

Tackling "Why This College?" Essay Prompts

BY CAROLYN Z. LAWRENCE at AdmissionsAdvice.com FRIDAY, OCTOBER 05, 2007

One of the most perplexing essays for many students is the one that asks the most important question of all: Why do you want to attend this college? Here are some tips for handling this essay.

First, let's talk a bit about why colleges ask this question in the first place. These days most colleges, especially highly selective ones, get many more applications than they have places for in their freshman class. Obviously, the admissions office does not want to waste an admittance on an applicant who is not likely to attend – and they also want to make sure that every student who does attend next fall has thought through their reasons for wanting to be there. In short, they are looking for evidence that you didn't just toss in an extra application on a whim, but that you truly are interested enough to have thought through your decision to apply.

They're also looking for clues to your personality, interests, and goals, and how you will contribute to or participate in all that the college has to offer. So, this question isn't just about why the college is a fit for you, but why *you're* a fit for the college. It's a subtle but important difference to keep in mind as you work on this sort of essay. Don't just tell the college why they are right for you – also tell them why you are right for them.

Here are some tips to help you tackle "Why This College?" essays:

1. Brainstorm before you start writing. Make a list of the five or ten most important things you are looking for in *any* college, not just this one. Next, write a list of your most important goals and interests. Then, brainstorm how this particular college might meet those needs, desires, and interests.

2. Do your homework. Learn everything you can about the college and its programs. If you've visited, think back over your visit and jot down anything that particularly struck you during the visit. Try to remember conversations you had with faculty or students, and places on campus that particularly resonated with you. What made you decide that this college was worth considering during your visit?

College websites are also loaded with information. Use them! Ignore the pretty pictures and catchy slogans in the admissions section this time around. Read the descriptions of departments you're interested in, explore a few faculty bios, find out the details of graduation requirements and advising for freshmen, examine the school's mission statement, read the online archives of the student newspaper, and scroll through recent press releases issues by the college news office.

Then, refer back to your list of what you are looking for in a college and match up the data points you've uncovered in your research with the most important things you're seeking in any college. What makes this school a particularly good match?

3. Make it personal. Don't write about things that any applicant can say about the school. Tell the admissions committee why everything you mention relates specifically to you. Instead of "I like University XYZ because it has a wonderful science program" say "I have a lifelong interest in zoology and the opportunity to work in University XYZ's on campus primate research center in Professor Smith's undergraduate research program will allow me to get hands on experience working with chimpanzees."

4. Don't comment on the obvious. The admissions office already knows they have a beautiful campus, a world-renowned faculty, rank high in U.S. News & World Reports, and are located in an exciting city. If you keep it personal, and focus on why this college or university and you truly are a match, your essay will stand out.

5. Be specific. Don't just say, "I was impressed with your library when I visited." Look up the name of the library, and tell them exactly what impressed you (beyond, of course, the coffee bar in the lobby.) Sometimes little details can speak loudly. I once read an excellent essay from a student which began, "When I entered the drawing and painting studio on the third floor of Smith Hall, felt the warm sun streaming through the large floor-to-ceiling windows, and smelled the pungent aroma of fresh turpentine, I knew that I had found a place where I could not only create art, but live it." Here's the litmus test to know if you've been specific enough: Try changing the name of the college in your "Why this college?" essay. If you can drop in the name of a different college, and the essay still makes perfect sense, it's a sign that you've written too generic of an essay.

Finally, if you find yourself truly struggling with explaining why this school is a unique match for you, it may be time to sit down and consider whether this college or university is truly right for you. Think about your college expectations and dreams, do some additional research, but if you still find yourself unable to express why you want to attend beyond general platitudes, think twice about applying.

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