

INSIGHT

IDEAS • OPINION • COMMENTARY

"I think the world is run
by C-minus students."

— Al McGuire

SECTION
C
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The write stuff

Many students dread college admissions essays,
but writing your way into a good school is possible

By Joanne Jacobs

"Pulled by my mother's dream, I walked barefoot across the border from Mexico. I was 6 years old."

That's how Selena started the essay she hoped would make her own dream — a college scholarship — come true.

Her single mother, who never made it past first grade in Mexico, dreamed only of a chance to support her family. Selena's mother works two jobs, sometimes three, as a janitor and seamstress in San Jose.

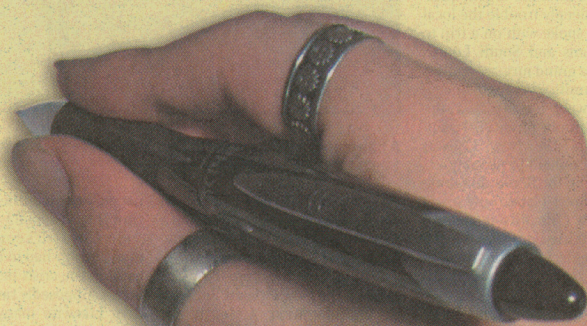
By applying her mother's work ethic to education, Selena became an A student in the first graduating class at Downtown College Prep, a San Jose charter school created to prepare underachieving Mexican American students for four-year colleges.

But her grades and test scores weren't enough: To win one of the rare scholarships open to undocumented immigrants, Selena had to nail the essay.

A new season is beginning in the college admissions sweepstakes. It's a contest in which middle-class suburbanites envy students like Selena, blessed with poverty, brown skin and compelling stories of hardship.

The advantaged analyze their life

► **WRITING:** Page C6



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Writing the ticket to get into college

► **WRITING**
From Page C1

histories for useful traumas, perhaps a parental divorce or an injury before the big game. Those with real family problems, such as alcoholism or mental illness, usually aren't ready to write about it.

The phonies do better: One of my daughter's classmates at high-ranking Palo Alto High wrote a moving account of coming out as gay, which he's not. Another invented a kidney donation to his grandmother.

I wondered briefly if my daughter could get pity points for her deformed finger, but sadly concluded that a cosmetic injury, which led to five minutes of lifetime teasing, wasn't going to erase years of upper-middle-class advantage.

In fact, students who grow up in educated, affluent families have a huge advantage. The SAT prep class is only the last step in a lifetime process of enrichment, enhancement and education.

It's the nightly reading of "Good Night Moon," the weekly library visit, the yearly trip to the art museum, the technology museum, the children's concert and "The Nutcracker." It's dance class, gymnastics class, piano lessons, art lessons, after-school French, math tutoring, Girl Scouts, soccer camp, computer camp and so on.

In high school, the race heats up. These days, affluent parents hire personal coaches to help their children build extracurricular resumes, find the best internship and just the right community service slot, prepare for the SATs and draft — or write — admissions essays.

Indeed, colleges are so suspicious that essays may be written by Mom or a hired consultant that some now require applicants to submit a paper graded by a teacher, with the teacher's assurance that it's the student's own work.

Selena had a shot at a good college because she'd escaped schools with low expectations, earned good grades in college-prep classes, built her reading, writing and math skills and retaken college tests to boost her scores. Even more, she also had middle-class mothers — not her own — on her side.

Downtown College Prep provides counseling, college visits, preparation for tests and essay-writing help.

College counselor Vicky Evans, who spent years helping at her children's volunteer-rich suburban high school, now helps students whose own parents may not have finished elementary school.

Evans told Selena that Santa

Clara University has a scholarship open to a member of Selena's low-income parish, regardless of legal status. It was her best hope.

Volunteer Karen Sherwood, another middle-class mom, worked with Selena to polish her writing, calling me in to consult on the lead.

I'd been tutoring at the charter school while researching a book on Downtown College Prep. As the first class of seniors began applying to colleges, I decided to try my hand as an essay coach.

Emilia, an A student, wrote about "a turning-point in your life," choosing her first day of school in America. Her essay did a great job of describing her fear.

You really saw that 11-year-old child staring at the cafeteria food and wondering what the hell it was. You felt her relief when the girl next to her offered in Spanish to show her what to do to get a meal.

But it was all about the fear, with little explanation of how Emilia made it from that scared kid to the confident, competent student she became in high school. I urged her to show her strength, as well.

I also corrected errors that revealed that Emilia still has problems with English idioms. It's "on the weekends," not "in the weekends," I said. Emilia asked why. "No idea," I said. "It just is."

It was hard to stand back and let Emilia do the work, but I did my best to avoid taking over. After all, I wouldn't be around to write her papers in college.

Yolanda, a C student with more serious English problems, asked for help filling out a form. One question asked if she'd ever held a job. She said she worked as a waitress from 5 to 10 three nights a week, and worked at a furniture store 9 to 5 on Saturdays and Sundays.

"That's 31 hours a week," I said. "That's a lot."

"Oh, everybody says that," she said. "I like to work, and my mother is laid off, so I give money to her and save for my college."

She'd been very sick as a child in Mexico, before coming to the United States for treatment. "So many years, I lay in bed and people take care of me," she said. "Now I like to work and take care of myself."

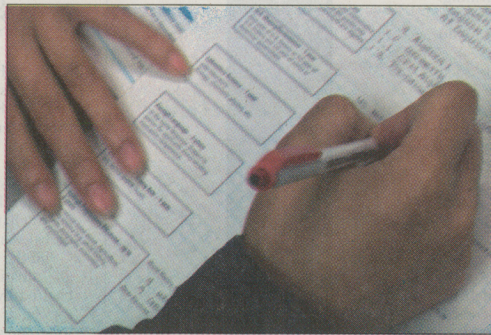
"In your essay, explain why you value independence so much," I said. "Tell them why you like to work hard."

It hadn't occurred to Yolanda to write about overcoming her health problems. She didn't know how to play the admissions game.

Fernando was trying to finish a short essay, due that day. He wrote that he had decided to avoid gangs

"So many years, I lay in bed and people take care of me. Now I like to work and take care of myself."

YOLANDA, a C student with English problems



MIKE KEPKA/The Chronicle

A student at Las Lomas High School in Contra Costa County fills out her college applications.

and focus on school, unlike most of his friends from the neighborhood. That was a standard line in many essays at the school. He needed more.

"Why did you make that choice?" I asked.

Fernando said he'd looked up to gang bangers until a summer day when he was 10 years old. Sitting outside with his best friend, he saw a Norteño hit a pregnant girl with a bat. Her boyfriend, the best friend's older brother, was a Sureño. He pulled out a gun and shot the Norteño.

Minutes later, a car pulled up with more Norteños, who shot the older brother.

"What happened to him?"

Fernando gave me a "Duh" look. "He died. After that, I decided to stay away from gangs."

"The story you just told me — write that," I said.

I got into Stanford on my essay. The question that year was to write about what you value most. I'd started out with intelligence but realized that I was boring myself.

I switched to sense of humor, using examples of a school-smart guy who couldn't get a joke and a girl who was smart about people but mediocre in school. I wrote it very quickly, and showed it to my parents, who thought it was too frivolous. I was sick of writing essays and decided to send it in as is.

In late winter, the dean of admissions, Fred Hargadon, wrote me a personal letter saying that he'd enjoyed my essay. The dean

Business School years ago told me about a graduating MBA who'd racked up more job interviews than anyone else after highlighting his victory in a chocolate chip cookie-baking contest.

I passed that on to Susana. She searched for a memorable anecdote and finally came up with a story about being tricked by her older cousins in Mexico into setting off a rocket, known as a "dragon," which went off in her face.

She did a wonderful job setting the scene in the Mexican farmhouse as the parents gathered in the house and the children played outside. The writing showed her humor and vitality.

But she needed a way to connect the rocket to her college prospects. "So far, this just says you're dumb enough to be conned by your cousins," I said. "Why should anyone admit you to college?"

"Because I'm curious about things," said Susana. "I like to try things, even if they might blow up in my face sometimes."

"Perfect," I said. "Write it."

Evans worried that Susana's essay was too frivolous. I told her to send it in.

Many colleges take the "common application," a great time and aggravation saver. When possible, I urged students to modify their common app essay for use at schools with more specific questions.

Typically, students are asked to write about:

A turning point in your life.

The person in history or fiction you'd most like to meet.

The person who most influenced you.

What a photo you've included means to you.

A day you'd like to live over again.

What you could contribute to the college.

Ernest, a B student trying to get into a small Roman Catholic college, had to write about "the challenges you've overcome."

The question was begging him to write about the problems of being Mexican American, but Ernest missed the cue. His challenge, he wrote, was to overcome his fear of math.

He'd learned that if he asked his teacher for help, doubled his study time and took deep breaths at the start of tests, he could ace algebra, geometry, advanced algebra and trig.

There was no time to produce an essay that would highlight his disadvantages, and I didn't have the heart to tell him he was supposed to be handicapped by his ethnicity. "I'd admit you," I said.

Of course, many students wrote cookie-cutter essays. They said they wanted to prove wrong the stereotypes about Mexican Americans belonging in gangs, not in college; they wanted to be "a role model to the community."

They were sincere, but not original. Almost everyone wrote, "I want to make my family proud." I pushed them to come up with more.

Few knew what they might study in college or what career they might pursue. They just knew that college was the path to a better life.

Tomas wrote that he came to the United States when he was 7. His single mother would bundle him in two layers of clothing, put him on the handlebars of a bicycle and ride him to school hours before it opened, so she could pedal across San Jose to her first cleaning job.

After school, he walked home to the apartment they shared with an aunt. The other boys would stop at a convenience store for snacks. "I had no money, not even a quarter. My mother had no money to give me. I could never get a snack like the other boys." He concluded, "I want to go to college and get a good job."

"So your children will be able to buy snacks?"

"Yes!" he said.

There was no way to add an academic goal without turning Tomas into a phony. I helped him with the grammar and told him to send it in.

Selena got the scholarship to Santa Clara University.

Emilia earned a scholarship to Mount Holyoke, and discovered it was an easy adjustment compared to her first day of school.

Susana, admitted to nearly every school she applied to, chose Santa Clara over UC Berkeley.

Ernest didn't get into the college that wanted to know about his greatest challenge but he was accepted at a similar college.

Yolanda, Fernando and Tomas were admitted to California State University schools.

After two years at UCLA, my daughter transferred to Stanford, helped by a first-rate essay that she wrote without my help — if you don't count the years of nagging and all the readings of "Goodnight Moon." Her fake gay friend became a Yale man; the two-kidney kid went to Princeton.

Jeanne Jacobs' book about Downtown College Prep, "Our School: The Inspiring Story of Two Teachers, One Big Idea and the School That Beat the Odds," is to be published in December by Palgrave Macmillan. Contact us at insight@chronicle.com.