The College Application Essay Mediating Inequality Along the Path to Higher Education

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THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY MEDIATING INEQUALITY ALONG THE PATH TO HIGHER EDUCATION

by

RALITSA TODOROVA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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The College Application Essay Mediating Inequality Along the Path to Higher Education

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

The College Application Essay Mediating Inequality Along the Path to Higher Education

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Advisor: Dr. Colette Daiute

This dissertation examines inequality and access in the college admissions process and, in particular, via the college application essay. With a research design and analysis sampling documents from multiple stakeholders in the college admissions process, this research considers how students with diverse histories of preparation for higher education interact with actors relevant to the admissions process in their college admissions essays. This research project ultimately asks how the college essay process (its importance, the preparation, and ultimate writing) mediates inequality in admission to higher education. Essays were collected from students at one large public university and one small private liberal arts university. These were analyzed alongside university admissions requirements and college preparatory agency information. Analyses showed that all student essays interacted with the institutional expectations and presented an awareness of the need to write for their audience. Students addressed their audience more and less directly, by conveying challenges they overcame and describing the personal growth that came from those challenges. Differences in essays by students across public and private universities emerged in how the students approached challenges and development. For example, first-generation college students and those who did not participate in college preparatory activities devoted more words to describing the challenge itself, whereas their non-first-generation peers and those that were exposed to college preparatory work devoted more attention to exploring the development of their passions. This
study sheds light on how students use the college essay process to negotiate their understanding of higher education and their potential place in it, in relation to numerous messages they have received. That said, barriers to higher education access remain. The findings can help researchers consider innovative designs for studying inequality and for considering practices of educators, policy makers, and families to better understand the college process.
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Chapter One

Background Introduction and Overview of the Project

A college education is becoming increasingly important for upward mobility in contemporary US society, but access to college is also becoming increasingly more difficult, especially for low-income and underserved youth (Abelev, 2009; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). In this dissertation research project, I examine the college essay as a mediator of the college access and admissions process. I focus on how students with different histories of preparation for higher education use their college essays to connect their goals with those of the institutional resources available to them. This theory-based methodological approach offers a different way of examining academic institutional structures and barriers for low-income and minority youth who do not grow up fully informed about the academic process (Bahl, 2015; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Daiute, 2014; Stephens et al., 2014).

The framework for this research centers around the college essay process – how the requirements and expectations are communicated, how students prepare, and ultimately, the produced final essay. The implemented methodology considers the complex interactions between various stakeholders that each have a role in the college essay process. An analysis of institutional documents captures the messages that institutions convey to students who are approaching the college application process. I examined the norms and expectations that higher education institutions, college preparatory agencies (such as Kaplan), and college application forms (such as the Common Application (Common App), an application system widely used by many colleges and universities in the US) set for potential candidates. I also analyzed a sample of student application essays from two different universities. This integrative approach considers the institutional process in the pathway to college, revealing difference in access, a promising
intervention approach, and the students’ own engagement with the task based on varying degrees of preparation.

The stakeholder documents show diverse expressions, which are captured in a design accounting for the college preparation system and with two kinds of narrative analysis. Comparisons across the student essays consider the diverse backgrounds that students come from, focusing on the universities they are attending, their access to college preparatory help, and their parents’ educational attainment. The essays students write speak to the varying norms and values presented by the institutions, whether directly or indirectly. Norms that are addressed range from the importance of college as a space for growth and development to the ability of students to create an essay with a conscious awareness of their college admissions audience. Each of these stakeholders interact with one another in the meanings and performances they present.

This study examines the role the college essay may play as a gatekeeper (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011; Paley, 1996) from multiple lenses, including developmental psychology, analysis of social inequalities, narrative analysis, educational research, and compositional research. I explore the college essay as a high-stakes genre that plays out in an unequal playing field, where access to college is unequal for different groups. I expect to see that youth with a better understanding of the “culture of college” (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004), who have had support and resources in navigating the requirements of the college process, will be better prepared to speak to institutional expectations in their essays. Previous research shows that underserved youth are less prepared to complete their college applications (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011; Kirkland & Hansen, 2011; Warren, 2013) but I still expect to find that those students are writing essays that engage with the institutional discourses and expectations of the college essay and
address the admissions audience. This analysis considers the college essay as students use it to interpret the college admissions culture in relation to their own goals to attend college.

This study explores how students are or are not addressing the institutional expectations as stated or implied in the application process and acknowledges that all students are agentive and active in the choices they make and the stories they tell. The main research question guiding this dissertation asks how the college essay process (its importance, the preparation, and ultimate writing) mediates inequality in admission to higher education. My project considers how institutions convey their requirements, expectations, and values and how students engage with, respond to, and challenge those institutional discourses. How do students make sense of and follow the rules of the college essay?

This first chapter gives an overview of the importance of a college degree before outlining the theoretical foundations that ground this dissertation research. The chapter then zooms out to consider the role of college broadly and discusses challenges to equity and access along the path to college. Next, the role of the college essay itself is discussed, considering the role it may play in admission and the implicit and explicit expectations it carries. Finally, the aims and research questions guiding this project are reinforced at the conclusion of the chapter.

The Importance of a College Degree

Given the contemporary US economy, a college degree is becoming increasingly necessary for success in obtaining middle-class wages and is considered a class equalizer (Abelev, 2009; Stephens et al., 2014; Torche, 2011). A college experience is also important for students socially, as a place to grow and build ties (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). But challenges exist along the road to college that make applying, enrolling, and ultimately graduating, difficult. Research consistently shows that children living in poverty are
more likely to drop out of high school, attend low-performing schools, live in single-parent homes, and be less likely to have a parent with a college education (Abelev, 2009; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004).

Higher-income youth attend high schools with relatively sufficient guidance staff and support programs (Ball, 2006; Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011), can afford preparatory courses, such as SAT preparation or personal essay consultation, and often have parents who understand and have had experience with the post-secondary education system (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011; Kirkland & Hansen, 2011; Warren, 2013). In many ways, these students grow up socialized and prepared to go to college through their home, school, and extra-curricular endeavors. Cabrera and Padilla (2004) term this awareness as the and understanding of the “culture of college”, which relates to the taken-for-granted knowledge that middle and upper income families hold that can help guide their children toward a higher degree. These differences in access relate to differences in how students understand and approach the college application process, and specifically the college essay process. Students’ level of academic preparation and network of support contributes to how they approach and understand the requirements of the college essay and their abilities to be a part of the academic discourse community. The less exposure and familiarity students have with creative writing, college preparation, and social resources that can aid in the college process, the more difficulties they may face in approaching the college essay genre.

Students from lower income backgrounds face many educational and academic challenges that can make the road to college difficult, such as attending schools that are under-resourced, lacking access to necessary materials, and having fewer qualified teachers (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, & Wycoff, 2008; Villavicencio, Bhattacharya, & Guidry, 2013). In
addition, low-income youth may be unable to afford college preparatory courses (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011) and have families that are less familiar with the higher educational system (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Stevens, 2007). While education can help one rise out of poverty (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Stephens et al., 2014), and research shows that there is virtually no difference in earnings among students who complete college (Torche, 2011), inequality makes it more difficult for underserved youth to gain access.

**Theoretical Foundations**

Beginning with cultural-historical activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which considers the reciprocal development of individuals and society, access to college can be understood through an activity-meaning systems model as well (Daiute, 2008; Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999). Within this system, there is an incredible amount of interaction occurring among all of the actors. Individuals are situated in and shaped by society, but by their existence there, the society changes and adapts. Institutions, higher education organizations, and the students themselves are all relevant and involved in the interaction between individual, culture, and society as each influence each other. The goal of this dissertation research is to examine how this mutual interaction impacts college admissions across socioeconomic levels through a narrative analysis of a wide range of relevant stakeholder documents (institutional scripts, college preparatory materials, student essays).

This project is grounded in the claim that human development is an interaction among social and individual actors creating meaning in language and activity (Bamberg, 2004; Daiute, 2014; Daiute, Todorova, & Kovacs-Cerovic, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). The college admissions process is thus a relational interaction among social structures (histories of participation and access), institutions (education systems of various kinds and trajectories), cultural groups (socio-
economic, ethnic, and others who have engaged with language in different ways), and individuals (with their own histories and backgrounds). The activity-meaning design is relevant to the narrative theory present in this study, as the diverse cultural tools that youth express and engage with are examined in the sampled documents. This theoretical concept and the relational research design that is grounded in activity-meaning systems design is based on the idea that discourses are variously shared across and within shareholders and the communities of practice they are a part of.

Stories, and in this case essays, are social in nature with culture and history influencing individuals’ perspectives at any given moment (Bruner, 1991, 2003). Within this framework, institutions, cultures, and individuals co-construct and co-create meaning. Through narrative, these cultural representations can be examined in ways that highlight the complexities that come into play from the multiple actors and stakeholders that are involved. People choose what it is they want to say and how to say it in relation to their goals and perceived audiences (Daiute, 2014; Daiute et al., 2015). In other words, narratives work as a way of making sense of the world one is in and developing through that sense-making and understanding (Daiute, 2014).

This relational approach to constructing narratives is nuanced as it applies to students’ college essays. The narrative choices students make will differ based on the kinds of resources they are working with. When considered in the context of access to preparation for the culture of college, students who are applying with parents who have knowledge of the academic process may have access to more narrative tools. As I will demonstrate further, youth with access to academic resources are better able to navigate college expectations and have more tools that they can use to interact with the institutional system. This does not mean that students with varying resources do not engage with and co-construct meaning through their essays as well. In this way,
we can think about cultural resources more broadly, beginning in childhood and certainly through adolescence, as multiple and varied (Daiute & Nelson, 1997; Daiute, 2016), thereby providing resources within developmental systems. Considering cultural capital in relation to activity meaning systems design, students’ opportunities to play with and use varying resources allows for a diverse expression of values.

All agents are active agents and all youth are dynamically co-constructing meaning (Daiute, 2014). Students who may be disenfranchised by the educational system are still agentive in the face of and in relation to that system. Even though they are coming from different social positions, all students are in conversation with the institutional discourse and this conversation is not one-sided. Narratives are a place “where world- and person-making take place simultaneously” (Bamberg, 2004).

The college essay process is the scene of the examination of this research, considering the steps along the way that lead to college admissions. The research design examines the essay itself, as expressed by the students, in relation to the higher education systems involved in the pathway to college access (along with additional actors that may aid along the way). I examine the college essay as a mediator of college access, where the multiple and varied resources that influence the produced essay are considered through a mutually interactive socio-relational approach.

Cultural capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986) is one frame through which access to college and the role of the college essay process can be considered. This theory considers social networks and the cultural tools and resources those networks provide as key in facilitating access to activities and opportunities. One’s cultural capital is based on relationships with individuals who can contribute a certain amount of resources – the more resources available in one’s social
network, the more capital they have. As described by Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is slow to accumulate but persists once it has been accrued. One cannot gain capital overnight. Rather, it is embedded in family structures and networks (Bourdieu, 1986).

Coleman (1988) is also frequently cited in education research for his approach to the role of social capital specifically, which considers the capital one has based on the relationships they have. Coleman (1988) cites the importance of parents transmitting norms, mannerisms, and ways of social control on to their children. Through this transmission, children are able to adapt and succeed in the social world, but also the academic world specifically (Perna, 2006). Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory takes a stronger stance than Coleman’s social capital theory by emphasizing structural barriers. In this, social class differences are reproduced through institutions, which ultimately determine the possibility of social mobility. Through this inequality in access to cultural resources, Bourdieu’s theory posits that the dominant class uses their capital to maintain their power (Perna, 2006).

Successful completion of the college essay process is grounded in the larger discussion of access and opportunity for entering college. Cultural capital theory is relevant to understanding youth development but is also important to be considered alongside other theories as well. If we can begin to break down the concept of cultural capital away from a have-or-do-not-have model, we can consider capital as an even wider network of access to varying forms of resources. Some resources may be more appropriate for certain tasks, such as reaching college, but that does not mean that other forms of capital that students have are unimportant or irrelevant. Rather than focusing on cultural capital as something one has or does not have, this study deems all resources meaningful and is interested in how students use the available resources that they have.
Available Resources for Applying to College and Navigating the Admissions Process

High school classrooms are one place where college preparation can occur. Schools with limited resources are typically unable to offer extracurricular courses, such as creative writing, or include college essay preparation in their English curriculum (Early, DeCosta-Smith, & Valdespino, 2010; Holding, 2005; Sagan, 2002). Underserved schools also have a harder time offering higher-level courses, such as AP classes, which work both to help the student prepare for college and show the college that the student is pursuing more rigorous work. These courses are disproportionately less available to minority students, where 7% of Black and 14% of Latino students have taken at least one AP exam compared to 61% of their White peers (Villavicencio et al., 2013). Applebee and Langer (2011) found that across all high schools, little writing is done overall. Teachers reported that over the course of a nine-week grading period, they assign on average 5.5 writing assignments that are one page or less and only 1.1 assignments that were over three pages long (Applebee & Langer, 2011). This shows how little writing of any kind students are actually doing in their classrooms.

When it comes to the college admissions process, there are gaps in where students can go to get information about applying to colleges and on financial aid (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Kim & Schneider, 2005). Bell et al. (2009) found that many of the 9th and 11th grade high school students that they interviewed used family members as their primary source of information about college. As the students got older (the 11th graders), more of them also began relying on information provided from their high schools. With families as the primary resource, students coming from low-income homes and whose parents have not gone to college, are at a disadvantage in the amount of knowledge they can gather. While all parents absolutely encourage their children to go to college, those who have not gone to college themselves often
lack experience that they can relay to their children (Bell et al., 2009). Kim and Schneider (2005) also found that parents’ educational attainment and income not only influence whether a child goes to college or not, but also whether that child ends up at a selective college. This emphasizes the inter-generational connection where family background works as an advantage for those who come from families with more resources.

While parents may provide social support and encouragement for their children to pursue post-secondary education (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2008), studies show that students whose parents are less familiar with higher education systems benefit more from outside support during the application process than their peers who know more about the university system from home (Bell et al., 2009; Kim & Schneider, 2005). Therefore, materials high schools provide become of even greater importance, as they may be some of the only college information students are receiving. Low-resourced schools, which are often the schools that low-income youth attend, are less able to fill these gaps and provide new and adequate information. Findings from Bell et al. (2009) show that as students get older, they begin to seek information from additional channels. But their findings also highlight a lack of schools’ direct ability to disperse college information to all of its students, especially if there is not a designated college counselor on staff, dedicated solely to college guidance.

High school guidance offices, whether they have specific college counselors or general guidance counselors, can direct students through the college application process. High schools with greater resources are often able to devote more of those resources toward guidance counselors. The hope is that schools can be a space for students to access information about the college application process, including guidelines, possible universities, and financial aid information. But this level of guidance can often be stretched thin at low-resourced schools,
where access to counselors is limited and counselor to student ratios are very high (Bahl, 2015; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008). Typically, it is the students who are already academically advanced who receive any available college counseling, as they are the ones deemed to have a better chance of going to college (Bahl, 2015). This means that students who have limited resources for college guidance outside of school are often also the ones who do not receive the necessary guidance and information within their schools.

High school counselors further play an important role in the application process for students because they are the ones who write letters of recommendation to the colleges. But counselors who have high caseloads naturally have difficulty giving extensive attention to each of their students. This means that when the time comes to write a recommendation, counselors are somewhat limited to the amount of information they can provide. It is the students who are able to receive the most individualized attention (especially those who are considered high achieving and are pushed toward college) that get the benefit of a stronger recommendation letter. In addition, once colleges are making admissions decisions, elite universities reach out to high school counselors that they have relationships with to gain additional information about applicants who may be on the border between an acceptance and a rejection (Steinberg, 2003; Stevens, 2007). This gives students at better performing high schools additional leverage. Not only do those students have access to academic and mentoring opportunities, they have an advantage in having counselors who know them, who know important people at post-secondary institutions, and can speak to their students’ strengths at vital moments.

**The College Essay Requirements**

The college essay genre has expectations and requirements that are often implicit and need to be learned. It is a high-stakes writing genre that expects students to write in a way that is
different from most of the other writing they have done and also carries the weight of influencing their admission to college. Students who grow up with access to the culture of college are exposed to college expectations and can pick up the nuances and expectations of the college essay genre almost implicitly, or at least with minimal guidance from parents, who are often aware of the genre expectations themselves. Students write their college essay in response to a handful of essay prompts. Often times, the prompts ask a relatively straightforward question but are simultaneously loaded with underlying requests and expectations. For example, three of the prompts displayed below ask about a failure, problem, or challenging idea. But as will become evident over the course of the analysis, the focus of the student essay should not be on the failure or problem. Rather, the failure should be mentioned and subsequently used to convey the students’ personal growth and development. Students are caught in a tricky position of attempting to understand what the essay is really asking of them while also opening up to an unknown audience (Paley, 1996).

The five Common Application essay prompts that were used during the 2015-2016 admission cycle are below. These have stayed fairly consistent over the past few years. For example, some changes were made during this most recent application cycle (2017-2018) where two new prompts were added and slight changes were made to wording (for example, in #3, “What prompted you to act?” was changed to “What prompted your thinking?” (Common Application, 2018)).

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

4. Describe a problem you’ve solved or a problem you’d like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma—anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family. (Common Application, 2015)

In addition to the Common Application, some universities also include their own supplemental essay questions as part of the application. The private university in this sample does require its own additional essay, but I have been unable to access the prompts from previous years. The essays that were sampled for this research were based on the Common App essay, not the supplemental essay.

With these prompts in mind, students are responding to specific norms and standards that have been created and are maintained by the institutional networks that they are trying to access. But students are not powerless (Daiute et al., 2015). They actively engage with the institutional scripts and compose narratives that ‘fit’, but also convey their own meaning and importance. As exemplified by disability essays (Vidali, 2007), students are using the college essay genre.
The study conducted by Vidali (2007) examined the college essays of students who disclosed a disability. These essays are unique in that whether a student chooses to tell the admissions committee about their disability is a complicated decision to make, both personally and socially. Vidali (2007) found that a key motivation behind writing about disability came from an effort to stand out to the admissions committee. With an awareness that admissions counselors are overwhelmed by hundreds of applications that need to be read in a very short period of time, there is an imperative for writing an essay that can capture the counselor’s attention (Steinberg, 2003; Vidali, 2007). In the case of the disability essays, students are performing their disabilities in ways that can help them stand out (and in ways that can be seen as challenging cultural discourses around disability). These rhetorical (and admissions) strategies found in the essays by Vidali (2007) show students’ understanding of the academic system and its expectations. While disability essays may highlight student vulnerabilities, they can also work in ways that are advantageous by giving a space for students to tell a unique and powerful story about themselves. In this case, students take their disabilities and shape their stories to serve the purpose of gaining college admission. This is not manipulative on part of the students (Vidali, 2007). Rather, the students are active in their use of the genre as a tool.

In a study conducted by Warren (2013), admissions counselors discussed their perspectives on various student application essays. In response to one prompt, which asked the student to talk about an important person in their life, some writers spent their whole essay describing the admirable attributes of that important person. But from speaking to the counselors, Warren (2013) found that the prompt is actually asking something else (and the counselors are expecting something else). Rather, through the description of someone else, students need to discuss how they themselves have grown and changed. Those students who only talk about the
significant person and do not connect that individual to their own growth did not complete the task properly, though they did technically answer the essay prompt. As Warren (2013) states, “the prompt asked only for description of an important person and explanation of that importance, but raters expected an oblique argument in favor of the writer’s admission” (p. 54). Students whose parents are familiar with the culture of college grow up with exposure to the expectations and discourses of higher education and can be guided by their parents (or others in their networks) specifically during the application process. For those who have not grown up with an understanding of academic institutional systems, the nuances of this request can be lost.

Further, college essays ask students to “be themselves” (Paley, 1996). The Common App (2015) essay states: “The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice.” The concept of voice is complicated and becomes a key feature in how students are expected to present themselves in their essays. Some scholars have argued that voice can carry rhetorical power and individual truth and sincerity while others claim that culture influences everything we produce, diminishing the possibility of a ‘true’ voice (Elbow, 2007). The messiness of voice becomes relevant in the student essays as it is an integral part of the framing of the essay task. Students are required to “be themselves” but to do so in specific, formal, and implicit ways. As Paley (1996) states, “the applicant's autobiographical statement must also be “of the right kind” for the admissions committee to unlock the gate to the university” (p. 89). This acknowledges that the college essay genre is not actually asking for students to tell an ‘authentic’ personal story – rather, they must tell a story that is “of the right kind” for the admissions context. Narrative theory posits that there is no singular, ‘authentic’ story (Bamberg, 2006; Daiute, 2011; Daiute & Kreniske, 2016). Instead, the stories that are told occur in a social relational process. Any narrative that the
students tell are framed in the relevant context, audience, and situation. The relevance of voice reemerges again as well, as the value of voice can be located in audience awareness (Elbow, 2012). My dissertation work explores how students then navigate the task of presenting their best-selves and addressing the purpose of the essay to their admissions audience.

**The College Essay Genre**

Considering the college essay as a cultural tool for understanding the complexities and inequalities of college admissions is useful as it is a narrative tool that allows students to show a side of themselves that is not based on grade point average (GPA) and test scores. Just like other narratives, the essay that is produced is grounded in cultural and social scripts that the student works with and/or challenges. People tell stories, which have an element of performance, with scripts that influence each narrative based on the context that the narrator and the audience are in (Stanley & Billig, 2004). Narratives, too, are situated in context (Bamberg, 2004; Daiute, 2010), where the setting and the interpreted audience one is speaking to matters. This is relevant, regardless of whether one’s understanding of the expectations is ‘right’ or not.

Students applying to college consequently write essays that are performative and that are also very mindful of the expectations and requirements of their audience – the college counselors who will make admissions decisions. This performative nature is very relevant because it emphasizes the importance of the audience (Bamberg, 1997). In the context of the college essay specifically, the student essays are bound by the expectations and assumptions students have about their audience, regardless of whether their expectations and assumptions are accurate. This means that the student essays are not simply representations of an event or of something that happened and what the narrator took away from that event (Bamberg, 1997; Daiute, 2010).
Rather, narrating is a process that unfolds in interaction with situations and audiences (Daiute & Kreniske, 2016).

Through students’ engagement with social narratives, youth deliberately construct meaning in the essays they craft. At its core, narrative can be used for many pragmatic functions (Oliveira, 1999), and in this case, the function is the important task of getting into college. With that in mind, the college essay genre speaks to Labov and Waletzky’s (1967/1997) notion that the purpose of narrating is to show the teller in a positive light and echoes Oliveira’s (1999) discussion of the use of self-aggrandizement in stories. The students engaging with the college essay process are primarily focused on presenting themselves as viable college candidates. The high-stakes aspect of the college essay task makes the production of the students’ essays a complicated dance between understanding and appealing to institutional expectations while performing the college essay genre in ways that can read as authentically convincing.

The college essay then becomes a tool in access to higher education. The way youth make sense of and understand the expectations and requirements of the essay genre will shape the essay they produce. In its relational nature, youth also use the college essay as a tool in their own way. While many of the expectations of the college admissions essay are tied to social norms and values that exist structurally through larger institutional systems, individuals have agency in shaping their narratives in terms of their own purposes and goals. In the case of the college essay, students use this cultural tool to gain admission to higher education. What this dissertation project will focus on is the variation in how different groups of students, based on university, access to college prep, and parental education background, use the college essay genre and how they do and do not respond to institutional scripts within the admissions process.
Standard Academic English

Standard Academic English (SAE) is a significant cultural tool that is relevant to writing the college application essay and can influence a students’ flexibility with addressing institutional requirements. A students’ fluency in SAE can relate to the amount of preparation and exposure they have to this language form in high school and in their homes. Students who come from under-resourced schools are also typically less skilled at writing in SAE (Gilyard, 1991; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). Typically, the mastering of SAE is considered to happen in high school and reflects a school’s ability to properly prepare students in this language (Ball & Ellis, 2008; Delpit, 2006; Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). The emphasis on proper writing can also silence minorities’ voices (Gilyard, 1991) as the values of their language tools are diminished in order to give preference to Standard Academic English.

Admissions counselors were interviewed on their perceptions of student essays in Paley’s (1996) study. Sentence structure and language use in the essays was one of the features counselors considered. One counselor who was interviewed explained that errors in mechanics make him “nervous” about the type of student this could be and that grammatical errors provided “warning signals of disadvantaged backgrounds” (Paley, 1996, p. 96). The admissions counselor explained that he actually liked the essay one specific student wrote but that it lacked a necessary sophistication that the counselor (and presumably the university) values. This dichotomy illustrates how students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have not had the basics of writing instilled in them from an early age, may be grappling with the best ways to turn their ideas into words. Through the challenges youth face in producing proper written material, they may end up kept out of elite institutions, which could have the potential to help them enter the conversation with their more advantaged peers.
Privilege is associated with proper academic writing and Standard Academic English that can often leave marginalized students feeling further marginalized (Bartholomae, 1986; Canagarajah, 2013; Gilyard, 1991). Difficult writing tasks can make the academic discourse community seem out of reach and inaccessible to students and can make the task of the college essay seem daunting. As SAE is the norm and college admissions officers maintain expectations of rigorous writing, students “must imagine for themselves the privilege of being “insiders” – that is, of being both inside an established and powerful discourse, and of being granted a special right to speak” (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 10). Youth who come from more privileged backgrounds, whose parents may have gone to college themselves or who attend more affluent public and private high schools, feel at ease with the college essay in ways that are taken-for-granted due to the knowledge they inherently possess from growing up with an awareness of the culture of college. Ultimately, students have an idea about what the college essay should be, and attempt to create that idea on paper, despite not having all of the tools or knowing all of the inherent guidelines. For the admissions counselors reading the final result of the students’ written work, the mistakes students make can seem careless or novice, but those errors may simply be students’ best attempt at tackling new expectations.

Standard Academic English and the college essay genre itself are discourse communities where language and writing is used in a certain way that is maintained within the group. Also consistent with this overall theoretical frame is the concept of discourse community. Discourse communities can be thought of as communities that share communication strategies, texts, technologies, and perhaps even goals. Further, discourse communities can be communities of practice, where its members mutually engage in a joint enterprise (Borg, 2003).
What is relevant to discourse communities, and in this case, academic discourse communities specifically, is the presence of gatekeepers that maintain the norms of the community (Borg, 2003). Canagarajah (2002) challenges the presence of gatekeepers by declaring that non-experts should be able to (and encouraged to) deconstruct the rules of their new discourse communities, so that the discourse community is constantly growing and adapting. The college essay, as it currently sits, is a measurement tool used by admissions officers who act as gatekeepers of the college essay discourse and determine students’ readiness (or appropriateness) to enter into the college community. This relates to the activity-meaning systems design in this dissertation research, where I sample different communities of students that have entered into new discourse communities of their universities. The ways in which students learn to relate their different discourse communities and the ways they may deconstruct or adhere to the rules is considered in the ways the stakeholders perform the college essay. This dissertation research will examine the ways in which students pick up on the messages from the institutional stakeholders in the system.

Bicultural youth also participate in various discourse communities and disproportionately struggle to enter higher education in the United States (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2008; Villanueva, 1993), constantly engage with and navigate multiple cultures, languages, and tools in ways that are often under looked (and historically looked down upon when they do not fall into the criteria of SAE). Scribner and Cole (1973) demonstrated that different social situations and needs require students to develop different cognitive abilities. Multicultural youth in the US are required to pick up certain skills in order to succeed in the ‘culture of power’ (Delpit, 2006), though they do not always have access to resources through which they can develop those skills. As many theorists of color have discussed (i.e. (Gilyard, 1991), multicultural youth learn to code switch
and learn that different rules govern different spaces. Rather than viewing dialects as a hindrance, youth use their language tools in ways that are appropriate based on the contexts they are in. As Villanueva (1993) so clearly conveys, “the code-switcher is a rhetorical power player. He knows language isn’t fixed, has a relativistic perception of language, knows that words take on hues of meaning when colored by cognates” (p. 22). This is a fundamental understanding of the complexity of language and its use – and how that use can be put in place to serve different purposes.

While these progressive conceptualizations of language are still ignored by larger institutional discourses and are not yet making their way into what university admissions considerations, these conceptualizations are an important frame both for thinking about the future of academia and for deepening our understanding of the diversity that students bring to their writing and their language use. The resources students have access to impact multiple steps along the path to college, including the mastery students have with the language reflected in the culture of college and the information and exposure students have to the application process itself.

**Programs Attempting to Bridge the Gap**

Private and public programs that attempt to bridge the gap between high school and college exist for students whose high schools and families may not have the resources to excel in the college admissions process (Early et al., 2010; Stevens, 2007; Wells, 2008). College access programs can be non-profit or university specific programs which work with students during their high school years in an attempt to guide and prepare them for college. A multitude of commercial college preparatory materials exist online, many of which students can use for free, but that do not come with support from a mentor. In some cases, programs can provide assistance
and guidance that large, urban, public high schools may not be able to give to each individual student. Stevens (2007) compares these types of supports to roadside assistance programs for students that may need more support – programs that are able to offer guidance or fill in the gaps that underserved students’ families may be experiencing. This dissertation will consider how some of these programs come into play in the discussion of college access, the reach the programs have, and their ability to help underserved students enter high quality post-secondary education.

Some high school English courses have college essay writing as part of their curriculum. These courses may be designed and incorporated by individual teachers, who personally believe it is important to integrate this type of writing into the course work (Sagan, 2002; Wells, 2008). Intervention approaches through which students attend intensive college essay writing workshops have also been employed (Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2011). In their intervention approach, Early and DeCosta-Smith (2011) found that students showed significant gains in their college essay writing, particularly in learning the necessary requirements for the genre. The study found that explicitly teaching instructions on the college essay process, such as addressing the audience and stepping outside of the narrative to convey a larger “so what”, was beneficial (Early & DaCosta-Smith, 2011). This was particularly the case for low-income students who are not typically exposed to the culture of college. In the same way that Delpit (2009) argues that it is important to explicitly teach skills in the classroom, the findings of Early and DeCosta-Smith (2011) expand that to college admissions and the essay genre specifically.

Additionally, many elite colleges have summer programs for students from under-represented groups (Steinberg, 2003; Stevens, 2007). These are offered to students who are still in high school and are beginning their college application journeys. Through these summer
programs, universities target prime minority candidates and hope to show them that their institution is the right choice. Universities are all striving to increase diversity on their campuses, as diversity has become a benchmark for elite schools (Stevens, 2007). But there are also challenges to increasing minority populations. There are a number of reasons for these challenges, most notably the fact that there are fewer minority candidates who meet baseline admissions criteria (such as minimum GPA and SAT scores), compared to their predominantly white peers. This creates a bit of a scenario where top minority applicants are highly recruited from many of the elite institutions, though they can only end up at one place (Steinberg, 2003). Additionally, minority students are not always drawn to predominantly white institutions, as they may not see themselves fitting in there (Stevens, 2007). In this way, those targeted summer programs not only expose underserved youth to college information they may not readily have access to, but can also work to show a student what their life could be like at a given campus.

For profit-college prep agencies (i.e. Kaplan, Princeton Review) are a relevant stakeholder in the college essay process and are examined in this dissertation research. Current research which examines college access does not yet consider the role that college prep agencies may play in reaching higher education. This study can contribute information to the field regarding the role that these agencies may also play for student access, with a focus on the college essay as well.

**Research Aims and Questions**

Each of the factors discussed above – the importance of developmental theory as interaction between individuals and social structures, inequalities that exist in access to education, and the admissions process mediated by the college essay specifically – are relevant to accessing higher education. This integrated research design considers the stakeholders that are
a part of the college essay process and allows for diverse interpretations of what that process is. Sampling relevant actors gives us insight into how their narratives shape and mold each other. This considers the information presented by the institutions, the preparation students have access to, and the ultimate implementation of norms, ideas, and performances into the produced student essays. Ultimately, this research design considers the college essay as a mediator of college access.

This project aims to answer questions relevant to college access with the admissions essay as an indicator and possible focal point for policy. How does the college essay process enact stakeholders’ norms, expectations and the students’ preparations? How are students prepared and socialized – or not – to become ‘college-ready’? How do students make sense of and follow the rules of the college essay? And how is the structure of preparation enacted in and around college essays by different groups of students and educational institutions? Finally, how does the college essay process (its importance, the preparation, and ultimate writing) mediate inequality in the higher education admissions process? Here, ‘mediate’ considers the college essay as a go-between for all of the interacting stakeholders. The essay mediates the dynamic interplay between structures and individuals and how they are responding to and with one another through the college essay process.

**Significance**

As the number of students attending college increases, admissions requirements have also been changing in order to capture a wider portion of the population. Over 800 institutions, 150 of which are considered ‘top tier’ schools (such as Middlebury College, Bowdoin College, and Wake Forest University) have become test-optional, which means they do not require SAT or ACT scores. Many of these universities are placing greater emphasis on increasing diversity on
their campuses, which is tied to an awareness that standardized testing such as the SAT is unfairly biased toward minority groups (Stevens, 2007). This transition means schools rely more on GPA, a student’s extracurricular experiences, and the personal essay. In 2006, 28% of colleges considered the essay to be ‘significant’ for admissions (Early & DaCosta-Smith, 2011). As of 2012, that number has increased as 60% of universities place considerable to moderate importance on the student’s application essay (Warren, 2013).

Though application essays are becoming more popular, current literature on the essay suggests that it highlights the vulnerability of students within the institutional system (Paley, 1996; Vidali 2007). Low-income youth are already at a disadvantage, as they often come from high schools with limited resources, which means less opportunities for upper-level courses, less access to guidance counselors, and fewer resources for their schools (such as up-to-date textbooks, access to computers and scientific equipment). Then, the college application essay acts as an interesting and unique gatekeeper. It is presented as a means for students to show a different side of themselves, to tell the admissions committee something that they might not be able to see in their transcripts or SAT scores. But ultimately, the college essay may work to restrict access for underserved youth, as it requires them to understand the system in subliminal ways that go beyond a grasp of standard writing. I examine if the college essay process mediates access and opportunity for applying students.

This project is important because while the college application industry, and the college application essay in particular, has vastly grown, there has been limited research on the actual essays that students write (Brown & Barton, 2004). The admissions essay is a unique genre as it is the place that an applicant can show who they are, while also demonstrating their knowledge of the educational culture. The activity-meaning systems approach this work is grounded in
situates the student essays in context and considers the co-construction that occurs between the individual and society.

Ultimately, I am interested in the nature of institutional structures and how these interact with student expressions in their essays. Previous research shows the structural inequalities that are embedded within higher education and demonstrates intervention and support programs can be helpful in aiding under-resourced youth. But research has not focused on how youth engage with, confront, challenge, and respond to institutional expectations. This dissertation uses a narrative analysis approach to focus on what students’ personal essays are all about and how the students frame and fit their essays into the larger cultural discourse of academia. While university admissions may be the ultimate gatekeeper that decides who does and who does not get admitted into their institutions, students are active participants in engaging with the admissions process, specifically as they write a college essay where they choose how and in what light they want to present themselves. My research examines how students from different socioeconomic contexts navigate and work within and outside of structural and institutional expectations.
Chapter Two

The Research Design to Discover Stakeholders’ Diverse Expressions

I designed this study in terms of the activity-meaning systems of interacting stakeholders (Daiute, 2008; Engestrom et al., 1999). The sample collected is based on the rationale of gathering materials from diverse actors involved in the college process. Various stakeholder documents show how individuals interact with and within larger institutional systems, and with the stakeholders that are in place to help students gain access. The research examines whether the norms and values that higher education institutions present are or are not upheld or disputed by the student essays.

A number of sites and stakeholders produced the material for this study. This includes the students themselves and the institutions that are responsible for framing and shaping the college experience. Gaining information about the overall admissions process is important to understanding the implications and meanings behind the essays themselves, as they are situated within the larger context of higher education. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the external sites granted their support for the project.

The Data from Multiple Stakeholders

In line with the developmental theory that foregrounds the design of this study, documents were collected from multiple relevant stakeholders across the college admissions process. Policy and institutional documents, such as admissions information from the universities and literature from the college admissions industry (i.e. Kaplan; College Board) were collected to gather information on university admissions expectations and for-profit institutions roles and recommendations in the application process. In their demographic questionnaire, student participants wrote from where, if at all, they received college preparatory materials or guidance.
Materials for this study were then selected to match the major sources students used (i.e. Kaplan, Khan Academy), as well as selecting materials from industries that are key in shaping the college admissions process and entry material (i.e. College Board). The college preparatory agencies whose documents were collected were selected based on services and agencies that students in this study said they used. The documents from those agencies were materials focusing specifically on the college essay and its part in the admissions package. Between three and four documents were collected from each organization. Participants were recruited from two institutions in the Northeast: one private, small liberal arts university (SLAU) and one large, public university in New York City (LPU). Admissions information was also collected from the participating university websites. These documents did not have to specifically address the college essay in the application process but were selected if they conveyed university admissions information to the students. Table 1 details the institutional documents that were used in the analysis.

Table 1

Institutional Documents Used in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document genre</th>
<th>Number of docs.</th>
<th>Total word count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University Admissions Material</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Prep. Industry</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5512</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The university data, which were materials collected from the two university websites, are small as there was a limited amount of information on the admissions websites, where the material that gets shared is vetted along the way to publication. University website content is also written with marketing and sales strategies in mind, with a goal of selling the university to its possible applicants. The focus of the admissions pages is mainly on the process of applying and
the technical steps that need to be completed. Little is written about the college essay, aside from whether the universities require it for admission. This procedural information on how to apply was not collected for analysis. Therefore, the bulk of the material that is in the dataset focuses on the universities’ image and how they describe themselves to possible admissions candidates.

Alternatively, the college prep industry is frequently generating material that is relevant to the college essay, as they are in the business of helping applicants with specific admissions tasks. The college prep industry also generates new material as they are keeping up with the changes and trends of university cultures and attempting to stay relevant in order to capture student attention. Unlike the universities, the college prep industry gives specific information relating to the essay that actually tells students *how* to tackle this writing task. Overall, this resulted in an imbalance between the number of university materials and college prep materials. But when the two universities are considered together, this creates a larger and readily useable sample.

I collected student essays from multiple sites in order to capture the diversity of writing and histories that youth come to college with. This can also capture applicants’ relation to the college discourses that reflect the ideal student population, along with the students’ presentations of themselves in their essays. The LPU school is a much larger and publicly funded university, which is more accessible to students in the community. As it often is with public universities, local students attend more frequently. But also given that the LPU system is in New York City, there is a wide range of diversity of students that attend even among the local community.

The SLAU is an important point of comparison, because while students at private institutions also come from varying backgrounds, this sample may show a different level of preparation and guidance during the admissions process than the LPU sample. In order to help
address questions of the permeation of cultural capital in college access, analysis will also consider whether students are first-generation college students. This is defined based on parental educational attainment, where first-generation students are those who do not have a parent that completed college and earned a baccalaureate degree (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Dennis et al., 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Students’ level of preparation and guidance is also examined based on whether or not students partook in any college preparatory work. Students at the SLAU also come from across the United States, with over 65% of students coming from out-of-state, 14% of which are international students. This presents a different sample than the LPU sample, where 61% of students come from New York City and an additional 30% come from New York State.

A total of 35 students participated in the study and submitted their college admissions essays ($n = 17$ from the SLAU and $n = 18$ from the LPU). Demographics of the sample are presented in Table 2. The demographic distribution between the two universities is also important, as the universities are a point of comparison. While the data will not be analyzed to examine ethnic differences in the student essays, it is interesting to note that of the SLAU sample, 12 of the 15 students identified as white. Given that class and race are often conflated in the US, the overwhelmingly white sample at the private university could speak to the cultural capital and privilege that may be handed down from families and networks. In the sample, there were five students from each institution that did not participate in college preparatory work (most of the sample, 25 students, did partake in some form of college preparatory help). Further demographic differences are presented in Table 3, which show the ethnicity distribution and parental educational attainment by university.
Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>University</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-generation status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not first-generation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College prep participation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>71.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HS type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>74.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

*Demographics by University (n)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SLAU</th>
<th>LPU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First-generation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not first-generation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>College prep participation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From looking at the demographic data, we can see that there are striking differences between the SLAU and LPU school in the number of students who are first-generation college students. There is a statistically significant association between university of attendance and first-generation status. That is, first generation students are more likely to attend LPU ($X(1) = 7.441, p = .006$). Data analysis examined differences in student essays across first-generation status and by participation in college preparatory work.

**Data Collection Process**

The recruitment process for the study involved collected anonymized student college essays from students enrolled at the LPU and the SLAU. Student college admissions essays were collected through a survey on Qualtrics, where the study is administered online. Participants first read the consent form before proceeding to the study questions. Then, students filled out their demographic information (such as age, race, and gender) along with college-related questions (such as what colleges they applied to and if they had any college preparatory preparation or assistance). At the end of the survey, students uploaded the file of the college essay they wrote when they applied to college.

Students at the SLAU were recruited through emails sent via the psychology department. Students taking Intro to Psychology or Research Methods in Psychology were notified about the study through their classes. Interested participants could access the study through a link in Qualtrics, where they followed the steps outline above.

At the LPU campus, students were recruited through the Research Pool of the psychology department. This Pool contains a database of current psychology studies that students can participate in for course credit. Psychology majors at this LPU have to complete a certain number of research credits in order to complete Introduction to Psychology 100. Students can
choose studies from the Research Pool that they are interested in completing. At the LPU campus, students were also directed to the study in Qualtrics, where they submitted their own de-identified essays, along with their demographic information. Students from the LPU received research credit for their participation.

The exploratory design of this dissertation research aimed to capture a variety of student essays of students who had already overcome the challenge of accessing higher education. Students who were already enrolled in college were recruited as a way of making the two university groups more comparable. While students within each university bring their own diversities and histories, having a sample of all admitted students ensured that the sample was balanced in college admission (although percentages of accepted students at each college may differ). Additionally, both of the universities that were sampled use the Common App. This means that students responded to the same prompts and within the same application format when applying to their individual universities. All students were recruited from psychology as well, as a way of keeping student major consistent. It is possible that students from the hard sciences could produce quite varied essays from their social sciences (or humanities) peers, a variable that this design does not consider. In order to ensure that differences in essays were not related to major selection and interest, psychology students were sampled. This is a strategic design sampling the diversity of student histories at each of the two universities, while attempting to keep other factors that can influence essay writing relatively comparable.

**Analytic Approach**

I uploaded and analyzed all of the documents using the software system Atlas.ti. I applied two methods of narrative analysis to identify meanings across the stakeholder expressions: values analysis and significance analysis. Values analysis applies across genres, like those
sampled in this study including mission statements, essays, and educational materials, thereby providing a way to relate meanings across participants in the college admissions process. Significance analysis attunes to linguistic devices especially prevalent in narratives (although present in all expressive genres). I applied significance analysis here for the nuances of meaning in the students’ essays. These analyses are, moreover, able to address my research questions in complementary ways.

Values analysis considers the guiding principles that we live by and which color the way we understand, frame, and make sense of the world (Daiute, 2014). This approach is based in dynamic narrating, where narrators are aware of and immersed in the norms and expectations of their culture (Daiute, 2014). Through referencing and positioning, narrators choose which cultural and personal values to uphold or challenge in the stories they choose to tell. These values can be explicit, but are often underlying in the stories that are presented and created. I am interested in exploring whether and which of the values championed by the institutions are picked up and adapted into the students’ essays. As actors whose purpose is college admissions, to what extent do the students engage with the values of their sought after institutions?

The analysis of the institutional documents through values analysis is an important element for understanding the context students are responding to and situating themselves within. Through collecting data from multiple levels, a deeper understanding of the structural interaction can be gleaned. Analyzing the essays without analyzing the context within which they are situated misses a key component of how those essays came to be. This refers to the broader culture of academia as well, which shapes how we discuss and understand higher education, in addition to the two universities in this sample. Analyzing the college essays within the context they are in illuminates the purposes of the student, the discourses they are responding to and
engaging with, and the tools they are using (or are creating on their own) as they attempt to
tackle the college essay in a way that will be most advantageous to them.

Oftentimes when applying to universities, students may not have much additional
information about a university aside from what they see on the website. Students use this written
material (along with possible college visits and experiences on campuses) to frame how they see
themselves fitting at a school. When they write their college application essay, sometimes one, if
not all, of their schools use the Common App, with some universities requiring additional essays.
Students position themselves in ways that they think will fit with the mindset of their target
schools. For this reason, unpacking the messages that the access-granting institutions convey is
an important piece of understanding the whole application process, and specifically, in
understanding the way students’ writing is positioned and channeled.

Values analysis involves analyzing the narratives by t-units. T-units are thought units of
independent or dominant clauses and the dependent clauses that go along with them (Daiute,
2014; Hunt, 1965). T-units are used given that participants do not always narrate in complete,
grammatical sentences, even when narratives are written. Given that the college essay is a high-
stakes writing assignment, most of the t-units were complete sentences. But because students
bring a range of writing expertise to the essay, t-units were still the unit of choice in order to
capture writing that was not in complete sentences. The values analysis yielded 81 t-units for the
university documents, 354 for the college prep documents, and 1,184 for the student essays.

Each document was read over a number of times to get a good grasp of the material and
to begin to see the values that the stakeholders were conveying. The data itself generates the
codebook, rather than bringing an apriori manual to the data analysis. All of the documents (the
student essays and the institutional materials) were coded using the same values codebook, in
order to be able to assess similarities, overlaps, and disconnects between the genres. After generating the codebook from reading 10 student essays and five institutional documents, two coders sat down to do reliability and to review the codebook. Cohen's $\kappa$ was run to determine if there was agreement between the two coders on 20% of the data. Substantial agreement was reached between the two coders, $\kappa = .728, p < .001$. We discussed any discrepancies and made modifications to the codebook in order to ensure clarity for the rest of the data analysis.

Values analysis also offers a tool for exploring whether and which of the values championed by the institutions get picked up and adapted into the students’ essays. Statistical analysis examined how different values emerge across the essays by comparing the essays between students at each university and by those students who did and did not participate in college preparatory work.

Significance analysis (Daiute, 2014) was useful to search for the nuances in meaning that students inserted into their college essays. This method focuses on the way a story is told as a guideline for understanding why a story is told. This is relevant for understanding how students are agentively using the college essay genre to achieve their purposes of gaining college admissions. Significance analysis highlights those small and often overlooked details within a narrative can have significant implications for understanding much more about the context within which a story is told (Daiute, 2014). I analyzed how students coming from different backgrounds and ending up at different institutions tell their stories and the mechanisms they use to do so. By examining how students present themselves through their writing, we can begin to understand how they are tackling this complex college admissions essay genre. While the significance analysis will focus on the ways stories are told, the values analysis will examine the
meanings those stories convey, how the students choose to present themselves, and how they speak to the institutions.

The coding framework for the significance analysis comes from Daiute (2014). Unlike the values analysis, where essays were coded by t-units, in significance analysis the coding is done at the word level, with a focus on the signifiers that are used in language. We coded the essays for psychological states, which include cognitive states (such as know, believe, and understand), affective states (such as joy, fear, cry), and speech (such as told and said). Qualifying adjectives, intensifiers, negations, causal connectors, hedges, and metaphors were also coded. Reliability was performed on the significance analysis, where both coders followed the significance analysis as outlined in Daiute (2014). Cohen's κ determines agreement between the two coders on 20% of the data. Substantial agreement was reached between the two coders, κ = .753, p < .001. Any discrepancies were discussed for the rest of the data analysis.

Overall, the essays students write interact with the institutional discourses that are in place. This interaction between individuals and institutions is a foundational developmental principle that occurs in everyday life. The goal of this dissertation work is to understand how these interactions play out through an important and complex structural gatekeeper, the college admission essay. Individual and institutional interactions happen to varying degrees and with a range of understanding of the rules of the essay genre depending on the context from which students are approaching the essay. Because of this dynamic interplay between genre and product, analyzing the context along with the essay itself is important. One cannot be understood without the other. Interactions are gleaned from the narrative analysis of the essays, which explore the way these are produced based on different levels of preparation and access to
information that students receive as they are applying to college. Table 4 describes in further
detail how each research question is addressed by the analysis.

Table 4

*How Each Research Question Will Be Addressed through the Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does the college essay process enact stakeholders’ norms, expectations and the students’ preparations?</td>
<td>• Institutional docs • Student essays</td>
<td>Values analysis − Which values from the institutional documents are taken up by students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do students make sense of and follow the rules of the college essay?</td>
<td>• Institutional docs • Student essays</td>
<td>Values analysis − Which values from the institutional documents are taken up by students? − How may they be challenging or creating their own values?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the structure of preparation enacted in and around college essays by different groups of students?</td>
<td>• Student essays</td>
<td>Significance analysis − How are different student essays coming from different backgrounds written?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are students prepared and socialized – or not – to become ‘college-ready’?</td>
<td>• Institutional docs • Student essays</td>
<td>Values analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the college essay process (it’s importance, the preparation, and ultimate writing) mediate inequality in the higher education admissions process?</td>
<td>• Institutional docs • Student essays</td>
<td>Overall analysis; overall findings from this dissertation research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Three

Institutions and Students in Interaction

This chapter analyzes the values expressed in the documents with different roles in the activity meaning system research design: the university information, the college preparatory (or college prep) industry materials, and the student essays. The goal of this chapter is to examine how the college essay process mediates institutional norms and expectations and informs the essays that students write. By examining the values of each stakeholder, we explore the dynamic interplay between the different stakeholder expressions. Additionally, the values analysis explores how students make sense of and respond to the rules of the college essay, as presented by the educational institutions.

This chapter explores the values that emerge across stakeholders and examines how these values are differently enacted between the stakeholders (the two universities, the college prep industry, and the students who participated in the study). Each of these stakeholders has their own way of addressing the college essay requirement but there is also overlap in what the stakeholders choose to emphasize and deem to be important. The college prep industry continuously and strongly stresses that students need to write their essays with an awareness of their audience in mind. This audience, the college admissions counselors, is important as it is this audience that determines whether the students get into college or not.

The university documents attempt to help students understand who their audience is and what kind of academic environment that audience resides in. The university documents are typically shorter, as the universities spend less time explaining strategies that can help the students apply and more on describing the culture of the university and the kind of place it is. University website material is written and edited multiple times before it ultimately ends up on
the page and always has a marketing and advertising goal. Institutions want to present
themselves as places that are attractive to students and want to recruit the best possible
candidates. I would argue that the university’s goal is to attract students that they would like to
see on their campuses, more than they are interested in guiding and helping students gain
admissions.

The institutional stakeholders, the college prep agencies and the universities, help frame
the audience and the requirements of the college essay task for the applicant. Then, through their
diverse perspectives and histories, students create essays that respond to the college essay task.
This chapter examines how the essays written by the applicants reflect, transpose, or reject the
values presented by the institutions.

The Values Expressed through Institutional Documents

The sites for this study are two universities – a private, small, liberal arts university
(SLAU) and a large, public City University of New York (LPU) school. In order to frame the
institutional level of analysis, the universities’ websites were used to collect materials relating to
the admissions process. Through reading information about the institutions on their sites,
students can get a sense of the culture and character of the university. This helps in the framing
of their essay and in getting an overall sense of what the schools may be looking for from
potential candidates.

Below are two excerpts from the admissions websites that demonstrate how the two
universities portray themselves. The SLAU states:

You’re motivated to push your own academic limits. You’re creative about
solving problems with new ideas. You’re passionate about changing the world.

You may just be an SLAU student in the making. We offer a liberal education
in a dynamic urban environment and are looking for creative individuals who think deeper, accept differences and challenge the norm to successfully become part of our local and global community. We’re interested in more than just test scores, and our Admissions Committee wants to get to know you as complete, holistic candidate.

The admissions introduction from the LPU website states:

Located in the heart of Manhattan, LPU College offers students a stimulating learning environment in the world's most exciting city. Since 1870, the College has led the way in higher education with a commitment to academic excellence, diversity and community. Today, LPU College’s tradition meets innovation with distinguished professors, high-achieving students and generous financial aid awards.

From reading these two samples, we get a sense that the two universities are different – they are emphasizing different aspects of their college environments. Both universities have long-standing histories and both universities care about their students. But the scripts they are presenting create different images and show the two places in a different light. The SLAU has an emphasis and pull of speaking directly to the applicant and all of the great and unique things the student can accomplish if they were to attend the SLAU. Conversely, the LPU is grounded in reputation and history. The LPU also emphasizes its ability to offer financial aid to students. Even within this short statement, the SLAU already tells its potential candidates that test scores are not all they care about. While the LPU never states that it cares specifically about test scores, its statement talks about tradition and prestige, where academic rigor measured by testing is the norm. The universities have chosen to emphasize these elements as key components of how they
want to represent themselves to students. The differences in description in some ways speak to
differences in the target audiences of the universities. These descriptions then also shape how
students will respond when applying.

The information presented by the college prep industry focuses on helping students
develop an awareness of the audience that will be reading their college essays. The college prep
documents are meant to help students apply to any US institution, rather than focusing on select
universities. For example, they give tips for an admissions essay that can wow any admissions
office: “Tips for stellar admission essays: Most universities require at least one essay as part of
your college application, but many also require two or more essays of various lengths” (Kaplan,
2017). The college prep documents remind students to use the essay space to tell the counselors
something new, keeping in mind that the admissions counselors have their full application
package. “The college essay is your opportunity to show admissions officers who you are apart
from your grades and test scores (and to distinguish yourself from the rest of a very talented
applicant pool)” (Princeton Review, 2017a) and “while your test scores and GPA give you
academic cred with college admissions officers, it’s your college application essay that really
helps you stand out among other applicants. Unlike a list of numbers, it answers the question
they really want to know—what makes you you?” (Kaplan, 2017).

The college prep industry also emphasizes that the admissions counselors expect to learn
something special or meaningful about the students that sets them apart from the other
applicants. College preparatory documents reiterate that students “have a unique background,
interests and personality. This is your chance to tell your story (or at least part of it). The best
way to tell your story is to write a personal, thoughtful essay about something that has meaning
for you. Be honest and genuine, and your unique qualities will shine through” (Princeton
Review, 2017b). College prep materials also attempt to ease student anxiety by presenting the college admissions essay as a piece of the application that should not cause the student to worry because “the essay is not as scary as it seems. In fact, it’s one portion of the application that the student controls completely” (Kaplan, 2017). But what comes up again and again within these institutional documents is that “the number one piece of advice from admission officers about your essay is “Be yourself.”” (College Board, 2017). This theme of students’ need to present their true selves will appear many times throughout the analysis and is one of the questions that both students and this research confront. There are many expectations of students within the college essay genre, where the requirements for students to show who they really are might be the most fraught with challenge. In many ways, it remains unclear what it is that admissions offices’ priorities and expectations are and how exactly students are expected to be themselves.

Often, the college prep documents present students with somewhat direct and relatively short lists of what they should and should not do in their college applications. For example, a posting from Kaplan’s website suggests:

5 College Application Essay Do's and Don'ts:

**DO** be concise, specific, personal, and honest. Surprise the reader, and take chances that go beyond the obvious.

**DO** use wit and imagination, but don't try to be funny if that's not your personality. Forcing humor can backfire and comes across as just plain silly.

**DO** proofread and then ask someone else to proofread for you. Careless mistakes will drive the admissions board crazy.

**DON’T** be cynical, trite, pretentious, or maudlin.
DON’T repeat what is included in other parts of the application by essentially writing out your resume. Go behind the details they already know. (Kaplan, 2017)

Despite the succinctness of the example above, the actual information that the excerpt conveys can be quite overwhelming for a student. Students are expected to address numerous directives simultaneously, any one of which can be challenging on its own. For example, the first point alone asks applicants to do six things, which can be difficult to combine, especially if the ultimate task at hand is for the writer to be “honest”, which can really mean anything in the college essay context. The multiple suggestions preparatory documents give leave students trying to find ways to craft an essay that focuses on one specific story or element of their life while finding a way to show how that specific choice is deeply meaningful and personal, while also having to open themselves up to an anonymous and highly judgmental audience. While these do’s and don’ts lists can seem like an easy place to go to for quick guidance, they may actually overwhelm and confuse the student even further.

Student College Essays

The student essays express many of the same values that the institutions emphasize. Students present the strengths, characteristics, and attributes that have shaped them into the student and person they are today and try to present a true self in their essays. Students also show an awareness of the audience they are writing to and of the importance of showing their audience who they are, but they do so through nuanced writing. For example, students may directly and explicitly address these expectations: “This is exactly what I intend to do at college. I don’t know what my future in college is yet, but I want to learn as much as I can, experience as much as I can, and have as much fun as I can” (Blueprint, SLAU). Or,
“Eventually I came to a conclusion regarding my dilemma between my ethnicities – that I am not required to choose just one country and stick with it, when I can just be comfortable blending them together in a way that makes myself who I am. Coming from two different cultures gives me a different point of view as well as an open-mindedness to anything occurring around me. (The Roots, LPU)

While addressing key institutional values, students also perform and expand upon other values as well, such as emphasizing challenges, development, and relationships that are meaningful to their stories. These additional values work to enhance the student’s essay and to respond to the task of the college essay genre and the audience for which they are writing through interesting moves and maneuvers that may not address the universities’ expectations as directly as the previous example does.

A detailed examination of values by all the stakeholders offers insights about the college essay process as a social relational space that mediates participation. This chapter moves into a detailed examination of the values analysis of the stakeholder documents. I discuss the rate and emphasis of the values as expressed among the institutions and the student essays to help us understand how the stakeholders interact. The analysis examines which values the student essays and institutional documents align on and which values are reconstructed. In this research project, the institutions are the ones who hold the power as they set the standards and requirements for admission and determine who is granted access to the universities. But this analysis also considers the creativity and the space for maneuvering that the students demonstrate. Students are active respondents to the institutional norms. They respond to the required essay task but also frame and shape their essays to address these norms in creative and nuanced ways. First, I take a
closer look at the overarching values among stakeholders. Then, the analysis will zoom in further to focus in on the individual stakeholders and their interactions with one another.

**Eight Major Value Expressions Evident among Stakeholders**

The values analysis revealed eight main values across the institutional documents and the student essays. These were: emphasizing personal development is important; facing and acknowledging challenges is important; searching for and finding solutions to those challenges is important; having an awareness of your audience is important; presenting a true self is important; acknowledging relationships that offer emotional support is important; relationships that offer academic mentorship are important; and it is important to address context in your writing and storytelling.

Table 5 below shows the emphasis of the eight major values among all institutional documents (these include college preparatory industry materials and university admissions information from the university’s websites) and all student essays (from students at both the SLAU and the LPU).

Table 5

*Percent (%) of T-units per Major Value Emphasized Across All Stakeholders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Value</th>
<th>Institutional Documents</th>
<th>Student Essays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development is important</td>
<td>29.11</td>
<td>26.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of audience is important</td>
<td>41.78</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to present a true self</td>
<td>14.05</td>
<td>8.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing and overcoming challenges is important</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>22.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding solutions is important</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>11.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are important</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>10.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship is important</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>5.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing context in writing is important</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>7.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From a first look at the results in Table 5, some obvious patterns stand out. There is a wide discrepancy in how much the value of addressing the audience came out in the student essays as compared to the institutional documents. From the examples above, we saw that audience was a dominant focus of the college preparatory industry materials specifically, where the college prep industry was attempting to guide students toward being aware of the audience they are writing to. The values analysis seems to show that students did not pick up on this value as much (7.69% of overall t-units directly addressed audience). This could relate to students lack of a complete understanding on how to approach the college essay genre and how to enter this academic discourse community. Students may be more familiar with, and feel that they have more control over, describing the content of their experiences, rather than finding ways to address their audience. But as will be further explored in Chapter Four, students are still finding less explicit ways of addressing their audience through other values that the students find meaningful.

Additionally, both the institutions and the students express the importance of demonstrating personal development as an integral part of the essay genre. Interestingly, there is a stark difference in the emphasis that the institutions place on describing challenges compared to that which the students place on challenges. There is also variation in how much value the stakeholders place on the importance of finding solutions, which are more prevalent in the student essays, perhaps in response to the higher percentage of challenges that are expressed in the essays – challenges that then require the student to also describe solutions.

In order to begin to examine these patterns more closely, Table 6 focuses on the values expressed among the institutional documents only.
First, it is important to make a note that the number of institutional documents available for analysis from the two universities was low. This is further detailed in the Chapter Two but is also relevant again here to keep in mind through the analysis. The college prep industry produces much more content on the college essay, but we can still see that the universities are emphasizing the importance of having an awareness of audience and demonstrating student development, which appear as important values among the college prep industry as well. The college preparatory industry also goes on to emphasize the importance for students to present their true self (18.95% of t-units among the college prep documents), which barely appears among the university documents (3.70%). This pattern is interesting and also unsurprising. The importance of conveying a story that is true to one’s self is a key element of the college essay genre. But because the universities are not specifically telling students how to approach the essay, it makes sense that this value does not emerge among those documents. On the other hand, the college prep industry is specifically addressing how to write the college essay and what type of information to present. It seems that an awareness of who the audience of the essay is, as well as

Table 6

*Percent (%) of T-units per Major Value Within Each Institutional Stakeholders*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>College Prep Industry</th>
<th>Universities Combined</th>
<th>SLAU only</th>
<th>LPU only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of audience is important</td>
<td>51.60</td>
<td>20.99</td>
<td>23.21</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development is important</td>
<td>16.03</td>
<td>56.79</td>
<td>62.50</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to present a true self</td>
<td>18.95</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding solutions is important</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing and overcoming challenges is important</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are important</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>6.17</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship is important</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing context in writing is important</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
an ability to convey your true self to that audience, presents high in importance among the college prep documents.

The college prep industry’s purpose is to help prepare students for college admission, and in this case specifically, for the genre of writing the college essay – *how* it should be written, *what* should and should not appear in the essay, *who* the students should be writing to and *what* that audience is expecting. Further examples from the college prep industry can help illuminate the information that students are receiving. Khan Academy (2017), a popular site where high school students seek guidance, suggests:

*Your actions can be small, but they should be loaded with meaning, i.e. that you’re taking a stand, making a decision, giving something up, or taking a risk. It can be simply deciding to get up in the morning or to smile. It just needs to represent that you’ve made a decision, change, or risk.* (Khan Academy, 2017)

This quote demonstrates a number of the values conveyed by the stakeholders and shows the gravity of what students are asked to write about. They can write about *anything* but it has to mean *something* important about them. In many ways, this statement above conveys that students need to present their true self, while also being aware of their audience – students have to show who they are but keep in mind that their audience wants to read about a story or situation that paints how the student has grown through courageous or challenging moments. The story the students chooses to tell can be about “simply deciding to smile”, which shows even further how students are asked to do so much with so little – be open, honest, and vulnerable, and yet do all this through a small but “loaded with meaning” story. This demand unfairly privileges students who have grown up with some knowledge of the culture of college, where they have grown up with implicit understandings of some of the expectations of higher ed.
The importance of showing one’s development is prominent among the university documents. While the universities are not telling students how exactly to compose their college essays, these institutions are presenting themselves as important places for growth, and especially as places where students can further the growth they are already doing. So while this is not directly presented as an important value that should appear in the students’ essay, it is reflective of what the universities hold as important overall. Given that students are writing their essays with their audience in mind, these university documents can help students understand how the universities see themselves and can then speak to the values that the universities deem important as well.

While challenges appear infrequently across all the institutional documents, it is striking that they do not appear at all among the universities specifically. This is understandable given that university admissions websites want to attract students to apply, not scare them away with potential challenges they may experience. The college prep industry briefly addresses challenges as a way for students to show adversity and growth. For example, Princeton Review (2017a) gives advice on how students can address the following prompt from the 2017 Common Application essay portion:

**Prompt:** The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

**Princeton Review:** You're trying to show colleges your best self, so it might seem counterintuitive to willingly acknowledge a time you struggled. But overcoming challenges demonstrates courage, grit, and perseverance! That’s why the last piece of this prompt is essential. The obstacle you write about can be large
or small, but you must show the admissions committee how your perspective changed as a result. (Princeton Review, 2017a)

This example shows how students can use an example of a challenge to highlight their best selves. The college prep industry is guiding students in how to understand the essay prompts and how to make the essay reach their audience. The prompt explicitly asks the students to reflect on a challenge and what they learned. The college prep agency emphasizes that it is the students’ best self that is important, and even though it may be difficult to address a challenge and still show your best self, the college prep documents attempt to push the students toward doing so.

Next, we consider the student essays as well, and examine the college essays by university as well as the institutional documents broken down by each institution. Table 7 displays the student essays in conversation with the values expressed by the institutions. As with the way we have been discussing the value categories thus far, each value should be read as “it is important to acknowledge and/or emphasize…”
Table 7

Percent (%) of T-units per Major Values Emphasized Across All Stakeholders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>True self</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Mentorship</th>
<th>Context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>All institutional</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>docs</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College prep</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industry</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>All student essays</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Table 7 we see that students respond to many of the values that the institutions bring forward. But students also engage with the college essay task in varying ways. Students maneuver their responses to the essay in ways that they feel suitably answer the prompts. The audience value, which permeates among the institutional documents, conveys that the students need to have an awareness of their audience. This value can be thought of in connection to the importance of presenting one’s true self, as opening up about themselves to the admissions audience is a key way to show that they understand who they are writing to. Students, of course, address their audience in subtle ways – no one explicitly writes “Dear college counselors” – but through ways that nonetheless show that the students are responding to the college essay task. For example, a student may write:

I came back from this trip with a completely different view of the world, which was only strengthened when I started an internship in a psychological counselling center the week I returned home. (SLAU student, Logan)

Evidently, there have been an assortment of aspects that have aided in the modification of my character. Some of the most momentous qualities that have shaped my individuality are my background, identity, interests, and talents. Observably, there are copious components that you obtain when striving to become the best version of yourself. (LPU student, Blues)

I sincerely believe that this combination of structured and logical freedom has allowed me to form a core character at a very early age. This lends itself to aiding all my past accomplishments, whether it be my success in academia, in basketball,
or everyday life, as well as serving as the basis for all my future endeavors. (LPU student, Linguist)

Though these excerpts use differing strategies (and show varying mastery), such as reflecting on their beliefs, a specific experience, or addressing how they have grown, these students are each reaching out directly to the admissions audience to present themselves as worthwhile candidates. Considering the value of development is also relevant here as it again speaks to an awareness of the audience. Students who understand what admission counselors are looking for – evidence of the students’ personality, maturity, and growth – can anchor their essays in moments of development that they have experienced. This value of development is especially prominent among the university documents, where the schools present themselves as places where students will grow (57% of the values that the universities convey). Thinking back to the university website excerpts, though both universities do so differently, each is pitching itself as a positive environment and positive place for the students to be. Students are aware of the importance of conveying their development and talk about how they have grown thus far and the future growing they hope to do (27% of the values elicited in all student essays).

Looking further at Table 7, the value of addressing challenges is much more prominent among the student essays (22% of t-units among all student essays) than it was among the institutional documents (2% of t-units across all institutional documents). The college prep industry very minimally references challenges as a key factor in the college essay genre but the students are aware of this strategy and utilize it to meet the other institutional expectations. As shown above by the Princeton Review example on responding to a prompt, there are ways for students to address the main institutional values (having an awareness of the admissions audience, presenting a true self, and showing development) that can be done through describing a
challenge. The students are attentive to this strategy and use challenges as a way to frame their essays and to ultimately show growth.

Similarly, the value of giving context to set the scene and tell one’s story was not prominent among the institutional documents but seems to be of value in the student essays and even more so among the SLAU students (10% of t-units). Perhaps through this scene setting and descriptive work, students are finding yet another approach for addressing their audience. Students may see the admissions counselors as ones that might appreciate good storytelling, especially if students believe it is important for their essays to be creative and are looking for ways to show their creativity. Writing that is more elaborative and detailed can work to highlight the youth as good students that deserve admission to the university of choice and can also work to present those students as good writers.

**Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter presents results of analyses of how universities present themselves and convey their admissions expectations to students. University documents were considered alongside documents from the college preparatory for-profit industry, which gives students information on how to approach the college essay specifically. The values of the importance of the audience, personal development, and presenting a true self emerged as the most prominent among the institutional documents. In their discussion of the college admissions essay, the institutional stakeholders strongly emphasized that students writing the college essay need to be very aware of who they are writing to (admissions counselors) and what those readers expect. While the universities work to pitch (and sell) the kinds of places they are, the college prep industry documents orient students more specifically to the how of completing a college essay. I would argue that perhaps despite their best efforts, the overall understanding of the college essay
task can still be confusing and require an implicit understanding of academic expectations that leaves students with less access to the culture of college in the dark.

The college admissions essay asks students to present their true selves, while also being creative and unique, without being cliché, but by finding ways to stand out nonetheless. An excerpt from the Princeton Review (2017a) nicely summarizes this difficult task by telling students:

Avoid slipping into clichés or generalities. Take this opportunity to really examine an experience that taught you something you didn't previously know about yourself, got you out of your comfort zone, or forced you to grow. Sometimes it's better to write about something that was hard for you because you learned something than it is to write about something that was easy for you because you think it sounds admirable. As with all essay questions, the most important thing is to tell a great story: how you discovered this activity, what drew you to it, and what it's shown you about yourself (Princeton Review, 2017a).

What gets lost amid all these recommendations is how truly challenging it is to do everything that the college prep documents suggest. In many ways, the necessity for students to present a true self is cliché itself, as it asks students to write a prescribed narrative that they believe will fit with what admissions counselors would like to know about them. The essay can be about “deciding to smile”, which implies that the purpose of the essay is less about discovering some trueness about the student and more about asking them to write a convincing narrative. Students are primarily asked to use a metaphor for a brief look into their lives, without it being obvious that the example they give is a metaphor so as not to sound cliché. The college essay asks so much of students in a genre that is becoming more and more high-stakes. Students
who do not have the social and structural support at home and in their wider networks are left reading all of the things they should be doing without much insight as to how to capture all of these asks in one 500-700 word piece of writing.

I argue that although the percentage of values that placed importance on addressing the audience and the importance of presenting a true self are relatively low in the student essays, the students actually address these points through nuanced ways through the other values that they expressed. By focusing on their development, applicants use this value to show they are aware of their audience needs and use development as a frame for the presentation of who they are. By describing the challenges they faced, how they overcame them, and how they have grown from them, the students are enacting and demonstrating these same values of development, audience, and an “honest” description of themselves. Ultimately, this chapter shows that it is through their development, along with the presentation of challenges that aid in development, that the students are actively addressing their audience and presenting who they are.

Despite this flexibility with the college essay genre, it is not to say that difficulties for students, especially underserved students, do not remain in completing the essay task. Students understand that a key part of the college essay requirement is to emphasize their strengths and show their development into the person they are today. But there are varying degrees of fluency with which students can command the college essay genre. The next chapter considers how different students approach the college essay and what values are conveyed among groups. Having explored the foundation of the institutional values around the college essay and how the student essays respond and interact with those values overall, the next chapter examines the student essays more closely.
Chapter Four

Students Mediate the Meaning of College through the College Essay

This chapter focuses on a specific portion of the activity meaning system research design by examining the values participants expressed in their admissions essays. Extending beyond the analysis of institutional norms and expectations (Chapter Three), the goal of this chapter is to understand how students interpret the values of academia in the admissions process, as they express similar and/or different values from the institutions.

The research questions that guide the present chapter focus on the students’ understanding and execution of the college essay. How is the structure of preparation enacted in the college essays by different groups of students? Values conveyed by students at the two universities in the sample are considered: from one private, small, liberal arts university (SLAU) and one large, public university (LPU) in New York City. To examine the access to resources and preparation that students may have, demographic differences are also considered. Parental educational attainment is a relevant measure for access to support and resources. Students form two groups: those who are first-generation college students and those who are not first-generation are considered. First-generation status was defined as students who do not have a parent who earned a college degree (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Dennis et al., 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Stephens, et al., 2014). Use of college preparatory information was also considered in the exploration of the data. Essays were analyzed based on students who participated in college prep work and those who did not. College prep was considered even if it was not directly related to the college essay, such as SAT prep courses or meetings with guidance counselors related to applying to college.
Based on analyses of the student college essays, this chapter explains that all students engage with the overall requirements of the college essay task and even express many of the subtleties that this task requires. But as we explore students’ values (compared to those of the institutional stakeholders), we observe that differences emerge in the underlying and subtle ways that students can present themselves in their college essays. We also see differences between groups of students – based on university of attendance, participation in college preparatory work, and college first-generation status – in the ways they use and describe their development and the challenges they faced.

As in the previous chapter, eight major value expressions emerged from the institutional documents and in the student college essays. These values reflect the importance of emphasizing personal development; facing and acknowledging challenges; searching for and finding solutions to those challenges; having an awareness of your audience; presenting a true self; acknowledging relationships that offer emotional support; along with acknowledging mentorship with structural requirements; and addressing context in writing and storytelling.

Two examples of student essays illustrate several patterns in the essays, though they by no means capture everything the students express. The first essay by a SLAU student describes a meaningful place.

As I walk through the oak arch of the doorway and gaze upon the yellow paint of the surrounding walls, I am reminded of the best parts of my childhood as well as the blessings of my current circumstances. I gaze over at my Sicilian grandmother as she stands kneading bread while her marinara sauce bubbling on the stove exudes a smell that brings me pure joy. It is during these sensory moments when I feel sure that this place is my favorite place in the world. My grandparent’s kitchen is the place where I am
perfectly content. It symbolizes the family that loves me. The classical Italian kitchen reminds me of all the ups and downs my family has gone through. The childhood memories of drawing pictures of my future with my sister and my cousins while my grandmother entices us with the smells of what she is cooking for dinner will never leave me. I was born into the most remarkable family I could possibly have hoped for and I am thankful everyday for that.

My grandparent’s house is a second home to me. It is the only house that has stayed constant throughout my life. Whenever I go over there I can’t help but smile. I love how every time I walk into the house and say hello, my grandfather says, “Are you forgetting something?” and I give him a puzzled look. He smiles and taps his check as I realize I didn’t give him a kiss on the cheek when I walked in. I smile and bounce over to him and peck him on the check. I think of all the family dinners that I have had there. All twenty of my relatives eating dinner and me stuck at the kids table, just trying to sneak onto the adults table and be apart of their enticing conversations. This kitchen holds some of my most cherished memories. The place where I would hide during hide and seek, and play jacks on the oak table. The times my mother would dye my grandmother’s hair, and my sister and I would sit there giggling as we watched. I will always remember that kitchen as the best place in the world. That kitchen represents my family more than any one person in my family ever could.

The walls of the kitchen, which are covered with etchings of famous works of art and portraits of family members, induce a nostalgic relief as I remember the best parts of my childhood. I see the drawing my grandfather did of my sister, the picture of my grandmother and me when her first cookbook came out. I look at the art covering the
walls that inspired my mom and her siblings to become artists. I look into the loving face of my grandparents that helped inspire me to follow my dreams. This kitchen is a little piece of the world where everything can seem possible. I experience serenity, knowing that I am loved. I experience the joy that all my childhood memories bring me. I am perfectly content sitting in the oak chairs around the table laughing at my grandfathers jokes, or helping my grandmother cook as she tells me “good cooks don’t sit down while they cook”, or just contemplating life as I think about the future and what it holds. My grandparent’s kitchen represents my past and many of the events that have transpired to make me who I am. As I walk back out of the oak archway of the door I see my future and the possibilities. I look back at my grandparents and my grandfather says, like he always does, “If I don’t see you in the future” and I reply, “I’ll see you in the pasture”. I walk away imagining life’s possibilities and I smile thinking of the place I just left.

(Penguin, SLAU student)

The essay above displays a number of the values that students expressed. The space of the kitchen interweaves throughout the whole essay and moves the reader through a number of values that the student deems important, with a primary focus on the importance of relationships. Through describing her grandparents’ kitchen, the student shows the audience how she sees herself and what she deems important. She uses the kitchen to share how family, love, and learning from those close to her have been key elements of her growing up, and how that growing up has happened in that same kitchen space. Her narrative moves the reader beyond just the meaningful place of the kitchen, where we get a sense she can keep returning back to, and shows us who the student is outside of the kitchen as well – an optimist and forward thinker, but one that is grounded in the support of her family, as she presumably goes on to college.
The next example essay tells a very different story, though it brings the reader to a similar conclusion. This example is by a LPU student and discusses the hardships faced after his mother’s cancer diagnosis. While this essay also discusses the importance of relationships, it also goes deep into the challenges that student has faced, in part relating to those meaningful relationships as well. The essay is about his mother’s sickness and death, but those challenges are made meaningful because of the importance of their bond and the relationship the student subsequently has with his father and others close to him.

In the sixth grade, my mother told me that she had become sick. No specifications, no elaboration. Just an anonymous illness. She presented this to my two younger brothers and me as my dad stood in the living room corner, unable to make eye contact. My Albanian culture highly values a stalwart, silent strength in its men which would enable them to become the breadwinners and emotional rocks of the family. However, my father was neither of these things. Immigrating to America in his mid-thirties, he had neglected to assimilate, and never learned proper English. My mother assumed his relinquished role while his emotional incapacities and inability to tolerate our increasingly insufferable home led him to further indulge in gambling and alcohol, but it was only after the death of my mother that I realized his total absence and neglect of my mother, my siblings, and myself.

My grandfather had died of cancer during my infancy, but I hadn’t realized that my mother inherited his illness. My family elects to ignore mounting precarious situations until they combust, and this was true for the realization of my mother’s illness by my brothers and me. My siblings and I had absolute faith in her eventual conquest over cancer. Even while my impressionable mental health began to dwindle with anxiety
and mood swings in my teenage years, the support of my mother and brothers allowed me to maintain A’s without professional help. However, her death in November of my sophomore year shattered our confidence in this ideal, and the consequent disillusionment poisoned our makeshift home. My father retreated into his vices to cope, and it was my responsibility to assume the vacated role of both mother and father. This was cemented by the last conversation my decrepit, dehydrated mother and I shared, in which the only words she uttered that day were to me: “Do well in school.” I embellished this pact with the words “I’ll care for my brothers; I’ll be responsible for them.”

My mother had been stricken with depression during my teenage years, but I hadn’t realized then that, beginning with her death, I had inherited the brunt of her mental illness. My anxiety multiplied after November, and once I had been rejected from my school’s mock trial team, my ego had popped (crashed, withered, deflated, disintegrated) and my energy, motivation, and attention had seemingly evaporated. Panicked, I consulted my father during one of his rare visits home and he seemed to echo what every Albanian had communicated to me at my mother’s funeral, “Be strong,” stating that I was the eldest brother, and could not afford to expose weakness in such a trying time. Moreover, he refused to provide me therapy or medication, under the pretense that I “don’t need it, and it’s a waste of money.”

Initially, I complied and even feigned to understand my father, but it became increasingly apparent that this was a persistent issue. As my grades, which I once worked feverishly to maintain, fell, my school began to intervene for the remainder of my sophomore year, but my father was obstinate. He appealed to the guilt that I had procured due to my mental health, between the stress that I imposed on my mother and the tears
that my brothers shed in empathy for me, believing that this was the reason my family had fallen apart. Summoning my strength of character, I contacted Children’s Services in the beginning of my junior year in spite of the potential risks and in hopes of gaining help. I wanted, more than anything, to be mentally able to fully realize both of the promises I had made to my mother. Through the support of my extended family, my brothers, my school, and social services, by the end of my junior year, I had overcome the mental and emotional barriers my father had instilled and acquired medication and therapy, creating the foundation to continue and expand my education and fulfill the potential my mother wanted and believed in. (Sabers, LPU student)

The LPU student expresses many hardships he has faced over the years, connecting these to familial struggles and to personal struggles, most likely stemming from family challenges. The narrative revolves around his mother’s cancer, but that challenge works to show the importance of relationships for this student as well. His essay not only shows us the importance the student places on relationships, but complicates those relationships by explaining how culture also plays a meaningful role in developing and sustaining those relationships. The writer introduces a number of meaningful relationships – his mother, his father, his siblings, and school personnel – to take the reader through how he grew from dealing with his mother’s terrible illness into the person he is today. We see this student move from a very dark and challenging place into someone who has been able to overcome many obstacles and be a mature and college-ready young man.

These two essays differ in their topics, one describing a happy family place and the other an extremely difficult family time. As I will illustrate in the analysis below, the LPU student essays emphasize hardships and perseverance much more than the SLAU students’ essays. This
is not to say that the SLAU students did not experience hardships or that they did not write about them overall. Rather, the LPU students chose to place more emphasis on the challenges themselves, while the SLAU students quickly moved away from focusing on challenges into other areas importance.

What appears in both essays exemplified above, and in the essays across universities overall, is the importance students place in conveying the growth and development they have done over the years. Each of the experiences they choose for their stories show how the student has come to be the person they are today. In the example above, the LPU student connects the values he holds dear to the lessons he has learned over time, the support he has found in others, and ultimately, to the importance of the role his mother played in his life:

Through the support of my extended family, my brothers, my school, and social services, by the end of my junior year, I had overcome the mental and emotional barriers my father had instilled and acquired medication and therapy, creating the foundation to continue and expand my education and fulfill the potential my mother wanted and believed in.

(Sabers, LPU student)

The SLAU student uses the space of the kitchen to symbolize the foundation of who she sees herself as and of the possibilities she believes the future holds.

My grandparent’s kitchen represents my past and many of the events that have transpired to make me who I am. As I walk back out of the oak archway of the door I see my future and the possibilities. I look back at my grandparents and my grandfather says, like he always does, “If I don’t see you in the future” and I reply, “I’ll see you in the pasture”. I walk away imagining life’s possibilities and I smile thinking of the place I just left.

(Penguin, SLAU student)
These narratives display some of the overarching patterns of values that emerge in the college essays. The essays start with a specific experience, whether a symbolic kitchen or a parent’s illness, that gives shape to the whole essay. Often, the essay takes the reader through a challenge that comes to a resolution, which displays the student’s growth and development. Relationships are expressed as important to the youth as well, but again, ultimately work to contribute to the personal growth of the student. All of the essays culminate in a resolution that shows the student as a thoughtful and mature young adult. Whether the student takes the reader there through overcoming a challenge or through demonstrating meaningful relationships, the ultimate takeaway is about the youth themselves. The college essay genre is a personal essay and the students interweave values of personal importance in order to address the college admissions audience and present a true self. By inserting elements of their histories that they tie into a narrative of development, the students attempt to describe a piece of themselves separate from their test scores and grades.

In addition to illustrating the major values and value patterns, the analysis also acknowledges the complexity of the students’ expressions. Values analysis offers the advantage of identifying an organizing principle, but also relies on hits and expressions that are not explicitly stated. It is through this analysis that the variety of ways challenges, development, and true self come to life, rather than having to be explicitly stated. For example, when the SLAU student writes “This kitchen is a little piece of the world where everything can seem possible,” she expresses her own sense of confidence and optimism, as grounded in the imagery of the kitchen she has detailed. Their essays show that it is not only literally what the narratives are about, whether it is about a mother battling cancer or a granddaughter entering a kitchen. The point of the story, the meaning of what the students want to share of themselves with the
admissions officers, emerges in the combination of the values organizing the specific presentation they craft.

**Similarities and Differences in the Values Students Expressed**

Stepping away from these specific examples, we examine the values that students expressed across all college essays. Table 8 shows the percentage of t-units of the values that students at the private SLAU and the public LPU express. In the same way that the values categories have been used thus far, each value should be read as “it is important to acknowledge and/or emphasize…”
Table 8

*Percent (%) of T-units of Major Values Emphasized in Student Essays by University*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>True self</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Mentor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All student essays</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Institutional documents emphasized the importance of one’s development as a prominent value of a college essay. Considering the value of development in the student essays, there is no difference between how much SLAU and LPU students emphasize this value (about one quarter of all values expressed by SLAU and LPU students related to their personal development). This is an interesting place to start as it shows both university groups are aware that depicting their development needs to be a prominent feature of their essays. In addition to the importance of one’s development, all of the students are similarly conveying the importance of presenting their true selves and of being aware of their audience. The importance of audience and the presentation of a true self were also values that the institutions deemed relevant and here across university cohorts, students equally understood and engaged with this value.

Interesting differences emerged between the student essays from the two universities. Differences appear in the emphasis students gave to experiencing challenges. While challenges can be an integral part of the doing the college essay task, where students use an example of a challenge they have faced to show how they have overcome adversity and grown, differences emerged in how students at the two universities used the importance of challenges in their writing. The LPU students expressed more than double the amount of challenges and obstacles they have experienced compared to their SLAU peers. Students who attended the SLAU expressed significantly fewer challenges ($M = 5.00, SD = 4.34$) than do the LPU students ($M = 9.94, SD = 6.37$) ($t(33) = 2.70, p = 0.01$). This means that on average per essay, LPU students elicited almost 10 t-units of challenges – as in they dedicated 10 sentences of their essay to the experience of the challenge – whereas SLAU students expressed only about half that number of challenges in their written pieces. So while SLAU students still do present challenges as an integral part of their story (all but four essays in the whole sample convey challenges), SLAU
students do not spend too much time delving into the details of the challenge. Conversely, LPU students seem to be more rooted in the challenge itself and spend more time describing and emphasizing the hardships they faced.

This pattern appeared in the two essay examples that opened the chapter and can also be seen in two excerpts below. The first is from an SLAU student and briefly mentions the challenge they are facing before moving on to the choices the student makes to go forward.

That day, I walked to band class and saw a sign on the door of the band room that said the name of the drum major for the 2015-2016 school year. I was crestfallen because it was not me and it was my last chance. Feeling under-appreciated, I felt resentful towards my band conductor and at the former drum majors who made the decision. I listened as other students said they planned to quit band because they were not given leadership positions. Although I was disappointed, I refused to quit. I love the camaraderie of music groups and the opportunity to challenge myself with difficult music and the opportunities to solo even though I often feel nervous. (Flame, SLAU student)

The next example is from a LPU student essay, where more time is devoted to expressing the details of the student’s challenges.

Every day, after school, I come home to a lonely, abandoned house. It was always me and my older brother, whom dropped out of high school and leeches off my parents which really ticks me off. My daily routine would always be to finish work then spend the rest of my day watching television until my sister comes home from school to cook. Occasionally my brother would come out of
his hole to get food from the fridge or bother me. He comes out randomly and starts teasing me. He starts to lecture me about how stupid I am, how our parents never loved me and how I was adopted. When words weren’t enough he starts to punch me and push me around and provoke me to take action. Every time I would fight back, he would overpower me and return to his hole.

(Jewel, LPU student)

These examples show how challenges are relevant to both of the students’ essays. The difference emerges in the weight and import the challenges carry themselves. It appears that the SLAU student uses the challenge simply to ground what comes next, whereas in the LPU example, the growth and development from the challenge is still unclear. This difference in the use of an important value may relate to students’ understanding of the expectations of the college essay genre. If students opt to use the prompt that asks them to describe an obstacle, they may be lured into focusing the essay on the full details of the obstacle, rather than strategically using the obstacle as a vehicle to demonstrate their growth.

The importance of addressing solutions is relevant in the context of challenges as well. Data shows that students at the two universities focus equally on presenting solutions. While we might expect that since LPU students elaborate more in depth on challenges, they would subsequently spend more time detailing solutions to their challenges, this does not seem to be the case. LPU students portray the importance of solutions at the same rate as their SLAU peers.

Finally, the importance of addressing the context of a story came up differently between students at LPU and the SLAU. When the writer used more descriptive language to paint a picture for the reader or to set the scene for the story they are telling, these t-units were coded as the value of addressing the context, as that context because meaningful to the overall
understanding of the story. The value of context speaks to the importance students and institutions place on the literary component of essay writing. In this sample, context is a relatively small portion of the values the students elicit but still functions to build the story the student is trying to tell. The differences in how students use descriptive context in their essays may show differences in the ways students write, where the SLAU students use more colorful language and spend more time setting the scene through descriptive language. There is a statistically significant difference is the focus that students give to presenting the context in their stories, where the LPU students ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.38$) present significantly less context than the SLAU students ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 2.82$) ($t(33) = -3.06$, $p = 0.006$). Below, two examples from SLAU students display this context-setting in storytelling:

I am Sherlock Holmes, pleasantly distant from the crowds of innocent civilians. I borrow his expertise to uncover the interesting snapshots lost in the chaos. Others are overwhelmed with sights and smells, but I'm able to capture the seafood salesman’s exasperation, and the light as it strikes exactly one bouquet of daffodils. I’m in my element—a camera in my hands, a fascinating city and an exhilarating commotion surrounding me. (Randall, SLAU student)

And,

Ambigleo number two: Dealing with poor pouring habits. At mealtime, there are pitchers of water and sometimes lemonade at every table. This presents a challenge because everybody pours water differently. Some people pour from the side, from the top or all the way up to the brim of the cup. Dealing with all these different pourers has also taught me an underlying message. I have learned to appreciate all different types of people. I have come to understand, from my many
mealtimes at camp, how to embrace and have respect for all the different types of
pouring methods. The world is going to be full of all different kinds of people and
I’m ready to pour water with all of them. (Blueprint, SLAU student)

Value Patterns Between the Essays from the Two Universities

Next, I’d like to consider the essays as a whole again, to look at overall differences in
presentation based on the order of prominence of the values that are expressed in the essays. The
top two values elicited by SLAU and LPU students are the importance of one’s development and
the importance of addressing challenges. But, these values are flipped in prevalence at each
university, where the SLAU primarily emphasizes development (28% of t-units) and the LPU
focuses most on challenges (31%). Looking at the second most prominent value, though this is
challenges for SLAU students, they do this at less than half the rate at which LPU students
expressed challenge.
Table 9

Values Enacted by Students at Each University in Order of Prominence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Private SLAU</th>
<th>Public LPU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development is important (28%)</td>
<td>Facing and overcoming challenges is important (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facing and overcoming challenges is important (14%)</td>
<td>Development is important (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships are important (14%)</td>
<td>Finding solutions is important (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding solutions is important (12%)</td>
<td>It is important to present your true self (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describing context in writing is important (10%)</td>
<td>Relationships are important (7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of audience is important (9%)</td>
<td>Mentorship is important (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is important to present your true self (9%)</td>
<td>Awareness of audience is important (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship is important (5%)</td>
<td>Describing context in writing is important (4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the one group, development is a predominant focus with a relative balance of challenges, relationships, solutions, and context providing a foundation for the students’ valued development. In the other group, addressing challenges and the importance of personal development create an interdependent orientation to the essay while the other values are expressed less and in relatively equal proportions. Perhaps this interdependence of challenges and growth shows that they see these two values working hand in hand. LPU students focus a lot on their challenges as a way of showing their development, rather than at the expense of their development. All of the students use stories of challenge to show how they have grown from those experiences. Perhaps LPU students rely on the challenge narratives more as it gives them an opportunity to narrate about an experience they have not otherwise typically embraced.

If we revisit the two example essays that began this chapter, there we can see in full view how these values are differently dominating the essays of the two students. The LPU student references back to his mother’s illness and the difficulty and heartbreak that brought to his family throughout the whole essay. This student also describes his growth and development from this significant experience, while continuing to describe it as a challenge. The SLAU student alternatively grounds herself in the comfort and joy she experiences from her family, and specifically in how that is embodied through her grandparent’s kitchen. She uses this story to describe ways she has grown and some obstacles she has overcome, but instead of coming back to challenges she has faced, she comes back to the development she has been able to reach because of her loving home. While both essays recall meaningful relationships, the SLAU student’s writing is grounded in the theme of her grandparent’s kitchen and goes back to the importance of her family frequently. As shown in Table 9, relationships appear third in prominence for the SLAU cohort and fifth in prominence among the LPU student essays. These
examples by no means represent exact outlines of what other students from these universities do, they help frame how different values appear prominently in different essays.

**Value Expressions Along Demographic Groups**

In addition to examining the values elicited by students at each university, demographic data allows us to consider whether there are differences in the values conveyed by students who participated in college preparation (either through taking courses or reading materials) and those who did not. Additionally, analysis examined the values between students who are first-generation college students and those who have at least one parent who went to college.
Table 10

*Percent (%) of T-units of Major Values Emphasized in Student Essays by Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All student essays</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>True self</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Mentorship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Prep</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Generation</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The value of development continues to play a prominent role in the analysis after examining the student essays along demographic variables as well. This is an integral part of the college essay genre and one that all students seem to be aware of – regardless of the universities they attend, their access to college preparation, or their first-generation status. While we may expect that students with less preparation or less access to educational capital may miss some of the institutional requirements of the essay, here we see that across groups of students, youth embrace one of the primary purposes of the essay as portrayed by the institutions: to demonstrate personal development. Perhaps this value is such an integral piece of the college essay genre that all students, despite direct exposure to the college admissions process, are aware of this integral component of the essay.

Some of the patterns that appeared between SLAU and LPU students are also observed when examining the values based on college preparatory participation and first-generation status. Similar to the LPU students’ presentation of challenges, students who did not participate in college prep and those who are first-generation college students spent more time conveying the challenges they experienced. While these differences are not statistically significant like the differences in challenges between students at the two universities, there are moderately significant differences where students who did college preparatory work \((M = 6.36, \ SD = 5.04)\) convey fewer challenges than and those who did not \((M = 10.50, \ SD = 7.10)\) \((t(33) = 1.95, \ p = 0.06)\). A similar pattern holds for first-generation students, where those who are first-generation convey more challenges than those who are not the first in their families to go to college. It is important to acknowledge that these trends do not mean that students who write less about challenges experienced fewer challenges in their lives. What these numbers speak to is that students who use challenges in their essay, but not as the focal point, have more access to
resources that affect their awareness of the culture of college (access to college preparatory help and parents with higher educational attainment) and may be more equipped to understand the subtleties of the college essay genre. Therefore, the students are able to move from the challenge to the description of their personal development based on that challenge, rather than settling into the difficulties they faced.

Looking further at students who did and did not do college preparatory work, results show that there is a significant difference in how much students attempt to present a true self in their narratives. Though I did not see any differences in the importance of presenting a true self between students at the two universities, there is a significant difference between those who did college prep ($M = 3.60, SD = 2.29$) and those who did not ($M = 1.50, SD = 0.97$) ($t = -2.78, p = 0.009$). Perhaps then, the insight gained from college prep work is distributed throughout universities, where immersion in college prep may work to drive the comparable value of presenting a true self among the SLAU and the LPU students. There are an equal number of students who did not participate in college prep at both universities (five students from each university), which may signify that access to college prep makes up for some of the differences in advantages that youth with access to academic resources may experience.

Overall, Table 10 points to several ways in which students – all students – accurately understand components of the college essay genre and its expectations. If we consider the findings around the challenges that students present, using a story about a challenge is a key strategic way to approach the college essay. It is through a challenge that students can show their subsequent growth and development – a key point of the admissions essay. But there are nuances from the institutional stakeholders around how much of a focus those challenges should receive. The college essay task requires students to find a balance between conveying a challenge,
describing how they overcame it, and what they learned. This is conveyed sometimes directly in
the institutional documents and at other times more implicitly, through an understanding of what
the university expectations are. However, we saw that students differed in the emphases they
gave to the balance of these values, where LPU students stayed more with the specifics of their
challenges and were less able to strike a balance between challenge and subsequent learning.

The value of development also relates to the importance of students to present their true
selves. Institutional documents all encourage students to present a true self and a major approach
that students can take in order to do so is through conveying their growth and development. The
strong prevalence of the value of development is an indication that students understand and
actively engage with the college essay genre. Students are aware that their strengths and positive
attributes need to shine through and that the best way to do so is to show how they have come to
develop and utilize those strengths and characteristics. Here, the different groups of students
showed balanced rates of conveying personal development. But because of the space the LPU
students dedicated to challenges, less room remained in their essays for the elaboration of other
values. Therefore, we saw that the LPU student essays focused less on the importance of
relationships and on the elaboration of context within their stories. With less space remaining to
elaborate further on other values, the LPU students are less able to capture all of the implicit asks
of the college essay genre, asks that are more obvious to students who come to the essay with
more knowledge of the culture of college. The LPU students still perform the college essay task
adequately and address key features, but the balance of how much they emphasize these key
features is off from what institutional documents suggest the ideal balance should be.
A Closer Consideration of Students’ Expressions of Challenges and Development

In addition to the major values discussed so far, the analysis also examined sub-values relating to the major value categories. These looked deeper into the importance of facing challenges and of demonstrating one’s development. The value of challenge was distinguished by emphasis on interpersonal, intrapersonal, or structural challenges. The development value consisted of the importance of personal growth, where students discussed how they have grown into the person they are today. The value of passion was prevalent as described by students who discovered something they are passionate about and conveyed wanting to pursue this going forward. Students also highlighted the importance of learning as a key part of their development, as a moment of change where they thought about or understood something in a new way or gained knowledge that they did not have prior. The value of differences relates to students who deeply cared and were moved by accepting and understanding diversity as a key part of their development. Students also expressed their development through their gaining an increase in confidence. Table 11 focuses on these sub-values, as expressed by students among the two universities.

Table 11

Percent (%) of Sub-Values by T-unit as Expressed in College Essays of SLAU and LPU Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SLAU</th>
<th>LPU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Challenges</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Challenges</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Challenges</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural Challenges</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Development</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast to the SLAU participants, LPU students emphasized the structural challenges that they faced. This difference is significant, where LPU students discussed structural challenges more ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 4.44$) than SLAU students ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 0.69$) ($t(33) = 2.08$, $p = 0.05$). In other words, per student essay, LPU students presented on average 2.5 t-units of structural challenges, while SLAU students barely mentioned this type of challenge. Alternately, SLAU students highlighted intrapersonal challenges, bringing in more of a focus on their individual experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

The finding that there are differences in the types of challenges that were emphasized is interesting, especially when considered in connection to the values the institutional documents emphasized. With the focus on the need to present a true and honest self, as conveyed by the institutional documents, we could assume that the challenges students are expected to write about would be interpersonal. The college essay genre is a first-person narrative with an expectation of the student to show who they are. Telling a narrative about yourself is most likely introspective and may lead the reader to expect interpersonal challenges.

The difference in expression between interpersonal and structural challenges may tie into the structural and cultural advantages that the SLAU students, who presumably had more support for the college admission process, may experience. The SLAU students may intuit that since the essay has to be about them, they can make a stronger case for themselves if the challenges they present are specifically unique to them personally. The LPU students on the other hand, are a much more diverse sample and are also living and studying in New York City. This exposure could make them more aware and attuned to structural challenges that affect all of us. Having an awareness and grappling with structural challenges may emerge as a resource the LPU students carry. While students from different backgrounds may demonstrate differences in the
understanding of the expectations of the college essay genre, perhaps LPU students are more willing to look outside themselves and consider wider forces and how those shape their lives more broadly. An example from a LPU student is presented below. A number of LPU student essays discussed challenges of poverty, immigration, and/or personal identity development as an immigrant youth.

I grew up in a rural area of Jamaica-a neighborhood where cats cannot be seen on the road after dark, and the loud bark of bullets often shatters the silence of the night. I lived with my mother and three other siblings in a board house; something that Jamaicans refer to as "a cardboard box". The house was built on an old abandoned train line located in front a cemetery and a pond. The entire house architecture was quite simple: a square with zinc roof with faded pink paint and broken glass windows. The entire building lacked structural support, a fact that caused my mother great worries whenever the hurricane season approached…

Coming to America had its own challenges too… (Eighteen, LPU student)

Next, examining the development sub-values, the LPU students focused most on growth and learning in the types of development they expressed. The SLAU students also presented growth as the most prevalent developmental sub-value, but they also emphasized the importance of following their passions. If we recall the difference between these two values, growth is about who the student has grown into and who they are today, whereas passion describes who they want to become as they continue to develop. The SLAU students are using space in their essays to show the admissions committees who they want to grow into beyond who they already are today, based on the experiences that have shaped them thus far. There is a significant difference
between SLAU students’ essays ($M = 3.12, SD = 2.29$) and the LPU students’ essays ($M = 1.28, SD = 1.74$) in the number of t-units emphasizing passion ($t(33) = -2.77, p = 0.009$).

The finding on differences in students’ expressions of passion is interesting and can again speak to the differences in access and understanding of the culture of college (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004) that students from the SLAU and the LPU school are coming from. Students with more awareness of the culture of college have been trained to think ahead and plan ahead – to talk about the future and where they see themselves going, to dream and imagine what the future may hold. Alternatively, students with less access to resources that can prepare them for the culture of college focus on the goals they have to meet and the things they need to do in the present. Both groups of students focus heavily on how they have grown into the people they are today, but the LPU students seem to focus more on conveying their maturity and attempting to show the admissions committee that they are independent and ready for the challenges of college. The SLAU students, on the other hand, seem to be more comfortable with portraying a self that is still in development, that allows for room to grow later and to use the space of college for that growth.

Below are two examples from student essays that speak to these development-related values. First is an example from an SLAU student that speaks to experiences she has had that have led to her finding her passion. T-units that were coded as the value of passion are presented in bold.

My parents have always encouraged me to follow my dreams, to make them a reality and to push myself to my limits. I have used this philosophy in everything I do, not just in music. Taking their words to heart, I decided that I could still continue my passion for music even if it will not be my career. I realized one
thing in life could not define my character. I am still extremely passionate about music: it has shaped me into the person I am today, but a musician requires time, patience and discipline. I took my passion and infused it into all aspects of my life including my rigorous course work. My musical experience taught me that I could infuse my passion and discipline into all aspects of my life.

(Capitals, SLAU student)

The student above explicitly expressed her drives and interests as passion. Her passion for music fueled her development and shaped other parts of her life as well. Passion can also be prevalent even without being explicitly stated. This second excerpt is also from an SLAU student and shows how the experiences she had, despite not being able to appreciate them as a child, have shaped what she wants to do with her life going forward.

Little did I know that her selfless actions then would help determine my career path now. At one time or another I wanted to be a veterinarian, a teacher, a chef, a psychologist, or a movie star that would use my fame and fortune to advocate for good causes. When I look back at all the things I wanted to be, I recognize the one thing they all had in common: a natural ambition to assist, support, or guide others with my services. While my focus has shifted in terms of whom I wish to assist and how, the desire to follow my mother’s example of leading an altruistic life of service has been constant. Although I didn’t realize it while I was stuck in the Watts’ home for what seemed to my childish brain like forever, I can concur that those afternoons of doing something I despised led me to discover what I strive for. (Rangers, SLAU student)
The essay by Rangers also reflected on experiences that the student had that have contributed to her development, but here she conveyed her passion less explicitly. She wrote about how her desire to help was always constant and was molded by the influence of her mother. This example shows the less direct ways that students can still convey their values, in this case the importance of helping others and the students’ development through following her passion. Next is an example of an essay from an LPU student that shows the growth she student has done and the person she is today:

Eventually I came to a conclusion regarding my dilemma between my ethnicities – that I am not required to choose just one country and stick with it, when I can just be comfortable blending them together in a way that makes myself who I am. Coming from two different cultures gives me a different point of view as well as an open-mindedness to anything occurring around me. Coming from two different ethnicities gives me a few advantages as well. I am able to speak two languages fluently, and understand a third language as well. It is easier for me to learn and communicate in different languages compared to others due to me naturally creating ways to effectively retain three of them as a child. Instead of looking at Greek and Filipino [my cultural] social gatherings as two separate things that I am an outlier to, they are instead more communities that I can fit into and that share something in common with me. I finally have a sense of identity regarding my background and have become a more rounded person overall. (The Roots, LPU student)

As we have seen with other examples, the importance of culture and relationships are expressed again as meaningful values in The Roots essay above. Through describing
how her culture has contributed to who she is today, this LPU student emphasized how she has grown into a “more rounded person overall”, due at least in part to her background. Next, a second LPU example also discusses important growing and development this student has done and highlights the challenges she has and continues to overcome.

Almost a year later, I still see my doctor once a week. The work he has me doing is tiring, and once I get the hang of a particular exercise, it is exchanged for something more challenging. But the results are clear. My grades have improved and while I may not be at the top of my class, I am finally at the top of my game. Although I sometimes wish I had known about this problem earlier, I know that working through my disability for so many years has made me strong and persistent. I am so grateful that I was finally diagnosed correctly, but I am even more grateful that I learned an important lesson: there is no magic pill. With good luck and good support you can figure out how to solve a problem, but the only magic lies in how hard you are willing to work to achieve your goals. (Avalanche, LPU student)

In each of these examples, students are showing to the admissions committee that they have grown over the years and are not the same children that they once were. They have learned to overcome challenges and have learned deeply about themselves. Most of the essays also ground student development in relationships and show a person or culture as meaningful to their growth. Nevertheless, as the examples subtly show, the SLAU students have explored opportunities and consider what it is they want to do in the future
as they pursue their passions. The LPU students have also deeply grown, but their stories convey overall life lessons and personal maturity, rather than plans for the future.

Overall, students are showing their understanding of the college essay genre and are responding to the genre with moving and convincing stories. The differences lie in how students convey their development and which aspects of that development they choose to emphasize. In all cases, students are making these choices – they are actively in charge of what story they want to tell and how they want the admissions committees to see them. But the differences in how students do this – through the differences in challenges that are portrayed and development that is shown – speak to the differences in access to choices students have and the ways they make sense of what choices they should (and can) be making based on what information should appear in their college admissions essays.

Chapter Summary

Overall, this chapter showed a number of patterns between the values conveyed by students at the two universities. All of the essays expressed values of development and students at both institutions did this equally. In the previous chapter, we saw that institutional documents encouraged students to present their true selves and a major way through which students can do so is by showing how they have grown and developed. The strong prevalence of the value of development indicated that students actively engaged with the college essay genre in a way that was expected. It is interesting to further unpack this value of development because though we did not see differences in development between students overall, we did see differences in the types of development different student groups expressed. SLAU students spoke of their development in terms of growing their passions while the LPU students described growth and maturity.
Students at the SLAU and the LPU emphasized challenges to different extents and in different ways. Students from LPU spent significantly more time describing and demonstrating the challenges that they faced. Challenges are a tool through which students can convey their development and are discussed as such in the institutional documents. But there are nuanced differences in how challenges should be used as a tool. A balanced display of challenge and growth would speak to the genre task, rather than a deep focus on the difficulties of the challenging experience itself. In addition, there were differences in the types of challenges youth chose to describe, where LPU students focused more on structural challenges while SLAU students tended to look more inwardly and present personal challenges. Figure 1 below summarizes the major value expressions as they were expressed by the stakeholders in response to and relation with the college essay.
Results also examined the essays of students who participated in college preparatory work and those who did not, along with students who were the first in their families to attend college (first-generation) and those who were not. Interestingly, there were differences in the level that students presented their true selves in their college essays between those who participated in college prep and those who did not. This is important as one of the key aspects of the college essay that the institutional stakeholders present is the value of conveying who you are to the admissions committee. The students who participated in college prep were more aware of this importance and presented more of their true selves in their writing.
While there were not significant differences between first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers, the differences between these two groups follow similar patterns as those between students at the two universities. Additionally, we know that there is a significant association between being first-generation and the university those students attend, where most first-generation students attend the LPU university. It seems that first-generation students have less access to college resources and are therefore less equipped to pick up on the implicit asks of the college admissions essay task (for example, that one should present a challenge they have overcome while at the same time, one should not dwell on the challenge for too long). Students’ whose parents went to college, primarily the SLAU students in this sample, have exposure to the culture of college and the higher education discourse community that goes along with it. This discourse community is embedded in the implicit culture of home, where the social supports students have and engage with can support students’ development and understanding of the expectations of the culture of college. Brandt (1998) considers these ‘sponsors of literacy’ who “enable, support, teach, or model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” (p. 166). These sponsors can also be considered as gatekeepers who maintain access to the discourse community, but can also be teachers (broadly speaking) who can provide their resources so that others can learn the requirements of the discourse community. What this activity-meaning systems design shows is that students draw on varying resources in their college essays, so that they may receive varying guidance in approaching the writing task. Through all the varying stakeholders that are involved in the college process, there is not just one gatekeeper that determines access to the academic discourse community. Rather it is a community that students can approach from varying degrees.
With that said, students’ understanding and presentation of challenges also offers insight to alternative interpretations where the students are using their essays to mediate a variety of diverse cultural and institutional influences. Students come to the college essay with diverse histories and bring those histories into play in the construction of their essays. The LPU student essays, which respond to the LPU university culture and perhaps New York City more broadly, bring their uniquely different perspectives on what challenges could entail. By breaking the norm of what the proper balance between challenges and development in an essay should be, these students are able to creatively play and perhaps adapt the essay to fit to their realities.

Through these results, we see that the differences in the student essays are not drastic or dramatic, where some students are completely lost on how to complete the college essay task while others flourish. The differences lie in the nuances of the expectations of the college essay genre and in the interpretation of how to do the genre based on the students’ exposure, familiarity, and access to the norms of higher education. In many ways, this is an even bigger challenge for educators, policy makers, and those interested in university reform because it shows that these nuances of understanding are harder to teach and convey. The results posit that access to college preparatory help does aid in closing some of the gap between more and less advantaged students, but variances in the nuances of the essay task exist. Given that all students are performing the college essay task overall, these differences in the minutia and in the details matter. It can be those small differences that determine successful admission for a student, especially at institutions where the essay carries more weight.
Chapter Five

The Significance of the College Audience in Students’ Expressions

In the previous two chapters, I presented values analysis to explore the meaning making and interaction of expressions prevalent in the data: the institutional documents and the student essays. The present chapter shifts the focus of analysis from values to the expressive details, the evaluative words in language, with the assumption that speakers and writers use these words to signal the significance of the story to the story teller (Daiute, 2014; Lucic, 2013). I present this analysis on the student essays only, with the goal of studying the students’ implicit meaning-making and evaluation.

Significance Analysis

Significance analysis focuses on evaluative words used in narrative, which can help indicate how narrators feel about a situation and how they are working to address their audience (Daiute, 2014). The audience that writers (or speakers) respond to is especially relevant in this context where the admissions counselors are a very particular audience. The counselors are strangers to the applying students, but expect to hear intimate personal details about the applicants’ lives, which will influence whether the counselor deems the student a good candidate for admission. This analysis addresses the question of how the structure of preparation is enacted in the college essays by different groups of students. The ways in which students write and specifically, the evaluative devices that they use, are of great interest in considering the moves students make in addressing the college essay genre. These moves are especially relevant in the college essay genre, where students do not directly state exactly what it is they are attempting to convey – rather than explicitly saying “I am mature,” students use narrative and evaluative devices to show and convince their audience of their qualities and attributes. By getting into the
details of the student writing, we can learn something new about the specifics of the language that students use and how they use that language.

Significance analysis is done at the word level, where a word is coded if it is one of the seven evaluative devices selected for study. The evaluative devices, as integrated by Daiute (2014) as a research method indicating narrators’ socio-emotional engagements with the story, were selected to examine how students narrate their college essays. These were:

**Psychological state expressions:** Affective expressions: Words that show emotional processes (e.g. cry; happy; love); Cognitive expressions: Words that show active through process (e.g. know; understand; believe); Speech expressions: Words that show conversation or expression (e.g. told; said; yelled)

**Qualifiers:** Descriptive words used to evaluate; most often adjectives (e.g. beautiful; new; big)

**Intensifiers:** Words used for emphasis, to highlight or accentuate meaning (e.g. very; repetitions such as ‘on and on’; exclamation marks)

**Causal Connectors:** Words that show cause and effect and build a sequence of events (e.g. because; but; then)

**Negations:** Small evaluations that convey things may be out of the ordinary (e.g. no, not, -n’t contractions)

**Hedges:** Convey a barely noticeable evaluation (e.g. sort of; just; only)

**Metaphors:** Sayings or phrases used to describe a situation in comparable terms (e.g. ‘my heart sank to the floor’)

Two raters analyzed 20% of the dataset in order to assess inter-rater reliability on the significance analysis coding scheme. Cohen’s $k$ is the statistical analysis used to determine the
level of inter-rater agreement on the coding. There was substantial agreement between the two coders, $k = .753$, $p < .0005$, where substantial agreement is considered to be a score of $k$ between .61-.80 (Landis & Koch, 1977; Viera & Garrett, 2005).

This chapter further addresses the question of how students are prepared and socialized – or not – to become college ready. This chapter considers whether and how students enact the structure of preparation around the college essay process. Results show that students actively consider and engage their audience, primarily through psychological states that work to humanize the student and show them as engaged thinkers (and ones that are college-ready). Students heavily use qualifying adjectives in their writing, which add context to their stories and insert value judgements that can convey how the student feels and assesses a situation. Differences in evaluative expressions appeared with the use of negations and causal connectors. LPU students embrace these devices more than their SLAU peers in ways that address and more thoroughly convey the challenges they express while also working to relate to their audience.

**Evaluvative Devices in the College Essays**

Since significance analysis occurs at the word level, Table 12 shows the total number of evaluative devices and words that appeared in the student essays.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Evaluative devices</th>
<th>Total Word Count</th>
<th>Mean evaluative devices per essay</th>
<th>Mean word count per essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SLAU</td>
<td>1,671</td>
<td>10,380</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPU</td>
<td>1,742</td>
<td>10,346</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the sample consists of a relatively equal use of evaluative devices between the two universities. What is interesting is that the overall length of the essays varies, where the
SLAU essays are significantly longer. Given that the evaluative devices are comparable overall, the LPU students used more evaluative devices in relation to the total amount of words they wrote. This condensed use of evaluative devices may show students’ attempt to address their audience more often and in more nuanced ways.

To foreground the results, a sample of a complete student essay appears below. This essay is by a LPU student and exemplifies a number of the evaluative strategies that appear in the data. The student uses the description of a challenge to tell their story, and uses psychological states, negations, and causal connectors to move their narrative along and to connect with their audience.

Going to Palestine three years ago, a light was shined upon an issue that I never thought I’d experience firsthand. It truly helped me become proud of my background as a Palestinian, amplify my urge to want to make a change in this world and further educate myself on the topic of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict and the Middle East in general. In addition, this experience strengthened my academic interest in the social sciences, and was one of the main reasons why I choose it as my high school major.

The event that completely changed my perspective on all these topics occurred while I was trying to cross over into Israel from Palestine. I was not happy to be in this run-down country of Palestine for the entirety of the summer. I was bewildered on how “backwards” of a place this territory was, and I was anticipating going to the beautiful, urban land of Israel.
My mom woke me up one morning and told me that we’re going to cross the border to visit her family in Jerusalem. The hot and humid thirty minute bus ride became the least of my worries once I saw the tall graffiti-filled wall dividing seemingly two different worlds. I knew how different Israel and Palestine were from my prior visit. Once we reached the border, I saw a long line of angered Palestinians slamming the gate. This sight showcased to me a miniature version of the conflict, making sense of the countless retaliation attacks caused by Palestinians. There were a wide variety of Palestinians, ranging from those dressed up to go to work, to mothers with the heavy burden of watching their many children. We all waited in anger and anxiousness for more than an hour before an Israeli soldier got himself situated behind the counter.

After seemingly forever, we reached the counter, and bluntly the Israeli soldier asked us for our passports. After handing them to him, my mother was allowed to pass through, but I wasn’t. I felt my human rights were being violated, not only because I was not being allowed to enter land that I personally believe I have the right to, but I wasn’t going to be able to visit my mother’s whole side of my family despite my previous ability to do so. Immediately after leaving the border-crossing station, my mother and I were approached by a Palestinian offering us an overpriced, illegal alternative to cross; by driving us to an Israeli bus stop in a settlement village. My mother and I were willing to go through all of this to stand by what we believe is right; to visit the land that was previously Palestinian territory, and to not allow us to be mistreated and discriminated against.
Luckily, we passed through safely and I was able to visit my grandparents, but that obstacle was much more than that to me. I’ve never had firsthand experience of tension between two groups of people solely based on nationality. It gave me an insight into daily struggles faced by Palestinians, but it also gave me an insight into the chaos that the Israeli soldiers have to deal with. This event gave me my first understanding of just how deeply rooted this conflict is amongst the people of both sides, and it makes me yearn to get as close to fully understanding the conflict as I possibly can.

This experience opened my eyes to the terrible conditions of the land where I’m from, and the land that now, I’m extremely proud to be from. Before this life changing experience, I was ashamed to tell people I was Palestinian. Now when I think of my background as a Palestinian, I only think of my pride and will to one day aid Palestinians, further educate myself on this conflict, and hopefully become an activist. (Angel, LPU student)

A few things stand out from this initial reading, some of which are highlighted in the last two paragraphs of the essay, which will be further expanded upon in the analysis below. This student uses negations in building the tensions around the challenge that he and his mom experienced. There are also numerous causal connectors throughout the piece. These are especially evident toward the end, where the student is summarizing their experience and primarily bringing our attention to how he has grown to who he is now. Psychological states are dispersed throughout the essay, working to humanize the student and draw the reader into the way the student was feeling. We will see how these
patterns play out in the whole data sample and will use this example essay as a reference point for other patterns as well.

**How Causal Connectors and Hedges are Used Between Universities**

To begin the analysis, Table 13 shows the results of how frequently each evaluative device appeared in the student essays by university.

Table 13

*Frequency and Percentages of Evaluative Devices by Students at Each University*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SLAU</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>LPU</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total psych states</td>
<td>656</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>366</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifiers</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensifiers</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal connectors</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>493</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negations</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphors</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the students from the two universities used similar rates of each evaluative device in their essays. However, despite small, some notable differences emerged. LPU students used more causal connectors than their peers from the SLAU. Causal connectors are used in writing to show cause and effect and to build a sequence of events (Daiute, 2014). This is relevant to the college essay genre, where students need to move through and build a story that ultimately tells something about them but also carries a story-like sequence conveying event(s) that occurred. Students used causal connectors to show the development of a story and the story moves. For example, one LPU student writes (causal connectors in bold), “I remember it
clearly: the stress, the anxiety, the impatience, **but** also the excitement and confidence” (Biggie, LPU).

The higher use of causal connectors among LPU students also works to move through the challenges the youth describe and to show connections between what they experienced before and how it has shaped them now. Causal connectors can be reflective, where the connections between then and now demonstrate growth. The causal connectors work to show the development of the student, by leading the reader through their experiences.

**Although** I didn’t understand how that could help, I was willing to try anything, and made an appointment with an optometrist… **Although** I sometimes wish I had known about this problem earlier, I know that working through my disability for so many years has made me strong and persistent. (Avalanche, LPU student)

LPU students often concluded their essays with the use of causal connectors, as a way to tie the story together and state the resolution they have come to: “**Now** I know that confidence is not always enough” (Biggie, LPU student). This strategy was used in the essay at the beginning of the chapter as well, where in the concluding paragraph, the student used causal connectors to guide the reader through his learning and thought process of how his trip shaped him.

Causal connectors can also function to connect the audience to the story (Daiute, 2014). This is grounded in the culturally determined ways that we tell stories, where there is cause and effect and logical building of the action (Daiute, 2014). Through this implicit understanding of how stories are told and socially understood, the audience connects to the writers’ experience. With the use of causal connectors to move through the story, the audience moves with the writer and experiences what the writer experienced. In this way, we connect to the story the writer is
telling and can see how we might also relate to their experience. It is interesting to consider the use of causal connectors by LPU students in this light as it may be a strategy the students use to convey the challenges they discuss. Looking back to the sample essay at the beginning of the chapter, the student uses 12 causal connectors to walk the reader through the story of attempting to get into Israel from Palestine. The causal connectors can bring the admissions audience in to the developing narrative they are reading about, which seem to keep building as the student and his mother reach new obstacles.

The examples above show multiple uses of causal connectors. Students use this evaluative device to move the story along (after this happened then this... however, something happened...) but also to move through the challenges and to the development that the student has experienced. Through the step-by-step description of events, the student can show how they have grown into the person they are today (“Now I know that confidence is not always enough,” Biggie, LPU student).

The use of negations demonstrates another interesting use of evaluative devices, where the LPU students again used these evaluative devices at a higher rate than the SLU students. At the outset, this is not necessarily surprising since we saw in the previous chapter that LPU students also expressed more challenges. For example (negations are underlined while all other evaluative devices are bolded):

Freshman year came, and my friend and I dreaded going back to school because we didn’t know anyone there, except each other. We were worried that we wouldn’t make any friends, or that we would not like our new teachers. (Biggie, LPU student)
This example shows how the student is describing an obstacle she faced at the beginning of high school. The psychological states that she uses (dreaded, know, worried) work to convey the negative emotions she felt at the time. Additionally, there are three negations within these two sentences that further emphasize that there is a challenge. Another LPU student wrote:

I did not understand why I could not go out with friends as much as my classmates did… I wanted to have freedom. I wanted to be able to do anything I wanted. I started hating my parents. I hated them for not allowing me the privileges other kids had at my age. I did not even have a phone! The anger and unhappiness I felt led me to do things that I regret. (Rockness Monster, LPU student)

The excerpt above is also within the context of a challenge and expresses how the student is trying to understand (with the help of psychological states such as “understand” and “want”) why things in her family life are different than in her friends’ families. The student used negations, which build the description of her struggles with her home life. One final example shows how negations can be used differently – to show development through what the student has learned they do not want. While this example also sits in a story of overall challenge, the negations describe the students’ growth rather than building the obstacle the student faced.

Thus, who I am now is a result from many obstacles faced in my past. Having a difficult past and facing many obstacles made me who I am today. What the challenge made me realize is how one should consider their actions as it can affect others. In the case of my brother, his actions made me who I am today. Someone who strives not to be him, helps others and is not like him. Although I loathe him, today I should be grateful to him for showing me a path that I shouldn’t follow. (Jewel, LPU student)
The use of negations to build who the narrator is is an interesting use of the evaluative device and might be particularly important within the college essay genre. As the students attempt to show the admissions committee who they are through unique and creative ways, using negations to describe growth – and specifically who you are not – is a creative way of showing who you are. The use of negations in this way is one example of how students use evaluative markers to achieve the expectations of the college essay task. This is related to the students’ audience awareness and their responding to the task of presenting a true self. Students use expressiveness in their college essays to draw their audience in.

**Psychological States and Qualifiers as Evaluative Devices Used by All**

Similarities between evaluative devices also emerged. Psychological states were very prominent overall and were the evaluative device that is most used in the student essays. Psychological states can connect and relate to ones’ audience, through a connection with common feelings and certain experiences we may have all felt before. As we have discussed, connection with the admissions audience is a prominent requirement of the college admissions essay. The students further used psychological states to humanize themselves and to open up to the admissions audience in an effort to present their true selves. In two examples below, one from a student at each university, the psychological states that are used are italicized. The abundance of psychological states is quickly evident, as they appear frequently among the sentences and repeatedly ask the reader to connect to an emotion or thought that the student is expressing (psychological states are italicized):

In thinking about the social skills I have *developed* over the years, I *credit* that growth to a phenomenon I *call* “ambigleo”, (am-big-lee-oh): the awkward differences between what you’re used to and new experiences. Over the years,
three ambiguities have stood out the most… Ambigleo number one: Learning to 
live with plastic curtains. In the average American bathroom, there is a solid-
locking door to keep people from intruding on your most private moments. At 
camp, we only have sliding plastic curtains. These beige barriers provide only the 
slightest protection from the pedestrians in the bathhouse. I have learned to deal 
with these “doors” and by doing so, I have discovered a deeper meaning to them. 
Over time I have become more comfortable with limited privacy and I can adapt 
to new lifestyles and shared living arrangements. By already overcoming my 
privacy concerns, I am more relaxed and comfortable in new settings. I proudly 
credit my adaptability to these plastic curtains. (Blueprint, SLAU student)

And,

Helping my mom return home was so important to me that it has made me 
consider a career in medicine because the joy I drew from my mother’s improved 
health is incomparable to that of other activities. I find it very rewarding to help 
people who cannot help themselves and to see your efforts in their progress.

(Method Man, LPU student)

Among the psychological states, cognitive states were most prominent. Psychological 
states further show the students’ efforts to address the college essay task. Through their writing, 
students show themselves as thinking, learning, understanding, and inquisitive individuals – as 
thinkers who want to go to college and who have grown into mature youth who are ready for 
college. The admissions counselors are looking to see that the student is college-ready. The 
emphasis on cognitive states is a nuanced way that students repeatedly emphasize that they are, 
in fact, college-ready. The uses of psychological states shows the students’ development overall,
as they are emphasizing their growth through their awareness and experience of cognitive and affective emotions. The use of psychological states also emphasizes that the college essay writing task is purposeful and performative. Students are attempting to convince their audience of something about themselves. Through their emotive language, the audience is better able to connect to the narrator and to be convinced that they are college material via the moves of the college essay.

Qualifying adjectives were also a prominent feature of the student writing. Qualifying “adds descriptive words that evaluate events, people, and settings in narratives” (Daiute, 2014, p. 166) – these are purposefully chosen to convey meaning and to insert the students’ opinions or ideas about something. In the following example, a student is evaluating an experience based on how they viewed it and/or want to portray it to the admissions committee (qualifying adjectives are dash-underlined):

It's been wonderful to witness and participate in this evolution; it is like the neighborhood lay fallow for a period, before allowing a familiar yet exotic renewed neighborhood grow in its place. The most remarkable thing to me is how nearly a decade ago a few creative and passionate people planted the concept of Local Garden which has caused a ripple effect on the street corners, the community and me. (Wings, LPU student)

The use of qualifying adjectives above shows that the student wants the audience to feel how this community organization has positively influenced everything around it. The use of these qualifying adjectives provides the student authors with tools for expressing their values explicitly through their choices of adjectives and also aids in the audiences’ understanding of the students’ experience. The words the students choose in framing their story help the audience
understand how the student interprets and experiences a situation, and therefore helps the audience connect to the student – and in the case of the admissions counselors, the ways students experienced a situation show the counselors a way that they are presenting their true self. Additionally, qualifying adjectives color the story and add useful description. Words like “wonderful,” “renewed,” and “remarkable” paint a specific picture of a flourishing place. Since the students are attempting to write captivating essays, using many qualifiers can work to both express their personal reflections and judgements about the topic at hand and can also make the scene more real for the reader. Next is one example of a student who used qualifiers to convey vivid imagery and description in her essay:

A roasted piece of meat, a side of mashed potatoes and steamed broccoli with a scrumptious treat of brownies to square off the last course, all layed out nicely in a combination of tupperware and plastic wrap. For a five year old child, this was quite the heavy load to carry once a week up a set of rickety old steps before having my mother ring the doorbell of a house I had seen many a time before… I spent many an afternoon quietly sitting in the corners of a beautifully hand crafted library while my mom sat for hours chatting and ‘catching up’ with people I didn’t find any interest in. (Rangers, SLAU student)

This student’s use evaluative devices to depict imagery work to pull the reader in and imagine this typical day for the young child. While this is not groundbreaking – narrators have often used evaluative devices to add descriptive elements to their stories – the use of qualifying adjectives is still relevant here as it is a necessary part of creating a college essay. Like other evaluative devices that students use to set themselves apart, the abundant qualifying adjectives
work to show that the story that is being told is unique to this student, with their imagery and their judgements included.

**Chapter Conclusion**

Through evaluative devices, this chapter showed how the students express themselves through what are often implicit maneuvers. The examination of the details of the student writing showed that students use language in specific and purposeful ways. Many evaluative markers emerged in the essays – 3,413 overall – each chosen to achieve the essays’ and the writers’ expressive purpose. Through the values analysis, we saw that students emphasized values that addressed the institutional values and worked to show the admissions committee a side to the student that the counselors might not see from their other application materials. The significance analysis showed another tool that students used to implicitly reach their audience with a focus on the specific words the students chose.

All of the evaluative devices presented work to address the audience. Again, as the primary purpose of the essay is to gain admission to college, students constantly choose evaluative devices that can reach and connect with their audience. The LPU students especially use negations and causal connectors to build challenges and show growth. In previous chapters, we saw that LPU students focus more on their experience of challenge than their SLAU counterparts. Through the analysis of the words they use, we saw how the students maneuver through their challenges and uniquely showed development. Negations are not only used descriptively to build obstacles in the narrative. Negations can also work to show the students’ development, by an explanation of who they are *not* as a way of showing who they *are*. This is another interesting difference between the writing done by the SLAU and the LPU students which also hints at diversity in the performance of the essay. The LPU students, through their use
of challenges, work in their use of negations to portray growth and development in ways that demonstrate creativity and a breaking away from the norm of a standard admissions essay. Rather than using negations to only describe the challenge itself, the LPU students use negations in their descriptions of their growth as well.

The significance analysis also showed similarities between some of the evaluative markers used by students between the two universities. The use of cognitive states showed knowledge and learning and worked to humanize the student. In the case of qualifying adjectives, students colored their narratives and made their stories ones that would be interesting to read. Beyond that, qualifying adjectives conveyed a message to the audience of how the student believes the evaluated event should be perceived – or at least how the student would like the reader to perceive them.

In writing their personal narratives, students are doing the work of convincing the admissions committee that they should be accepted to their college. Students reach out to their audience through the values that they choose to express and embellish upon. This chapter further complicates the maneuvers students make by highlighting the word-level choices they make. There are interesting differences in how the LPU students, who presented more challenges in their stories, use negations and causal connectors to make those challenges come to life and to portray the growth that occurs beyond the challenge. The use of negations and causal connectors could show a flexibility within the genre, where the LPU students, despite perhaps focusing too much on the negative challenges, use evaluative devices to skillfully move out of the challenges. Additionally, the other similarities that are present between the students’ uses of evaluative devices could show that students are overcoming inequities in resources in understanding the
college essay process. The students from both universities use language to emphasize meaning and reach their audience in meaningful and nuanced ways.
Chapter Six

Discussion and Implications

Analyses of students’ essays discussed in the previous chapters have painted quite a complex picture of how youth use the college admissions essay to make their appeals to enter higher education. At the core of this dissertation research is the importance of the interaction between structural forces and individual action. This work is one of the first studies to examine the role of the college admissions essay and the role it plays in maintaining higher education standards in the current admissions system. My research is a new body of work that is the beginning of tilting work in education access in a new direction. This study attempts to show how institutions shape and convey their requirements, expectations, and values and how students engage with, respond to, and challenge those institutional discourses. In this case, the degree granting institutions where the students are applying ultimately hold great power as they determine whether the student will get in to college or not. But this work also shows that the students incorporate their diverse backgrounds and experiences into their produced essays and engage with the discourses of the larger institutions. The youth are speaking to and addressing the expectations set forth to them by the institutions. However, through their navigation of challenges, including the types of challenges they highlight, and the distinction with which they express personal growth, students make their own interpretations on how best to write the essay. Youth also engage with their audience in meaningful and conscious ways throughout their whole written document. Through the descriptions they use, the challenges they describe, and the growth they portray, youth are constantly aware of the priorities of the admissions audience.

If we look back specifically to the values that were expressed by the institutions and the students, we can see how the analysis addresses the research questions. To begin, how does the
college essay process (it’s importance, the preparation, and ultimate writing) mediate inequality in the higher education admissions process? And further, how does the college essay process enact stakeholders’ norms, expectations and the students’ preparations? These questions lie at the core of my dissertation work and at the core of developmental theory as well, where society and individuals are mutually influencing and dynamically interacting with one another. The activity meaning systems design allows for the expression of interactions between different socio-cultural experiences and in the context of this research, allowed for the dynamic expressions of the various stakeholders to emerge, where we saw differences in the presented values. The next research question of how students make sense of and follow the rules of the college essay is also relevant here. Through their level of audience awareness, students are actively engaging the admissions counselors. But students also emphasize values that are more subdued in the institutional documents but work very well in crafting a strong college essay that tells a story about the students’ true self. With their use of challenges, students pick up on a briefly mentioned approach and carry it through as a foundational point of their developmental essays.

This dissertation project shows that what happens with the admissions essay is more complicated than simply saying students with more exposure to the ‘culture of college’ understand and navigate the essay genre better than their peers. All students who write college admissions essays are performing the task of what the essay genre requires and who its directed audience is. What this research shows is that students bring their own histories and experience into the creation of their college essays. While students with more culture of college preparation may be able to write essays that speak to the institutional norms and expectations, youth coming from less privileged backgrounds are able to play more with the genre and go out of bounds of the norm. Perhaps by being unsure of the strict boundaries of the norm, students with less
awareness of the culture of college bring in a level of play through an incorporation of their personal experiences and histories. Students mold their personal values into the values that institutions deem important, rather than speaking directly to the institutional norms and requirements.

This research also hints at the benefits of participating in college preparation – regardless of the shape that preparation takes. Whether students take classes, meet with a counselor, or read a college preparatory book, it seems that general exposure to the language and requirements of college is useful in guiding students toward expressing themselves in ways that resonate with the essay task.

**Revisiting the Expressions in the Data**

The institutional documents placed great emphasis on the importance of the awareness of one’s audience and on the importance of students’ presentation of a true self. The value of personal development also emerged as highly prominent among the institutions. These values attempt to engage the student and bring their awareness to how important it is that they write to this specific admissions audience. The institutional documents really bring home the purpose of the essay and convey the importance of the task.

Students picked up on the major values conveyed by institutions and expressed these values in their essays as well. But students also did this in interesting and unique ways that showed the genre as a place of interaction – where the student values and the institutional values meet, merge, and diverge. Rather than addressing the admissions counselors directly and stating the explicit purpose of their essays in a thesis statement, students approached their audience through storytelling. Youth also picked up on a less discussed value that briefly emerged in the institutional documents – the importance of overcoming challenges. Understanding the nuanced
value of challenge is directly related to the students’ ability to notice the less overt expectations of the essay and to find ways to address their audience through crafting essays that show who the student is through the hurdles they have overcome. In their essays, students also use storytelling to show their development and convey their values on what development means to them. Through these stories of personal growth, the students notably address the needs of their audience.

Differences emerged in the extent to which writers from each university expressed challenge. The LPU students spent significantly more time describing and conveying the challenges they faced. SLAU students still used challenges in their writing quite a bit, but showed more of a balance of other values as well. Institutional documents conveyed a delicate understanding of challenges, where students should present their ability to overcome difficulties without divulging too much personal drama to their admissions audience. I argue that the SLAU students, who carry a more implicit awareness of educational institutions and familiarity with the culture of college are better able to navigate this balance between expressing just enough adversity without divulging too much. With their familiarity with the culture of college the SLAU students tap into useful resources and knowledge that helps them address the college essay task. The use of these resources is further complicated in this study, where the activity meaning systems design acknowledges the presence of diverse resources that other students have access to. The LPU students, who address challenges in more detail, may be drawing from their own relevant resources in framing an essay that therefore expresses their true selves and challenges the normative framework of the college admissions essay.

The exploration of the student essays becomes even richer when considering the values that students at the two universities expressed in terms of the kinds of challenges that they
discussed. LPU participants described significantly more structural challenges than their peers. This finding around the differences in kinds of challenges is interesting as it adds to the diverse experiences that students come with and the range in performances that the essay elicits. The LPU students come from diverse backgrounds where larger structural forces are more present or noticeable in their lives. Perhaps the LPU students are better able to express their lived experiences through larger structural awareness, rather than through an individual lens.

Students took up the institutional value of conveying personal growth and development and made this value at the core of their narratives. By telling a story, usually about a specific moment or experience, the students guide the reader through how they lived through and came out of that experience. This often resulted in concluding their essays with a summary of who they have become, typically in light or despite of the challenges they faced.

While we saw that all students expressed the importance of demonstrating their growth and development to their admissions readers, differences emerged between the kinds of development that students at the two universities emphasized. Youth who attend the SLAU wrote more about the development of their passions and the importance of their relationships and what they want to pursue as college students and future young adults. Students from LPU still talked about developing, but did this with more of a focus on how they have matured and grown into the people they are today. The SLAU students seemed to be able to express more future-oriented goals and ambitions while the LPU students focused on presenting themselves and strong and independent individuals now. Perhaps through growing up with an understanding of the culture of college, the SLAU students were more able to see themselves entering that college space and growing beyond that. For many of the LPU students who were also the first in their families to go to college, going to college is a wonderful accomplishment in and of itself. It may be the case
that the LPU students focus on their development today as their accomplishments are important and meaningful today.

The institutional documents showed that it is important for students to show development in their essays, and students pick up on this and abide. But how can we further guide disadvantaged students in understanding the more implicit asks of the genre? The college essay as it currently stands requires students to not only show the admissions committee that they have grown but to also demonstrate what they will do next with that growth as a university student. The implicit task of the college essay genre requires students to think beyond what is explicitly expressed in the assignment while sticking to the overall framework of what the essay should be. But should students be required to adjust to the template? In other words, as researchers and those who care about youth development and access, it is not just the students’ responsibility to play the hegemonic game better. It is also about expanding the options of the game.

Access to college preparation played an interesting role in students’ expressions of values. The role of college preparation is rich and can be further explored if distinctions are made between specific types of college prep that students participated in. Here, college prep was considered as a resource overall, so whether students specifically had college essay tutoring or they attended mandatory college preparatory courses at their high schools was considered equally valuable, as it is a resource that students accessed in their college application process.

Interestingly, students who participated in college prep expressed more of the importance of presenting a true self, which was a key value that emerged in the analysis of the institutional documents. The higher presentation of self occurred despite the students’ parental educational backgrounds or the university they were attending. The results suggest that access to college prep – whether its help from guidance counselors, paid college prep courses, or access to free college
admissions and essay writing material – can work as mediator for students who are applying to
college with access to more limited college resources. Access to academic tools and resources
can be a way in which underserved youth gain access and compete in a more equal playing field.
This is not to say that college prep programs are the ticket to eliminating inequality in access to
higher education and that other disadvantages disappear. But students’ participation in college
preparatory work does make them more familiar and better able to address university
expectations. This is hopeful for researchers, educators, and activists, as it shows that
intervention programs can work.

Significance analysis of the student essays showed a number of interesting patterns. The
ways in which students wrote and specifically, the evaluative devices they used, are of great
interest in considering the moves students make in addressing the college essay genre. I found
that students used evaluative devices as another means of connecting to and addressing their
audience. There was a higher use of negations and causal connectors among the LPU essays, as
those essays conveyed more challenges and then worked the reader through the development and
growth that arose from those challenges. Negations are used descriptively to build obstacles in
the narrative but students also used this evaluative device to show development, by an
explanation of who they are not. Causal connectors are further used to build the narrative of the
story by taking the reader through the steps of what occurred. These evaluative devices played
another role in the writing, where they were used by students as a way to again connect with
their audience, with implicit understandings of how stories are told and how we socially
understand connected elements of experience. Much of the results presented in the significance
analysis speak to the importance of addressing the audience, which was a key value in the values
analysis as well. Through the vivid imagery and skillful storytelling that many students brought
to their essays, these college essays were enjoyable to read as a researcher. The use of evaluative devices helped to strengthen the narratives as convincing and interesting stories. In this way, students capture their audiences’ attention.

Ultimately, so much of the work that the students do in their essays is specifically about relating and addressing their audience. The youth are incredibly aware of the importance of this high-stakes writing task and express values and use evaluative devices that will address the needs of their admissions audience. The audience is at the core of what the college prep documents convey as important and is integrated throughout all of the student essay responses. This is not a shocking finding – the students have a task that is important for their college admission so they work hard at addressing that task. But the level at which they do so and the amount of attention they devote to the specifics of what their audience requires is powerful. Students are not simply telling a story and at the end, wrapping it up with a summary directed toward the admissions committee. Rather, the youth are constantly addressing their audience and attempting to show who they really are through the implicit values they convey and evaluative devices that they choose to insert.

Similarly, a study by Daiute and Kreniske (2016) examines the values expressed by community college students. In narratives about their best and worst experiences in community colleges, Daiute and Kreniske (2016) posit that students’ expressions of challenges, through the process of narrating, emerge as integral in growing and shaping the students’ developmental process. This reflects the findings in the current study, where the LPU students especially use challenges at higher rates in their descriptions of personal development. Additionally, the community college narratives belong to students who were already enrolled in college and expressed the importance they placed on the role of college as a place to develop broadly
speaking, not only intellectually but socially and politically as well (Daiute & Kreniske, 2016).

In many ways, the student college essays examined in this dissertation speak to students’ hopes of one day being in a college space where they can also participate in this kind of growth.

Further, a study by Kreniske (2017) focused on the evaluative devices in a blogging community of students enrolled in a first-year seminar. With an analysis on peers’ comments to one another on the blog, Kreniske (2017) found that the use of psychological states in a student’s original post predicted the likelihood that that post will receive a comment. The importance of psychological states here demonstrates how this evaluative device really works to connect and reach audiences. As the students in my sample are writing their college essays, their goals are to bring in their admissions audience, to make the counselors remember the student through their essay. The commenting from Kreniske’s (2017) study can be thought of as responding a college counselor might make. If the counselors remember the students’ essays and remember them positively, they can ‘comment’ to admit the student. The high use of psychological states filled the essays with the goal of bringing the admissions audience in to relate to the student writers.

The research findings bring out the complex and interactive nature of narrating, where the interactions between stakeholders are evident. The college essay process asks students to complete a high-stakes writing task by following fairly prescribed norms. The data shows that some students are able to address the institutional norms as expected, while others perform their essays through less conventional interpretations. This study does not imply that because students show creativity and an ability to use their personal histories in their essays, that barriers to entry into higher education fall away. The culture of college and the institutions at play still hold great power in their decision making of who goes to college and who does not. In the context of academia and the process of accessing higher education, there are some resources that are more
appropriate than others. But what this study does show is that youth can compile and navigate through various resources and challenge the conceptions of what the essay task ultimately should be. This research asks us to consider the diverse resources that may exist – families, peers, high schools and the individuals that work within them, preparatory programs, youth leaders, religious leaders, and all other types of programs students may be involved with. This dissertation examines how youth are drawing on the resources that they have available to them and how they are able to sample from what they do have access to into creating an essay that can address the institutional expectations in diverse ways. The students show that they are navigating within the resources that they have in order to produce material that, while it may not fit the exact prescribed norms of degree granting institutions, challenges the conceptions of what those prescribed norms ought to be.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

Stakeholders from across the college essay process can build on the results from this dissertation research. Admissions counselors and university administrators, who could benefit from knowing more about how students use and approach the essay, can learn from these findings. This research gives us a better understanding of how diverse students embrace and challenge institutional norms and expectations around the college essay. Given the recent push to diversify higher education institutions, the implications from this study can be relevant to admissions offices who are working to be inclusive of diverse students. This could be reflected in expanding what counselors look for and place value on when reading admissions essays. Given that students come to the college essay with a range of diverse experiences and performances, admissions offices accepting of general student diversity should be accepting of diversity that is outside of the college essay standard form as well. The findings show that students from
underserved backgrounds place a greater emphasis on the challenges they have faced. The traditional college essay genre expects students to have faced challenges, but to find a delicate balance that places less of an emphasis on the challenge itself. Students who write essays that are rich in challenge are bringing their unique perspectives and experiences to the college essay genre and it is worth admissions counselors to consider widening the frame of the standard expectations. In this sense, the task of the college essay becomes less about students ascribing to a mold and more about educators expanding the possibilities that can fit into that mold.

Throughout this research, numerous sources of support for the students emerged. The role of college preparatory agencies is interesting. These agencies do provide resources that help students understand the application process generally, and the college essay specifically, but many of these agencies are also for-profit services that only provide limited information to students who do not pay. Princeton Review, for example, has a few links on their website that anyone can access. But if you are able to pay, you can get much more in depth application support. Princeton Review can provide On Demand Essay Writing Help for $39.99 a month, where students have access to a tutor that can proofread their essays. For $500, Princeton Review will go over a student’s whole application and essays (including any supplemental essays a university may require), and for $1,450, a student can have access to the most in-depth support, with guidance along the whole way of the application process.

From my findings, it is evident that accessing college prep, even minimally, helps students navigate institutional expectations. But these cost barriers only further emphasize the difference in the amount of support a student can receive based on how much they can pay. If the goal is to truly make the admissions process an equitable one, then all students need to have access to the same information and guidance of how to best complete their applications and
essays. Removing college prep’s pay walls is a start. The existence of these pay walls (and really all hired tutoring or support students can access by paying) raises additional questions around who is ultimately completing the application. I am by no means claiming that Princeton Review is writing students’ essays for $1,450, but the more a family is able to pay for college application guidance, the closer their essays will be tailored to fit the institutional standards and expectations.

Any changes that college prep agencies may or may not make go hand in hand with any changes higher education institutions may or may not make. In many ways, both of these stakeholders work together in maintaining admissions requirements. As one institution deems diversity as important, other institutions hear and respond to that as well. For the college prep agencies to change the ways they provide information and the kinds of information they give, the universities also need to change their transparency in tandem. These changes can come from responding to the students. If the degree granting institutions consider diversity to be important, this dissertation encourages them to then read for students’ diverse essays. There are youth who are writing essays that do not adhere to the norms as they have existed. Rather than dismissing those essays as unqualified, perhaps institutions can look to them to see what students are saying.

High schools and counselors also have a role in providing students with information that can help them navigate the application process. Unlike private tutors or internet pay walls, these teachers and counselors are a free resource that all students should have access to. Given the inequalities that exist in secondary schools as well, we know that even though teachers exist, not all students go to schools where their teachers can provide hands-on support. The results of this dissertation add weight to the importance of incorporating support into classrooms, since we saw that college prep has an impact on helping students gain an understanding of the culture of
college. Drastic overhaul of public education is not a practical recommendation here, but there are small ways that all high school classrooms can further guide students. Presenting students with guidelines and handouts on the college process, on financial aid, and on the college essay genre are a basic way to ensure that all students receive at least some information.

Teachers can also be encouraged to teach the college essay in their classrooms. This does not have to entail a semester long scaffolded assignment or multiple dedicated class sessions but can simply be a one-time introduction to college essay basics. There are numerous course curricula that have already been developed that teachers can use in their classrooms, without having to take time to create their own lesson plans (such as Early et al., 2010; Holding, 2005; Sagan, 2002). There are also summer programs that universities currently offer, oftentimes in order to attract more diverse students (Stevens, 2007). Universities can expand on similar programs so that they are not only for students that have already been admitted, as a way of drawing them in, but work with students that will be applying, as a way of guiding them through the process – not only the college essay process but the whole application process. Opportunities for students to work directly with institutions can help make the universities’ expectations more transparent and can also allow the universities to see how the students are approaching the college essay genre in their own ways. This can lead to a co-creation of essay expectations, as students and universities work together to shape what the next admissions requirements will look like.

Further questions also emerge around the types of college prep programs that exist and their ability to help students. Khan Academy, which has a large online database with free access, was listed as a common source for LPU students. Gaining a better understanding of what options students go to, what resources they are looking for, and how they find them can be an important
step in making programs accessible and comprehensive. I would further argue that some of the preparatory material presented to students is complex and nuanced, as are the university expectations. The next step may not lie in modifying preparatory materials in order to make them more user friendly but in a rethinking of the college essay genre and what it requires of young students. As one admissions counselor said himself, “I think students get really caught up in thinking that this essay has to encompass your entire life and it has to be groundbreaking and, you know, publishable quality. And that’s a lot to ask of a high school student” (Khan Academy, 2017). With the awareness that we are asking students to do a lot in their essays and that this can absolutely be overwhelming, how can university requirements adapt to make this process more reflective of student growth and development?

Additionally, it is also worth analyzing essays from the institutions students did not get into. This would be a different design than the design of the current study, where only accepted students from two universities were possible participants. When this study gets expanded, I would also consider essays of students who were rejected from certain institutions. This could give us a better understanding of how students creatively move outside the boundaries of the college essay norms and at what institutions those boundaries may be more or less flexible. Perhaps it is something about this specific LPU that engages students to perform a deeper immersion into challenges they have faced and that this institution specifically embraces such challenges more than others. Further research can look for diversity in performances of student essays from a wider sample, where the interaction between the university expectations and the student written work can be examined.

In spirit of the interdisciplinary work of this project, there is much more literary work that can be done to examine the college essays as well. The analysis of the evaluative devices is one
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step toward assessing the literary component, but I would like to expand that analysis to include the modes of persuasion, ethos, pathos, and logos, that students use. As these essays ultimately have a persuasive goal at hand – to convince the admissions counselors that the students are admissible applicants – an analysis of how the students maneuver and which kinds of appeals they make to their admissions audience is relevant and useful information. Is there a difference between university students in who makes emotional appeals and who makes logical appeals to their admissions audience?

Additionally, the area of discourse communities has not been fully explored through the college essay. The college essay is a unique space that reflects on the expectations and requirements of being a part of an academic discourse community. Students’ level of preparation, use of Standard Academic English, and exposure to the culture of college all play into their abilities to perform the college essay genre. With an understanding that “academic discourse is not just an entity but a social, cognitive, and rhetorical process and an accomplishment, a form of enculturation, social practice, positioning, representation, and stance-taking” (Duff, 2010, p. 170), the college essay is a relevant space to explore how this discourse community is enacted.

**Inequality in Access to College**

Ultimately, the college essay product can be considered as a number of power moves that students are or are not able to perform. This leads the question of the possibility of taking risks in high-stakes writing requirements. High-stakes writing is often used in assessment and can carry high-stakes outcomes (Bean, 2011). From the way high-stakes assignments are used in a class context, the greater weight the assignment carries can leave students less willing and able to take chances and play around with language (Bean, 2011). Given the findings from this study, the
answer to who can take risks in high-stakes assignment is somewhat hazy. Structurally, the degree granting institutions set the admissions requirements and therefore hold power. Students who are quite familiar and comfortable with the expectations of the essay may be able to take some risks in their writing, as they know what the boundaries are and therefore can choose how to push them. Alternatively, students who are less familiar with the expectations of the college essay may also have an advantage in their ability to play within this high-stakes genre, as they are less familiar with the boundaries and therefore can experiment regardless of what the boundaries may be. Future research can narrow in on this question of taking risks in high-stakes assignments and can explore if and how students take risk in their essays and can also consider who is able to take those risks.

The findings from this dissertation research demonstrate how students are performing the college essay genre, how they respond to the institutions, and how they interact and reshape the institutional expectations with their own diverse performances. This research moves beyond the traditional descriptor of “first-generation college students” and captures a factor relevant to inclusion and success in higher education by revealing how students draw on a range of resources and use the essay to convey their own unique perspectives on college. That said, barriers to higher education access remain. Because this study sheds light on how the college essay process is interpreted and executed by stakeholders relevant to higher education, the findings can help educators, policy makers, and families find ways to provide further support for students with less preparation for college at home, in high school, and perhaps even at the colleges of their choice.
Concluding Thoughts

Through this research, we gain a better understanding of how the college essay process works as a mediator of college access. This work is only the beginning of studying how the college admissions essay mediates inequality. By analyzing the admissions essays, we see how the interacting stakeholders are involved in the process of college access and the social-relational nature of the narrative process that occurs. Students engage with the college essay and tackle this writing challenge in relation to institutional expectations. The role of college prep programs is particularly relevant, as those programs are a source of support for students. This project is also important in helping structure programs that can aid students in applying to college.

What we see in this research is that access to college prep can work as a sort of mediator that supplements resources for students with less knowledge about the culture of college. Students who participated in college prep spoke to more of the institutional values and were better able to address the nuances of the essay expectations. These findings can help educators, policy makers, and families find ways to provide further support for students with less inherent college knowledge. Ultimately, the college essay emerges as an interactive space between institutional norms and expectations and students’ adherence and play with those expectations.
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