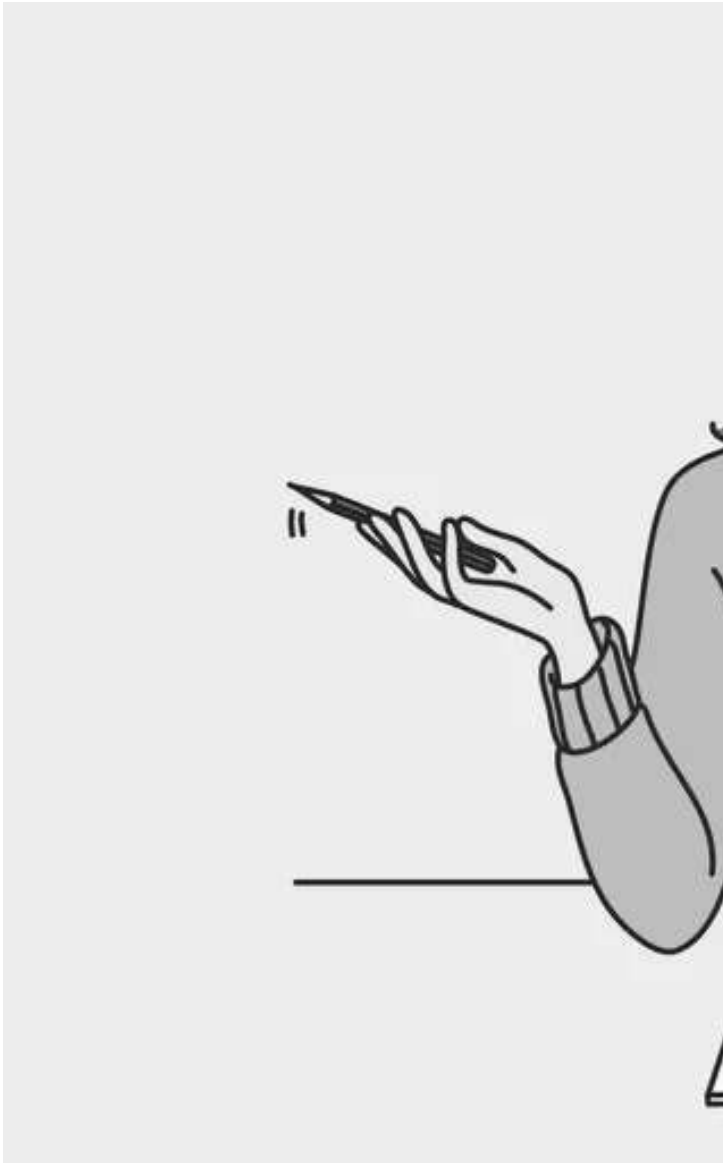


The rise of the confessional college essay

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Every spring, rising high school seniors work on their college admissions essays. As an essay adviser who has worked with 800-plus applicants, I have witnessed a sea change in their approach to the personal statement, and the impact it can have on acceptance into elite schools.

In the wake of COVID-19, the ongoing teen mental health crisis, the trend toward “test-optional” admissions and the Supreme Court’s gutting of affirmative action, applicants are opening up more about their feelings in the essays as a way to differentiate themselves from candidates with similar profiles.

Last year, independent of each other, two of my highest-achieving applicants (a girl from the South, and a shy boy from the Northeast) pitched the same essay idea about how their dad’s extramarital affair impacted them. This idea was brave, mature and deeply personal, which I applauded.

In 2012 when I started my business, STEM kids wrote about their robotics team or about watching an orthopedic surgeon swap out a knee. I often suggested more intimate and personal stories, but applicants from science, technology, engineering and math tracks were reticent about being vulnerable — so I didn’t push what was scary or unfamiliar to them. Plus, they were regularly getting accepted to Ivy League schools, so I stopped trying to fix what wasn’t broken.

Those two stories of infidelity were tough to hear. In one, the girl blurted out to her family what her father had done and how she had suppressed the memory. Her essay was about how art therapy saved her, and how her nonprofit provides free mental health services for struggling kids. In the other essay, the boy heard his parents fighting, learned what had happened and wrote about how amid the family turmoil, his dad suggested they build a backyard deck together — a metaphor for rebuilding their relationship.

With the recent upheaval in admissions, colleges have seized on the opportunity to accept applicants they previously might not have. Suddenly, it got easier for me to cajole my kids to be more vulnerable in their essays. After a whole lot of listening (like with a good shrink), these kids started sharing their innermost thoughts, writing powerful essays.

A girl from Louisiana wrote about her insecurity around being tall and thin, and how a bodybuilding class helped her appreciate her body.

A quiet, awkward boy from Michigan wrote about being stuck on a three-hour van ride with nine rambunctious preteen girls and how they succeeded in drawing him out, helping him become a new version of himself.

There was a young woman from Minnesota who umpired girls' softball who described how she fought and won to hold onto her authority and self-esteem while the male, 30-year-old coaches ridiculed her.

There was the strong, determined pastor's daughter who saw that God and religion came with conditions, and how she found, away from the church, a sense of community and belonging in other areas of her life.

There was an only child from New Jersey who wrote about refereeing his parents' disagreements, and how being a master mediator impacted his academics and extracurriculars.

These kids are typically more comfortable writing code than writing about their feelings. But they desperately want to change the perception of the nerdy robotics cliché. They are increasingly more open and self-reflective while living with uncertainty, mental health issues and climate change. And as if this is not enough, they are also going through the most stressful thing they have ever attempted — applying to college.

By engaging these kids in the right way, I have watched them become more comfortable unburdening themselves in their personal statements. The stories they share are more likely to address issues and feelings they once ignored. And colleges are looking for this.

The two essays about infidelity shared many of the same emotions — relief, satisfaction and a feeling of accomplishment. Both kids were accepted to Ivy League schools.

Parents tell me they worry about their kids as they venture to college and beyond. But I do not worry about them in the least. Beyond their grades, scores and academic pursuits, teenagers have much to say about their lives in reflective and thought-provoking admissions essays that are making a difference and getting them accepted.

Robert Schwartz is based in Brooklyn, NY and is president of yourbestcollegeessay.com.

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