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Two, Three Essays? More Can Mean Less

By ERIC HOOVER

DURING a staff retreat last winter, Boston College's admissions officers decided something had to change. Although the college was receiving more applications each year, increasingly larger shares of admitted students were choosing to go elsewhere. Between 2004 and 2011, the college's yield — the proportion of accepted students who enroll — had declined from 32 percent to 23 percent. Some applicants, says John L. Mahoney, director of undergraduate admissions, "probably weren't very serious about us all along."

His solution: Ask students to do more. [Boston College](#) added a 400-word essay to its [application requirements](#). "Tell us about a time you had all of the facts but missed the meaning," one prompt says. Another invokes St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the college's Jesuit order, and invites students to reflect on their plans to "serve others."

Results were dramatic. This year, applications decreased by 26 percent. Though the yield is not yet known, Mr. Mahoney suspects that the new requirement deterred frivolous applicants as well as weaker ones (grades and test scores increased slightly).

Boston College's strategy cuts against the grain of recruitment trends. In the hunt for more applicants, many colleges have trimmed their requirements, making applications easier to complete — quickly. And in an age of texting and instant messaging, some admissions deans think asking teenagers to come up with a slew of colorful responses is passé.

After all, the [Common Application](#) has changed the equation. Most selective colleges use the standardized online admissions form, which allows students to apply to any of 488 participating colleges. To complete the form, applicants must write a short essay. In an overhaul for the new admissions cycle, students will get more [room to write](#) (up to 650 words) and prompts that nudge them more toward personal reflection. Only about a quarter of the Common Application's member colleges require additional writing.

For years, [Skidmore College](#) included one or more short-answer questions on its supplement to the Common Application. Last year's applicants had to respond to three prompts. One was: "Please share an example of an instance when you feel creative thought really did matter." The answers were supposed to give Skidmore insights into

applicants, says Mary Lou Bates, dean of admissions and financial aid. Yet some students and college counselors complained that the questions were too onerous. “We heard that our questions were the hardest,” she says. “And someone called them ‘the worst.’”

Ms. Bates has now concluded that the additional writing was not adding much to the evaluations, and the Common App essay is sufficient. “The answers felt very generic,” she says. So Skidmore removed the extra writing for students applying for the fall. After a few years of application declines, Skidmore saw a big jump this winter. The college received 8,200 applications, up from 5,700 last year. And more students (81 percent versus 75 percent) completed the application once they started it, a rise Ms. Bates attributes directly to the streamlined supplement.

The results may have as much to do with the ease of technology as with laziness. At the 11th hour, with anxious students looking for a few more colleges to apply to, those that don’t require additional writing look more appealing than those that do. “With the Common Application,” says Matthew J. DeGreeff, director of college counseling at the Middlesex School, in Concord, Mass., “you can drop 10 apps with a keystroke on Dec. 31.”

Though some students relish the opportunity to write about themselves, many view the requirement as a chore. So says Jay D. Bass, director of college counseling services at [Thomas S. Wootton High School](#), in Rockville, Md. “Most juniors and seniors are not great writers,” he says. “Trying to figure out what colleges want to hear is stressful.”

Mr. Bass has wondered about the downside to supplemental essays. Additional requirements, he suggests, may deter low-income, first-generation applicants from applying to a particular college.

“For kids who do not have access to resources, or a parent who can sit down and help them with this,” he says, “does it impact their ability to meet what they think the college is looking for?”

Gregory W. Roberts has thought about that concern, but he says additional writing gives students more chances to make an impression. Mr. Roberts is dean of admissions at the University of Virginia, which requires two essays of about 250 words on its supplement in addition to the Common Application essay. “Asking for two short answers seems appropriate and reasonable,” he says. “Writing in a different format can give you a sense of different types of skills.” Admissions officers are looking not only at what students write, he says, but how they express themselves.

Applicants to U.Va.’s College of Arts and Sciences must describe a work of art, music, science, mathematics or literature that “surprised, unsettled or challenged” them; applicants to the schools of architecture, engineering and nursing are asked to explain their interest in those programs. All applicants must also choose one of four other

prompts, including, “Discuss something you secretly like but pretend not to, or vice versa.”

Mr. Roberts recalls an essay written by an applicant from a poor family, who described her father coming home from the coal mines, his face covered in soot. In her essay, the student described why she had not participated in extracurricular activities — she had worked part-time jobs to help support her parents.

A memorable essay, Mr. Roberts says, “tells me someone knows how to write, and knows who he or she is,” and can help an applicant with middle-of-the-road test scores stand out.

Plenty of submissions fall short, however. “It’s shocking, the lack of effort we see in some essays,” he says. Yes, from time to time his staff comes across an essay that seems to have been repurposed (they know what’s being asked out there, and even a response to the quirkiest prompt can get broad after the first paragraph). He says he doesn’t really mind.

Of the four new topics presented by Boston College, the one about service to others has proved the most popular among applicants. Some responses have moved officials; the ones in which applicants recite their achievements and list their professional ambitions, not so much. “I don’t think everyone’s fully grasping the questions,” Mr. Mahoney says.

The requirement has some drawbacks. Previously, admissions officers read five applications an hour, but now they’re lucky to get through four, Mr. Mahoney says. Yet he believes the additional writing sample has helped his staff make better decisions.

“We’re trying to hear the student’s voice,” he says. And they know what they’ve heard came from applicants who were willing to type an extra 400 words.

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