



The
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College Essay Preparation in High School

At this time, there are no states that mandate high schools to offer college application essay preparation. Most college application essay preparation takes place informally in Advanced Placement and college-preparatory classes.¹ Instead of a general curriculum that includes explicit college essay preparation, it is up to the schools to determine what level of college essay preparation students will receive. This report will focus on efforts set forth by schools to further students' application essay writing skills both in Vermont and in other states, as well as the challenges posed to students while writing their college essays.

Vermont

The VLRS consulted University of Vermont's Admissions Office and inquired as to whether they had heard of any Vermont schools that required college application essay preparation, or whether any schools offered application essay specific courses. Of the schools contacted, none specifically offered a class in college application essays, and most did not have a formal essay class, however there were some notable efforts.

The Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School in Townshend, Vermont requires all seniors to write personal essays. Linda Rood, an English teacher at Leland and Gray, stated that Advanced Placement, or "AP," English students are required to read "On Writing the College Application Essay" by Harry Bauld during the summer before their senior year. She also stated that these AP seniors must write one essay per week for five to six weeks, and also complete a workshop in class. While these essays are not always the exact essay a student may send into the school, this process often helps the students get ideas on what to write. Rood stated that other non-AP senior students also complete similar essay writing programs, and that it does help a great deal in the college application process.²

¹ Jessica Singer Early and Meredith DeCosta-Smith, "Closing Opportunity Gaps," *Educational Leadership* 68 (2010), <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov10/vol68/num03/Demystifying-College.aspx>.

² Linda Rood, English Teacher, Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School, Townshend, Vermont, April 25, 2011.

High Schools in Other States

This VLRS team was unable to locate specific high schools that mandated or actually contained college essay preparation as a requirement in their curriculum. We found that several high schools' websites contain lists of resources for students to use in their endeavors. For example, the Homestead High School in Cupertino, CA has a resource page for college admissions. One of the subsections is called "College Essay Preparation" and contains links to several webpages that give tips for writing a good college essay. The website can be accessed here: http://www.hhs.fuhisd.org/cms/page_view?d=x&piid=&vpid=1234018621907.

Our team also found evidence of some extra-curricular college preparatory programs offered by some high schools. The Immaculate High School in Danbury, CT offers summer courses, one of which is a college essay preparation class that is offered to incoming juniors.³ Another is a program offered through the Chaminade College Preparatory School in Saint Louis, Missouri. Students can enroll in a one week summer course focused on college essays for \$200.⁴

Beth Wisner, the Director of University of Vermont Admissions, stated that she did not know of any out of state schools that specifically required college essay preparation as part of their official curriculum. She did state, however, that often junior and senior English classes will cover the topic as part of their regular class. According to Wisner, any college essay preparation that a student has is not in the form of a specific class that will show up on a high school transcript.⁵

Problems Developing Writing Skills

In the *Journal of College Admission*, Sam Patterson, an award winning private essay tutor, notes that even high school students who are competent in the classroom at analyzing an author's work "suffer from an ignorance of reflective writing."⁶ This argument is also reinforced by Sarah McGinty, a former professor at Harvard University and an author of numerous college application essay books, when she insists that the "separated voice of objective reflection is neither the daily practice nor academic habit of high school students."⁷

As a result of the daunting prospect of writing college essays many students will not apply to colleges that require essays."⁸ Sarah McGinty notes that 25% of students in under-counseled

³ Immaculate High School, "Wednesday Envelope: May 12, 2010," accessed April 12, 2011, http://www.immaculatehs.org/cf_enotify/view.cfm?n=945.

⁴ Chaminade College Preparatory School, "Summer Academy for CCP Students," accessed April 12, 2011, http://www.chaminade-stl.org/summer_academy/summer_academy_for_ccp_students/index.aspx.

⁵ Beth Wisner, Director of Admissions, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, April 16, 2011.

⁶ Sam Patterson, "How Much is Too Much? Ethical and Effective Response to the Application Essay," *Journal of College Admission* 1898 (2005): 2.

⁷ Sarah M. McGinty, "In the space provided: the college application essay," *English Journal*, 84 (1995): 70-72.

⁸ Patterson, "How Much is too Much," 2.

settings did not complete at least one college application because of a required essay.⁹ In another study, Karen S. Paley, a professor at Rhode Island College, argues that students are uncomfortable with revealing themselves in their essays, which is an essential component to the essay as many admissions offices encourage the applicants to expose themselves.¹⁰ Paley further notes that “the ‘invitation’ to share a personal narrative with an invoked audience that has decision-making power over them is, in reality, a mandate that subjugates and perhaps even humiliates the student.”¹¹

Conclusion

Currently, there are no states that require a college application essay as part of their general high school curriculum. Instead, essay preparation in high school is left to high schools and more specifically, English classes, and can be exclusively for Advanced Placement students. Also, writing skills that are developed in high school often are not applicable to the complex nature of the college essay, and students are in need of extra guidance.

Prepared by Allyson Perleoni, Alexander Rosenblatt, and Max McNamara in response to a request from Senator Ginny Lyons, under the supervision of graduate student Kate Fournier and Professor Anthony Gierzynski on June 14, 2011.

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Disclaimer: This report has been compiled by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in the report does not reflect the official policy of the University of Vermont.

⁹ Sarah M. McGinty, “Issues of access: the college application essay,” *Journal of College Admission* 177 (2002): 26-30.

¹⁰ Karen S. Paley, “The College Application Essay: A Rhetorical Paradox,” *Assessing Writing* (1994): 3-4.

¹¹ Karen S. Paley, “The College Application Essay,” 3.