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Standing Out From the Crowd

By **RON LIEBER**

“I wonder if Princeton should be poorer.”

If you're a high school senior trying to seduce the admissions officer reading your application essay, this may not strike you as the ideal opening line. But Shanti Kumar, a senior at the Bronx High School of Science, went ahead anyway when the university prompted her to react in writing to the idea of “Princeton in the nation's service and in the service of all nations.”

Back in January, when I [asked](#) high school seniors to send in college application essays about money, class, working and the economy, I wasn't sure what, if anything, would come in over the transom.

But 66 students submitted essays, and with the help of Harry Bauld, the author of “[On Writing the College Application Essay](#),” we've selected four to publish [in full online](#) and in part in this column. That allowed us to be slightly more selective than Princeton itself was last year.

What these four writers have in common is an appetite for risk. Not only did they talk openly about issues that are emotionally complex and often outright taboo, but they took brave and counterintuitive positions on class, national identity and the application process itself. For anyone looking to inspire their own children or grandchildren who are seeking to go to college in the fall of 2014, these four essays would be a good place to start.

Perhaps the most daring essay of all came from Julian Cranberg, a 17-year-old from Brookline, Mass. One of the first rules of the college admissions process is that you don't write about the college admissions process.

But Mr. Cranberg thumbed his nose at that convention, taking on the tremendous cost of the piles of mail schools send to potential students, and the waste that results from the effort. He figured that he received at least \$200 worth of pitches in the past year or so.

“Why, in an era of record-high [student loan](#) debt and unemployment, are colleges not reallocating these ludicrous funds to aid their own students instead of extending their arms far and wide to students they have never met?” he asked in the essay.

Antioch College seemed to think that was a perfectly reasonable question and accepted him, though he will attend Oberlin College instead, to which he did not submit the essay.

“It’s a bold move to critique the very institution he was applying to,” said Mr. Bauld, who also teaches English at Horace Mann School in New York City. “But here’s somebody who knows he can make it work with intelligence and humor.”

Indeed, Mr. Cranberg’s essay includes asides about applicants’ gullibility and the college that sent him a DHL “priority” envelope, noting inside that he was a priority to the college. “The humor here is not in the jokes,” Mr. Bauld added. “It originates in a critical habit of mind, and the kind of mind that is in this essay is going to play out extremely well in any class that he’s in.”

Admissions professionals often warn people not to think that they can write their way into the freshman class. “The essay is one document that, even in the best of circumstances, is written by an individual telling one story,” said Shawn Abbott, the assistant vice president for undergraduate admissions at New York University. “I don’t believe that any one writing sample should trump what they did over four years.”

Still, he acknowledged that his staff had been taken with the story told by Lyle Li, a 19-year-old Brooklyn resident who applied this year. He wrote about his family’s restaurant and his mother, an immigrant from China who once wanted to be a doctor and now works behind a cash register.

“When I visit my friends, I see the names of elite institutions adorning the living room walls,” wrote Mr. Li, a senior at Regis High School in Manhattan. “I am conscious that these framed diplomas are testaments to the hard work and accomplishments of my friends’ parents and siblings. Nevertheless, the sight of them was an irritating reminder of the disparity between our households. I was not the upper-middle-class kid on Park Avenue. Truth be told, I am just some kid from Brooklyn. Instead of diplomas and accolades, my parents’ room emits a smell from the restaurant uniforms they wear seven days a week, all year round.”

Mr. Abbott said that N.Y.U. received plenty of essays about the immigrant experience. So Mr. Li risked writing one of many stories about long odds and hard work in an unfamiliar, unforgiving place.

But he did not fall into that trap and will be attending N.Y.U. this fall. “His essay brought his family’s circumstance and background into Technicolor,” Mr. Abbott said. “He paints a very vivid picture of what life is really like in his home. I think he’s proud of his accomplishments and work ethic, but there’s also a humility each day when he takes off his preppy blue blazer in front of his mom.”

The essay by Ana Castro, an 18-year-old senior at the Doane Stuart School in Rensselaer, N.Y., is about not quite arriving, in spite of having been born in the United States. And her essay for Hamilton College, which she will attend in the fall, centers on her desire to serve in the Peace Corps. It opens with a joke about her hating clowns and leeches and tells a sad story of a visit to the Dominican Republic, where her father refused to let her play with the destitute boy next door. “My heart broke, not because I was now stuck eating plantains by myself in the stinging sun, but because that boy experienced a level of poor I never knew.”

Then she makes a startling statement that stopped both me and Mr. Bauld as we were reading it for the first time. “I have never seen the United States as my country,” Ms. Castro wrote. “I have never felt total patriotism to any country. I do not instantly think of staying here to help ‘my home,’ because I do not consider the United States my home. The Earth is ‘my home.’ ”

To Monica Inzer, Hamilton’s dean of admission and financial aid, bold declarations like this one are a strong sign of authenticity if nothing else. “Lots of essays have been doctored or written by other people,” she said. “You know that a parent didn’t write this. I don’t know how I know, but I do.”

Mr. Bauld knows how he knows. “There’s always an attempt in some of these college admissions factories to smooth out a student’s edges,” he said. “But what I loved about this piece is that there is no attempt to smooth out anything.”

As for Ms. Kumar, the 18-year-old Princeton applicant, her essay wasn’t so much smooth as it was slick, gliding effortlessly from her breakfast table to the manicured campus of Princeton to the “occidental bubble” of her school classroom. There’s a detour onto the city bus and then a quick trip to India before coming back to the “towering turrets” of New Jersey again.

Nevertheless, Princeton rejected her, and when I approached the university to find out if it had anything to do with her essay, it cited its policy of not commenting on any applicants or admissions decisions. I told its spokesman, Martin Mbugua, that other schools had commented on their own applicants once the students gave them permission, but he was unmoved.

Ms. Kumar suggested that her grades might not have been quite high enough, but Mr. Bauld contended that Princeton should have been swayed by her words.

“One of the things that makes this essay is her tone,” he said. “It could have been, ‘Princeton should be poorer,’ but she opens it as an inquiry. What she does is that she listens very carefully to what you have assigned her to do, and as a response to that, she says, ‘Well, let me ask you this!’ ”

Next week, Ms. Kumar will take the stage as Marty in the Bronx Science production of “Grease,” and she’ll collect her diploma on June 21. In the fall, she’ll attend Cornell, for which she wrote no essays about the university’s level of affluence.

To Mr. Bauld, that’s Princeton’s loss. “She is that person who is always going to give an interesting answer, even to the most boring question,” he said. “That’s my confidence in reading it, and I’d want that person in my class as a teacher.”

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