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PREPARING THE COLLEGE ESSAY

Maryland Higher Education Commission Offers Advice on Completing the College Essay

Annapolis, MD (November 29, 2006) -- For many Maryland high school seniors, preparing the college essay creates a great sense of anguish and panic, but it doesn't have to, according to academic affairs experts at the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC).

"It is natural that students are anxious about preparing the college essay," said MHEC Secretary Dr. Calvin W. Burnett. "The essay is what sets the student apart from other students with comparable grade point averages and SAT scores. But knowing what and how to express ideas is what gets you in or keeps you out."

Barbara Gill, Admissions Director at the University of Maryland, College Park, agrees. She reads thousands of essays a year and makes the following recommendations to students: write clearly and concisely and write about things that interest you.

"Too often students write for the reader of the essay and who they are gets lost. We want to know who the person is. This is not the time to be shy." She also recommends that students stay away from well-worn topics like sports and scoring the winning touchdown or basket or essays about the loss of a loved one. Gill also advises students to be creative without being too cutesy, where it can be interpreted that they didn't take the essay seriously.

The National Association for College Admission Counseling, an education association of secondary school counselors, college and university admission officers and counselors, makes the following recommendations:

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1. **Start early.** The more time you have, the less stress you'll have. And you'll have plenty of time to give the essay your best effort.
2. **Be yourself.** Take a moment to think about what interests you, what you love to talk about, what makes you sit up and take notice if it's mentioned in class or on TV. Then write about it.

One of the biggest mistakes students make is "writing what they think others want to hear, rather than about an issue, event, or person that really had significance for them," says Richard M. Fuller, dean of admission and financial aid at Hamilton College (NY). An essay like that is not just boring to write-it's boring to read.

3. **Be honest.** You're running late (see #1), you can't think of what to write -- and someone e-mails you a heartwarming story. With just a tweak here and there, it could be a great essay, you think. It's what you would have written if you'd just had enough time.

Don't be fooled! College admission officers have read hundreds-even thousands-of essays. They are masters at discovering any form of plagiarism. Adapting an e-mail story, buying an essay from some Internet site, getting someone else to write your essay -- admission people have seen it all. Don't risk your college career by taking the easy way out.

4. **Take a risk.** On the other hand, some risks can pay off. Don't settle for the essay that everyone else is writing. Imagine an admission officer up late, reading the fiftieth essay of the day -- yours. Do you want that person to nod off because he or she has already read ten essays on that topic?

"The danger lies not in writing bad essays but in writing common essays -- the one that admission officers are going to read dozens of," says Scott Anderson, associate director of college counseling at Mercersburg Academy (PA). "My advice? Ask your friends what they are writing -- and then don't write about that!"

5. **Keep in focus.** This is your chance to tell admission officers exactly why they should admit you. Unfortunately, some students try to list every single reason--their stellar academic record, their athletic prowess, their community service -- all in a page or two. When that happens, the essay looks like a grocery list.

Instead, read the essay question carefully and jot down a few ideas. Then choose the one that looks like the most fun to write about. Stick to that main theme throughout the essay. You don't have to list all your achievements -- that's what the rest of the application is for. Use the essay to help the admission officers get to know you as a person.

6. **Write and rewrite.** Don't try to write a masterpiece on your first try. It's not possible -- and all that pressure is likely to give you writer's block. For your first draft, write anything that comes to mind about your topic. Don't worry too much

about grammar or spelling. Just get it down on paper (or computer screen). Then let it "rest" for a few hours or a few days.

When you come back to the draft, look for ways to make it more focused and better written. Some people are "fat" writers: they write long, wordy first drafts that need to be shortened later. Others are "skinny" writers: they write short and simple first drafts and then need to add details or examples to "flesh out" the skeleton. Either way, don't be afraid to make major changes at this stage. Are there details that don't really relate to the topic? Cut them. Do you need another example? Put it in.

Here are two other things to try, suggested by college counselor Marti Phillips-Patrick.

1. Remove the introductory and concluding paragraphs, and then see if your essay seems stronger. These paragraphs are often the most likely to have unnecessary detail.
 2. Go through the essay and cut out every "very" and every "many." Words like these are vague, and your writing is often stronger without them.
7. **Get a second opinion.** Even best-selling novelists ask other people to read their manuscripts before they're sent to the publisher. When you've rewritten the essay to your satisfaction, find someone who can give you advice on how to make it even better. Choose a person you respect and who knows something about writing -- a favorite English teacher, a parent, a friend who writes for the school paper. Ask them to tell you what they like best about your essay -- and what you can do to improve it.

Criticism of your writing can be tough to hear, but try to listen with an open mind. You don't have to make every change suggested -- after all, it's your essay and not one else's -- but you should seriously consider each suggestion.

8. **Proofread.** Finally, you're ready to send your essay. Not so fast! Read it over one more time, looking for those little errors that can creep in as you write or edit. If you're using a computer, also run a spell check.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to catch minor typos -- you've read the essay so many times that you see what should be there rather than what is there. To make sure you catch everything, try reading your essay out loud or having someone else read it out loud to you. Another strategy is to read the essay backward, from the last sentence to the first. That makes it just unfamiliar enough for errors to stand out.

9. **Don't confuse applying online with sending e-mail.** Applying online is just as serious as applying "the old-fashioned way." It may feel like you're sending e-mail, but you're not.

"One thing I've often seen is that students who apply online submit sub-par essays," says Palmer Muntz, director of admission at Oregon Institute of Technology. He has found that essays submitted online tend to be much shorter than those submitted on paper. In addition, students often use e-mail language -- no capitalization, or abbreviations such as BTW or "thanx" -- which are not appropriate to a formal document. Make sure that you put as much effort into an online essay as you would if you were sending it snail mail.

10. **Don't expect too much from an essay.** The application essay is important, but it's not the only thing that is considered. "Can [the essay] make a difference in getting the 'thin versus thick' envelope? Absolutely," says Fuller. "But that is the exception rather than the rule."

That's because admission officers look at the whole package -- your academics, extracurricular activities, standardized tests, and other factors. A great essay rarely makes up for a weak academic record. On the other hand, a mediocre essay won't necessarily consign your application to the "deny" list. So make your essay as well-written as you can, but don't put so much pressure on yourself that the rest of the application fades in importance.

For more information about higher education in Maryland, contact the Maryland Higher Education Commission at 410-260-4500 or 1-800-974-0203.

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