developed a working teacher-student relationship. But this relationship also allowed me as researcher to know the personalities, learning styles, and some life experience of each participant, which helped me to analyze their work and have insight into their experiences. My goal as a teacher in assigning the essays and videos was not so much to get them to produce works they could send to colleges but to get them working toward that goal, which would more

likely occur during their senior years, when they were no longer my student. A number of participants did ask me to provide feedback on the works they made as seniors, well before I asked them to participate in this study. That they asked me to review their work when they were no longer my students showed that they trusted my feedback. Further, no prospective participants rejected the offer to participate in the study, and most expressed that they were gratified to be considered.

Because I am not an admissions officer, I can only rely on my experiences and knowledge of the process to help students navigate it. Students often ask me what admissions officers want in an applicant, and my first answer is always a shrug of the shoulders. My second answer is typically a sympathetic comment about the frustrations of navigating such an opaque system. And my third answer considers the skills, interests, and personality of the student, and suggests ways to present those qualities to the faceless, all-powerful, and enigmatic admissions officer. Although I may have read more about the processes of admissions and read hundreds more essays than my students have, we are both mostly shooting in the dark. Nevertheless, my feedback to students changes their work in every case. Unlike typical assignments in which students do the work once or maybe twice and earn a grade, they do their essays in my class until we both feel like they have an essay worthy of submission. The limitation here was covered previously: at what point is the essay written by committee? While I know that their essays improve with further iterations, I try to keep my hand light so I can ethically say that the final essay is the work of the student as much as any high school assignment is the work of the student, even with the guidance and feedback that accompanies nearly all high school work.

Because we spend a lot of time in class discussing the admissions process, students know that I am bothered by the unknowns attendant to the process, sympathetic to their frustrations,

and dedicated to helping them best navigate the system. Thus, participants uniformly recognized that although they mostly did not look forward to the hard work of creating their essays and videos, they were glad that I made them begin their work more than a year prior to admissions deadlines.

For all the reasons above, students viewed me as a trusted ally in their admissions quest, and such trust enables me as a researcher to delve into their experiences in ways that likely would not have occurred had an outside observer conducted the research.

Another limitation is the sample size of eight participants. I chose the eight participants to ensure a range of experiences. I did not seek participants whose work was the "best" in their class, although several participants here did produce what I would consider excellent work. I did not randomly select among the 100 or so students I taught during the 2022-23 school year. I chose participants I suspected could speak articulately and openly about their experiences. Any eight other participants would have produced some data different from that of this study. A case study approach worked well in producing data for each individual, but less well for generalizing data, although the goal was not to produce generalizable data. A larger sample using similar methodology would produce an unwieldy amount of data for a single researcher, although such data might produce generalizable insights.

Although the school's demographics are socioeconomically diverse, that all students attended the same school limits the diversity of experience among the participants. By some measures, they all share a school experience. This factor could also be seen as a strength, since the differences in participant experiences are not caused by which school they attended.

Implications for Future Research

Three areas tangential to this study could be further investigated in future studies.

The first involves how high school teachers prepare students for the college application process generally and the essay in particular. As my students seemed inexperienced at writing narratively, I wondered what other schools and other teachers did to embed in their curricula the types of writing that would better prepare students to write narratively about their experiences. That working on their essays and videos often caused participants here to experience new insights into their past experiences, personalities, and future desires suggests that this type of creative work in the English classroom might have benefits beyond the college application, including for students not intending to attend college. Although administrators might have difficulty in quantifying through standardized testing the effects of such learning, attention to creative, personal storytelling in the English classroom may promote intellectual and ethical growth in participants.

A second area for future research is the effect of recent developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Supreme Court's decision banning the use of race-conscious admissions. Such studies need not necessarily include both issues. Studies might investigate how AI affects application essay writing from the perspective of students or from the perspective of admissions officers. Another inquiry might analyze how students are writing about their experience of race, as Chief Justice Roberts said they might in his majority opinion for the court. From a teacher's perspective, as soon as I realized AI was available to students, I had to change my classroom practices to obviate its use. But at the present time it appears that there is no watermark or other obvious way to detect AI use in an application essay. Admissions officers will surely be on the lookout for AI-generated or assisted essays, but they will rely on hunches

more so than hard evidence, making a murky realm even murkier. What used to be an essay by committee may become an instant essay by AI, given a few specific details true of the applicant and then combined with every application essay available on the internet.

A third area for study is the effect of the essay or video on admissions outcomes. While the literature review here discussed previous studies on the subject, the matter still appears opaque, like admissions decisions more generally. The obvious challenge here is that elite schools will not candidly reveal their admissions practices, and thus the import of the essay is difficult to ascertain. But it is possible that an experienced but not practicing admissions officer might reveal new insights into an opaque process.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings affirm the benefits to students in undertaking rigorous, process-driven creative tasks such as a college admissions essay or video. These benefits were felt strongly by participants, if in individual ways. Works such as those created by this study's participants are difficult to adapt to the standardized testing models prevalent in schools today, but teachers should nevertheless employ narrative and creative lessons in the curriculum.

One challenge I face every year when assigning these works is that there are almost no rules to what might constitute a "good" or "successful" essay as there are when writing in traditional academic modes like the five-paragraph essay form. My students tend to prefer that I tell them exactly what to do so they can just do that and earn the grade. But hoop-jumping assignments such as those merely show that a student can perform an academic skill, while creative tasks such as the admissions essay or video offer venues for a higher level of intellectual rigor while also promoting emotional growth in students.

Thus, teachers should integrate more such creative and narrative tasks into their teaching repertoires if they are not doing so already. But I would be remiss to not address two important events, noted briefly previously, that occurred around the time I was working on this study: artificial intelligence (AI) becoming widely and freely available and the United States Supreme Court's banning of race as a factor in college admissions decisions.

In late April 2023, I received a paper from a student who had written essays in single paragraphs all year. This paper was different, because it was well-organized in the standard five-paragraph form. The paper had been written on paper in class, so I did not think to think that it may have been copied from a covert Apple Watch. I put a 100 on the paper and, pleased that she had "gotten it," a note: "Bravo!" Over the next few days, I began to question how a student who never wrote in five-paragraph form and whose arguments and language tended to be imprecise could have made such a leap in such a short period of time. I made an account with ChatGPT and asked the app to write a five-paragraph essay using the same prompt used in class a few days prior. Seconds later, the app gave me an essay eerily like the one I had a read a few days earlier. I asked the app the same question again, and it gave me another similar but not exactly the same essay. At this point, I knew that essay writing in schools, and academic writing in general, would be forever changed, and that I had a new battle on my hands, one I certainly did not want to fight. I had already established the practice of doing most writing in class on paper, but the following year the computer was never used in my class for any written work. It was all done on paper, in the classroom, in my view. I also developed a nose for AI-generated works, which tended to be too well-organized, too articulate, and too syntactically precise for high school juniors to have written.

Then, on June 29, 2023, The United States Supreme Court (SCOTUS) effectively banned colleges' ability to consider race, commonly called Affirmative Action, as a factor in admissions decisions (*Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023). In his decision for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts noted that students could use their application essay to discuss how race had affected their lives, and colleges were free to consider such information.

These two developments had little effect on this study's participants during the period covered by the study, since they had already written their essays and made their videos, although it is possible that their admission or rejection to one school or another was affected by the Affirmative Action ban. (The study's sample was too small to analyze any such impacts, and its research questions were unrelated to such issues, as they were determined well before the SCOTUS decision was handed down.) But AI and the Affirmative Action ban may have far-reaching consequences for applicants going forward.

In the case of AI, the originality, quirkiness, or authenticity of an applicant's essay becomes ever more important. A great number of student essays I read each year are dull, unoriginal, and formulaic. The difference between these essays and those generated by AI is that the AI-generated essays are better organized and free of grammatical mistakes. The problem of "essays by committee" discussed previously is akin to that of AI. Admissions officers could never be sure of whose hands were in the essay, whether it was purely the student, or the student and the teacher, the parent, or the hired college consultant. As a teacher, my goal is to offer feedback and suggestions that can help push the student toward their best work. Several participants here noted feedback they had received from their parents, although much of this seemed to be after they had left my class and were preparing for submitting their applications.

But as AI becomes increasingly dominant in the classroom, everyone involved in the application essay, from students to teachers to parents to consultants to admissions officers, will have to determine how each will guard against AI-generated essays. One of the key problems I saw as a teacher is that hard evidence of a student using AI is sometimes hard to generate. The basic evidence I have is that the suspected AI-generated essay lacks the hallmarks of the student's prior work, such as their syntax or other grammatical quirks. But although I see a student's syntax as identifiable and unique as a fingerprint, that type of evidence may not be supported by administrators or parents.

Thus, the question of AI-generated essays may go in several directions. On the one hand, the stakes for the essay become ever higher, in that students must write in a way that AI cannot, through their use of original structures, quirky storytelling, humor, or any myriad ways that AI has yet to learn to do. AI is soulless, so a student's essay now must be full of soul and personality and creativity. In other words, the essays need to have more of what colleges have been demanding all along: authenticity.

It is possible that a video may solve some of these problems, as the video offers its maker a chance to speak directly to admissions officers, in their own voice, with their own expression, cadence, and personality, as Jorn et al. (2019) noted. But Gray (2016) warned that videomaking could become just as much a team sport as has essay writing, where wealthy parents simply hire editors and camerapeople to produce spectacles of clickbait.

Conclusion

This study presented the experiences of eight college applicants as they wrote college application essays, created application videos, and navigated a perplexing realm of the college admissions process. The intentional diversity of the study's participants ensured that the

narratives presented here showed a broad range of experiences that affected the personal growth of each participant. One participant described his family's choice to leave Japan after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, while another discussed the challenges of committing to professional-level dance. One built an essay around childhood memories of the play of light behind her closed eyes, while another struggled to complete an essay before finally being inspired by meeting a cognitively impaired couple. One used the spice box of her Indian heritage to examine her identity as an American teenager, while another opened up about the trauma of being the child of drug-addicted, often-incarcerated young parents, and his subsequent adoption into a loving family. Every teacher of some years of classroom experience would recognize this group of participants as their own. Not these exact stories, but a similarly broad scope of diverse experience is inherent in young people, who are on the cusp of adulthood and learning about who they are and how they fit into a chaotic world.

While their stories are each singular, this study found several themes common to most or all participants. First, all participants exemplified the critical role of family in their works. For some, the essay and video became a venue for examining their own role in their family unit or the effect family experiences had on their development. For others, family members helped shepherd their application materials into being. Second, for young people deep in the liminal state between childhood and adulthood, the work they created for the application served as a springboard toward a new understanding of their budding identity. Third, participants used their application works to emphasize their difference, in most cases by an iterative process of revising their works. The importance of such an iterative process led directly to the fourth theme, which is that the process of making and remaking these materials led to an epiphany-inspired transformation. While such an epiphany or realization was more pronounced in some than in

others, all participants recognized some level of new realization through the work they did. That the works were process-driven rather than simply done and forgotten, and that the stakes were high, since they were to be used for ostensibly selective college admissions, caused participants to treat them differently than they would everyday classroom assignments.

The importance of process and the resultant epiphany was not hypothesized as a possible outcome of this study, but such findings are a reminder of the power of meaningful, creative work in the classroom, and that repetition is not necessarily a sign of inertia but can be instead a path to innovation and reinvention.

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Appendix A

CommonApp Prompts

Common App Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Source: https://www.commonapp.org/blog/2022-2023-common-app-essay-prompts

Appendix B

College & Career Project Instructions

Demer/AP Lang/Spring 2023

College/Career Project

The purpose of the College/Career Project is to acquaint students with colleges and careers that may interest them, and to prepare students for the college admissions process. Keep an electronic copy – you will actually use much of this material when you apply to schools next year. Seriously.

This assignment will really help you with the college admissions process that's mere months away. Please take it seriously.

Grading:

If you want an A, go above and beyond. Show in your work that you care about your work and you are taking this assignment as an opportunity to help prepare you for your future. Think critically, write thoughtfully.

If you want a B, just do exactly as the assignment description asks!

If you prefer a C, skip some of the parts. Do cursory work.

- Each assignment should begin on a new sheet. Be sure that each page clearly states which assignment I am looking at. For example, for assignment 1, the heading should state "Assignment 1" and "Senior Year Plans and Goals for College and Career" or similar.
- Everything except the very last assignment gets turned in to Google Classroom.
- However, you will turn in some of the nine assignments together (for example, 1-3 is due together). To make life easy for me, make it ONE DOCUMENT per upload, so make sure to put 1-3 into a single word (or similar) doc.
- Don't send me a link to your google doc.
- Each assignment must be typed in 12 pt, plain font.
- If you cut and paste (yes, this is the *one* assignment for which it is acceptable to cut and paste information from the internet) information about schools or careers from the internet, make sure the font, size, and style are consistent with the rest of the project. Yes, you may cut and paste information about a school from their website.
- All pages should be consistent in font, font size, and style.
- Attractiveness and organization count.
- To get grades in the A range, your work should be thorough and thoughtful, and show evidence of the time you spent working on this important project. For grades in the B range, you have completed all of the things I asked you to do, but your work looks cursory or less thorough or thoughtful than those in the A range. The C or below range does not follow directions, has portions missing, or insults me as a professional trying to help you with the complicated and frustrating business of getting into college.

The assignments which make up the project are as follows:

1. A written discussion of senior year plans and courses, and post-secondary goals for college and career. Include questions you need answered regarding senior year and

applying for college. *Minimum one page.* If you haven't thought about next year (and college, and after college), you need to start thinking about it. You probably won't believe what I'm about to tell you, but it's ok to change your mind.

2. A summary of information on two possible careers. You should include salary, projected job growth, necessary experience/schooling, and other pertinent information (include your sources so we both know that your data is legit). What skills and interests do you possess that would make each career a good choice for you?
3. Research scholarship and financial aid information.
   -Find three scholarships you might be eligible for.
   -Make a list of four websites that will be helpful when researching financial aid information. Note why each might be useful to you.
   - Write a plan about how you might realistically pay for college.

4. Locate and organize pertinent information about four colleges you are interested in. You should have at least one reach, one goal, and one safety school.
   -If your reach, goal or safety school is Georgia State, UGA, GA Tech, or GPC, you need to analyze in writing your chances for admission, but you have to research four other schools. Because we all already know about those schools.
   -Of your four schools, one must be outside Georgia and another must be private.
   Note the following for each school you research:
   -number of students
   -degree programs offered (if there are hundreds, list the ones that appeal to you)
   -tuition and fees: Go to the school's website and use the cost calculator (Thanks, Obama) and find out what you are likely to pay to attend. Make a chart or some kind of easily readable graphic that shows sticker price and your likely cost to attend.
   -% of students receiving financial aid
   -average amount of financial aid
   -location
   -admissions requirements and deadlines, and average SAT/ACT scores or GPA of students admitted
   -strong academic areas that interest you
   -other information pertinent to you
   Each school's website is a good place to begin. You can also use the College Board's site, and there are plenty of sites that share data from students about their experiences at a school.
   -Finally, write a half page about why this school is a good fit for you. Yes, that's a half page for *each school*. Deciding where to go to college is a big decision. Liking the football team is probably not the best reason to attend.

5. A. List the protocol for obtaining teacher recommendations. In other words, what is the correct method for obtaining a rec from a teacher? Recs are written out of the goodness of our hearts, not because it's a requirement of the job. B. Write a letter asking a teacher to write a recommendation. You do not have to give the letter to the teacher, but you will do so in the fall, when you need a recommendation. Why should the teacher write you a rec? What attributes do you possess that you might want to remind the teacher about? List the things you think the teacher might want to include about you in bullet-point form.

6. Create a typed personal resume that can assist teachers and counselors in writing a recommendation. You must use Resume Wizard on Word or some similar template. Make it look

pro. Don't simply type up the information. No one will be impressed. Include your full name, address, email, phone, GPA, academic distinctions, awards, extracurricular activities, jobs, interests, etc. Make it fit on *one page*. If it doesn't fit on one page, you have too much information.

7. Write a college application essay based on the topic provided by one of the schools you are interested in attending. If none of your schools offers an essay topic, use one of the CommonApp topics below. The essay you write for this project must be on a topic different from that on which you wrote last semester.
8. Write a one-page reflection of this project and your originally stated goals.
9. Parent signature verifying discussion of college and this project, and that parent has read your final draft. List any questions you or your parents have that your teacher or counselor might be able to help you with. This is the only assignment that needs to be turned in to me as a hard copy. Everything else goes to Google Classroom.

Mon Jan 19	Assignments 1/2/3 Due on GC by 8:10 AM
Tue Jan 17	4/5/6 Due on GC by 8:10 AM
Mon Jan 23	7 Due on GC by 8:10 AM
Thurs Jan 26	8 due on GC by 8:10 AM 9 due hard copy at beginning of class

Common App Essay Prompts (https://www.commonapp.org/blog/2022-2023-common-app-essay-prompts)

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
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 problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma-anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Appendix C

IRB Approval Exemption Form

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04436-2024

Responsible Researcher(s): Mr. James A. Demer

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jamie Workman

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. Meaghan Arrastia-Chisholm

Project Title: *Narrative Inquiry of High School Juniors Creating College Application Essays and Videos.*

Institutional Review Board Determination:
This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

Comments:

- *Although initially submitted as an expedited protocol, the research study was approved as exempt under federal guidelines.*
- *The approved protocol is authorized to begin at the DeKalb County School District. Data collection guidelines must be adhered to in keeping with site permission issued by Dr. Carol J. Thurman (10.31.2024).*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym/email lists, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

☒ ***Proposed modifications are to be submitted to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu for review and approval before being implementation is permitted.***

Elizabeth W. Olphie 11.04.2024
Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 06.02.16

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

1. KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCHER AND THIS STUDY
Study title: Narrative Inquiry of the Experiences of High School Juniors Creating College Application Essays and Videos
Principal Investigator: James A. Demer, doctoral student in Curriculum & Education, Valdosta State University; English teacher, Chamblee High School.
Faculty Advisors: Dr. Jamie Workman; Dr. Meagan Arrastia-Chisholm; Dr. Denise L. Hill.

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form contains information that will help you decide whether to join the study.

1.1 KEY INFORMATION

- The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of high school students who write college application essays and create college application videos as part of the college application process.
- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview via phone or video call with the researcher to discuss your experiences regarding the college application essay and video. Such an interview will likely take 45 minutes.
- There are no known risks for participating beyond the risks of your normal, everyday activities.
- There are few if any direct benefits for your participation, but your participation may assist others in the future in their college application processes.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can stop at any time. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

2. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study endeavors to better understand the experiences of high school juniors and seniors who create college application essays and videos as they prepare to apply to college. Such information may assist teachers and school staff who guide students in the application, college admissions officers to better understand the ramifications of their practices, and future students who create essays and videos.

3. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY?
3.1 Any student who recently completed a college application essay or video may participate in this study.
3.2 How many people are expected to take part in this study? 5-10 participants are expected to participate in the study.

4. INFORMATION ABOUT STUDY PARTICIPATION
4.1 What will happen to me in this study? Participants will be interviewed, via phone or video call, about their experiences writing their college application essays and producing their college application videos.

- Interviews will take place at a time convenient for researcher and participant.
- In addition to data collected by interview, the participant's video, essay, and contemporaneous commentary will be collected as data.
- The interview may take 45 minutes of a participant's time.

4. RISKS AND BENEFITS

4.1 What risks will I face by taking part in the study? What will the researchers do to protect me against these risks?

- There are no known or expected physical or psychological risks with participation in this study beyond those risks of your normal, everyday activities.
- Personally identifiable material will be modified to protect the confidentiality of participants, according to the participant's request.
- You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
- Because this study collects information about you, the primary risk of this research is a loss of confidentiality. See Section 7 of this document for more information on how the study team will protect your confidentiality and privacy.

4.2 How could I benefit if I take part in this study? How could others benefit?
You may not receive any personal benefits from being in this study. However, others may benefit from the knowledge gained from this study.

5. ENDING THE STUDY

5.1 If I want to stop participating in the study, what should I do?
You are free to leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty to you. If you decide to leave the study before it is finished, please tell one of the persons listed in Section 8, "Contact Information". If you choose to tell the researchers why you are leaving the study, your reasons may be kept as part of the study record. The researchers will keep the information collected about you for the research unless you ask us to delete it from our records. If the researchers have already used your information in a research analysis it will not be possible to remove your information.

6. FINANCIAL INFORMATION

6.1 Will I be paid or given anything for taking part in this study? You will not receive compensation for your participation in the study.
6.2 There are no known financial or other conflicts of interests related to this study.

7. PROTECTING AND SHARING RESEARCH INFORMATION

7.1 It is the goal and responsibility of the researcher to use the information shared by participants responsibly. After completing the interview, the researcher will provide the following form in order for participants to decide how they would like their information to be handled. Participants will be asked to check one of the following statements:

__ You may use my information just as I provided it. No details need to be changed and you may use my real first name (but not last name) when using my data in publication or presentations.

__ You may share the information just as I provided it; however, please do not use my real name. I realize that others may identify me based on the data, even though my name will not be used.

__ You may share the information just as I provided it; however, please do not use my real name and please change details that might make me identifiable to others. In particular, it is my wish that the following specific pieces of my data not be shared without first altering the data so as to make me unidentifiable (describe this data in the space below):

7.2 Right to review interview material. Participants may review transcripts of interview material prior to publication or presentation for accuracy. The researcher will provide each participant with the appropriate transcript.

7.3 Who will have access to my research records?
There are reasons why information about you may be used or seen by the researchers or others during or after this study. Examples include:

- University, government officials, study sponsors or funders, auditors, and/or the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may need the information to make sure that the study is done in a safe and proper manner.

7.4 What will happen to the information collected in this study?
I will keep the information I collect about you during the research for study recordkeeping. The results of this study could be published in an article or presentation but will not include any information that would let others know who you are without your permission.

8. CONTACT INFORMATION. Contact the following to…

- Obtain more information about the study
- Ask a question about the study procedures
- Leave the study before it is finished
- Express a concern about the study

Researcher: James Demer
Email: demer.james@gmail.com
Phone: 404-403-2330

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jamie Workman
Email: jworkman@valdosta.edu
Phone: 229-333-5633

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Meagan Arrastia-Chisholm
Email: mcarrastia@valdosta.edu
Phone: 229-249-2777

10. YOUR CONSENT

Consent/Assent to Participate in the Research Study

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records and I will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information in Section 8 provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Print Legal Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date of Signature (mm/dd/yy): _____

Parent or Legally Authorized Representative Permission

By signing this document, you are agreeing to your child's participation in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. I will give you a copy of this document for your records. I will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree for my child to take part in this study.

_____

Print Participant Name

_____

Print Parent/Legally Authorized Representative Name

Relationship to participant: □ Parent □ Spouse □ Child □ Sibling □ Legal guardian □ Other

_____

Signature Date

Appendix E

Video Project Instructions

College Essay Video Project Overview

The goal of this project is to create a college application video. The video should show colleges some essential qualities you possess. Creativity is more important than polish here; the video does not have to be technically competent, but it needs to be creative, expressive, and interesting.

Just like your college essay, your video should say something unique about you, but it does not necessarily have to be autobiographical. it could focus on a family member whose example is influential to you. It could be about an interest you have. it could be about a global or local problem and how you see it or would like to solve it. It could be a Top 5 list. Be creative; think outside the box. Think up a new box altogether.

The maximum length of your video is five minutes; the minimum is two minutes.
Shoot in landscape, please.
Avoid using material you did not create yourself.

The video attached below provides some general ideas about what the video should do. At the end of the video, they solicit their services -- the video turns out to be an advertisement for their (paid) services, so turn it off when they start asking you to use their services.

I also attached "Make it Count" by Casey Neistat. If I were an admissions officer, this video would have gained him admission to my school, regardless of his SAT or how many AP courses he took (he happens to be, I believe, a high school dropout who later was hired to run a program at MIT). Note a few things about the video. He filmed most of it with his phone. He repeats visual motifs, which create continuity and hold disparate elements together. His personality comes across as fun-loving, adventurous, and irreverent. The narrative is told more in images than in words. He has a simple idea ("Make It Count") that is exemplified by all of the other elements. The cuts are very quick -- there are probably many hundreds of images, but most of them last only a fraction of a second, just long enough for your brain to "get it." He uses quotes to bolster his idea and tie his actions to his inspiration.

That said, please do not engage in any of the other stuff Casey does in the video, like jumping off cliffs or skateboarding in traffic or getting tattoos. The video is just an example of a simple and low-budget video that expresses a big idea with loads of personality and creativity, shot mostly on a 2012 cell phone.

You should be able to make your video using your phone and the editing software available on YouTube. Again, the technical aspect of your video is not what you will be graded on, but rather the creativity, ideas, and expressiveness of your work.

Elements and due dates:

1. Feb 3: Share with your classmates a video that you find illuminating in some way. Write a paragraph explaining what aspects of the video might help you in completing this project.

2. Feb 14: Conceptualize, in writing, your video. Discuss the visual elements as well as the spoken/verbal/literal elements. Discuss how the video will express certain qualities you possess. Also discuss your feelings about the process so far, what you hope to achieve, how you think the video may help you in the application process, etc.
3. Feb 28: Storyboard and script your video. Show graphically and in text how the video will progress from beginning to end.
4. Mar 14: Shoot the video elements.
5. Apr 11: Edit the video; share the rough edit.
6. Apr 27: Submit the final version. In the comments, discuss your feelings about the process, if you achieved your goals, how you might approach it differently if you had to do it again, what you like (or don't like) about the video, etc.

Appendix F

Interview Questions and Topics List

Interview Questions and Topics

The first section of the interview seeks to gather contextualizing data and is not focused specifically on the topics in the participant's work samples. Questions for Section 1 may include the following:

- Tell me about your parents. Where did they grow up? Where did they attend school? What kind of work do they do?
- Tell me about your family. Do you have siblings? Tell me about them and your relationships with them.
- Tell me about your childhood. Have you always lived in DeKalb County? Where have you attended school?
- When you think about the most significant events of your childhood, what do you think about? (This question may lead to related questions in the other sections of the interview. It may be that the participant created their essay and video about such an event, so the interview will naturally follow up on the meaning of the event. But if the participant decided against writing about what they consider their most important life event, that issue should also be examined in the interview.)
- What aspects of school do you find most rewarding or interesting, or most frustrating and anxiety-inducing? In particular, tell me about your experience with written work. Tell me about your experience with creative work.

The second interview section examines the topics and narratives in the participant's work samples. Possible interview questions include the following:

- Your essay focuses on [subject matter]. What made you decide on this topic?

- Tell me about your writing process. What were the challenges in writing the essay? Which parts came easy to you? Did you feel prepared to write this type of essay?
- Tell me about your process for making the video. Is it easier to express yourself in the video format?
- Add some questions focusing on the differences between the essay and video.
- Your narrative focused on [life event or events]. What qualities about yourself did you want to express through that narrative?
- When you thought about the audience for your [essay, video], who did you imagine? Did you worry about how they might perceive [a certain aspect of the narrative]?
- What factors influenced your process when making the video? Or, how did cultural influences affect your vision for the video? Did you think about some videos you had seen that helped you conceive of your video or decide on a style for it?

The third interview section focuses on the meaning participants ascribe to their works. Possible questions may include the following:

- Questions about the success of the product. Do you feel like your essay was successful? Did it represent you in the way you had hoped? Do you feel that your video was successful in representing you as you had hoped? Do you feel that one or the other, the essay or the video, was a better or more true representation of yourself?
- Looking back, what would you change about your essay? About your video?
- Questions about the essay-to-video process. If the student used the essay as a basis for the video: Why did you decide to use your essay as the basis for your video? What changes did you make to transform the essay to video? If the student's essay and video are

unrelated: Why did you choose a different topic for your video, rather than just adapt your essay?

- Questions about teacher feedback and direction. In what ways did the assignment's structure help or hinder your process in writing your essay or in making your video?
- Questions related to the place of the essay or video in the admissions process. What role do you think your essay and video will play in your application? Do you think your work will make you stand out among applicants with a similar GPA or SAT score? Do you think essays or videos should play a significant role in admissions? How did you craft the essay or video due to what you know about admissions?
- General feelings about admissions process. What are your feelings about the way admissions work?

Appendix G

Sample Page of Google Meet Transcription

00:08:04.000 --> 00:08:08.000
([redacted])
Common App essay.

00:08:08.000 --> 00:08:12.000
([redacted])
topics again and And I tried to connect with

00:08:12.000 --> 00:08:16.000
([redacted])
each one of them and see which one mattered the most to me and

00:08:16.000 --> 00:08:20.000
([redacted])
personally my culture

00:08:20.000 --> 00:08:24.000
([redacted])
Heritage religion. All of those are really important to who I am and it's

00:08:24.000 --> 00:08:28.000
([redacted])
kind of what all of my extracurriculars and everything. I've been centered around for

00:08:28.000 --> 00:08:32.000
([redacted])
years. So I thought it would be nice to incorporate that into

00:08:32.000 --> 00:08:36.000
([redacted])
my video because even though there's a lot of Indian Americans. I

00:08:36.000 --> 00:08:40.000
([redacted])
don't know if everyone has the same experience. I do coming from the type of family I

00:08:40.000 --> 00:08:44.000
([redacted])
come from so I thought it'd be interesting to show that

00:08:44.000 --> 00:08:48.000
([redacted])
aspect in the video and show how that's

Note. Participant's name redacted.