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**Merit for All: Application Essays and the Ritual Production of Merit
in US Selective Admissions**

Ben Gebre-Medhin*
Sonia Giebel**
AJ Alvero**
anthony lising antonio**
Benjamin W. Domingue**
Mitchell L. Stevens**

**Mount Holyoke College*

***Stanford Graduate School of Education*

Please direct correspondence to:

Ben Gebre-Medhin
50 College Street
South Hadley, MA 01075
bgebreme@mtholyoke.edu | 413-538-2803

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ABSTRACT

US colleges and universities are defined by their exclusivity, and the most prestigious schools reject most of those who apply. Yet these same schools also widely advertise their inclusiveness, encouraging students from all backgrounds to submit applications and highlighting evaluation protocols that identify many characteristics worthy of consideration for admission. We surface this paradox and use it as motivation to theorize a little studied component of college applications: personal essays. Drawing from cultural sociology, we posit that the commission and production of essays extolling applicant worth and worthiness is a ritual practice that instantiates an idea of merit that is broadly shared among those who submit applications to admissions-selective schools. We pursue this work empirically by observing essay prompt selections of 55,016 applicants to the University of California in 2016 and conducting human readings and statistical analyses of 3,519 unique essays. Results indicate that prompts and essays encompass a broad but bounded range of activities and experiences that selective schools and applicants consider meritorious. The entire process of application to selective US schools helps to reify a national cultural belief we call *merit for all*.

¹ The authors thank the University of California Office of the President for sharing the relevant data.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gaining admission to a highly-ranked US college or university is not easy. Even at public state universities, where access and diversity are priorities enshrined in law, the chances of acceptance can be exceedingly small. For example, University of California, Berkeley (UCB) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), two of the top-rated universities in the world, accepted fewer than twenty percent of those who applied for undergraduate admission in 2021. Yet these same schools note that their evaluation protocols positively consider many different forms of accomplishment: UCB's website states that the school employs a "broad conception of merit" and "recognizes a wide range of talent and creativity that is not necessarily reflected in traditional measures of academic achievement" (Office of Undergraduate Admissions 2020); UCLA invites applicants who are "idealistic, driven and creative" "changemaker[s]" who "love learning," "feel empathy," and "see obstacles as a chance to grow" (Undergraduate Admissions 2020). These two facts together present a paradox: official recognition of a wide range of "merits" by the very schools that exclude most of those who apply.

The social arrangement that sustains this paradox is *holistic review*, an evaluative regime that defines organizational best practice among admissions-selective schools in the United States and is internationally peculiar. Prior scholarship has explained the evolution of holistic review as a function of ongoing efforts by relatively powerful groups to sustain their privileged access to the nation's most prestigious schools in a decentralized and complicated US postsecondary ecology (Karabel 2005; Karen 1991; Labaree 2017; Stevens 2007). However essential, these accounts have elided an important feature of holistic review: its productive character. National

postsecondary systems elsewhere rely almost exclusively on secondary-school performance and academic examinations that define fitness for admission narrowly, even on the basis of the outcome of a single high-stakes test (Carnoy et al. 2019). By contrast, schools practicing holistic review oblige applicants to craft relatively elaborate applications. Like all artifacts of human creation, these applications bear empirical traces of the social context of their production and may be imbued with meanings beyond their instrumental purposes.

Our contribution corrects the elision of the productive character of applications submitted for holistic review. We begin with the observation that the crafting and evaluation of applications is a carefully orchestrated and serially repeated collaborative practice: in a word, a ritual (Emirbayer 1996). It is distributed across multiple parties, requiring active participation by applicants, high schools, and colleges according to explicitly specified protocols. In spite of the increasing material and social consequences of selective college admissions, social scientists have paid relatively little attention to its productive and ritual aspects.

We argue that holistic review enlists applicants and schools alike in reifying a distinctively American conception of merit as varied, difficult to measure, and ubiquitously distributed across the population of college hopefuls at least somewhat independently of their social backgrounds. At its inception in the 1920s, holistic review broadened the notion of merit beyond academic achievement for the purposes of social/religious exclusion (Karabel 2005). While the system of holistic review has persisted, the notion of academic merit around which it is organized has evolved and expanded. Since the mid-20th century, American higher education has been

characterized by novel commitments to inclusion as embodied by the *college for all* movement (Rosenbaum 2001). Social and political reforms beginning in the 1940's expanded the notion of who was worthy of a college education to include veterans (Thelin 2004), racial and ethnic minorities (Skrentny 2002), and the economically disadvantaged (Brint 2019). In each of these cases, the practice of holistic review has been revised to accommodate these new constituencies. The result is a contemporary conception of merit as varied, difficult to measure, and ubiquitous which we describe as *merit for all*. Merit for all provides the ideational scaffolding of college for all: because all are meritorious, all deserve the benefits and opportunities a college education affords. Remarkably, holistic review -- the very mechanism used to exclude most applicants from admissions-selective schools -- elicits practices and artifacts that sustain a US-national faith in the idea that all are worthy of postsecondary opportunity.

Our empirical focus is on the written essays required by holistic-review protocols in US selective admissions. Essay requirements offer an opportunity for each applicant to produce a presumably original narrative of their personal challenges, accomplishments, and ambitions for evaluative scrutiny. We argue that the solicitation and production of essays represents an annually repeated instantiation of an expansive and peculiarly American conception of merit. By obliging applicants to craft narratives of their own worthiness as part of their applications, schools enlist young people in reifying broadly shared ideas about what is considered meritorious. Analyzing essay prompt selections and utilizing human readings and statistical analyses of 220,062 essays contributed by 55,016 applicants to the University of California system in 2016, we find that

prompts and essays encompass a broad but bounded body of cultural beliefs that are widely evident across the class spectrum represented in the UC applicant pool.

How, to what extent, or even whether essays inform admissions decisions remains unclear (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Hossler et al. 2019; Rothstein 2017; Selingo 2020; Smith, Hurwitz, and Howell 2015; Stevens 2007), but is not of relevance to the analysis presented here. Our tasks instead are to (a) theorize holistic review as a ritual process of cultural production and (b) consider a sample of the essays produced to observe what they may reveal about how merit is rendered meaningful across a cross-section of college applicants. Regardless of the utility of essays as evaluative tools, they represent an enormous investment of time, attention, and craft by applicants, guidance counselors, and a vast industry of writing coaches and admissions consultants. We take all of this work seriously in its own right, developing what is to our knowledge the first explicit sociology of personal essays in contemporary US selective admissions.

2. BACKGROUND: HOLISTIC REVIEW IN CONTEXT

Academic evaluation systems may define merit narrowly or broadly. For example, merit is defined quite narrowly in university systems in China and India, where test scores alone determine admission to selective university programs (Carnoy et al. 2019). In the US, merit is defined very broadly and evaluated by a bevy of indicators -- test scores, class rank, grades, writing samples and essays, athletic and artistic talent, family background and ethno-racial

identity -- are all officially legitimate criteria for evaluating applicants (Berrey 2015; Espenshade and Radford 2009).

Virtually all colleges and universities in the United States with selective admissions organize evaluation with a protocol that aims to integrate multiple indicators of merit when deriving decisions. Systems of holistic review oblige applicants to submit some combination of statistical and transcript data describing their high school academic accomplishments, standardized test scores,² lists of verifiable extracurricular accomplishments, letters of recommendation, and original essays crafted by applicants. Schools typically communicate to applicants that the purpose of essays is not just to showcase expository skills, but also to enable "whole person" evaluation that expands notions of worthiness beyond grades and test scores (Bastedo et al. 2018).

Precisely how applications are appraised under holistic review remains shrouded in mystery. A large body of research utilizing datasets describing characteristics of applicant pools and admitted cohorts relies on inferential statistics to speculate about the relative weight admissions officers give various applicant attributes (e.g. Espenshade and Radford 2009). Such studies have not considered qualitative components of applications nor the gestalten process of holistic evaluation. In a recent study of 311 admission officers, Bastedo and colleagues (2018) found substantial variation in how officers approach the task of holistic review, with some reading primarily to derive the "whole context" of an applicant's lifeworld, others seeking a picture of

² We recognize the growing movement for test-optional admissions policies, which was accelerated by institutional responses to COVID-19, and take it up further in the discussion section below.

the “whole person” represented in the file, and still others prioritizing the obligation to read the “whole file.” While there is general agreement across the admissions profession on the positive value of holistic review, there is little shared understanding within the field about how it is best carried out (Hossler et al. 2019). This ambiguity about best practices is remarkable in light of the intense scrutiny selective admissions has received from legislatures, critics, and courts in recent years.

Social scientists explain the persistence of this ambiguity by recognizing that US colleges and universities are self-interested, strategic actors. They compete with one another on multiple dimensions for personnel, patronage, and prestige (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

Undergraduate admissions is a key site of this competition, both for overall rankings of prestige and selectivity, but also as an arena for triage on multiple and even competing organizational objectives (Clotfelter 1996; Winston and Zimmerman 2004). In his ethnography of a selective college admissions office, Stevens (2007) argued that opacity in admissions is essential to a school’s ability to manage the varied intramural parties with competing stakes in admissions outcomes: development officers, athletics coaches, and institutional research personnel who submit admissions statistics to third-party ranking agencies such as *US News*. The opacity of decision making provides flexibility to manage the competing organizational goals that are pursued through the admissions process (Brewer, Gates, and Goldman 2002; Golden 2006; Karabel 2005; Karen 1990; Killgore 2009).

However useful they may be for organizational flexibility on the side of schools, opacity and ambiguity in evaluation make for substantial anxiety and expenditure of time and effort for applicants and their families, and has abetted a growing industry of admissions consultants (Grusky, Hall, and Markus 2019; Selingo 2020). The annual outpouring of labor and money produces millions of textual artifacts each year: recommendation letters from teachers, guidance counselors, coaches and well-positioned friends; portfolios and recordings of applicant artwork; and the personal essays that are almost invariably required components of applications under regimes of holistic review. Our premise here is that this activity and its artifacts are culturally generative in their own right, because they represent the enlistment of young people and their relevant others into active participation in the evaluative process.

While qualitative social scientists and investigative journalists have produced rich portraits of how young people and their families prepare for the college application frenzy (McDonough 1997; Selingo 2020; Steinberg 2003), they have only occasionally studied the material artifacts which make up the required application portfolios. To the extent that they are systematically produced cultural artifacts, cultural sociologists might use them to observe patterns and variation in how people present themselves as meritorious applicants (Mohr et al. 2020). Following prior models of inquiry investigating letters of recommendation for faculty positions (Tsay et al. 2003), prizes and fellowships (Lamont, Kaufman, and Moody 2000), applications to early career teaching fellowships (Streib et al. 2021), and to law school (Kirkland and Hansen 2011), sociologists might see traces of prevailing conceptions of merit in undergraduate application materials submitted by a population of college hopefuls. We pursue such work by leveraging a

corpus of undergraduate application materials submitted to the nine campus University of California system in 2016.

3. THEORY: RITUAL, GENRE, AND INCOMMENSURABILITY

We integrate insights from several different domains of sociological theory in the service of recognizing the productive character of holistic review. First, we posit that the entire enterprise of selective admissions is amenable to conceptualization as ritual: a web of carefully coordinated collective actions which reify otherwise ineffable beliefs (Durkheim 1995). As an evaluative ritual, holistic review reifies the notion that merit is complex, and resistant to precise measurement. The totality of the application ritual enlists myriad parties -- children, parents, guidance counselors, testing agencies, authors of recommendation letters, and admissions officers themselves -- in carefully scripted routines that translate and enact ideas of merit and meritocratic selection. These myriad parties and practices do much to sustain the idea of merit for all: If the application process were simple and concentrated, rather than complex and distributed, fewer parties would have the opportunities for the enactments which sustain belief (Collins 2014; Goffman 1982).

Second, we draw from the sociology of knowledge to recognize the productive and collaborative character of evaluation. In this theoretical tradition, evaluation projects do not just represent reality; they actively produce it (Beljean, Chong, and Lamont 2016). The outputs of these projects are cultural artifacts that instantiate the thing they purport to describe. To the extent that multiple parties are implicated in this production, the entire enterprise is bolstered by distributed

commitment. MacKenzie's (2006) famous summary description of econometric analysis as "an engine, not a camera," producing the reality of the economic forces it claims merely to represent, is applicable also to the idea of merit for all. We theorize that this idea is sustained, at least in part, through the active participation of those who solicit calls for application essays and those who labor in responding to these calls. The entire enterprise instantiates the idea of merit for all.

Third, drawing from the sociology of culture, we theorize that admissions essays are a *genre*.

Here we build on Griswold's (1981) conceptualization of a genre as a recognizable type of cultural production whose outputs are shaped jointly and in patterned ways by authors, audiences, the formal requirements of a cultural practice, and the social context of cultural production. The admissions essay as a genre, as well as specific manifestation of it ("my essay") are outcomes of the interaction of these four factors.

Following Griswold, we expect that essay authors will draw on the experiences and cultural materials (topics, plots and character types; vocabulary; idioms of narration and storytelling, e.g.) available to them in their particular social situations, such that essays will bear traces of those contexts. Prior research on admissions essays has noted distinctive inflections on the topic of "diversity" submitted by authors of different class backgrounds (e.g. Kirkland and Hansen 2011). Our own work below investigates the socioeconomic context of applicant authors.

Integrating notions of ritual and genre in the production application essays enables us to theorize that the output of this four-pointed interaction as both a body of cultural artifacts (application essays), and a reification of the idea of merit for all. We depict this process visually in Figure 1, which borrows liberally from Griswold's (Griswold 1986) imagery of the cultural diamond.

Figure 1: The ritual production of merit for all

Fourth and finally, we draw on the sociology of quantification to recognize that the personal essay is a distinctively qualitative component of the application file that has remained resistant to commensuration (Espeland and Stevens 1998). Grades, SAT scores, and AP records all are amenable to quantification and hierarchical ranking, but personal essays resist standardized

assessment. They are not commensurable in any *a priori* fashion known to applicants. Even if particular schools might apply metrical assessments to essays behind closed doors, we know of no instance in which such metrics are easily available to organizational outsiders. Because there is no clear, public, or agreed-upon metric for what “counts” as an excellent or even acceptable essay, these components of applications are at lower hazard for the reactive homogenization of more standardized evaluation regimes (Sauder and Espeland 2009). We thus have good reason to suspect heterogeneity in the content and composition of any corpus of essays under the norms and rules that currently govern admissions offices practicing holistic review.

We provide empirical evidence for our theorization through two observational studies of a corpus of applications to the University of California (UC) system. The UC case is especially apt because it has a long tradition of encouraging access while also comprising several of the most admissions selective public university campuses in the nation (Douglass 2007; Oakes et al. 2012). In this way it embodies the paradox of inclusion and exclusion which characterizes elite US higher education more generally.

4. DATA AND ANALYTIC STRATEGY

For the analyses reported here, we begin with a random sample of 60,000 applicants drawn from a universe of more than 165,000 individuals who submitted application materials to UC in

November 2016 for matriculation in Fall 2017. Applicants who did not report residency in a US state or territory we excluded. Our analyses use reported household income (abbreviated as RHI, household income, or income) as a proxy for social class; applicants who did not report their household income were also excluded for the analysis. These restrictions yielded a sample of 55,016 individual applicants and 220,062 corresponding essays.

Those seeking admission to any of the nine undergraduate campuses within the University of California system are obliged to submit a standardized and centrally administered application. In addition to transcripts and test scores, applicants for admission in Fall 2017 were offered eight prompts and were required to write essays of 350 words or less in response to four prompts. The average length of the essays in our sample is 307 words; approximately 90 percent of essays exceed 220 words.

We leverage these data in two studies to empirically investigate the interactions represented by the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the diamond heuristic presented above. In Study 1, we observe the horizontal dimension by examining the call prompts given by UCs and the responses to those prompts by applicants. Here we engage in systematic human readings of essay prompts and submissions to observe the range of phenomena that schools and applicants consider falling within merit's purview. Qualitative coding of submissions enables us to identify and define one component of the application essay genre: *meritorious struggles*. Meritorious struggles comprise life challenges which, when met by applicants, constitute experiences authors deem worthy of positive consideration by admissions gatekeepers. In Study 2, we investigate the vertical

dimension of the diamond, representing the relation between essay content and the socioeconomic situations of applicant authors. Here we analyze a larger corpus of essays to observe for potential relationships between applicants' social class and their depictions of meritorious struggles.

The purpose of these analyses is to learn about the extent to which applicants seeking admission to selective schools are drawing from a shared body of cultural materials when producing application essays. Observing similarity in the content of essays generally (Study 1) provides a gauge of the existence of a merit genre that informs authors' sense of what makes for a meritorious struggle. To wit: if we observe boundedness in essay content, it is reasonable to speak of a merit genre. Similarity in the content of essays submitted by authors from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Study 2) provides a gauge of the extent to which conceptions of merit vary by social class. To wit: if we observe similarity in essay content across the class spectrum, it is reasonable to speak of the merit genre as transcending class distinctions.

5. TWO STUDIES OF MERIT NARRATIVES

For the 2016 application cycle, the UC offered eight essay prompts and required applicants to respond to four of them (see Table 1).

Table 1: UC Application Essay Prompts and Number of Submitted Responses, 2016		
Summary	Frequency	Prompt
1. Leadership experience	31,576	Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.

2. Creative side	20,874	Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
3. Talent or skill	25,228	What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Educational barrier or opportunity	26,607	Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
5. Significant challenge	34,328	Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
6. Academic inspiration	34,292	Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
7. School & community service	20,941	What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
8. Why I stand out	26,216	Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to <i>the</i> University of California?

This menu of choices offers flexibility to applicants, but also provides parameters for what applicants might construe as acceptable submissions. We note, for example, that the menu does not ask applicants to reflect on a relationship with a spiritual deity, confess a sin, or demonstrate their loyalty to a national government -- though it is possible to imagine evaluative contexts (admission to religious schools or military academies) in which both essay commissioners and authors might consider such prompts acceptable. Thus the prompts themselves provide empirical evidence about what defines the genre, at least at this secular public university: academic and

extracurricular accomplishment (#1, #3, #7), creativity (#2), secular inspiration (#6), service (#7), individualism (#8) and challenge (#4, #5).

While the prompts themselves impose some parameters around the genre, applicants are afforded a remarkable range of choices between and within prompts. In Figure 2 we offer a summary of the relationship prompt choice and RHI. We order the eight prompts by the average household incomes of those who chose each prompt as one of their four for submission, with the lowest average RHI located at the top. The graph to the left indicates a rough tripartite clustering, with four prompts in a mid-range RHI grouping and two prompts both below and above this middle cluster. The four prompts in the middle cluster fall in a band separated by less than \$2,500 (8. “why I stand out,” 6. “academic inspiration,” 3. “talent or skill,” and 1. “leadership experience”). The lower-income cluster includes the only two prompts which have mean RHI below \$100,000 (5. “significant challenge” and 4. “educational barriers and opportunity”). The higher-income cluster comprises two prompts where mean applicant RHI exceeds \$110,000 (7. “school & community service” and 2. “creative side”).³ This pattern comports with sociological intuition: lower-income applicants are somewhat more likely to write about “challenges” and “barriers,” while more affluent applicants are more likely to write about their “creative side” and “service” to school and community (Jack 2019; Khan 2012).

³ We conducted an ANOVA test for difference in means which was significant at the .0001 level. Further Tukey post-hoc comparisons between group means provided additional evidence for these three clusters. The results can be found in Appendix III.

Figure 2. Income statistics by prompt. “Mean RHI per prompt” (left) plots mean as points and 95% confidence intervals as whiskers. “Proportion of applicants per prompt” (right) plots the proportion of students who responded to each prompt with respect to median RHI for the sample (n=55,016): light blue for those with below median RHI, white for those with RHI equal to the median, and dark blue for those with RHI above the median.

Yet the right side of the figure, which shows the proportion of applicants above and below median RHI (\$65,000) who chose each prompt, demonstrates that there also is considerable class heterogeneity in prompt choice. We see clearly that no prompt is the exclusive province of a single class group. This simple description suggests that the UC’s four-essay call gives applicants across the class spectrum opportunities to draw on a varied repertoire of life experiences when producing merit narratives.

In order to bound the corpus for further evaluation, we limited our subsequent analysis to a single prompt, #5: *Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?*

Our choice was motivated by a number of factors. First, prompt #5 was the most popular choice in the corpus.⁴ Second, the prompt does not delineate any particular kind of challenges, giving authors considerable discretion over essay topic. Third, the prompt closely parallels prompts included in the Common Application utilized by hundreds of US colleges and universities nationwide.⁵ The relative ubiquity of the prompt suggests it might elicit responses representing general understandings of merit among a contemporary population of college hopefuls.

5.1. Study 1: Identifying Meritorious Struggles

The goal of this study is to identify the range of circumstances that applicants deem to fall under the purview of a challenge that is both “significant” (per the wording of the prompt) and amenable to positive consideration by a college gatekeeper. We presume that applicants may have faced many challenges that they might deem significant in their lives but are not worthy of a positive consideration in this particular evaluative situation. To the extent that crafting a written response to this prompt represents an act of authorial curation -- a selection of some challenges to write about at the exclusion of others -- a census of the meritorious struggles present in a representative sample of essays should provide information about the contemporary merit idea as it is understood among a population of authors (cf. Griswold 1992).

⁴ While other scholars have used the cultural ideas of students and universities at the pinnacle of the American academic hierarchy to uncover what might be called the merit ideal (Lamont, Kaufman, and Moody 2000), we focus on a much broader cross section of applicants to evaluate the diversity of individually articulated notions of merit in the context of the college for all ideal.

⁵ The 2021-2021 Common Application currently features a question that focuses on overcoming what are listed as obstacles, challenges, setbacks, or failures (<https://www.commonapp.org/apply/essay-prompts>). Some version of this question has been present since the Common Application significantly revised its essay prompts in 2013-14.

5.1.1. Methodology

Four coauthors worked collaboratively and iteratively to observe the universe of challenges narrated in a random sample of 3,519 essays submitted to the “significant challenge” prompt. Although our analyses achieved theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967) with respect to types of challenges within a reading of about 500 essays, we eventually coded just over ten percent of all the challenge essays in our corpus. We employed a constructivist approach (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to identify challenges, examining whole essays to see full depictions of struggles, disappointments, and setbacks. Throughout the coding process, coders were blind to applicants’ demographic characteristics.

Over the course of two months, the coding team members read identical sets of essays randomly selected from among the “significant challenge” essays and generated codes capturing what we came to call the “primary challenge” depicted in essays. We began with open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008) of challenges and, through sharing and consultation, created definitions as well as criteria for inclusion and exclusion for each code (MacQueen et al. 1998). We iteratively tested and refined the codebook through nine rounds of reading, coding, and discussing batches of an initial sample of 504 essays. We concluded this process when (a) no new codes surfaced and (b) the team attained a Fleiss Kappa statistic, describing inter-rater reliability, above 0.80.⁶ Team members then read and coded an additional 3,015 essays, for a total reading sample of $n = 3,519$.

⁶ The codebook, which includes definitions and descriptions of the fourteen meta-codes as well as a listing of the eighty-five sub-categories, is attached in the Appendix I.

5.1.2. Findings

When the UC called for narratives of “significant challenge” as evidence of worthiness for admission, applicants responded broadly and creatively. Analysis surfaced fourteen primary challenges, as represented in Table 2. Primary challenges display a wide range: from material (economic insecurity) to physical (health/ability) to affective (inter/intra-personal) challenges and including abuse, academics, death, discrimination, and challenges related to sports. We also identified 85 subcategories within the primary challenges, indicating a fairly heterogeneous set of experiences applicants drew upon to construct their narratives (Appendix I). The 85 distinct topics generated across our analysis demonstrate the flexible and ecumenical idea of merit among this sample of authors. At the same time, our analysis yielded a finite number of reported challenges, suggesting at least some shared cultural parameters around what might count as a challenge worthy of consideration by evaluative gatekeepers.

Table 2 provides a summary of the aggregate results of the qualitative coding. The table’s second column provides counts of essays coded for each primary struggle. We present two excerpts for each challenge to illustrate the within-challenge heterogeneity we observed, further underscoring the breadth of phenomena that applicants regard as falling under the purview of meritorious struggle. Affective challenges were the most common and the most heterogeneous, ranging from challenges of self-confidence and identity struggles to experiences with bullying, friendship strife, and conflicts with parents. Challenges which we coded as “domestic instability” were similarly common, and comprised marital issues such as divorce, fights, and infidelity; and disruptions to home life initiated by (for example) household moves and parental military

deployments. Perhaps the most telling evidence of the breadth of struggles authors deem appropriate in this evaluative context is that specifically academic challenges (“A challenge I had was English class in 9th grade because I did not understand the work.”) were offered in fewer than ten percent of the essays.

Table 2: Bounded Breadth - Primary Challenges, Examples, and Frequency in 3,519 Essays		
Primary Challenge	Frequency	Illustrative Excerpts
Abuse	49	<p>“That was not her first time physically abusing me and I certainly knew it was not going to be the last one either.”</p> <p>“My dad had sexually molested me from as young as I can remember.”</p>
Academics	340	<p>“One challenge that I struggled with during my time was in elementary school. I really had trouble during sixth grade in which I grossly [sic] terrible in my [state] test. When my mom saw bad I was struggling, I decided to make a stand in which I choose to stay back one year.”</p> <p>“A challenge I had was English class in 9th grade because I did not understand the work. For that, I got lazy and did not do or turn in any work and failed the class.”</p>
Affective Inter/Intra-Personal	657	<p>“Around my Junior High I began to realize that I had lost a significant amount of confidence in myself which translated over to a decline in my personal goals.”</p> <p>“The thought of being disregarded by my friends eventually grew so strong that I couldn't function in any aspect of my life.”</p>
Death	266	<p>“In the early hours of August 19, 2013, I began the most difficult challenge of my life. My father woke me to say that my stepmother had died of cancer.”</p> <p>“When she died at the beginning of my freshman year, I lost a friend, a parent, and a role model.”</p>
Discrimination/ Stereotype	118	<p>“This challenge, being unable to digest why people are prejudiced, has moved my life in a positive direction by broadening my perspective on discrimination and allowing me to advocate for equality.”</p>

		<p>“It was engraved into my head that I was just another dark face destined to be a negative statistic. I began to feel that my dark skin, and the depression I gained with it, was a challenge that only death could fix”</p>
Domestic Instability	528	<p>“My father frequently cheated on my mom when I was growing up, and in the long run, he ended up leaving our family. I resented him for years and I grew up thinking I was never enough.”</p> <p>“This was the fourth state that I had moved to in the past four years so I didn't think it was going to be that big of a deal, except it was.”</p>
Economic/ Material Insecurity	176	<p>“Coming from a low-income background has been, and remains my greatest challenge. have struggled having a casual living since my parents do not have stable, well-paying jobs.”</p> <p>“We didn't hesitate the tears that rolled down our eyes as we were forced to acknowledge that we were now homeless.”</p>
Failure	30	<p>“My freshman year I ran for class president and although I had never been part of any leadership organization I was still determined to campaign and get involved. Unfortunately, I did not win.”</p> <p>“My recent failure was a major setback but I didn't realize it was setting me up for a life lesson.”</p>
Immigration	295	<p>“I've helped my parents out in job applications, bill payments, or any important paperwork. When it came to meetings or doctor appointments I was always there serving as a translator.”</p> <p>“It is a big challenge for me to enter US high school and adapt to the new circumstances. When firstly transferred from China, I strived to enter this new community without holding back. In my mind, American juveniles are willing to accept new items. I was so desperate to understand them.”</p>
Mental Wellness	273	<p>“Throughout sophomore year I suffered from depression. I gained weight, my grades slipped dramatically, and I didn't have the motivation to even leave my bedroom.”</p> <p>“Anxiety provokes chronic pain and scars; it's a challenge that an individual should overcome accompanied with others.”</p>
Physical Health/ Ability	405	<p>“Seering pain suffocates my lungs with each breath. The only thoughts to cross my mind, however, are to score that winning goal, finish that race, or complete that last assignment. When breathing becomes a labor, simple tasks like walking or even talking become strenuous.”</p> <p>“My oldest brother, the once D1 lacrosse player, ASB president, and one of the smartest I (sic) people I know fell victim to opioid addiction.”</p>

Sports	166	<p>"Whoosh" was the sound of the wind as I had kicked the soccer ball to win the game, but it unfortunately went straight to the goalkeeper's hands. My confident world came tumbling down as if it had never existed."</p> <p>"Accustomed to being a team leader and consistently contributing to the team, I thought that my excellence would continue into high school. Boy was I wrong."</p>
Time/ Scheduling Pressure	182	<p>"Playing two sports while enrolled in challenging course work became my life after freshman year of high school. I had to learn to balance sports, academics, and family because there was not enough time in one day."</p> <p>"My senior year was the year I decided to really challenge myself while my peers decided to take it easy. I signed up for four AP classes while my other peers signed up for one or two. With this challenge of taking four AP classes eventually something bad was going to happen. I ran into many bad grades in those classes, not because they were too hard, but because it was overwhelming the studying I had to do."</p>
Travel	34	<p>"During my junior year of high school, a time when I should have been maximizing AP courses here at home, I chose a different challenge. I chose to study abroad."</p> <p>"Looking back to when I first got off the airplane with two suitcases that was as big as I was, I can say that it was the biggest challenge in my life. However, I can confidently say that I successfully overcame my challenge and significantly grew from it. Living away from home at such a young age brought many challenges."</p>

The frequency of each primary challenge is related to the topical breadth within them. Relatively infrequent descriptions of discrimination were largely limited to experiences of racial and gender discrimination ("...I was just another dark face destined to be a negative statistic") or reflections upon one's own bias or societal discrimination ("This challenge, being unable to digest why people are prejudiced..."). The repertoire of challenges concerning the affective realm, on the other hand, is quite broad. They took the form of either personal struggles ("I began to realize I

had lost a significant amount of confidence in myself”) or interpersonal challenges (“being disregarded by my friends”).

Following a long tradition in cultural sociology (Bernstein 2003; Bourdieu 1990; DiMaggio 2018), we presumed that the social situations of authors would likely be reflected in their essays. Specifically, we expected that students’ socioeconomic backgrounds would somehow be evident in essay content. The fourteen categories of meritorious struggle that emerged from our human coding encompassed a range of struggles that one might suspect to vary in frequency with the socioeconomic backgrounds of authors. For example, to the extent that divorce and family instability, job loss and income volatility, and adverse health problems all correlate negatively with income (Western et al. 2012), we might predict that essays coded as Domestic Instability, Economic/Material Insecurity and Physical Health/Ability would skew toward applicants from lower income backgrounds. Yet readers were careful to code essay content in isolation; no information about student demographic characteristics or any other components of application files was made available.

Close readings of the essays surfaced qualitative evidence of such stratification. Some categories, such as “sports,” included many narratives that suggested comfortable socioeconomic domestic milieus. Take for example the following essay about an applicant’s initial experiences on a swim team:

Swim trunks were not a good idea. Swim trunks were most definitely NOT a good idea. My floral-print knee-length suit stood in sharp contrast to the Speedo briefs upperclassmen wore. This was my first day as a freshman on the swim team. I joined because I love the beach: relaxing salty breezes, warm sun, and soft sand. Standing there, I looked more ready to grab a

boogie board and catch waves than compete. In a whirlwind, we were off, and I was in the water. Coach separated me from the others and brought a senior girl over to teach me some basics. I floundered to imitate her flip turn and came up sputtering. Two minutes in, and I was already spectacularly demonstrating inadequacy. My next few weeks of practice were all governed by the same principle: try not to drown. I had mixed results. Each day after practice, I staggered to my mom's car and begged her to stop on the way home for food. Food was the only means to revive. A wrap, and an entire box of s'mores flavored poptarts: these were my lifeblood. I could struggle to stay awake two more hours. I had to fight the call of the reclining chair in our family room and do my homework. Balancing my new sport while earning top grades is one of the greatest challenges I have ever faced. Swimming is that exhausting. Months of practice passed and eventually I improved. Sheer willpower propelled me through that first season. I finished in the best shape of my life and as a member of a very close and positive community. Now, as a senior, I am the captain and one of the strongest sprinters on the team. Swimming teaches me endurance. All the miles in the pool shape my confidence and resolve, and I've translated these lessons to my academic performance because I've expanded my capacity to focus, endure, and keep working long after I am ready to stop.

This account details many of the trappings of an upper-middle class upbringing: extracurricular sports requiring costly facilities (a swimming pool), a mother available for pickups and dropoffs, favorite foods and a home commodious enough to include a family room. The narrative suggests a way of life described by Annette Lareau's (2003) term "concerted cultivation." Though the essay makes no explicit reference to wealth or income, cues about socioeconomic context are sprinkled throughout the essay. By contrast, the following essay (which we coded "domestic instability"), includes more overt references to class:

My mother had me when she was in her third, but final year of high school. Yes, my mom graduated in three years. My biological father at the time already had a son and wife so me and my mom weren't exactly in the picture. So my mom had to find me a caretaker for me while my mom worked days and nights, two sometimes three jobs, was tough for my mom. I went to many houses as a child and had many people take care of me. Also two men also came into mine and my mom's lives. Growing up till pretty much fifth grade I lived out of a backpack. I would stuff clothes and other special belongings I had into my backpack and go visit my family. I would go visit my dad. Then go visit my step dad that raised me when I was a child. He has been a good father for what I can remember and I have siblings that stay there as well. Then I would go stay with my grandma, aunts, and uncles. Living out of a backpack growing up taught me to be true to myself, see life from different perspectives, try and keep negativity away from me, and that I

really only got myself. I learned to stay true to myself by being alone most of the time on my way to another family to stay with. I would feel neglected and always wonder why me? But, through this I learned that only I know who I am and I won't let people define me if they don't completely understand my story. By staying with other families I learned many customs and traditions. I learned that not everybody lives the same and shouldn't be ignorant and believe people do. Also by doing this I would be down a lot so I had enough negativity around me. Through all that negativity I couldn't allow myself to believe that life is negative and I wouldn't allow others to feel life was negative so by that I would help many people out.

A mother's multiple jobs, "living out of a backpack," and constant moves between various family members' homes are problems engendered by economic precarity.

Yet while some essays carried class signals to varying degrees, many others did not. For example, essays addressing the death of a loved one, such as the one presented below, provide few if any clues to the socioeconomic situation of the author:

The most significant challenge I have faced is easily the death of my aunt. Shortly after my freshman year had begun, I lost my aunt to cancer. This was a challenge for me not only because of the fact that I lost a family member, but because my aunt was a motherly figure to me. She meant the world to me. I was just starting my high school career, and learning and understanding the ways of being a high schooler after years of preparing for that stage in my life. The death of my aunt took a toll on me physically, emotionally, mentally, and academically. Moving away from the pain of grieving was very difficult for me. I did not really know how to process it. Especially with all of the school work I already had. However, in order to try and overcome this point in my life I first made an effort to heal my mental and emotional state before I tried to fix my academics. While I did think my grades were important, my mental health was more important. I strongly believe that a lot of times, we as students put our grades before ourselves and in the end, this damages us emotionally. I began to see a counselor to talk about how I felt, and how I was dealing with things. From there I tried to slowly fix my grades. However I was so defeated. I had already gotten very far behind in my studies. Which in turn resulted in long days of staying after school to catch up, study hall, the help of many teachers, and two summer vacations. This was a very long, and difficult recovery process. In complete honesty I did not fully overcome this challenge in terms of academics until my junior year. Emotionally I got better, but the repercussions of the mistakes I made freshman year caught up to

me. However eventually I learned that my aunt would have never wanted me to give up so easily. So I continued, and went on to develop better study habits, and fix my grades.

The intent of Study 1 was to demonstrate the broad, but bounded, variety of responses to a single essay prompt. Findings revealed considerable breadth in conceptions of merit and variation in signals of the socioeconomic circumstances of applicant authors. Copious qualitative empirical research (Lamont 1992, 2000; MacLeod 1995) and recent quantitative inquiries (Alvero et al. 2020; Arthurs and Alvero 2020; Kirkland and Hansen 2011) would lead us to expect a clear relationship between authors' class backgrounds and the content of submitted essays. Indeed, some authors made either implicit or explicit reference to their class positions; yet other accounts were more class-ambiguous. We take the uneven communication of class as motivation for our next study, in which we employ quantitative analyses to discern the extent to which authors' class situations are related to essay content.

5.2. Study 2: Topic Variation by Social Class

We have theorized that application essays are rituals that enable a broad swath of college hopefuls to produce textual artifacts instantiating the idea of *merit for all*: a notion that fitness for admission to selective schools may be demonstrated through a wide range of life experiences and accomplishments. This theory would be challenged, however, if merit narratives were strongly correlated with the socioeconomic situations of authors. If applicants from different class backgrounds produced substantially different accounts of meritorious struggle, for example, this would provide evidence of stratified and segregated merit genre, with authors in different class

situations drawing on different cultural meanings when producing their essays. Classic studies in the sociology of culture, depicting class variation in adults' conceptions of moral worth and worthiness, would lead us to expect class variation of this sort (Lamont 1992, 2000). By contrast, commonality in narrative content across class differences would indicate a shared store of meanings of what applicant authors (and those who coach them) and a more broadly shared merit genre. We investigate this matter empirically in this second study.

We begin by observing the distribution of the fourteen mutually exclusive primary topics derived from Study 1 across household income levels. Figure 3 provides two visualizations of the result. The dot-and-whisker graph on the left side of Figure 3 reports the mean of reported household incomes of applicants in the sample who submitted essays with that topic ($n = 3,519$; error bars represent 95% confidence intervals). The bar graph on the right side of Figure 3 reports the proportion of each challenge relative to the overall sample, broken down further by the proportion of authors writing to each topic who report incomes above, equal to, and below the median RHI (reported household income) of the overall sample.

Figure 3: Income statistics by primary challenge (within Prompt 5). “Mean RHI per challenge” (left) plots mean as points and 95% confidence intervals as whiskers. “Challenge Proportion per primary challenge” (right) plots the proportion of essays assigned to each primary challenge with respect to median RHI for the sample (n = 55,016): light blue for those with below median RHI, white for those with RHI equal to the median, and dark blue for those with RHI above the median.

These visualizations suggest correlations between social class and topic choice that are not sociologically surprising. Economic/material insecurity, abuse, domestic instability and immigration appear to be topics chosen more frequently by lower-income authors; sports, failure and travel by higher-income authors. Yet there also is noticeable class dispersion across the fourteen topics. For example, about a third of essays about domestic instability were submitted by higher-income authors. Well over half of the authors who wrote about affective/interpersonal troubles were in the lower half of the income distribution represented in our sample. Additionally, none of the fourteen topics are the exclusive choices of lower- or higher-income authors. There are at least a few relatively well-off applicants who write about economic/material insecurity, and a few non-affluent applicants who write about sports and travel. We take these

patterns as initial evidence of shared ideas about the content of merit across the class spectrum. Regression techniques enable a more systematic assessment of the relationship between household income and primary challenge.

5.2.1. Methodology

We use a multinomial logistic regression model to predict primary challenge using RHI. Prior to the multinomial logistic regression analysis, we tested associations between each topic and RHI using standard logistic regression. We found that nine of the fourteen topics have a statistically significant relationship ($p < .05$) with RHI relative to all other primary challenges; estimates are reported in Appendix II. To communicate results, we rely on estimates of the probability of an essay being coded as a given challenge conditional on RHI.

5.2.2. Findings

Figure 4 is a visual representation of our findings from the multinomial analysis. Solid lines in Figure 4 display the topics for which individual logistic regression results were significantly correlated with applicant household income. As in the analysis above, many of these associations comport with sociological intuition. Challenges of domestic instability, immigration, and financial troubles are significantly more prevalent among lower income applicants, while interpersonal/emotional problems, mental health issues, and challenges related to sports and travel are associated with higher RHI.

Figure 4: Multinomial logistic regression results. Probability of primary challenge by RHI (Log scale). The solid lines portray statistically significant relationships with RHI ($p < .05$). The dashed lines portray non-significant relationships with RHI (Appendix II). Colors are used to distinguish lines/text and run from blue to red as ordered by the leftmost point of each curve.

Yet the regression analyses indicate the partial independence of applicants' class backgrounds and chosen essay topic. After coding more than 3,500 submissions, we do not find evidence that household income has strong effects on students' choice of topics under physical and academic difficulties, deaths of friends and loved ones, time and schedule dilemmas, and experiences of discrimination. This result indicates a substantial pool of experiences that are written into merit narratives by applicants across the class spectrum.

Taken together, the findings presented comport with our postulate of a broadly shared body of cultural material the college applicants believe to fall within merit's purview. Just as theories of cultural production would predict, the class background of applicants is evident in the corpus of essay texts. But by no means are these accounts of merit easily predicted by the socioeconomic backgrounds of the applicants who submit them, suggesting a conception of merit that is shared across the population of those seeking entry to admissions-selective schools.

6. DISCUSSION

Admissions-selective schools in the United States present their publics with a paradox: they advertise a very wide range of activities and accomplishments that are worthy of consideration by college gatekeepers, even while most of those who submit applications are turned away. This puts admissions-selective US schools in strong contrast with academic regimes in other countries, in which the most coveted university spots are distributed on the basis of a few clear metrics. This paper has endeavored to surface this paradox, and in so doing it has charted a path toward a novel explanation for how it is sustained.

Drawing on theoretical tools from the sociology of culture, we posited that the practice of holistic review serially enlists whole cohorts of young people in ritually producing documentary evidence of merit's breadth despite the hard fact of institutional sorting and exclusion in US higher education. In contrast with prior sociological and historical accounts of selective admissions, which have emphasized the measurable academic attributes and demographic characteristics of those who are admitted and excluded from elite schools, we trained our

attention on application essays: rarely studied components of holistic review regimes whose demographic correlates and specific role in admissions evaluation are little understood.

Integrating classical sociological insight on ritual with cultural-sociological conceptions to genre, we conceptualized the crafting of application essays as a reification process that continually reproduces a peculiarly American idea that merit comprises factors far beyond measurable academic accomplishment and is broadly distributed across the national population of college hopefuls.

Utilizing a dataset comprising thousands of applications to the University of California system, we found a delimited but nevertheless wide variety in what applicant authors consider as meritorious activities worthy of consideration by academic gatekeepers. Our analyses indicate that in the US context, the idea of merit includes confronting the death of a loved one, surviving physical or mental abuse, navigating a move to a new school or city, or negotiating changed family relationships in the wake of divorce. Accounts of such experiences are submitted by college hopefuls across the class spectrum, suggesting a shared body of meanings on which a wide range of American authors draw when constructing merit narratives. These findings recognize the productive and creative cultural outputs of holistic review and suggest its importance in mediating a fundamental tension in the institutional order of US higher education: the promise that all are worthy of the opportunities afforded by postsecondary access, simultaneous with mass exclusion from the most prestigious colleges and universities.

We imagine that some readers might expect us to acknowledge a much more instrumental theory of the value of essays, namely, that their primary purpose is to inform admissions officers' final decisions on applications. However intuitively appealing this theory may be, it largely awaits empirical investigation. Admissions offices fiercely guard the secrecy of their evaluative work and have to date largely succeeded in maintaining the mechanics of evaluation in a black box. To our knowledge, the only observational study of holistic review in the scholarly literature is by Stevens (2007), who found that "the numbers" describing applicant characteristics such as test scores, high school grade point averages, curricular difficulty, and athletics ratings were the most important components of applications, with quantifiable household characteristics such as parents' social prominence, legacy status, and record of donations important second-order factors. On the basis of his observations, Stevens posited that personal essays had negligible weight in admission decisions and were rarely invoked in committee reviews.

The exact role of the essay in admissions decisions at the nine undergraduate campuses of the UC is only slightly more clear. Publicly available information about decision making algorithms imply that the essay may be a consequential factor in selection, but only for a narrow band of students "on the bubble" who necessitate close human scrutiny (Karabel et al. 1989; Leonard et al. 1993). While this historical evidence is only from a small set of cases, it at least suggests that there may be utilities of essays additional to their instrumental value in rendering decisions. Even if future inquiries were to open the black box of evaluation at the UC or beyond and discover -- perhaps even measure -- an instrumental role of essays in the process of academic selection and exclusion, such a finding would not counteract our general argument about the productive

dimensions of the essay requirement, and indeed of the college application process more generally. Regimes of evaluation can be instrumental, ceremonial and productive all at once (Espeland 1998; Lamont 2009; Posselt 2016).

In addition to providing a novel explanation for the role of application essays in holistic review, our analysis may contribute an important piece to a larger puzzle: how has the system of holistic review persisted for nearly a century despite serial waves of complaint and criticism? To be sure, struggles over affirmative action, legacy admission, and the role of the SAT (to name only a few) portend significant public skepticism with holistic review. While revisions have been made to the specific formulae of evaluation over time, the notion that students' worthiness for a college education can be reduced to a few measures of academic performance remains heretical in the United States. Indeed the tide of public opinion is moving in the opposite direction, as a growing movement to curtail or eliminate the use of standardized tests in selective admissions steadily gains ground (Furuta 2017). As numerical measures lose some of their legitimacy as indices of worth and worthiness, cultural objects that are resistant to hierarchical ranking are likely to take on greater symbolic importance. The time and attention that applicants make in producing these cultural objects, and that evaluators expend in calling for and reading them, provide *prima facie* evidence to a skeptical public that merit is more than a composite of easily comparable grades, ranks and scores. At the same time, many of the things that can be brought into the purview of holistic review through the essay genre are broadly distributed across the national population. Grieving loss, navigating change, and overcoming obstacles, for example, are hardly the distinct accomplishments of a privileged few.

As is so often the case with ritual practices, the opacity of the holistic review process does much to sustain faith in the idea of merit for all. Because applicants do not know just how their merit narratives will be read and rewarded by academic gatekeepers, any specific recipe for merit remains elusive. And because assessment of essays is done without recourse to universal metrics, potential relationships between essay content, applicant background, and official evaluation are immune to statistical discovery. In this application essays differ categorically from standardized test scores and high school transcripts, for example, which have now serially been shown to translate socioeconomic privilege into ostensibly class-neutral measures academic merit (Carnevale, Schmidt, and Strohl 2020; Hamilton and Nielsen 2021; Sandel 2020; Tough 2021).

By contrast, no one knows just how, or even if, the content of application essays figures into admissions decisions. This opacity, coupled with the wide range of essay prompts and the inherent flexibility granted to authors by the essay genre, incentivizes ongoing creative acts that instantiate the idea of merit for all. However ironically, the artifacts instantiating this idea are produced through the very same evaluative machinery that perpetuates systematic privilege and exclusion in elite higher education.

While the analysis presented here specifically investigates the relationship between merit narratives and social class in the United States, future research on the implication of gender, ethno-racial, organizational and cross-national variation in the production of merit narratives would likely yield rich insight. With its great variety of cultural traditions and demographic

niches and an exquisitely complex postsecondary ecology, we might expect merit narratives to vary systematically by the characteristics of colleges and authors alike. For example: do applications submitted to historically Black colleges, women's colleges, or conservative religious institutions betray distinct characteristics? Do merit narratives vary with the characteristics of the high schools their applicant authors attend? Finally, do merit narratives betray the patterned cross-national variation evident in accounts of worth and worthiness demonstrated in prior cross-national studies (Lamont 1992, 2000; Warikoo 2016)? Wherever large numbers of people are called upon to narrate themselves, empirical pursuit of such questions is highly tractable.

7. CONCLUSION

Our analysis provides novel insight into the productive dimension of the costly and mysterious evaluation protocol at the heart of the US college admissions process. Whatever roles they may or may not play in decision outcomes, application essays instantiate an American faith in the idea of merit for all. Yet as with any faith, this one can be challenged by critics, undermined by systematic evidence, and potentially instantiated in new ways. Journalists and social scientists alike are producing texts which seek to substantially reform, if not abandon, the inherited machinery of selective admissions which we describe in this paper. Books with titles like *Broke* (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021), *The Merit Myth* (Carnevale et al. 2020), *Tyranny of the Meritocracy* (Guinier 2015) and *The Meritocracy Trap* (Markovits 2019) collectively argue for the considerable dissonance between American academic culture's prevailing idea of merit as independent of privilege and the final outcomes of competitive admissions decisions. Given the

growing number and prominence of these counter-narratives, we suspect that in the near term application essays will become only more important to academic gatekeepers, elicit more creativity and anxiety among college hopefuls, and receive more scrutiny from social scientists.

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APPENDIX I

Meta-codes and associated sub-codes:

Abuse -Emotional -Physical -Sexual	Discrimination/stereotype -Class -Gender -National origin -Own/personal bias -Physical ability -Race -Religion -Sexual orientation	Mental wellness -Depression -Eating disorder -Mental wellness - Family -Stress/Anxiety -Suicide attempts/ideation
Academics -Challenging subjects -First-generation college (non-immigrant) -Learning disability (related learning disorder) -Poor performance -Procrastination	Domestic instability -Change of school (non-processional) -Divorce -Domestic violence - parents -Household move -Incarceration -Military deployment -Parent conflict -Parent work travel or relocation -Separation -Single parent	Physical health/ability -Addiction (substance) - personal -Addiction (substance) - primary family -Addiction (substance) - extended family -Disability - personal -Disability - primary family -Disability - extended family -Illness - personal -Illness - primary family -Illness - extended family -Injury - personal -Injury - primary family -Injury - extended family
Affective intra/inter-personal -Acceptance -Bullying/teasing -Body image -Gang issues -Interpersonal struggle -Identity/ethics/values -Loneliness -Motivation -Parental pressure/conflict -Self-confidence -Shyness -Social Anxiety	Economic/Material insecurity -Homelessness -Job Loss -Poverty - family -Poverty - neighborhood -School resources	Sports -Challenge successfully met -Failure -Injury -Retirement
Death -Family - extended -Family - primary -Friend -Grief related sadness/depression -Pet	Failure -Failed to accomplish goal or desired achievement -Program/admission rejection	Time/Scheduling Pressure -Class commitments -Combined commitments -Extracurricular commitments -Family responsibilities -Sports commitments
	Immigration -Cultural adaptation -Deportation -Language -Navigating US school system -Undocumented	Travel (unrelated to immigration and relocation) -Family trip -Foreign exchange -Mission trip -Outward bound

APPENDIX II

Individual Logistic Regression Models (Primary Challenge and Log RHI)	
Topic	Coefficients
Economic/Material Insecurity	-0.447*
Abuse	-0.225*
Domestic Instability	-0.321*
Immigration	-0.233*
Time/Scheduling Pressure	0.035
Death	-0.041
Mental Wellness	0.158*
Physical Health/Ability	0.0971
Academics	0.104
Discrimination/Stereotype	0.172
Affective Inter/Intra-Personal	0.184*
Sports	0.522*
Failure	0.570*
Travel	0.678*
<i>*p < .05</i>	

APPENDIX III

Tukey HSD Post-hoc Test For Pairwise Comparisons of Means				
Prompt Comparisons	Difference	Conf Interval (low)	Conf Interval (high)	P Value at .05
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 2	11142.944	7874.2994	14411.5886	0.0000
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 4	-11440.262	-14489.5461	-8390.9779	0.0000
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 5	-16179.4842	-19036.6104	-13322.358	0.0000
Prompt 2 vs Prompt 3	-12197.399	-15625.8029	-8768.9951	0.0000
Prompt 2 vs Prompt 4	-22583.206	-25971.1442	-19195.2678	0.0000
Prompt 2 vs Prompt 5	-27322.4282	-30538.5069	-24106.3495	0.0000
Prompt 2 vs Prompt 6	-12686.956	-15903.673	-9470.239	0.0000
Prompt 2 vs Prompt 7	-6505.942	-10089.718	-2922.166	0.0000
Prompt 2 vs Prompt 8	-13546.981	-16946.0082	-10147.9538	0.0000
Prompt 3 vs Prompt 4	-10385.807	-13605.7526	-7165.8614	0.0000
Prompt 3 vs Prompt 5	-15125.0292	-18163.6286	-12086.4298	0.0000
Prompt 3 vs Prompt 7	5691.457	2266.0557	9116.8583	0.0000
Prompt 4 vs Prompt 6	9896.25	6902.6962	12889.8038	0.0000
Prompt 4 vs Prompt 7	16077.264	12692.3642	19462.1638	0.0000
Prompt 4 vs Prompt 8	9036.225	5847.576	12224.874	0.0000
Prompt 5 vs Prompt 6	14635.4722	11837.9017	17433.0427	0.0000
Prompt 5 vs Prompt 7	20816.4862	17603.6085	24029.3639	0.0000
Prompt 5 vs Prompt 8	13775.4472	10770.0323	16780.8621	0.0000
Prompt 6 vs Prompt 7	6181.014	2967.4974	9394.5306	0.0000
Prompt 7 vs Prompt 8	-7041.039	-10437.0377	-3645.0403	0.0000
Prompt 4 vs Prompt 5	-4739.2222	-7732.0901	-1746.3543	0.0001
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 7	4637.002	1371.5069	7902.4971	0.0004
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 8	-2404.037	-5465.6369	657.5629	0.2516
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 6	-1544.012	-4401.8567	1313.8327	0.7278
Prompt 3 vs Prompt 8	-1349.582	-4581.1931	1882.0291	0.9116
Prompt 1 vs Prompt 3	-1054.455	-4148.6369	2039.7269	0.9695
Prompt 6 vs Prompt 8	-860.025	-3866.1229	2146.0729	0.9889
Prompt 3 vs Prompt 6	-489.557	-3528.832	2549.718	0.9997