sandbox **Keeping an eye on kids and parents.**

The New College Try

Helping low-income students write their application essays.

By Ann Hulbert

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"I don't want to write about obstacles and overcoming them," Assita announced with a toss of her head as she and the four other high-school seniors on "Writing Team Ann" settled into the classroom designated for my group. It was a muggy June weekend, and, like the kids, I had come from Washington, D.C., to Morgan State University, a historically black campus in Baltimore. The occasion was a four-day summer workshop, one of 30 held across the country by College Summit, a nonprofit organization founded 13 years ago to help low-income students tackle a competitive college admissions process that intimidates everybody these days. Assita was the first to speak up as we embarked on the especially agonizing ordeal I was there to oversee as a volunteer "writing coach": producing "the personal essay" for the Common Application used by a wide array of colleges.

The personal statement, a legacy of an old collegiate tradition of impressionistic character (and class) assessment, is back in the spotlight after decades in the shadow of the SAT. The total number of colleges that rate applicants' essays of "considerable importance" in admissions decisions rose from slightly more than 10 percent in 1993 to almost 25 percent in 2003. Nearly 40 percent of highly selective schools (where fewer than half of the applicants get in) say they now seriously weigh students' words as well as their scores. At the hypercompetitive top of the heap, personal statements just might turn out to be the decisive factor, college counselors tell kids: 250 to 500 words in which a student may prove he or she isn't "like many others," the dreaded verdict that consigns even qualified applications to the large reject pile. No wonder essay-crafting services and even summer camps, as the *Wall Street Journal* recently reported, are catching on among an affluent clientele. Everyone's trying to come up with what College Summit calls the "bomb essay." But it just might be that this is one contest in which privileged students don't have the edge. If anyone stands to gain from the renewed emphasis on that qualitative *je ne sais quoi* in applicants, it may well be poor kids who come from understaffed schools but have real stories to tell.

Behind the new focus on personal testimony lies the unsettling fact that America's turn-of-the-millennium meritocracy seems to be functioning rather like an aristocracy. Harvard's president, Lawrence Summers, sounded the alarm more than a year ago: Well-prepped kids from educated families are swamping elite colleges, while economically disadvantaged kids are losing out in the pursuit of degrees. (According to the *Economist*'s recent survey of America, "a student from the top income quarter is six times more likely to get a BA than someone from the bottom quarter.") For admissions officers desperate both to winnow among the super-credentialed and to delve for underserved students, the personal essay is designed to elicit an applicant's distinctive voice and expose his or her particular passion or perspective. What the Common Application asks, in essence, is: Who or what (ideally dramatic something) has shaped you, and how?

Unfortunately, for high performers who have been busy grooming their résumés since grade school, the essay has a way of turning into yet another self-packaging exercise for attentive parents, or hired experts, to facilitate. (There's a reason students' SAT essays are available online for perusal by college admissions boards: so they can be compared with highly buffed application submissions.) It's at the other end of the spectrum that the personal statement has the potential to serve as a genuine epiphany—not just for admissions officers, but for the students who write them. At Morgan State, we were providing an essay-prep service, but I discovered it was the opposite of packaging: Unwrapping was more like it, in a

laborious process well-suited to revealing signs of tenacity and teachability that might otherwise go unnoticed in low-achieving students.

Where cosseted kids (and their parents) pull strings and open wallets to arrange essay-worthy experiences, kids like Assita tend to need prodding to share dilemmas right there on their doorsteps. Mostly from fraying families as well as ill-equipped schools, they're afraid that their woes—having a father in prison or a mother on crack, or getting slashed at school—are evidence of weakness, which was the last thing anybody on my team wanted to betray. They're startled to find writing coaches hanging on their words—and then taken aback to see, when they finish, that they have a story that isn't just grist for what I overheard someone call a "pity party" but that actually shows their grit.

For just about all of these kids, the essay-writing process itself is an eye-opening challenge that, at least as College Summit conducts its workshops, reveals aptitudes that can otherwise be hard to discern. What colleges need to know about students who are emerging with low GPAs and test scores from unimpressive schools isn't just the state of their literacy skills. Schools also need indications that these are students who aren't easily daunted, much as admissions officers want to know whether privileged applicants reared on extracurricular opportunities have managed to cultivate some resilience and self-reliance along the way. But the College Summit cohort, most of whom are the first in their families to go to college, also need a chance to show precisely what advantaged kids wear on their sleeves: signs that they're open to adult influence. Morgan State offered a weekend for students to reveal themselves as tough kids who could nonetheless let down their defenses and muster the energy to make the most of an occasion (an all too rare one) when grown-ups are hovering, ready to help them.

Or rather, hound them. College Summit coaches are urged to push, and push, for concrete details that can make a real narrative—sentences that show, rather than tell. But the "ethical guidelines" prohibit us from polishing the prose. (It's OK to ask questions—Does that verb or tense sound quite right?—but the kids are supposed to do the fixing.) With only half a day remaining, I confess I was discouraged and almost wished my team seemed a little more worried. But just as our time was running out, even my most obstinate student, whose professed fatigue left her staring hour after hour at the blank page, finally squeezed out a vivid paragraph. I could tell from his giddy mood that Marc, a focused athlete who had buckled right down to write about memories of his felon father, had never expected to be so buoyed up at the end.

Team Ann gathered behind the podium at the closing banquet of the College Summit workshop, jittery at the prospect of me reading snippets of essays in which most of them had revealed more than they were sure they'd meant to. But we had the ideal introducer in brash Assita (who, after a frustrating false start, ended up writing about how yet another death in her family had made her feel resolute about a controversial decision). I took it as a good omen for the hard college road ahead of these students—80 percent of whom end up enrolling—when she flounced to the mike and made it sound as though our labors had been a breeze.

Ann Hulbert is the author of Raising America: Experts, Parents, and a Century of Advice About Children.

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