Application Essays and the Performance of Merit in US Selective Admissions

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Draft paper available at Stanford Pathways Lab (pathwayslab.stanford.edu)
The role **SAT scores** and **high school preparation** in college admissions has received significant attention.

**Essay requirements** lack a sufficient social science research literature.

*Our lab is taking up this work.*
How is social class related to essay content?
Data

State U - A large multi-campus, public university system

Significant metadata - but with some limitations

55,016 applications - US applicants in 2017 with reported household income

4 essays per applicant - prompts selected out of eight possible choices

220,062 individual essays - written by applicants in this sample
### Data: Personal insight questions

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<th>Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.</th>
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<td>2. Creative side</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<td>3. Talent or skill</td>
<td>What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?</td>
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<td>Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.</td>
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<td>Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.</td>
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Analysis 1: Within-prompt variation

5. Significant Challenge (34,328 applicant essays):
“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?”

Read and coded 3,519 individual essays
Analysis 1: Significant challenge responses

“The most significant challenge I have faced was being to shy to [sic] ask for help in school.”

“Women belong in the kitchen’’ is one of the most stereotypical phrases heard when people speak about a woman's place in the world.”

“When I came to the United States I was fifteen years old, the most significant challenge I faced was not knowing English.”

“Not knowing if you will live to see the next day can be hard. During the years of my depression, I woke up everyday wondering just that.”

“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.”
## Analysis 1: Significant challenge codes

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Analysis 1: Significant challenge and income (n=3,519)

Within prompt patterns (n=3,519)

Mean RHI per challenge

Proportion of essays per primary challenge

Challenges:
- Economic/Material Insecurity
- Abuse
- Domestic Instability
- Immigration
- Time/Scheduling Pressure
- Death
- Mental Wellness
- Physical Health/Ability
- Academics
- Discrimination/Stereotype
- Affective Intra/Inter-personal
- Sports
- Failure
- Travel (unrelated to immigration and relocation)

Mean Reported Household Income (RHI)

Proportion of essays

Income levels: $50k, $100k, $150k, $200k
Analysis: Significant challenge and income (n=3,519)
Analysis 2: Prompt choice patterns (55,016 applicants & 220,062 essays)

- Hardship narratives
- Earnest hard work
- Abstract citizenship
Sustaining the *merit idea*
Theory: The Performative Production of Merit

(Griswold 1987; cf McKenzie 2006)
Conclusion

Merit is an idea whose legitimacy needs to be sustained.

Whatever their evaluative function, essays serve an important ceremonial function, legitimating the idea of merit as broad and complex -- and, in fact, requiring human reading. *At least for now...*

We suspect growing social-science scrutiny of application essays as controversy over the meaning and measurement of merit grows.
But what is merit?