



SUNDAYREVIEW | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Naked Confessions of the College-Bound

Oversharing in Admissions Essays

JUNE 14, 2014

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THE Yale applicant had terrific test scores. She had fantastic grades. As one of Yale's admissions officers, Michael Motto, leafed through her application, he found himself more and more impressed.

Then he got to her essay. As he remembers it, she mentioned a French teacher she greatly admired. She described their one-on-one conversation at the end of a school day. And then, this detail: During their talk, when an urge to go to the bathroom could no longer be denied, she decided not to interrupt the teacher or exit the room. She simply urinated on herself.

"Her point was that she was not going to pull herself away from an intellectually stimulating conversation just to meet a physical need," said Motto, who later left Yale and founded Apply High, a firm that guides students through the admissions process.

And his point in bringing her story up during a recent interview? The same as mine in passing it along:

When it comes to college admissions, our society has tumbled way, way too far down the rabbit hole, as I've observed before. And in the warped wonderland where we've landed, too many kids attach such a crazy degree of importance to getting into the most selective schools that they do stacy, desperate, disturbing things to stand out. The essay portion of their applications can be an especially jolting illustration of that.

It's an illustration of something else, too: a tendency toward runaway candor and uncensored revelation, especially about tribulations endured and hardships overcome, among kids who've grown up in the era of the overshare. The essay is where our admissions frenzy and our gratuitously confessional ethos meet, producing autobiographical sketches like another that Motto remembers reading at Yale, this one from a male student.

"He wrote about his genitalia, and how he was under-endowed," Motto told me. "He was going for something about masculinity and manhood, and how he had to get over certain things."

Motto, who was an assistant director of admissions at Yale from 2001 to 2003 and evaluated applications part time from 2007 to 2008, said that essays as shocking as those two were a small minority. Other people who have screened college applications or coached applicants through the admissions process echoed that assessment.

But they also noted, as he did, an impulse in many essay writers to tug readers into the most intimate corners of their lives and to use unfiltered frankness as a way to grab attention. In some of the essays that students begin to draft and some of the essays that they actually wind up submitting, there are accounts of eating disorders, sexual abuse, self-mutilation, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction. Sally Rubenstone, one of the authors of the "Panicked Parents' Guide to College Admissions," has called this "the Jerry Springer-ization of the college admissions essay," referring to the host of one of the TV talk shows best known for putting private melodrama on a public stage.

Stephen Friedfeld, one of the founders of AcceptU, an admissions consulting firm, told me that in the essay of a student he and his colleagues worked with this year, he encountered a disorder he'd never heard of before: cyclic vomiting syndrome. And Friedfeld and his colleagues huddled over the wisdom of the student's account of his struggle with it. Would it seem too gross? Too woe-is-me?

Their solution was to encourage the student to emphasize the medical education that he'd undertaken in trying to understand his ailment. They also recommended that he inch up to the topic and inject some disarming humor. Friedfeld said that the final essay began something like this: "In my Mom's car? Yep, I've done it there. As I'm waiting in line to eat my lunch in school? Yep, I've done it there." The "it" was left vague for a few sentences.

Right now, during the summer months between the junior and senior years of high school, many kids who'll be putting together their college applications in the fall start to sweat the sorts of essays they'll write. And as they contemplate potential topics, some of them go to highly emotional places.

"Being a little vulnerable can give great insight into your character," said Joie Jager-Hyman, a former admissions officer at Dartmouth College and the president of College Prep 360, which helps students assemble their applications. "I've had successful essays on topics like 'my father's alcoholism' or 'my parents got divorced because my dad is gay.'"

She'll shepherd students through four or more drafts. Michele Hernandez, another prominent admissions counselor, runs one or more sessions of an Application Boot Camp every summer in which roughly 25 to 30 kids will be tucked away for four days in a hotel to work with a team of about eight editors on what she told me were as many as 10 drafts of each of three to five different essays. The camp costs \$14,000 per student. That doesn't include travel to it, the hotel bill, breakfast or dinners, but it does include lunch and a range of guidance, both before and during the four days, on how students should fill out college applications and best showcase themselves.

Hernandez, Jager-Hyman and others in the booming admissions-counseling business try to steer students away from excessively and awkwardly naked testimonials, which can raise red flags about students' emotional stability and about their judgment.

"Admissions officers pay as much attention to students' choice of essay topic as they do to the details in their essays," Motto told me.

He added that admissions officers can sniff out an essay that a student got *too* much help on, and he told me a funny story about one student he counseled. He said that the boy's parents "came up with what they thought was the perfect college essay," which described the boy as the product of "an exceptionally difficult pregnancy, with many ups and downs, trips to the hospital, various doctor visits."

"The parents drafted a sketch of the essay and thought it was terrific," Motto said. Then they showed it to their son, "and he pointed out that everything mentioned happened before he was born." He ended up choosing a topic that spoke to his *post*-uterine life as a math lover who found a way to use those skills to help patients at a physical rehabilitation center.

THE blind spots and miscalculations that enter into the essay-writing process reflect the ferocious determination of parents and children to impress the gatekeepers at elite schools, which accept an ever smaller percentage of applicants. Students are convinced that they have to package themselves and communicate in entirely distinctive fashions.

"We argue that one of the ways to help your case is to show that you have a voice," said André Phillips, the senior associate director of recruitment and outreach at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "But in that effort, sometimes students cross the line. In trying to be provocative, sometimes students miss the point."

Motto said that one Yale applicant "actually described himself as one of the world's great Casanovas" and said that his amazing looks inspired envy in other boys and competition among girls vying for his affection.

In response to several essays about emotional trauma, Motto contacted the students' secondary schools to make sure that the applicants were O.K. He said he called the guidance counselor at the school of the girl who had urinated on herself, expressing concern about the essay and about whether she might be sabotaging her own application. He said that the counselor was aware of the essay and as baffled by it as Motto was.

The girl didn't get into Yale, Motto said. Neither did the boy who mulled his genitalia. And neither did Casanova. There were apparently limits to the reach of his legendary sexual magnetism, and the Gothic spires and ivy-covered walls of a certain campus in New Haven lay beyond them.



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A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 15, 2014, on page SR3 of the New York edition with the headline: Naked Confessions of the College-Bound.

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