

By Sam Patterson



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Philosophically Informed: Exploring the Ethic of Help

While students are the center of the college admission process, the individual student is transient within the process, involved for a short amount of time, trying to get a spot in the freshman class of university X. Counselors and admission officers are the stewards of the process, the keepers of the code and the architects of the maze. In this position, we have a unique perspective, the long view. The universities can engage the process on both levels of focus, the short view is finding the best freshman for their class next year, and the long view works to preserve the integrity of the application process. Part of our responsibility to the application process and our profession is to evaluate our context, to ask critical questions of the process and use this examination to continue to craft local and national policy.

Attempting to digest this process in pieces, we writers find ourselves concentrating on the ethics involved in helping with the application essay. This conversation, not to be had with students and parents, must take place within the community of college counselors, teachers and private essay coaches. Together, we must look at the needs of our students and the universities to which we help them apply. The way we construct this ethic of help will shape the college application process of the future.

Trapped in the present, we often look at this task from a limited point of view particular to our professions. When we are in the midst of responding to an essay, we don't have time to develop an understanding of the philosophical basis of helping any particular student, but as stewards of the application process, we have to occasionally step back and consider the roles and values of the stakeholders in the application essay process. Perhaps we should ask ourselves, what would John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, or Alan Watts do?

Utilitarianism

If John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) weighed in on the process of assisting students with their application essays, he would undoubtedly

draw upon his foundation in Utilitarianism and ask what action will provide the greatest benefits—measured in happiness—for the greatest number of people.

Students, Parents, Happiness, and the Application Essay

For those of us within this process, the adjacent placement of the words “happiness” and “college application essay” may seem openly laughable. Students and parents often view the application essay as a means to an end; their happiness will be achieved once the student is admitted to some prestigious institution. Their individual happiness in this respect may be great. On the surface, it could provide for many hours worth of happiness, dropping the name of the fine university at key social moments. Going deeper, it could be a keystone in a lifetime of achievement and status for the student. This happiness is the happiness of a plan realized. This focus on the end product, serves as a caution to us within the process.

The Happiness of Helpfulness

On the flipside, a tutor or teacher is typically happy about a job well done and the check that will help ensure his or her financial

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security. Ultimately, the greatest happiness occurs when a tutor sees the student learn something about him or herself, as this does not happen during every, or even most tutoring sessions.

In order to preserve this happiness, the tutor must be working in a way that develops and draws out the student's ability, instead of allowing the student to lean too heavily on the tutor. Without these types of safeguards, the tutor may be working for the student's happiness, but compromising the validity of the overall process and his or her position, which in turn could interfere with the “happiness” of the whole system.

An Effective Bureaucracy is a Happy Bureaucracy

If the tutor manages to help the student showcase his or her talents in such a way that the school can recognize a good fit to their program, the school will be happy with the choice made to admit the student. Later in life the student will be counted among the celebrated alumni and asked each spring to contribute to the fund to preserve the program... However, if the tutor has managed to assist the student in creating a false notion in the application, the real student may not be able to fulfill expectations, causing unhappiness for all parties.

If the admission process is designed to find and admit the students most qualified for those programs, then improperly helping students through that process could directly undermine the primary purpose of the process. The gamble might result in even money, if this is where the chain of unhappiness stopped. The top school in the U.S. cannot accept even 10 percent of its applicants. This one misplaced student means a missed opportunity for another student. It boggles the mind to think what the world might miss if qualified students are not admitted because unqualified students were able to submit stronger applications.

Categorical Imperative

If one asked Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) for his opinion on the issue of assisting students with the college application essay, he would answer with the categorical imperative, “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (in Rachels 1986, 115).

Students' Rights

From Kant's perspective, I should only help if I can offer equal aid to all. Clearly, as one person, I can't achieve this mission, but I can create universal law declaring that all students will receive

help on their college application essays. In this theoretical realm, I can employ the categorical imperative as supporting the right to help; unfortunately, in the real world, not all students have access. That leaves us asking, “If I cannot help all students, should I help no students?” Considering the consequences, there would be no way to impose this categorical ban on assistance—parents and the students would be outraged, and thanks to technology, collaboration and plagiarism may end up sold on the black market.

Colleges' and Universities' Rights

While some schools do not require an essay as part of the application package, many others still see it as a vital humanizing element in a process that is too numbers driven. The use of the essay as a qualitative piece of the application is not universal and neither is the attitude of universities towards assistance. For example Harvard University (MA) business school requires applicants sign a statement attesting they have received no help on their personal statement, while Duke University (NC) simply asks applicants to describe what types of assistance they received. In a National Association for College Admission Counseling conference session discussing ethical response, an audience member suggested students submit a “statement of ethical assistance” so the university knows the level of help the student received. Ultimately, the universities are in no position to ban assistance on the application essay or provide a uniform level of assistance.

Should We Help?

Although the argument that no assistance is fair (because assisting all is impossible) is understandable and Darwinian, in that it assumes that the most able will survive, we must consider that the playing field was never even. Many students have better academic opportunities, because they simply go to better secondary schools, so even without explicit assistance on the application essay, they are advantaged. Unfortunately, this cycle in the educational system replicates our unequal society unhindered. As an ethical compromise, it makes more sense to attempt help all students as a professional body, creating the best over all result.

The Golden Mean

Aristotle's (384 B.C.E.–322 B.C.E.) idea of virtue, more flexible than the categorical imperative, embodied in “the golden mean,” guides the examination of individual roles (Solomon, 310).

We can easily see that somewhere between making help universal and banning it is a middle ground. It is unlikely that everyone in this situation would embrace the virtue of honesty, so the “means to an end” problem can still arise. The golden mean, a realistic standard in today's competitive world, guides students to receive an “appropriate” amount of help. Likewise, tutors and teachers can clearly draw a line between helping and cheating.

We also can interpret Aristotle's golden mean by adjusting the degree of help offered to each student according to need.

For example, a student who has substandard education, but with some help, could be well represented in the application essay, should receive help, even if he or she cannot pay. Another student, fully able to buy all the help needed, who has the benefit of a quality name brand education, may not be as deserving of help, because he or she already has the advantage of a lifetime of quality educational experience. Although this tactic serves as a social recuperation that amends minor shortcomings of prior education, it does not address other inequalities (i.e., college not being an option).

Life is Suffering

With his philosophical roots deeply embedded in Buddhism, Alan Watts (1915–1973), might tell students, though they might not be pleased to hear it, that suffering is constructive and advise essay assistance professionals to have compassion for students afflicted by the process.

Many adults forget the feeling of power and fear attached to the essay question, and the difficulty of self-definition in the task of responding. During application process, a student is actively creating a “paper self.” This self-creation is fairly formulaic (forms), until the student comes to the application essay, in which students, usually for the first time, consciously and actively engage in self-construction. Guiding a student through this discovery period requires the utmost compassion and attention.

This assistance could lead to the middle way—the active and conscious construction of a temporary ego for the most-needed self. This act of construction will be repeated time and time again when applying for a job, a doctoral program, club membership, and even when simply writing a letter to the editor. Too many students worry about showing their true or best self in their application essays, when they should be concerned with allowing their most-needed self to shine through.

Can a Philosophically-Informed Policy Maintain the Validity of the Application Essay?

Because we cannot ban help on the essay for several reasons, both the college application essay and the market for college application essay assistance will remain, and it is our responsibility to make sure access to it is equitable. The mentioned philosophies all tie into the process. Exercising compassion in essay assistance helps students learn about writing and about themselves. When they learn these skills, our society improves academically, which benefits the economy, which in turn benefits us all. As we strive for equality, categorical imperative and the golden mean teach us that all students deserve help, but to differing degrees (Weston 2000, 119). Ethically, we need to address our professional anxiety about the new market for college essay help, asking if there could be an industry standard of acceptable and unacceptable levels of essay assistance (Weston 2000, 185).

Samples of Acceptable and Unacceptable Levels of Essay Assistance

Acceptable	Unacceptable
Reader response that mirrors back to the author the message they have written	Suggesting starting sentences written for the student
Personal counseling about the role of the application essay and the challenge of writing one that serves a purpose in the application	Suggesting sentences and rewrites supplied for the student in response to a draft
Responding to the essay off the paper	Co-authorship
Answering the student's questions	Selecting essay topics for the student
Instructing students about the rhetorical genre of the reflective essay	Writing corrections directly on the draft
Asking questions about the topic or the focus	Making assumptions
Asking questions about the level of detail	Telling the students the level of detail

Protecting the Application Essays of the Future

We have an opportunity to create ethical standards helping students with application essays. Creating this standard makes a second opportunity possible—training people in methods of ethical response. This training could be offered to current essay assistance professionals, as well as parents, teachers and anyone else involved. As a third opportunity, communities could even create workshops for volunteers wanting to aid under-counseled schools. This idea launches a new approach; rather than being concerned that individual students cannot pay for assistance, we tutors can approach schools in need of college essay workshops, optimizing the tutor-to-student ratio. Perhaps funding can be drawn from the school sites' No Child Left Behind Title One monies for programs to enrich the student learning experience.

We have within our grasp a golden opportunity to make the college application process more equitable by creating a standard of excellent and ethical help, and working to make that help accessible to a much broader population of students. It's time to apply this thought to action.

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