

Essay

Purpose Makes a Great College Application

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When I was a high school senior applying to college, I wanted a higher learning experience where the opportunities were so vast, the campus so big, I could theoretically meet someone new every day and still not know everyone.

That was my defining characteristic for choosing a college. Of course, it was the late 1980s and times were different, but kids were not. Teenagers have narrow perspectives as they've existed until that moment in a bona fide bubble of parental protection and limited geography. That's what it is to be a teenager — you can dream big because someone else is responsible for building your foundation.

In Kim Lifton's Oct. 18 article, "[Share Your Voice: What do colleges really want in an admission essay?](#)" we learn that college admissions counselors want a piece of the applicant's personality, that the application essay should be reflective, show the applicant's character. My eldest son is a high school junior eager to look at colleges and dream of the future he might build. He's ready to go.

But is he ready to write this kind of essay?

I have been a writer all my life, and I'd like to think that when I was ready to apply to college, I somehow had the magical talent to write an application essay that dazzled admissions counselors. I don't remember what I wrote about, but I'm going to guess it wasn't that fantastic. After all, I was 17. My life experiences were limited; I was sheltered.

Today, I could write the kind of reflective essay that colleges are looking for, but I'm 47 years old, the author of eight published books and thousands of articles, and I've taught college writing classes for more than 20 years. I've lived enough to know what it means to reflect. My command of language is more sophisticated than when I was a teen. My love of learning runs deep.

Today's schools are not focused on instilling in our children a sense of wonder and joy when it comes to learning. They aren't teaching them the skills they need to compete on this level. Even for my children, who attend great schools and are high-achieving students, high school English is about regurgitation, learning to take standardized tests, writing resumes and cover letters and, ultimately, churning out a sample college application essay.

This is not learning for learning's sake. When did high school become just a funnel for college? When did we give in to the pressure to do more, be more, achieve more, instead of embracing learning as a journey to the deeper self, a way to know our place in the world?

Some of the high school teachers guiding our children toward college cannot spell and don't understand how to eliminate passive voice or write vividly to paint a picture with words. How can they lead our children toward success?

As the system leaves our children ill-equipped to meet their next challenge, parents end up paying hundreds or thousands of dollars to college coaches to help them game the system so their kid gets an opportunity that he or she might not be able to obtain on their own. I've helped several wonderful high school students on their essays, but I feel uneasy about it because I wonder if I am contributing to a misguided way of life.

Our society moves at such a fast pace that I'm not sure many of us have had the time to ponder how we got here or if this is where we want to stay. I encourage my children to consider taking a gap year after high school to explore, wander, ponder and develop their interests so when they finally hit college, they are ready for it. I don't know if any of them will take me up on this, but I hope so.

One of the fundamental themes of Judaism is *simchah*, or joy. The word appears 12 times in *Deuteronomy* because it lies at the heart of the vision of life for the Jewish people in the land of Israel: to serve God with joy.

We have lost the joy of learning, of pursuit, of adventure. Today, we are frozen in an endless competition for more, better, things and achievements. Life is short. Our material possessions or framed degrees will not follow us to the hereafter.

What we must cultivate, more than a sense of self-reflection, is a sense of purpose to drive everything we do. Why apply to college? Why this college instead of that one? Why do anything? Without purpose, there is no meaning.

All the problems teens face today (and adults, too) — anxiety and depression, eating disorders and binge drinking, to name a few — stem from a vacuum of meaning and connection. We're busier than ever, we have the illusion of connection thanks to 24/7 social media, but we are lonely; and this aimless pursuit for the best college simply compounds that emptiness.

If we could guide our college-bound teens in one direction only, I'd suggest that we guide them toward finding purpose. A big-brand college is not the only place to carve out a meaningful path. There are 3,000 universities and colleges in this country, so there is a place for everyone.

If you know what matters to you, if you're driven by purpose and meaning, you might have a better chance of landing where you belong than continuing to struggle in a place where you don't. Perhaps we can guide our children toward that pursuit, which might make a great college essay, too.



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