

ABSTRACT

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

by

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This dissertation examines inequality and access in the college admissions process and, in particular, via the college application essay. With a research design and analysis sampling documents from multiple stakeholders in the college admissions process, this research considers how students with diverse histories of preparation for higher education interact with actors relevant to the admissions process in their college admissions essays. Essays were collected from students at one large public university and one small private liberal arts university. These were analyzed alongside university admissions requirements and college preparatory agency information. All student essays interacted with the institutional expectations and presented an awareness of the need to write for their audience. Students addressed their audience directly and less directly, through conveying challenges they overcame and describing the personal growth that came from those challenges. Differences emerged in *how* the students approached challenges and development, where first-generation college students and those who did not participate in college preparatory activities spent much more time describing the challenge itself, whereas their non-first-generation peers and those that were exposed to college preparatory work quickly moved on to explore the development of their passions. This study sheds light on how students use the college essay process to negotiate their understanding of higher education and potential place in it, in relation to numerous messages they have received. That said, barriers to higher education access remain. The findings can help researchers consider innovative designs for studying inequality and considering practices of educators, policy makers, and families to understand situations for students with less preparation for college.