

Article

# Institutional Expectations and Students' Responses to the College Application Essay

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**Abstract:** This paper explores inequality along the path to college through an analysis of college admissions essays and institutional documents that shape admissions expectations in the United States. The research considers how successful applicants from two different universities and students who are the first in their families to go to college compared to those who are not, approach the college essay in relation to the presented institutional expectations. The sample consists of institutional materials from two universities, one a small private university and one a large public institution. Institutional materials also include documents from college preparatory agencies (such as Kaplan and Khan Academy). Thirty-five student essays were collected from the same two universities mentioned above. Through values analysis, a narrative analysis method, I ask how students with less exposure to the culture of college (taken for granted knowledge about college that is passed down from families) perform the college essay genre. Findings show that students with less exposure to the culture of college focus more on challenges and narrate less expression of their “true selves” in their college admissions essays. Findings can help stakeholders create a more equitable college admissions process that more clearly illuminates institutional expectations for students.

**Keywords:** college application essay; college admission; college access; first-generation students; values analysis

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, colleges and universities have made additional efforts toward diversifying their campuses (Stevens 2007; Steinberg 2003). With an increase in the importance of diversity and equity in access to education, universities have tried various approaches such as creating summer programs for low-income youth and removing the SAT from the required documents for application (Stevens 2007; Syverson 2007). Over time, there has also been an increase in the emphasis universities place on the college essay (Early and DeCosta 2011; Warren 2013). While the college essay is presented as a space where students can be themselves and show who they are to the admissions committee, it is still fraught with (often implicit) challenging expectations. In this article, the application process, and specifically the admissions essay, is considered in its role as a possible gatekeeper to college entry.

Individual outcomes in financial success upon completion of a college degree can vary, especially based on the amount of loans a student is required to take (Rothstein and Rouse 2011). Further research shows that education can work to help reduce class inequities (Lohfink and Paulsen 2005; Stephens et al. 2014), and data has shown that after college completion, graduates with different socio-economic backgrounds do not experience differences in earnings (Torche 2011). But many challenges still lie in the path to gaining college access, where underserved youth face disadvantages in accessing higher education. Underserved students are more likely to attend schools that are under-resourced, which means less opportunities for upper-level courses, access to quality instruction in Standard Academic English (SAE) writing, access to guidance counselors, and fewer resources for their schools

(Ball and Ellis 2008; Boyd et al. 2008; Early et al. 2010; Holding 2005; Kimura-Walsh et al. 2009; Sagan 2002; Villavicencio et al. 2013). In addition, low-income youth, who are often the first in their families to go to college, may be unable to afford college preparatory courses (Early and DeCosta 2011) and have families that are less familiar with the higher educational system (Dennis et al. 2005). Challenges also continue after college enrollment, where first-generation students, in particular, are less likely to complete their degrees (Lohfink and Paulsen 2005; Lombardi et al. 2012). Students' first-generation status is defined by parental educational attainment, where first-generation students are those who do not have a parent that completed college and earned a baccalaureate degree (Dennis et al. 2005; Pike and Kuh 2005; Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski 2007).

On the other hand, higher-income students attend high schools with relatively sufficient guidance staff and support programs, can afford preparatory courses, such as SAT preparation or personal essay consultation, and often have parents who understand and have had experience with the post-secondary education system (Early and DeCosta 2011; Kirkland and Hansen 2011; Warren 2013; Ball 2006). In many ways, higher-income students grow up socialized and prepared to go to college through their home, school, and extra-curricular endeavors. These students approach higher education through an awareness of the "culture of college". This refers to the taken-for-granted knowledge that middle and upper income families hold that can help guide their children toward a degree, such as ways of accessing financial aid and participating in extracurricular activities (Cabrera and Padilla 2004; Clauss-Ehlers and Wibrowski 2007). Students with greater cultural capital as it relates to the culture of college can access the required knowledge and information that can help them transition from high school to college. In this paper, first-generation status will be used as a proxy for students' familiarity with the culture of college. Even though many programs and agencies have become available to help guide underserved students access quality higher education institutions (Jack 2016; Stevens 2007), students' social class background, as measured through parental educational status, is still a factor in their familiarity of the culture of college.

Students' level of academic preparation and network of support contributes to how they understand the requirements of the college essay and their abilities to be a part of the academic discourse community. Differences in access relate to differences in how students interpret and approach the college application process and the college essay specifically. This research is rooted in cultural capital theory (Bourdieu 1986), where the access to resources one has determines their access to opportunities. This stems from Marxist theory on social reproduction, which considers the ways in which inequality is maintained generationally through families and specifically through labor, with the passing down of levels of skill and expertise (Katz 2001). Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory includes the social and financial resources one has access to through their network and emphasizes structural barriers, which ultimately determine the possibility of social mobility. The less exposure and familiarity students have with creative writing, college preparation, and social resources that can aid in the college process, the more difficulties they may face in approaching the college essay genre.

### *The College Essay*

The college essay genre has expectations and requirements that are often implicit and need to be learned (Early and DeCosta 2011; Paley 1996; Warren 2013). It is a high-stakes writing genre that expects students to write in a way that is different from most of the other writing they have encountered. Often, the college essay prompts ask a relatively straightforward question while simultaneously being loaded with underlying requests and expectations. For example, three of the Common Application prompts during the 2016–2017 admissions cycle asked about a failure, problem, or challenging idea with the underlying expectation that students would focus on how the failure, problem or challenge helped them grow and develop. Students are caught in a tricky position of attempting to understand what the essay is really asking of them while also opening up to an unknown audience (Paley 1996). For students who are less familiar with the culture of college, the subtleties of the college essay task may be masked by the overt essay prompt.

There is little research that examines the college essay specifically but a few studies have uncovered how some of the inherent inequalities of the college essay task present themselves. Warren (2013) conducted interviews with admissions counselors in order to see how the counselors would respond to and rate various student essays. In one essay prompt, students were asked to talk about an important person in their life. Some applicants spent their whole essay describing the great qualities and attributes of this important person, but from the counselors' reports, it becomes evident that they have other expectations for the prompt. The purpose of the essay was for the students to show who they are and how they have grown *through* the influence of the significant person (Warren 2013). Those students who only described the other person and did not connect that individual's qualities to their own growth did not complete the task properly, even though they did technically answer the essay prompt. As Warren (2013) states, "the prompt asked only for description of an important person and explanation of that importance, but raters expected an oblique argument in favor of the writer's admission" (p. 54). Students whose parents are familiar with the culture of college grow up with exposure to the expectations and discourses of higher education and can receive academic guidance, specifically during the application process. For those who have not grown up with an understanding of academic institutional systems, the nuances of this request can be lost.

A study conducted by Vidali (2007) shows how students who do understand the culture of college are able to grapple with (and perhaps challenge) the college essay genre. Essays by students who disclosed a disability were of interest because whether a student chooses to tell the admissions committee about their disability is a complicated decision to make, both personally and socially. Vidali (2007) found that a key motivation behind writing about disability came from an effort to stand out to the admissions committee. With an awareness that admissions counselors are overwhelmed by hundreds of applications that need to be read in a very short period of time, there is an imperative for writing an essay that can capture the counselor's attention (Vidali 2007; Steinberg 2003). In the case of the disability essays, students are presenting their disabilities in ways that can help them stand out (and in ways that can be seen as challenging cultural discourses around disability). The rhetorical (and admissions) strategies found in the essays by Vidali (2007) show students' understanding of the academic system and its expectations. While disability essays may highlight the students' vulnerabilities, those essays can also give the students a space to tell a unique and powerful story about themselves.

This research examines how students from different socioeconomic contexts navigate and work within and outside of structural and institutional expectations. How do students with varying levels of familiarity with the culture of college make sense of and follow the rules and expectations of the college essay? Ultimately, this paper explores if the college essay process reproduces inequality in access to college.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The current study considers the college essays that students produce in the context of the larger discourses shaping institutional norms and expectations of higher education. Stemming from cultural-historical activity theory, this research is grounded in an activity-meaning systems model (Daiute 2008; Engestrom et al. 1999), where interaction occurs between all social spaces and actors. With this in mind, the student essays need to be considered in the context of the higher education system within which they are situated. The current study samples admissions materials from college preparatory agencies (college prep) that provide essay guidance, admissions documents from two university websites, and the college essays of students from those two universities. IRB approval was obtained from the author's university before the start of data collection.

First, information specific to writing the college essay was collected from documents that college prep agencies provide for applicants. The agencies I selected, such as Kaplan, Princeton Review, and Khan Academy, were based on popular sources students in the sample said they used. The resources that are provided to applicants through college prep agencies attempt to demystify the application process. Second, admissions information was collected from the two universities' websites,

which were the site for data collection of the student essays. One university was a small, private, liberal arts school (private university) and the second was a large, public, urban university (public university). The private university was less selective, with a 55% acceptance rate, compared to a 39% acceptance rate at the public university for the 2015–2016 academic year. Alternatively, the private university has a 78% graduation rate, whereas the public university has a 52% graduation rate. The higher selectivity of the public university could make for a less strong comparison point with the private liberal arts institution. The private university does fare better in graduation rates. Table 1 displays a summary of the documents that were collected from the institutions. The admissions information was collected to capture the culture of the specific institutions the students in this sample were applying to. Both universities used the Common App for their application process, which meant that the students responded to the same essay prompts. The private university also asked a supplemental essay question, but these were not collected for the study.

**Table 1.** Institutional documents used in the study.

Document Genre	Number of Docs.
College Prep. Materials	10
University Website Admissions Materials	7
From Private U	3
From Public U	4

A total of 35 students participated in the study and submitted their college admissions essays ( $n = 17$  from the private university and  $n = 18$  from the public university). All participants were already enrolled at their universities and were recruited from psychology classrooms where they were given a link to complete the study in Qualtrics. There, students were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire and then upload a de-identified copy of their college essays. Students at the public university received “research credit”, a requirement for completing the psychology major, for their participation. At the private university, students received extra credit in their class for their participation. Students at both universities came from two admissions cycles. Demographics of the whole sample are presented in Table 2. It is important to note that of the private university sample, 12 of the 15 students identified as white. Given that class and race are often conflated in the US, the overwhelmingly white sample at the private university could speak to the cultural capital and privilege that may be handed down from families and networks. Additionally, only two of the 17 students that submitted essays from the private university were first-generation college students, while the public university sample consisted of 10 out of 18 students who were the first in their families to go to college. In this analysis, the essays of students at the two universities are considered, along with essays of students that are first-generation college students (first in their families to go to college) and those who are not the first in their families to go to college. While data on students’ generation status is not available for the public university, the gender and ethnic distribution of the sample is reflective of the institution. The sample from the private institution also reflects the university in terms of gender and ethnicity. The private university does provide first-generation status data, which shows that the sample slightly under-represents first-generation students. The university is made up of 19% first-generation students, compared to 11% in the sample. It would be beneficial to know the selectiveness and types of other colleges and universities that students applied to and where they may or may not have been admitted. The current study uses students’ generation status as a metric for socioeconomic status, along with access to college preparation as an innovative measure for access to sources of capital. More measures could be added to capture the full range of students’ family background, school setting, and access.

The essays themselves were relatively similar in length, where the average word count for the public university students was 575 words and 611 words for the private university students. The excerpts from student essays that are presented below have been slightly modified to preserve the students’ anonymity.

**Table 2.** Participant demographics by university.

		Public		Private	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	6	33	4	23
	Female	12	67	12	71
	Other	0	0	1	6
Ethnicity	White	5	28	12	71
	Asian	4	22	0	0
	Chinese	3	17	0	0
	Black	2	11	1	6
	Latino/a	1	5	1	6
	Other	3	17	3	17
High school	In-state	17	94	4	24
	Out-of-state	1	6	13	76
First-generation status	Yes	10	56	2	12
	No	8	44	15	88
College prep participation	Yes	13	72	12	71
	No	5	28	5	29

### 2.1. Analytical Framework

Stories, and in this case essays, are social in nature with culture and history influencing individuals' perspectives at any given moment (Bruner 1991, 2003). Within this framework, institutions, cultures, and individuals all co-construct and co-create meaning. People choose what it is they want to say and how to say it in relation to their goals and perceived audiences (Daiute 2014; Daiute et al. 2015). This relational approach to constructing narratives is nuanced as it applies to students' college essays. Students write their college essays with the admissions counselors in mind and with the goal of gaining college admission. However, the narrative choices students make with that audience and goal will differ based on the kinds of resources they are working with. When considered in the context of access to preparation for the culture of college, students who are applying with parents who have knowledge of the academic process may have access to more narrative tools. This does not mean that students with varying resources do not engage with and co-construct meaning through their essays as well. Considering cultural capital in relation to activity meaning systems design, students' opportunities to encounter and use varying resources allows for a diverse expression of values. In other words, narratives work as a way of making sense of the world one is in and developing through that sense-making and understanding (Daiute 2014).

Given the meaning-making aspect of narrating and the interacting stakeholders that are involved in the ultimate production of the college essay, the current research employed a values analysis approach to analyze the data. This unique approach is relevant for the college admissions process as it examines the guiding principles through which we operate in the world, which influence the way we understand, frame, and make sense of our experiences (Daiute 2014). This approach is based in dynamic narrating, where narrators are aware of and immersed in the norms and expectations of their culture (Daiute 2014). Through referencing and positioning, narrators choose which cultural and personal values to uphold or challenge in the stories (and essays) they choose to tell. This article explores whether and which of the values championed by the institutions are picked up and adapted into the students' essays.

## 2.2. Analysis Process

Each document was read a number of times to achieve a thorough understanding of the material and to begin to see the values that the stakeholders were conveying. The data itself generated the codebook, rather than using a manual created a priori to the analysis. All of the documents (the student essays and the institutional materials) were used to generate the codebook and were then coded in order to see where values may overlap and where they may be at odds between the genres. I discuss the values that the institutions present as strategies for understanding the expectations of the universities because the universities are ultimately the ones that hold the power in granting students' admission. However, the codebook was not solely generated from the university values.

The narratives were coded by t-units, thought units of independent or dominant clauses and the dependent clauses that go along with them (Daiute 2014; Hunt 1965). The author and a second coder worked on generating and reviewing the codebook and analyzed 25% of the dataset. We discussed any discrepancies and made modifications to the codebook in order to ensure clarity for the rest of the data analysis. Finally, upon completion of the coding, the t-units were counted by each value in order to assess the prevalence of the values across the different stakeholders. This helped illuminate which values received more or less emphasis by the students or the institutions and how different groups used their values to tell their story.

This article attempts to understand how these interactions play out through an important and complex structural gatekeeper, the college application essay. Individual and institutional interactions happen to varying degrees and with a range of understanding of the rules of the essay genre depending on the context from which students are approaching the essay. Because of this dynamic interplay between genre and product, analyzing the context along with the essay itself is important. One cannot be understood without the other. Interactions are gleaned from the narrative analysis of the essays, which explores the way these are produced based on different levels of preparation and access to information that students receive as they are applying to college.

## 3. Results

The values analysis revealed seven main values across the institutional documents and the student essays. These are: emphasizing personal development is important; facing and acknowledging challenges; finding solutions; audience awareness; presenting a "true self"; emotionally supportive relationships; and academic mentorship. Table 3 shows the emphasis on the seven major values among all institutional documents and all student essays.

**Table 3.** Percent (%) of t-units per major value emphasized across all stakeholders.

	Institutional Documents	Student Essays
Awareness of audience	41.78	7.69
Development	29.11	26.69
Presenting a true self	14.05	8.87
Finding solutions	4.95	11.66
Mentorship	4.16	5.32
Relationships	2.77	10.05
Facing and overcoming challenges	2.18	22.30

### 3.1. Institutional Documents

One of the main messages that the college preparatory documents convey to student applicants is the importance of being aware of the audience that will be reading their essays. The college prep documents remind students to use the essay space to tell the counselors something new about themselves, given that the admissions counselors have their full application package. "The college essay is your opportunity to show admissions officers who you are apart from your grades and test scores (and to distinguish yourself from the rest of a very talented applicant pool)", ("Popular College

Application Essay Topics (and How to Answer Them)”) and “while your test scores and GPA give you academic cred with college admissions officers, it’s your college application essay that really helps you stand out among other applicants. Unlike a list of numbers, it answers the question they really want to know—what makes you you?” (“Write an Amazing College Application Essay”).

Audience awareness also relates to the importance of presenting “a true self” in the essay, which emerged as another key value. The college prep materials emphasize that the admissions counselors expect to learn something special or meaningful about the students and ask the students to be honest. College preparatory documents reiterate that students “have a unique background, interests and personality. This is your chance to tell your story (or at least part of it). The best way to tell your story is to write a personal, thoughtful essay about something that has meaning for you. Be honest and genuine, and your unique qualities will shine through” (“Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay”).

Often, the college prep documents present students with somewhat direct and relatively short lists of what to do and what not to do in their application essays. For example, a posting from Kaplan’s website encourages students to:

**“DO** be concise, specific, personal, and honest. Surprise the reader, and take chances that go beyond the obvious.

**DO** use wit and imagination, but don’t try to be funny if that’s not your personality. Forcing humor can backfire and comes across as just plain silly.

**DO** proofread and then ask someone else to proofread for you. Careless mistakes will drive the admissions board crazy.

**DON’T** be cynical, trite, pretentious, or maudlin.

**DON’T** repeat what is included in other parts of the application by essentially writing out your resume. Go behind the details they already know.” (“Write an Amazing College Application Essay”).

Despite the succinctness of the points above, the actual information that is conveyed can be quite overwhelming for a student. Students are expected to address numerous directives simultaneously, any one of which can be challenging on its own. For example, just in the first point, the applicant is encouraged to do six things, which can be hard to do all at once. This becomes all the more challenging with the ultimate ask of the writer to be “honest”, a metric that is impossible to assess (and possibly difficult to achieve) in the college essay context. This is an example of the value of presenting a “true self” and illustrates the guidance students are provided with for how to “be themselves” in this genre require a certain level of comfort and familiarity with writing and with the application process overall. Students are expected to open themselves up for judgement to an anonymous audience in a writing genre they have limited experience with.

Further examples from the college prep industry can help illuminate the information that students are receiving. Khan Academy, a popular site where high school students seek guidance, suggests:

“Your actions can be small, but they should be loaded with meaning, i.e., that you’re taking a stand, making a decision, giving something up, or taking a risk. It can be simply deciding to get up in the morning or to smile. It just needs to represent that you’ve made a decision, change, or risk.” (“Avoiding Common Admissions Essay Mistakes”).

The college prep industry’s purpose is to help prepare students for college admission, and in this case specifically, for the genre of writing the college essay—how it should be written, what should and should not appear in the essay, who the students should be writing to and what that audience is expecting. In addition to the importance of honesty and being genuine (presenting a “true self”), the institutional documents greatly emphasize the importance for students to convey their personal growth and development. Often, these two values go hand in hand, as it is through stories of growth and development that students can do the work of showing who they are. This helps students

somewhat narrow down what their essays should be about. While they can write about anything, it would be most useful if they can show the admissions counselors that they are thoughtful and introspective and ready for continued growth in college. The college prep documents encourage the students to reflect on how they have grown through their experiences, how the experiences they have had have changed them or helped them become the people they are today. For example, Princeton Review pushes students to go further with their experiences:

“Anyone can write about how they won the big game or the summer they spent in Rome. When recalling these events, you need to give more than the play-by-play or itinerary. Describe what you learned from the experience and how it changed you.” (“Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay”).

It seems that though audience awareness is the primary message the institutional documents are conveying to the students, the content of the college essay should tell a story about a meaningful experience that impacted the student and/or shaped their growth and development into the person they are today.

### 3.2. *The Student Essays*

The students present many of the expected values expressed by the institutional documents. Despite the subtleties of the essay requirements, the students capture and convey they key elements of what a college essay should be. This can be primarily seen in the prevalence of development in the student essays. As I will demonstrate further below, students use the development value to do the work of some of the other institutional expectations as well—as a way of connecting with their audience and showing their “true selves” through their developmental experiences. Interesting differences do emerge between the values expressed by the institutions and those expressed in the student essays, and furthermore, differences emerge between the essays that students from different demographic backgrounds write.

As with the institutional documents, all student essays placed great emphasis on personal development (27% of the values elicited in all student essays). Students who understand what admission counselors are looking for—evidence of the students’ personality, maturity, and growth—can anchor their essays in personal moments of development and change. Development here was understood as experiences and stories students tell that show change in their lives and how they responded to that change. All of the student essays were written around an event, experience, or memory—whether it be immigrating to America, learning to play an instrument, or spending time volunteering. The topics of the essays at times overlapped, but the students used their stories as a way to show themselves to the admissions audience. Two excerpts of college essays can serve as guiding examples. The first essay by Penguin, a private university student who is not the first in her family to go to college, has been parsed down and describes a meaningful place.

“As I walk through the doorway of my grandparent’s kitchen and gaze upon the yellow paint of the surrounding walls, I am reminded of the best parts of my childhood as well as the blessings of my current circumstances. I gaze over at my Italian grandmother as she stands kneading bread while her marinara sauce bubbling on the stove exudes a smell that brings me pure joy. It is during these sensory moments when I feel sure that this place is my favorite place in the world. My grandparent’s kitchen is the place where I am perfectly content. It symbolizes the family that loves me. The kitchen reminds me of all the ups and downs my family has gone through . . . I was born into the most remarkable family I could possibly have hoped for and I am thankful everyday for that . . . This kitchen is a little piece of the world where everything can seem possible. I experience serenity, knowing that I am loved . . . My grandparent’s kitchen represents my past and many of the events that have transpired to make me who I am. As I walk back out of the door I see my future and the possibilities . . . I walk away imagining life’s possibilities and I smile thinking of the place I just left.” (Penguin, private university student, not first-generation.)



Penguin's essay displays a number of the values that students expressed. The space of the kitchen interweaves throughout the whole piece and moves the reader through a number of values that the student deems important, with a primary focus on the importance of relationships. Through describing her grandparents' kitchen, the student shows the audience how she sees herself and what she finds important. She uses the kitchen to share how family, love, and learning from those close to her have been key elements of her growing up, and how that growing up has happened in that same kitchen space. Her narrative moves the reader beyond just the meaningful place of the kitchen, where we get a sense she can keep returning back to and shows us who the student is outside of the kitchen as well—an optimist and forward thinker, but one that is grounded in the support of her family.

The next example tells a very different story, though it leads to a similar conclusion of the importance of family. This essay by Sabers, a public university and non-first generation student, discusses the hardships faced after his mother's death.

"In the eighth grade, my mother told me that she had become sick. No specifications, no elaboration. Just an anonymous illness. She presented this to my siblings and me as my dad stood in the living room corner, unable to make eye contact . . . My mother had been stricken with depression during my teenage years, but I hadn't realized then that, beginning with her death, I had inherited the brunt of her mental illness. My anxiety multiplied after she passed, and once I had been rejected from my school's mock trial team, my ego had popped (crashed, withered, deflated, disintegrated) and my energy, motivation, and attention had seemingly evaporated . . . Summoning my strength of character, I contacted Children's Services in spite of the potential risks and in hopes of gaining help . . . Through the support of my extended family, my siblings, my school, and social services, I had overcome the mental and emotional barriers my father had instilled and acquired medication and therapy, creating the foundation to continue and expand my education and fulfill the potential my mother wanted and believed in." (Sabers, public university student, not first-generation.)

Through Sabers' essay above, many obstacles he has faced over the years are expressed, connecting these to familial and personal struggles. The narrative revolves around his mother's illness, but that challenge works to show the importance of relationships for Sabers as well. We see him move from a very dark and challenging place to become someone who has been able to overcome many obstacles and be a mature and college-ready young student.

What appears in both essays exemplified above, and in the essays overall, is the importance students place in conveying the growth and development they have done over the years. For example, when Penguin writes "This kitchen is a little piece of the world where everything can seem possible," she expresses her own sense of confidence and optimism, as grounded in the imagery of the kitchen she has detailed. Both essays show that it is not only literally what the narratives are about, whether it is about a sick mother or a granddaughter entering a kitchen. The point of the story, the meaning of what the students want to share of themselves with the admissions officers, emerges in the combination of the values that organize the specific presentations they craft.

Interesting differences emerged in the expression of challenges, both between the institutional documents and the student essays and within the different student essays themselves. Challenges were very briefly mentioned by the institutional documents, where describing a challenge was suggested as a way for students to subsequently show their growth. The emphasis was again on the importance of describing the students' development, where the challenge can be an example that grounds the story. Overall, students did express challenges in their essays, but differences emerged between the public and private university and first-generation and non-first-generation students. Table 4 displays the values that were elicited among these student groups. These are calculated based on the number of times each value appeared in all of the student essays across each demographic variable.

**Table 4.** Values expressed among student groups.

	Development	Challenges	Solutions	Audience	“True Self”	Relationships	Mentorship
Private U	27.6	14.05	11.57	9.26	8.93	13.55	4.63
Public U	25.73	30.92	11.74	6.04	8.81	6.39	6.04
Not first-gen	26.14	19.88	11.81	8.43	9.52	11.93	4.1
First-gen	27.97	27.97	11.3	5.93	7.34	5.65	8.19

Almost 31% of the values elicited by public university students focused on challenges, more than double the emphasis that private university students placed on this value (14.05%). This is exemplified in the two essay excerpts above, where Penguin rooted the story in a comforting kitchen, whereas Sabers’ piece is set around the challenges of a sick mother and personal mental health. Similarly, first-generation students emphasized their challenges (27.97%) more than their non-first-generation peers (19.88%). These findings are interesting as they may directly speak to the knowledge and access that different students have to the culture of college. While there is a prompt from the Common App Essay Questions that specifically asks students to describe an obstacle they have faced, the prompt also asks students to discuss how it affected them and how they learned from it. Princeton Review, for example, urges students to respond to this prompt by:

“You’re trying to show colleges your best self, so it might seem counterintuitive to willingly acknowledge a time you struggled. But overcoming challenges demonstrates courage, grit, and perseverance! That’s why the last piece of this prompt is essential. The obstacle you write about can be large or small, but you must show the admissions committee how your perspective changed as a result.” (“Popular College Application Essay Topics (and How to Answer Them)”)

Two additional examples work to convey the ways in which students use challenges in their essays. The first, from Flame, a private university student who is non-first generation, briefly mentions the challenge they faced before moving on to the choices they made going forward.

“That day, I walked to band class and saw a sign on the door of the band room that said the name of the drum major for the school year. I was crestfallen because it was not me and it was my last chance. Feeling under-appreciated, I felt resentful towards my band conductor and at the former drum majors who made the decision. I listened as other students said they planned to quit band because they were not given leadership positions. Although I was disappointed, I refused to quit. I love the camaraderie of music groups and the opportunity to challenge myself with difficult music and the opportunities to solo even though I often feel nervous.” (Flame, private university student, not first-generation.)

The next example is from Jewel, a public university, first-generation student; he devotes more time in detailing the experienced challenges.

“Every day, after school, I come home to a lonely, abandoned house. It was always me and my older brother, whom dropped out of high school and leeches off my parents which really ticks me off. My daily routine would always be to finish work then spend the rest of my day watching television until my sister comes home from school to cook. Occasionally my brother would come out of his hole to get food from the fridge or bother me. He comes out randomly and starts teasing me. He starts to lecture me about how stupid I am, how our parents never loved me and how I was adopted. When words weren’t enough he starts to punch me and push me around and provoke me to take action. Every time I would fight back, he would overpower me and return to his hole.” (Jewel, public university student, first-generation.)

The examples above show how challenges are relevant to both of the students' essays. The findings do not imply that private university students did not experience hardships or that they did not write about them. The difference emerges in the weight and import the challenges carry within the whole narrative. In the examples, it appears that Flame uses the challenge simply to ground what comes next, whereas in Jewel's essay, the growth and development from the challenge remains unclear. Students' distinction and awareness of the ultimate purpose of the essay—to demonstrate their ultimate growth through overcoming the challenge—may vary based on their implicit understanding of the expectations of the college essay task. Therefore, students at the public university and those who are first-generation may be less familiar with the culture of college and subsequently spend more time immersed in describing the challenge itself, rather than quickly moving on to how they overcame that challenge. Despite addressing development and solutions rather equally, students who spend less time on challenges are able to make other genre-specific maneuvers (in response to the college essay task) in their essays, such as describing important relationships and presenting a "true self" more readily. If students opt to use the prompt that asks them to describe an obstacle, they may be lured into focusing the essay on the full details of the obstacle, rather than strategically using the obstacle as a vehicle to demonstrate their growth.

The expression of solutions contributes to the analysis of challenges, here we see no differences in presentation of solutions in the student essays. In other words, although the public university and first-generation students spend more time discussing challenges they have faced, they do not then go on to discuss the solutions to that challenge in greater detail.

When looking at the college essays, I argue that that the students are constantly attempting to address their audience and present their "true selves" in their pieces. These two values do not appear nearly as much in the essays themselves as they do in the institutional documents but that is because students are using other values to do the work of addressing their audience and presenting a "true self". The value of development is a major way in which students show that they are aware of the purpose of the essay and use stories of their growth and development as a way of conveying new and unique sides of themselves to the admissions counselors. Students address their audience in subtle ways—no one explicitly writes "Dear college counselors"—but through ways that nonetheless show that the students are responding to the college essay task and want to speak directly to the admissions counselors. For example, a student may present a "true self" by writing:

"I came back from this trip with a completely different view of the world, which was only strengthened when I started an internship in a psychological counselling center the week I returned home." (Logan, private university student, not first-generation.)

Here, Logan makes a point to be clear to the reader about the beliefs and goals they hold. Rather than simply illustrating the story of the trip, Logan explicitly presents the ways their thinking changed and the next steps that were taken to pursue this new frame of mind. Another example also demonstrates a students' presentation of their "true self".

"Evidently, there have been an assortment of aspects that have aided in the modification of my character. Some of the most momentous qualities that have shaped my individuality are my background, identity, interests, and talents. Observably, there are copious components that you obtain when striving to become the best version of yourself." (Blues, public university student, first-generation.)

This excerpt is even more explicit and comes at the end of Blues' essay. It works to summarize the collection of experiences the student wrote about and to tell the admissions counselors that they are striving to be their best self. Though these excerpts use differing strategies, such as reflecting on their beliefs, a specific experience, or addressing how they have grown, these students are each reaching out directly to the admissions audience to present themselves as worthwhile candidates.

Though small, some differences can be seen in the essays by students who address their audience and present their "true selves" more often. The differences between the private university and public

university students are minimal, especially with respect to the “true self” value, where the students are expressing this value at the same rate. The emphasis on audience awareness and presentation of a “true self” seem to be heightened among students that are not first-generation college students. Those who are not the first in their families to go to college address their audience more and narrate a “true self” more often than their first-generation peers.

Finally, there is an interesting distinction that occurs within student essays regarding the values of the importance of relationships and mentorship in the students’ lives. In the coding, relationships were considered to be emotional and personal connections that students described, most often with family members and close friends. Mentorship, on the other hand, was most often described through teachers, counselors, and other adults who supported the student in academic ways. In the college essays, first-generation students emphasized mentorship more than their non-first-generation peers (8.2% vs. 4.1% respectively). Conversely, the essays of students who were not the first to go to college described their personal relationships more frequently (11.9%) than their first-generation peers (5.7%). The patterns that emerge for the values of relationships and mentorships are interesting as they may tell us something about what role models or sources of support the students believe are important to highlight in their college essays. First-generation students, who may otherwise feel less familiar with the culture of college, may use mentor figures in their essays to demonstrate their connections or experiences with the college process. Students with parents who did go to college may feel more familiar with the culture of college, and subsequently, the college essay expectations, and may feel more liberty in the characters they can introduce in their essays, where an emotional and personal relationship can be just as valued as an academic mentorship.

#### 4. Discussion

At the core of this research is the importance of the interaction between structural forces and individual action. This study examines how institutions shape and convey their requirements, expectations, and values and how students engage with, respond to, and challenge those institutional discourses. In this case, the degree granting institutions where the students are applying ultimately hold great power as they determine whether the student will get in to college or not. This work also shows that the students incorporate their diverse backgrounds and experiences into their produced essays and engage with the discourses of the larger institutions. Through their navigation of challenges and expression of development, students make their own interpretations on how best to write the essay that represents them. Youth also engage with their audience in meaningful and conscious ways throughout the whole written document. Through the descriptions they use, the challenges they describe, and the development they portray, youth are constantly aware of the priorities of the admissions audience.

The notion of presenting one’s “true self” is especially fraught and is at the core of what makes responding to the college essay task so challenging. While college preparatory materials attempt to shed some light on the admissions process, in many ways, it remains unclear how exactly students can pull off this expectation of showing their “true self” within a genre they have most likely no experience writing in, and an audience that is intimidating at best. The Common App essay instructions state: “The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice” (“What’s (app)enning? 2015–2016 Essay Prompts”). Students are required to “be themselves” but to do so in specific, formal, and implicit ways. As Paley (1996) states, “the applicant’s autobiographical statement must also be “of the right kind” for the admissions committee to unlock the gate to the university” (p. 89). This acknowledges that the college essay genre is not actually asking for students to tell an ‘authentic’ personal story—rather, they must tell a story that is “of the right kind” for the admissions context. Any narrative that the students tell is framed in the relevant context, audience, and situation that they are responding to, but, students who are less familiar with the institutional context will have a harder time presenting “the right kind” of statement for the admissions counselors.

Through the values analysis, we see that students tell personal stories that convey development, express challenges, and discuss personal relationships. Interestingly, the challenges that students express differ among students at the two universities and among those who are first-generation and those who are not. Students who spent less time describing their challenges may be showing an implicit engagement and understanding of the culture of college and its norms and expectations. Students who are more familiar with the expectations of the genre know that it is more important for the admissions counselors to learn about the students' growth and development.

Further studies can expand on this project through additional analyses of the college essay. The quality of the student writing was not a question that was approached in this research. Typically, the mastering of SAE is considered to happen in high school and reflects a school's ability to properly prepare students in this language (Ball and Ellis 2008; Delpit 2006; Purcell-Gates et al. 2007). Considering students writing quality, especially if it is alongside information on their high schools, can further contribute to our understanding of how cultural capital is at play in essay writing. Given that an emphasis on proper writing can also silence minorities' voices (Gilyard 1991) as the values of their language tools are diminished in preference to SAE, ways in which students present their own voices in their writing can also be explored. Additionally, computer programs can be used to analyze many essays, with a focus on frequency of words or specific vocabulary that is used. For example, work by Pennebaker et al. (2014) analyzed the use of parts of speech (i.e., articles, prepositions, pronouns, adverbs, negations) in 25,000 essays and found links between students' application essays and subsequent grade performance in college.

Finally, while this study attempts to show that all students are doing interesting maneuvers and crafting thoughtful essays, further examination could consider students' demographic variables more deeply to see if other differences between students' essays emerge. There are many other cultural factors that can contribute to first-generation students' experiences and understandings around what is appropriate for their college essay. Expanding demographic data to include other universities that students applied to (and whether they were admitted) could help understand the values of the students' essays as they relate to other institutions.

First-generation college students who experience imposter syndrome may also approach their essay in ways that are reflective of their feelings of not being qualified (Jury et al. 2017). The access to cultural capital that students have extends beyond their first-generation status and additional research could measure the multiple sources of guidance students may use. From research done by Jack (2016), using distinctions such as privileged poor, for those students who attended elite high schools or participated in college access recruitment programs, can help delineate the opportunities students are working with. The participation in college preparatory work that was assessed in this study was an attempt to address additional resources students used. However, given that so many of the participants engaged in some form of college preparatory work, additional information would be useful for further analysis.

This study illuminates the values that higher education institutions present around the college essay process and how students engage with and respond to those expectations. By analyzing the content of the students' essays, we can see how they interpret this writing genre and how they attempt to make sense of and tackle this writing challenge. With these findings, we can work toward structuring programs that can aid students in applying to college, specifically by focusing on uncovering some of the more mystical expectations of the college essay audience. The resources that are currently available to students through college prep programs are useful and attempt to guide students in completing their applications, but college prep resources can be further adapted to explicitly address some of the mysteries around the culture of college that first-generation students, for example, may be unfamiliar with.

Ultimately, if universities are sincere in their desire to diversify their campuses, then changes to the college essay process need not lie only with the college prep agencies and the students themselves. Importantly, this study goes beyond an analysis of the essay as 'good' or 'bad' as written by more or less privileged students. The research shows that students are using their own approaches, based on

their stories, histories, and experiences, to address the college essay requirement. Universities hold great influence and responsibility in shaping the culture of college and its subsequent expectations. A widening of the traditional expectations of the college essay can allow more room for diverse student voices. Students who write essays that are rich in challenge are bringing their unique perspectives and experiences to the college essay genre and it is worth admissions counselors' consideration for widening the frame of the standard expectations. In this sense, the task of the college essay becomes less about students ascribing to a mold and more about educators expanding the possibilities that can fit into that mold.

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