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Guest Commentary

Keep College Essays Real

By Elise Epner

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It happened again. Just yesterday I had another one of those calls from a concerned parent of a student with whom I've been working on college applications. With an early decision deadline only weeks away, the parent had snuck a peak at her son's essay.

Although trying to hide her natural maternal anxiety and maybe hoping to be gentle with my feelings, she soon let on that she was worried about her kid's almost-completed college essay.

"His essay, well, it makes him sound, so much like himself," the parent finally confided to me.

He's done so many impressive things, this mom reminded me. Why did he pick one of a bazillion ordinary fights with his sister as the topic for his all-important college essay?

What about his community service in Nicaragua, building a school with his youth group this summer? An essay highlighting his academic success, in tough courses like chemistry and calculus, could showcase his smarts and love of learning. Wouldn't the details of his science research demonstrate his preparation for his intended pre-medical studies?

The truth is that college essays are most impressive

when students sound just like themselves. The oft-quoted remark by a former admissions dean, that "if an essay sounds like it was written by a 45-year-old attorney, it probably was" should be a warning to all of us aging and well-meaning parents.

Colleges are looking for real kids. That means kids who write about their frustrations during a summer science program, rather than pretending their research may be curing cancer. Real kids even describe actual mistakes, showing their regrets and growth from everyday living, rather than painting themselves as Fairfield County's Mother Theresa. Real kids write with words that you might actually overhear as they explain a wrong answer in a classroom or on the field when they tell their side of the story to a coach.

To be sure, not everything our kids do should be memorialized in a college essay. Plenty of topics and language choices get offensive real fast. What happens at the beach or in the woods late on a Friday night really should stay there. (Or, better yet, not happen at all). Most admissions officers, perhaps parents themselves, will not be impressed. College essays are not the place for risks.

Yes, real kids benefit from help brainstorming topics, crafting stories and revising essays just like real adults. Having an independent college counselor or other informed reader as a sounding board definitely can improve student success.

Students benefit from guidance and feedback about how their application will be perceived during the college admissions process. Just be sure the finished essay sounds like your child.

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