

The New York Times

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MANCHELA TORRES *The New York Times*

November 2, 2013

Robots or Aliens as Parents? Colleges Gauge Applicants' Creativity

By **RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA**

As legions of high school seniors polish their college applications, plowing through predictable essay topics about their lives and goals, they might also run across something like this: "Tell us your favorite joke and try to explain the joke without ruining it."

A small but growing number of select colleges have turned to off-kilter questions like that one, part of this year's application to the University of Chicago, or like this one, from Brandeis University: "You are required to spend the next year of your life in either the past or the future. What year would you travel to and why?" This year's most-discussed question, from Tufts University, was about the meaning of "YOLO," an acronym for "you only live once," popularized by the rapper Drake.

And even those are tame compared with some choices from the last few years, like "If you could choose to be raised by robots, dinosaurs or aliens, who would you pick?" (Brandeis), or "What does Play-Doh have to do with Plato?" (Chicago).

For the colleges, such questions set them apart, though the applications invariably give a choice of subjects, including some that are closer to traditional. And at a time when some elite colleges worry that high school students are more likely to be high achievers than independent thinkers, oddball essay questions offer a way to determine which of the A-student, high-test-score, multi-extracurricular applicants can also show a spark of originality.

Most elite colleges use the Common Application, which contains fairly standard essay questions, and require their own supplemental applications, with more writing exercises.

"In the day of the Common App, there's such a sense of sameness in applying to the different schools, so we're trying to communicate what's distinctive about us and determine what's distinctive about our applicants," said Andrew Flagel, the senior vice president for students and enrollment at Brandeis.

A quirky essay subject can seem like a burden to students who, already stressed out by the application process, find that being diligent and brilliant is not enough — that colleges also want them to be whimsical and creative. Teenagers pepper social media with complaints about the questions, though they do not want to be interviewed, for fear of alienating their colleges of choice.

But others embrace the chance to express themselves, seeing it as a welcome relief from the ordinary applications.

“Usually, the essay prompts are boring,” said Sam Endicott, a high school senior from Edmond, Okla., who said he chose the University of Chicago’s topic on explaining a joke. “They don’t inspire a whole lot of creativity. I like the ones that allow more free rein to be a little different.”

Looking at the same application, Matt Bliss, a senior from Portage, Ind., seized on the invitation to make up his own topic. Recalling that one of the University of Chicago’s essay choices last year was “So where is Waldo, really?” he wrote his essay on “Can Waldo find himself?”

“I see it as a way to really show the college, ‘This is me,’ to establish your voice as a writer and show that you’re willing to take a risk,” he said.

Most students prefer — and are better off — avoiding the unusual questions, said John B. Boshoven, a counselor at Community High School in Ann Arbor, Mich.

“There are the kids who find it just invigorating, but they are not the majority,” he said. “The linear, sequential, mechanical kids of the world usually don’t want to play that game, no matter how smart they are.”

Counselors and private admission consultants say quirkiest questions are more of a challenge for students getting a late start and feeling the pressure of an application deadline — usually November for early admissions or January for regular admissions — and for overseas students.

“In the next few days, I’m going to be seeing stressed-out seniors trying to bang these things out and wondering why they’re bothering,” said Don McMillan, a consultant based in Boston. “And we’ve got kids from Brazil or Nicaragua who are going to have trouble even getting the joke, much less know how to answer it.”

The University of Chicago, well known for its off-the-wall questions, began asking them in the 1980s and invites current students and recent alumni to submit ideas. The results have

become more unorthodox over the years, producing applications in the last decade that have offered topics like “Destroy a question with your answer” and, in reference to the industrial-size products at some big-box retailers, “Write an essay somehow inspired by super-huge mustard.”

When asked whether the past question “How did you get caught?” exposed unsavory behavior or whether this year’s query about a joke elicited anything obscene, John W. Boyer, the dean of the undergraduate college, said, “As long as it doesn’t violate the criminal laws of the State of Illinois, it’s fine with me.”

In recent years, unusual questions have appeared on applications for other colleges, including Tufts, Brandeis, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Virginia, the University of Pennsylvania and Hamilton College (which once asked, “If you were reduced to living on a flat plane, what would be your greatest problems? Opportunities?”). But some of those institutions have reverted to more traditional essay topics, and the unorthodox approach remains limited to a relative handful of elite universities.

Dr. Boyer said the questions had helped build the University of Chicago’s identity; years after graduation, alumni often remember their essay topic.

“It requires a little bit of wit and more than a little bit of imagination,” he said. “We want to give students an opportunity to be unconventional in a pushing-the-boundary sense and see what they can do.”