Helping Students Develop Statements that are PERSONAL

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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 of the essay: 1) having students begin the journey inward and 2) sharing their “how to” with others. Here are tips to address both challenges.

First, have students begin to understand that a personal statement is like a conversation between you and the reader. This involves writing about experiences you have had, and how those experiences have shaped your current understanding of the world. It is important for students to realize that their personal statement is not just another essay they have to write, but rather an opportunity to share their unique perspective with others.

Second, students need to know how to structure their personal statement. It is important for students to understand that personal statements are not just a collection of facts, but rather a narrative that tells a story. Students should be encouraged to write in a way that engages the reader and makes them want to learn more about the student.

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 memorable material used to create a unique profile in the mind of an interviewer.

• It is a writing sample, which indicates 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 by thinking you have to write something that is typical or expected. The key is to choose topics that are unique and personal. You can write about your experiences, what you have learned from them, and how they have shaped your current understanding of the world.

• Write about a moment in your life that was significant to you. It could be an experience you had, a lesson you learned, or a realization you came to.

• Write about your future goals and how your personal statement helps you achieve them. Explain why you have chosen your field of study and how it relates to your personal background.

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

• If you find yourself laboring over the introduction or conclusion, step back and concentrate on your central message. You will develop greater clarity if you have developed them.

• Be clear and deliberate. Make sure your story strengthens your claim. Your storytelling needs to include real evidence and examples.

• Be willing to find surprise and adjust your story.
as you learn from your writing. Often you will
discover connections that were hidden before
you arrived at the personal statement process.
You will need to be flexible and have the
flexibility to move from one draft to the
next. One successful personal statement usually
arises from multiple drafts.

Note 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. It's not about you. You might
  honor others by your purpose but to connect to
  yourself. Although you are undoubtedly very
  smart, don’t be boastful. This is a personal
  statement.
• Test yourself. Are your statement line by line
  and a list of the things your reader will
  have learned about you. If you’re stuffed, go back to
  your writing. If you’re not, ask yourself if you are not
  satisfied with what’s there or interested about it because it
  really captures your essence.
• Share your writing with a trusted advisor or mentor,
  you might then share it with someone who
  actually doesn’t know you very well. Encourage
  them to be honest with you. In any part of this
  statement confusing, wordy, repetitive or
  disorganized? Have 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 or intellectual or emotional growth
is a challenge that you not only met but surpassed,
your inner strengths, personal qualities and/or
your academic, personal 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 unifies you to bring your highest mark, too.

How do I have learned what to do, is there
everything else I should not do?
• Don’t use quotes or give a title to your
  statement.
• Don’t ask the statement to explain something
  negative. Save it for an addendum.
• Don’t use passive voice in your closing to
  repeat what was said in two places to make it
  as obvious and unnecessary things about
  your goal. That 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.

CREATING SCHOLARSHIP
CULTURE
Craig J. Culhane, Director, University Honors Program & Associate
Professor of Political Science, Western Kentucky University

In 2005, as part of Western Kentucky University’s
strategy to gain national prominence, I was hired
to direct the Honors Program. This is an Honors Col-
lege. 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 pro-
gram national ranking and recognition within five
years, I said “No, etc.” Needless to say, the look on
his face told me it was not the answer he wanted
me to hear. It was now up to me to explain why it
just wasn’t going to happen in five years and then
not national recognition was the goal, in much quicker
time would not be. Through the scholarship process, I
encouraged the range of scholarships that I had in mind
with our president and how we could benchmark
WKU against more prestigious and developed
scholarship programs. He liked it and that is the
process we are currently pursuing.

Prior to 2005, very few students at our institutions
applied for prestigious scholarships. Those that did
apply met with minimal success. Knowledge of the
scholarships, understanding of the application pro-
cess, etc. was absent in our culture our university lacked
a “culture of scholarship.” To rectify this situation, we
encouraged the students to apply to these scholarships
and we道理 students who were successful in
applying for these scholarships. Although the development of
a scholarship culture is a multi-year process, we are
progressing towards achieving that goal in the near
future. Our goal is to have all of our students know about
and be involved in the scholarship application process.