



## **The College Spy Podcast with Michelle McAnaney**

Episode 5

*The College Essay*

Welcome to the College Spy podcast, a podcast for parents and students addressing all aspects of the college selection and admissions process. I'm Michelle McAnaney, the founder of The College Spy. We offer college planning services to students and families across the United States and internationally. We are a team of dedicated educators who are committed to helping students and families identify the right colleges to apply to and get accepted. We offer our guidance and expertise in a way that improves student performance, increases confidence and promotes college readiness and maturity. The College Spy works with all students including students interested in the STEM fields, students with learning differences, international students, and third culture kids. To learn more about The College spy, visit our website at [thecollegespy.com](http://thecollegespy.com) and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#).

In today's episode, I'm going to talk about the college essay one of the most important parts of your college application, you will learn the essay's role in the application review process, and I'll give you some advice on what to include in your essay and what to avoid writing about. I will also give you The College Spy's admissions Tip of the Day. And today's college spotlight is Vassar College.

The college essay is probably the part of the college application that students are the most stressed out about. And there are several reasons for this. First, many high school students struggle with writing in general, and those that are better at writing might be stressed about this essay because it's different from what they normally write about in English class. They're being asked to do some self-reflection, to be a little bit vulnerable and to really write a creative essay. It is a creative writing assignment and they're not accustomed to that. And the final reason why students are often stressed about the college essay is that it's the last part of the application that's within their control. Their grades are set, their standardized tests have been taken, and even if they're taking them again in the fall, they pretty much know approximately how well they will do. Letters of recommendation aren't within students control and they've participated in the activities they've already participated in. The essay is still within the student's control and that's why it causes so much stress.

So today we're going to talk about the college essay and I'm going to give you some information and advice about how students can do a better job with it. And I'm going to give you some information and advice about the essay. We're going to talk about how the college essay fits into the application review process, what colleges really want to know about you, if there are any topics that are off limits, and how to go about choosing a topic.



First, let's talk about how the college essay fits into the review of the application. Colleges review applications holistically, or at least most of them do. And this means that there isn't one GPA or one test score, that is the cutoff. They're looking at all of the elements of the application and evaluating them as a whole. And the elements of the application they're looking at are your academic rigor, so the courses you took in high school and how well you did in them, grades or your GPA, the college essays, which include the personal statement or main college essay, and supplements. They're looking at extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation, and SATs or ACT scores, if submitted. They're not required at all colleges.

So how can you know how important the college essay is, to an admissions office? Well, what you can do is look up the common data set for each college. Almost every college publishes one. And the way you find it is you put into Google the name of the college and the words "common data set." It's an annual report that comes out. And so you want to look at the most recent one. And if you scroll down to section C7, you will see a chart that shows you the different parts of the application that the college is looking at holistically and how important each part is. So they will let you know whether the element of the application is very important, important, considered or not considered at all.

So I have pulled up in front of me two different common data sets for Section C seven. One is for the University of Michigan, where they tell us that what's very important is academic rigor, and your GPA. And they consider the application essay to be important. The other one I'm looking at is Swarthmore College and they say the most important things are your rigor and GPA, as well as class rank, essay and letters of recommendation. So, most of the time when you look at the common data set, Section C7, to find out which elements of the application are most important to the colleges that you're looking at and considering applying to, you will find that the key things that they consider are academic rigor and GPA, and everything else is usually considered less important. However, there are some colleges that consider the other factors of the application to be equally important to rigor and GPA.

Let's get into the purpose of the college essay. It's an opportunity to tell admissions something about you, the applicant that isn't reflected in the rest of your application. You are definitely more than your test scores and your grades and how you spend your time. And, colleges want to hear from you. And they want to hear more about who you are as a person. They want to know your beliefs, what makes you tick, what your motivations are, what are elements of your character, and in general, who you are, they are interested in finding out through the college essay, what your personal qualities and characteristics are. These personal qualities and characteristics are the theme of your essay. The essay isn't actually about the topic you pick. The topic highlights the theme, which is your personal quality and characteristic. One of the easiest ways to choose a topic for your college essay is to choose which personal quality or characteristic you want to highlight in your application. And then, choose a story about yourself



that delivers your message. So your topic is your story. And your theme is the personal quality and characteristic that you want admissions to know about you.

There are some things that colleges don't really want to know about you. They're not interested in your grandma, for example. They don't want to know about other people. You might write about somebody else in your essay, but the point of the essay is really for it to be about you. So be careful if other characters enter your essay, and that they don't take up the main spot on the stage. Another thing that they don't want to know about is an entire trip that you took. You might highlight one aspect of the trip or something you learned from a trip, but they're really not interested in what happened from start to finish on a trip. They don't want to hear repeat items from your application. So, writing an essay, which goes through all of the different activities that you have participated in throughout high school is not very helpful to admissions in figuring out who you are. Because they already have that information in the activity section of the application. You want to write about something new. This is your opportunity to talk about yourself in a way that isn't written in the rest of the application so make sure you take that opportunity. And the other thing they don't really want to know about is stories from your childhood. When I'm advising students on choosing a topic and a theme, I suggest that they pick to talk about something that the story is about something from ninth grade or later. Sometimes students need to reference things from when they are a little bit younger. But the bulk of the essay should be about what's happening during high school. And the reason why is who you are in high school is more indicative of the kind of person that's going to college than what you were like when you were younger. So it's more helpful to admissions in figuring out reasons to accept you if they hear about who you are more recently during high school.

Let me give us some tips for the college essay. First of all, it's supposed to be written in the student's voice. The college admissions counselors want to hear from the student, and they want it to sound like you. This essay is supposed to sound like a 17 year old wrote it. If it sounds like a middle aged parent wrote it, then the student isn't doing this correctly. It doesn't need to be sophisticated writing; it's supposed to sound like the student. In fact, they're more interested in the content of the essay than the format of the writing. Adults should be really careful about not over editing an essay. It's important for students to show their essays to adults in their lives, whether it be a college counselor, like me, or a school counselor, or an English teacher or a parent. But if a counselor or English teacher or parent or any adult has too much of a heavy hand in editing the essay, oftentimes it comes off being not very authentic, it takes away the student's voice. And in addition, the other thing that it does when adults do this is it often makes students feel really bad. Most of my students work really hard on their essays and they're personal statements. It's a personal story. And so when adult comes in and slashes things with a red pen or changes things to be the way they want it to be, students will often feel bad about that. And they should be walking away from this essay really proud of their work.



And they should be handing in an application that they're really proud of. I find when my students are proud of the applications they turn in, they're more likely to get accepted.

Secondly, this is not a five paragraph English class essay. So students should really be telling a story as part of the essay, as opposed to writing an introduction, three supporting paragraphs and a conclusion.

And finally, I just want to emphasize here, that the story doesn't have to be about the time they saved the world. It doesn't have to be about something big. It doesn't have to be about a challenge that you overcome. That's a myth that lots of students believe, but it doesn't need to be about a challenge. It can be. This can be about something very, very small or just a moment in time in the student's life. As long as the story the student tells highlights a personal quality or characteristic that they want to share with admissions, the student has picked the right topic.

The College Spy's expert team works with students on college essays individually, or as part of workshops consisting of several students. Whichever format you choose, your student will learn how to write a college essay, what colleges are looking for and what to avoid. We brainstorm topics, edit and revise the essay until we have a polished document that highlights your students personal characteristics and qualities to best support their college application. Students who work with The College Spy write effective essays they can be proud of. For more information about how The College Spy can help your student write an effective college essay, please visit our website at [thecollegespy.com](http://thecollegespy.com). Or contact me, Michelle McAnaney, at <mailto:Michelle@thecollegespy.com>.

#### **The College Spy's Admissions Tip of the Day:**

Some college applications have optional essays. I highly recommend if you come across an optional essay in your college application, that you complete it. Doing so will show admissions that you are very interested in attending the college, something that they often take into consideration when deciding whether to offer you an acceptance or not. And it is also an opportunity to give the college a little bit more information about yourself. There are times where the question might not actually apply to you. For example, in recent years, I have been seeing more and more questions that are optional about gender identity. So if you don't have anything that you want to add about your gender identity, it's okay not to answer that question. And there are other questions that are similar that would be appropriate not to answer. However, if they're asking you a general application question and giving you the opportunity to answer it or not, in general, I would say answer it. It will help you get accepted.

#### **Today's colleges spotlight Vassar College.**

Vassar College is a private college in Poughkeepsie, New York, which is approximately 70 miles north of New York City. It attracts exceptionally bright, often liberal students who are



passionate about the things that interest them. Vassar does not have a core curriculum or general education requirements. So students are granted a lot of academic flexibility. It used to be an all-women's college but started accepting men in the 1960s. Vassar is need blind in admissions and meets 100% of demonstrated financial need. Interesting majors at Vassar that are not always found at other colleges are cognitive sciences, philosophy, Russian studies and dance. Vassar takes an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and therefore offers multidisciplinary majors. Some of these include neuroscience and behavior Science, Technology and Society, Urban Studies, women, feminist and queer studies, and medieval and Renaissance studies. You can also create your own major at Vassar, which is referred to as their interdisciplinary program. Famous alumni include Meryl Streep, Anne Hathaway, Katharine Graham and Mary Oliver. A fun fact: over 20 foreign languages are taught at Vassar.

Thank you for listening to The College Spy podcast. For more information about The College Spy, visit our website at [thecollegespy.com](http://thecollegespy.com). For college admissions tips and up to date trends in admissions, follow The College Spy on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). Don't forget to like and subscribe to this podcast. We always appreciate five star reviews. See you next time.

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