

Buyer Beware! The Ethics of College Essay Workshops
By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

It is important to understand some fundamental truths about college essays. First, many parents ask me if I can help their student with 'The College Essay.' These 3 words suggest a singular piece of writing. The average college applicant will tackle far more than one essay before the application process is complete. Last cycle, students I worked with wrote an average of 6 essays and the range was 0 – 16. Students who wrote 4 essays applied to the University of California, the CSU system and a few other colleges that required no essays at all. Those students who wrote many essays developed responses to the UC application's Insight Questions as well as the central essay for the Common Application and a wide variety of supplemental essays required by the most selective colleges nationwide. With careful revisions and editing, the central essay on the Common Application can often be used for one of the 4 Insight Questions on the UC application—but just one.

Earlier I mentioned supplemental essays—these are essay questions that are unique to each school and are a way for colleges to know more about what they are looking for in an applicant—colleges are searching for good matches too! For example, supplemental essays help a college to assess the writing ability of students, freshness of their minds, the uniqueness of their experiences as well as how well the student has researched their school. Having a number of writing requirements also enables colleges to assess if the student is writing their own essays—they look for consistency across essays (of voice, writing quality, knowledge of conventions, overall presentation, and so on).

Then there is the matter of timing. If you know that the UC is keeping its Insight Questions the same as the prior year's prompts, and the same is true for the Common Application prompts, a student can write essays for these applications as early as the summer following junior year. But a student can't begin to develop their supplemental essays until she or he has a college list, and even then, only after the college has released all of its essay requirements for the current application cycle. Often this does not happen until September of the student's senior year.

For many seniors, the list of colleges and essays to write continue to grow well into fall application cycle. After the student has done a substantial amount of writing, many essays can be recycled with smart editing and minor revisions, often including expansion or reduction in word count. I do try to help the student reuse essays, whenever this is possible, but not when reworking an essay will damage the student's chances of admission.

I take the time to describe and explain this essay writing process, so you are not misled by advertising that promotes getting 'The College Essay' written for a small price tag over the summer months. In my view, these essay workshops are unethical, unless they clearly explain that writing one essay may only get a small part of the job done. It's tough enough to write good college essays. Uncovering them late in the process, makes a tough job even harder.