

## Helping Students Develop Statements that are

# PERSONAL

Karen Clemence, Lafayette College

*Even the brightest students are clueless about how to develop a personal statement. Because advisors might also feel anxious about guiding students they scarcely know, structuring a collaborative process enables you to lead students to higher levels of self-discovery and narration as you enjoy getting to know them.*

There are two big challenges at the outset: 1) helping students begin the journey inward and, 2) showing them how to not allow the first draft to confine them. When working with students, I recommend keeping the draft face down on your desk while asking them what they believe they have communicated and why. Keep that conversation going for as long as it is fruitful, branching into their life stories whenever possible. Turning to the draft as the final step de-emphasizes the permanence of each draft as it encourages openness to discovery and change – and your students might even tell you how surprised they were to enjoy the process!

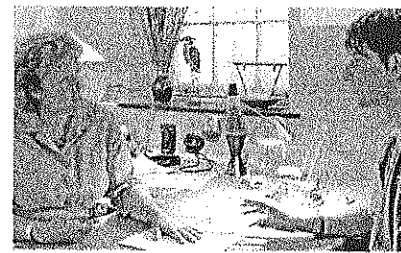
*The outline below can serve as a handout for students and a guide for advisors.*

### **What is a personal statement?**

- It is an essay, typically 500 to 1000 words or two double-spaced pages, often presented in story form. It provides nonquantifiable material used to evaluate you in lieu of a personal interview. As such, it is an important opportunity to make a positive contribution to your application.
- It is a writing sample; it validates whether or not you demonstrate the ability to be logical, clear, and persuasive.

### **Now that I know what a personal statement is, how do I decide what to write about?**

- Don't approach your essay trying to guess what your target audience wants; instead, examine and express what you have to say. Take plenty of time to update and review your resume, then make sure your personal statement doesn't look anything like it! One way to use your resume as a resource is to sift through the experiences listed on your resume searching for times you felt



energetic, inspired, challenged and/or proud. Expect this process to feel somewhat awkward; most college students don't spend much time, if any, thinking or writing about themselves. Couple this sort of thinking with reflections about your life, its challenges, your personal qualities and accomplishments. Search for what really matters to you.

- After you have reflected on your own, consider sharing your thoughts with an advisor or someone you trust. An outsider's perspective is an essential part of this process because you are writing for others.
- Whether or not you have decided about what to write, sometimes it is beneficial to just write. See what happens. It may yield useful material or possibly lead you to a different approach.

### **Now that I have chosen a theme, how do I write the statement?**

- If you find yourself laboring over the introduction or the conclusion, stop and concentrate on your central messages. You will develop greater clarity after you have developed them.
- Be careful and deliberate. Make sure your story substantiates your claims. Your storytelling needs to include real evidence and examples.
- Be willing to find surprises and adjust your story

as you learn from your writing. Often you will discover connections that were hidden before you initiated the personal statement process. You will need to be flexible and have the time to be flexible as you move from one draft to the next. Yes, successful personal statements usually emerge from multiple drafts.

*Now that I've written it, how do I know if it's any good?*

- Have you checked for mistakes in grammar and punctuation? Have you checked again?
- It's not good if it's not about you. You might honor others but your purpose must be to connect to yourself. Although you are undoubtedly very smart, don't be theoretical. This is a personal statement.
- Test yourself: turn your statement face down and write a list of the things your reader will have learned about you. If you're stumped, go back to your writing. If you've got a substantial list, ask yourself if you are not just satisfied with the list but enthused about it because it really captures your essence.
- Share your writing with a trusted advisor or mentor, you might even share it with someone who actually doesn't know you very well. Encourage

them to be honest with you. Is any part of the statement confusing, extraneous, repetitive or disorganized? Take their advice seriously; it can be difficult to stay open to suggestions after you have been writing for a while.

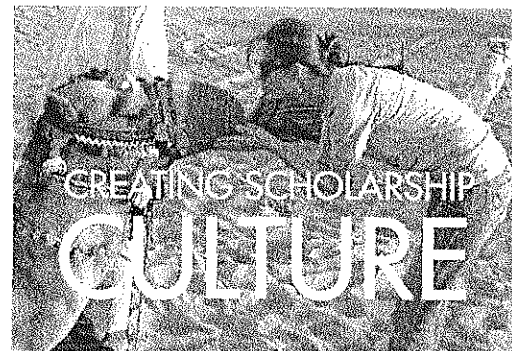
- Remember, personal statements should address something you are passionate about, experiences that resulted in intellectual or emotional growth, a challenge that you not only met but surpassed, your inner strengths, personal qualities and/or your academic interests and research. Believe it or not, some applicants find a way to include all of these angles in one cohesive statement. If you look hard enough, you might find an underlying theme that enables you to hit your highest mark, too.

*Now that I have learned what to do, is there anything else I should not do?*

- Don't use quotes or give a title to your statement.
- Don't use the statement to explain something negative. Save it for an addendum.
- Don't use precious space in your closing to repeat what was said in two pages and try not to say obvious and unnecessary things about your goals. Trust your message and end your statement naturally.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE: WHY NATIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS MATTER

*The following articles provide three institutional perspectives on the role and importance of national scholarships for universities and colleges.*



**Craig T Colbane**, Director, University Honors Program & Associate Professor of Political Science, Western Kentucky University

*Senida Husic (Honors Program), Gilman Scholar to United Arab Emirates, Spring 2007. She was traveling in Egypt at the time of this photo.*

In 2005, as part of Western Kentucky University's strategy to gain national prominence, I was hired to transform the Honors Program into an Honors College. Although an Honors College is one of many ways to earn a reputation as a "leading American university," it can take years to gain the desired reputation. So, when, on my first day at WKU our president asked me if I could get our honors program national ranking and recognition within five years, I said "No, sir." Needless to say, the look on his face told me it was not the answer he wanted to hear. It was now up to me to explain why it just was not possible in that time frame and that if national recognition was the goal, a much quicker route would be through the scholarship process. I discussed the range of scholarships I had in mind with our president and how we could benchmark WKU against more prestigious and developed

scholarship programs. He loved it and that is the process we are currently pursuing.

Prior to 2005, very few students at our institution applied for prestigious scholarships; those that did apply met with minimal success. Knowledge of the scholarships, understanding of the application process, etc. was absent. In short, our university lacked a "culture of scholarship." To rectify this situation, the Honors Program opted to take the lead in developing this culture. Although the development of a scholarship culture is a multi-year process, we are cognizant of the need for short term successes in order to build long-term support and resources. Because the recipients of post-graduate awards (e.g., Gates, Marshall, Rhodes, and Mitchell) are not on campus, nor do they typically return to campus after their awards period, they generally do not partici-