

# Making a case for college: A genre-based college admission essay intervention for underserved high school students

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**Abstract:** A significant percentage of students who attend secondary schools in the United States do not acquire the basic writing skills required to gain admission to four-year colleges and universities. In the present study, participants were 41 low-income, multi-ethnic 12th-grade students, 19 of whom received instruction on specific genre features for writing college admission essays. The other 22 12th-grade students formed the comparison group and received instruction as usual in their regular English class (mostly on literary analysis). The students who received instruction on genre features of the college admission essay scored higher on a rubric-based rating of the pre and post test essay writing and on writing self-efficacy surveys associated with the genre. Findings yielded from this study point to the merit of using a features-based genre instructional approach to teaching college admission essays to low-income, multi-ethnic high school students.

**Keywords:** college admission essay, self-efficacy, features-based instruction, composition



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One of the most important ways secondary students succeed in the every day written work of school is by mastering specific genre forms, and specifically, by mastering high stakes genres (Cope & Kalantizis, 1993; Donovan & Smolkin, 2006; Martin, 1989). In the United States, there are a number of high stakes writing tasks required of students as they near the end of their secondary schooling. Some of these genres include college admission essays, which are personal essays required by many U.S. colleges and universities as part of the application process; Advanced Placement essays, which are academic essays connected to secondary college preparatory courses; the SAT exam, which is the most widely used college admission exam in the U.S. and includes an essay question that requires students to develop and express ideas (The College Board, 2010); and aptitude and scholarship essays. Unfortunately, many of these high stakes genres are often left out of the secondary writing curriculum leaving students to manage on their own or to rely on support from family members. When instruction for these genres is provided in high schools, it too often takes place only in honors and Advanced Placement English classes, which predominately serve middle and upper income Caucasian students due to systemic policies of segregation and sorting within public schools (Gándara & Rumberger, 2003; Oakes & Guiton, 1995). Low-income and ethnically diverse students are often sorted into less academically rigorous English courses labeled “Regular English” where they generally do not receive exposure to college preparatory curriculum. If low-income minority students who want to attend college are not provided instruction in high school for high stakes writing genres, such as college admission essays, and if they do not have access to writing sponsors to support their acquisition and practice of these particular genres in their extracurricular lives, they are then placed at a disadvantage in their transition from high school to college (Ball, 2006; Brandt, 2001). It is imperative that secondary schools work to demystify these gate-keeping writing forms for under-represented populations so these students may develop necessary writing skills to help gain admission to colleges and universities.

The United States is currently experiencing rapid demographic shifts and public education is increasingly responsible for a more diverse population than at any time since the early 20th century. As a result, the educational achievement of low-income and ethnically diverse students in schools has become an issue of major public concern (Gándara, 2008). According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2007 minorities accounted for at least one-third of the nation's population. Nonwhites now make up a majority in almost one-third of the most-populous counties in the United States and in almost one in ten of the nation's 3,100 counties (Bernstein, 2007). The single largest immigrant group in the United States is Latinos, making up 18% of the total K-12 public school population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Despite the increasingly diverse population in the United States, there are significant disparities between white students and students of color on educational achievement measures (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee, 2002). Indeed, the achievement gap for low-income diverse students begins early

in students' education, much earlier than college, and limited writing achievement is part of the problem (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2007).

Secondary writing instruction, in particular, has received little attention from educational researchers in the United States and is an area where low-income and minority students are falling behind. The NAEP report card (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2007) on writing in urban schools in the United States specifies that students who attend schools in low-income and under resourced communities are not acquiring the writing skills needed to succeed in today's competitive and technologically advanced society (Ball, 2006). Additionally, a significant percentage of underserved secondary students in the United States do not acquire the basic writing skills necessary to pass state mandated high school competency exams and few minority students enroll in the college preparatory English courses required to gain admission to college and universities (NCES, 2007; Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Chu Clewell, 2000). Writing serves as a gatekeeper for entrance in college and specific writing tasks such as college admission essays, resumes, the writing component of the SAT, and college composition placement essay exams, often serve as barriers for minority students (Falbo, Contreras, & Avalos, 2003).

Most empirical studies of the teaching of writing at the secondary level in the United States have been descriptive, for example, examining the amount and forms of writing taught in high schools (Applebee, 1981, 1984; Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Hillocks, 2002), high school students' writing processes (Atwell, 1987; Emig, 1971; Graves, 1979), the impact of teacher-written feedback (Gee, 1972; Hillocks, 1982; Sperling, 1990), and the mode and focus for writing instruction (Hillocks, 1986). To date, no empirical studies of secondary writing have examined the impact of a features-based instructional approach for teaching the writing of the college admission essay genre to underserved, multi-ethnic high school students.

## **1. Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1 Genre Theory and Writing Instruction**

Genre theory is based on the understanding of written texts as socially constructed language practices that reflect the norms and expectations of a community. Communities continually set, maintain, and shift expectations for the discourse practices that take place within their social context and, hereby, a genre or set of genres emerge (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007, p. 11; Prior, 2006; Swales, 1990). While there is no simple, unified definition of what constitutes 'genre,' in teaching writing two accepted tenets include teaching the features of particular writing forms along with the ways these specific tasks allow writers to participate in the social actions of a discourse community (Dean, 2008). Bazerman and Prior (2005) argue that genre theory has three different perspectives: genres as text, as rhetoric, and as practice. The *genre as text* perspective focuses primarily on the features of textual form as reflections

of a particular social situation and views the norms that govern particular writing forms as fluid and flexible – continually shifting to fit socio-cultural values and contexts. *Genre as rhetoric* emphasizes the social situations that surround the various textual forms. The third perspective, *genre as practice*, begins with the contexts and processes of genre rather than the genre form itself. The repeated patterns and rhetorical decisions a writer makes while writing help form specific genres (Paré & Smart, 1994). Genres also create familiar communicative moves and serve as benchmarks to explore new rhetorical situations (Bazerman, 1997). While genre is defined by expectations, form, and an “insider” understanding of its social and contextual uses, it is important to note that genres are ever evolving and are never stagnant (Freedman, 1993; Miller, 1984).

Discourse and research on writing, genre, and genre theory primarily exists at the college level within the field of college composition (Charney & Carlson, 1995; Devitt, 1993; Fahnestock, 1993; Swales & Feak, 1994; Yancey, 2000) and in second language pedagogy (Cheng, 2008; Gebhard, Demers, & Castillo-Rosenthal, 2008; Henry & Roseberry, 1998; Hyland, 2007; Johns, 1995; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 2000). This approach to writing instruction has yet to be widely applied at the secondary level and there are few empirical studies of instructional practices designed to support genre knowledge with secondary students (Donovan & Smolkin, 2006; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1986). A number of studies have examined the impact of explicit teaching of genre features in elementary children’s writing (Kamberelis, 1999; Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). These studies focus on teaching children the text structure of story, exposition, and poetry and have shown that direct teaching of these text structures improved children’s understanding of and ability to write in those genres (Englert, Stewart, & Hiebert, 1988; Fitzgerald & Teasley, 1986; Schnoor, 2004). The empirical studies of the impact of explicit teaching on children’s composing of specific kinds of texts show, for the most part, that students with this kind of instruction outperform those without (Graham & Perin, 2007). Miller (1984) has cautioned against teaching genre features as an overly simplified set of rules, which are decontextualized from the discourse communities in which a genre is expected. One way to teach genre features while also showing students the larger social context may be to ground the instruction in real life purposes with authentic writing tasks (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). Purcell-Gates, Duke, and Martineau (2007) found a strong correlational relationship between degree of authenticity of reading and writing activities connected to informational and procedural science texts and growth in genre-specific abilities. This work adds to the growing body of research that suggests the importance of involving students in reading and writing activities with real-life purposes. Further, there is a need for additional research, particularly at the secondary level, where there is little empirical research on genre-based instruction grounded in age appropriate authentic tasks. In the present study, college admission essays served as an authentic, gate-keeping genre for students to learn and practice.

In this study we borrow, in part, from a larger socio-cultural framework of writing and language development (Gee, 1992; Prior, 2006; Street, 1984; Vygotsky,

1934/1962). This theoretical perspective considers how writing practices are enhanced through social relationships situated in the context of activity systems (Prior, 2006). From this perspective, writing is always situated, tied to specific purposes, and changes over time with practice and guidance. This line of research has found that successful writers often have a person or institution in their lives sponsoring their acquisition of writing skills (Brandt, 2001; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005). What becomes important from this understanding of writing growth is not the place individuals begin as writers, but instead, their exposure to quality writing instruction and rich learning contexts with opportunities to engage in meaningful writing.

### **1.2 Self-Efficacy**

A further line of research on writing instruction has focused on self-efficacy, which concerns the role of agency in an individual's developmental and decision-making processes. Interaction between individuals and their social and cultural context helps predict and explain behavior. Individuals' agency beliefs allow them to demonstrate some control over their actions, decisions, and feelings (Bandura, 1986). Students' personal interpretations about their perceived potential to achieve academic success are integral to their success as writers (Pajares, 2003). Research consistently shows that students' general self-efficacy is related to writing performance (Pajares & Johnson, 1996; Pajares, Johnson, & Usher, 2007; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995; Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; and see Bruning & Horn, 2000; Graham & Harris, 2005). In studies conducted on writing and self-efficacy, correlations between students' self-efficacy and writing performance typically ranges from .30 to .50 (Pajares et al., 2007). Research shows that writing self-efficacy levels often drop in middle school and remain at that lower level through high school (Usher & Pajares, 2008). One important goal of high school writing instruction may be to increase high school students' confidence and knowledge about a specific writing genre leading to greater writing success with authentic tasks. Because writing is both social and emotional, self-efficacy is key to each step of the writing process and is instrumental in writing development (McLeod, 1987). Further, students' self-efficacy not only influences writing performance but can also impact the academic decisions students make in high school and college, as well as resultant career choices (Hackett, 1995). This is especially true for ethnic minorities who perceive more educational and career barriers (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001) and differences in their ability to write and read (Murphy & Shell, 1989) than their Caucasian counterparts.

### **1.3 College Admission Essays as a Gate-keeping Genre**

At most colleges and universities in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia, and other countries around the world, students' applications for admission are evaluated based on multiple criteria before being admitted. Some of these criteria include ability to pay, recommendations from high school counsellors and teachers, interviews, high school grade point averages (GPA), high school class rank, evidence of

extracurricular activities, admission test scores, and the quality of a written essay (National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC], 2008). According to the United States' NACAC (2008), along with GPA, class rank, and admission tests, college admission essays are an important factor in determining whether to admit prospective students. College bound high school students in the United States typically write college admission essays during the first semester of their senior year as part of the application process.

In the United States, college admission essays have traditionally been considered an important part of the college application process along with college entrance exam scores from exams like the SAT and ACT and on-demand written tests. Large university systems in the United States, like the University of California and the State University of New York, have adopted common prompts and instructions that help define the genre of college admission essays. The relative importance of admission essays has increased recently as large numbers of colleges and universities have opted not to require scores from the widely used SAT entrance exam as a basis for admission decisions. For example, in 1993, only 14% of colleges considered the essay to be of "considerable importance," but by 2006, 28% of colleges considered the essay to be a significant admission factor (NACAC, 2008). Further, over 28% of four-year degree granting institutions have opted not to require admission test scores and, as a result, the college admission essay, along with other key factors, has become an increasingly important factor in gaining admittance to college (NCES, 2009).

The college admission essay is a high stakes genre form. Twelfth grade secondary students in the United States generally write these essays for an unknown and particular audience: college admission officers and admission committees. This genre contains specific features and repeated patterns, such as compelling leads, first-person accounts of powerful lived experience, an ability to connect outside information (characters from texts or world events) to personal values and interests, and lessons learned from these experiences. Currently, 15% of four-year degree granting institutions in the United States use a common application, including a common admission essay requirement using a standardized prompt, which is accepted at private and public schools around the country (see Appendix A for the Common Application prompt from The Common Application for Undergraduate Admission, 2010). While numerous guides have been published on how to write successful college admissions essays (see Gelband, Kubale, & Schorr 1986; *Harvard Independent*, 2002), to date, there is little empirical support for the efficacy of these methods (Samway, 2006). Of the studies that focus on underserved secondary students, none examine the impact of features-based instruction on improving the writing quality of college admissions essays (Graham & Perin, 2007).

## 2. Research Goals

The purpose of this study was to evaluate a features-based approach (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007) to instruction on teaching college admission essays using a quasi-

experimental group comparison design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) to determine its impact on underserved diverse high school seniors on the following dependent variables: (a) the quality of college admission essays and (b) writing self-efficacy associated with this genre. We designed this study drawing from genre theory and the concept of writing self-efficacy in order to create a six-week writing workshop based on the specific features that make up successful college admission essays. We addressed the following two research questions in this study:

What is the impact of explicit teaching of genre features of college admission essays on low-income minority high school students' ability to write these texts?

What is the impact of explicit teaching of genre features of college admission essay on low-income minority high school students' writing self-efficacy associated with this genre?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Setting**

The present study was conducted during the fall semester of 2008 at an urban public high school in the Southwest of the United States. The secondary school was comprised of grades 10-12 with 2,217 students. The demographics of the school follow: 40% of students identified as Hispanic, 42% as Caucasian, 10% as Native American, 6% as African American, and 2% as Asian. A total of 58% of the students received free or reduced-price lunch. In 2008, fifty-one percent of the school's 12th-grade students had not met the standards on a state-wide writing assessment (Arizona Department of Education, 2008, 2010).

#### **3.2 Participants**

In the present study, participants were 41 high school seniors, 19 boys and 22 girls, from two 12th-grade high school classrooms within the same secondary school. All of these students completed both the college admission essay pre and post tests and the pre and post self-efficacy surveys. The average age of the students was 17. The students in this study comprised two entire classes, which were selected based on the similarity of the demographics of the two groups of students. Each class was randomly assigned to a treatment or comparison condition using a coin toss. The comparison group was made up of students ( $n = 22$ ) from one pre-established first-period 12th-grade English course and the treatment group consisted of students ( $n = 19$ ) from one pre-established fifth-period 12th-grade English class.

Twenty-nine of the 41 students self-identified as Hispanic/Latino (71%). Latino students in this study were all first or second generation Mexican Americans, meaning their parents were originally from Mexico. Six of the 41 students identified themselves as Anglo (15%), 3 as Native American (7%), 2 as African American (5%), and 1 as

Asian American (2%). Although the majority of the students had been previously classified as English Language Learners (ELL), none of them were taking part in ELL programs at the time of the study and all were enrolled in regular English classes. Fewer than 50% of the participants' parents had attended high school and the majority of the participants were first generation college-bound. Additional participant information can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics

	Treatment group	Comparison group
Number of participants	19	22
Mean GPA	3.18*	3.36*
Primary language		
English	58%	36%
Spanish	37%	54%
Spanish/English	5%	0%
Navajo/English	0%	5%
Tagalog	0%	5%

*Note.* Six GPAs not reported in comparison group and one not reported in treatment group.

### 3.3 Procedures

The comparison group took the same pre and posttest college admission essay and writing self-efficacy measures as the experimental group and received instruction as usual from their regular English teacher. Self-reporting from the students and their freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior English teachers, indicate that neither group had received instruction on writing college admission essays prior to the study and the comparison group class did not receive this instruction during the study. At the completion of the intervention, the comparison group received the same instruction and curriculum as the treatment group. The treatment group received instruction on writing college admission essays using a features-based genre curriculum created by the principal investigators and modelled after curricular lessons created by Dean (2008).

## 4. Assessments and Measures

### 4.1 Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy for college admission essay writing was measured using a self-efficacy scale created by the principal investigators and derived from Bandura (1986) and Shell et al. (1995). This questionnaire consisted of fifteen questions connected to facets of writing associated with this genre in a response format of an eleven-point confidence Likert-like scale ranging from “not at all confident” to “completely confident.” Seven of the survey questions asked students to note their confidence with particular genre elements of a college admission essay: (a) overall writing a college admission essay, (b) understanding different parts of the college admission essay, (c) writing an introduction, (d) writing a conclusion, (e) sharing personal experiences, (f) sharing lived experiences, and (g) audience awareness. Five questions asked students about their confidence with particular writing skills: (a) varying sentence structure, (b) expressing voice, (c) use of adjectives, (d) use of dialogue, and (e) writing about setting. Three of the questions asked participants to rate their confidence with elements of the writing process, including: (a) asking for help with the essay, (b) revising their own essay, and (c) revising someone else’s essay. The students responded using an eleven-point confidence Likert-like rating scale (10 being 100% or “completely confident” and 0 being 0% or “not at all confident”). This instrument was administered on the first day of the study with all participants and again at the end of the intervention.

### 4.2 Quality of Essays

At pretest and posttest all participants were asked to write one essay responding to a written prompt from The Common Application (see Appendix A), which is also the required prompt for one of the major universities in the state where the study took place (The Common Application, 2010). The Common Application essay prompt is open-ended and allows students to choose from six essay topics including: (a) a significant experience, risk, or ethical dilemma, (b) an issue of local, national, or international concern, (c) a significant person, (d) an important character from a text, (e) a personal experience which represents diversity, and (f) a topic of choice.

The overall quality of the college admission essays was assessed by two raters. These raters were previously high school English teachers and had received extensive prior training on using holistic scoring measures (the most common procedure for scoring writing quality; see Graham & Perin, 2007) for analyzing writing. Using the holistic scoring method, raters read each essay carefully to obtain a general impression of overall writing quality. They were told that ideas, organization, sentence structure, word choice, content, and grammar should all be taken into consideration when forming a judgment about the writing, but no single factor should receive undue weight. Papers were scored using a 6-point scale, with higher scores (e.g., 6) representing higher quality writing and lower scores (e.g., 1) representing poorer quality. We provided raters with a representative paper (or anchor point) for each score

of 2, 4, and 6. The raters used these anchor points to help them score papers and they used an overall, holistic rating scale to assign scores.

After an exhaustive phone and Internet search to find a scientifically appropriate and widely used college essay rubric, we were unable to find a rubric for this genre. Therefore, we made a decision to use a rubric modeled after the six traits rubric (Education Northwest, 2010). We selected this rubric based on the following criteria: (1) it is used to assess writing in all fifty of the United States and in countries such as Great Britain, China, Australia, France, and Turkey (Culham, 2003; Spandel, 2001; Spandel & Stiggins, 1990), (2) it is used to assess various writing tasks across genre at the secondary level, (3) the language used within the rubric is part of a common discourse widely used amongst writing teachers and administrators. The six traits include: (1) ideas and content, (2) organization, (3) voice, (4) word choice, (5) sentence fluency, and (6) conventions. This rubric has been shown to be a useful tool to guide writers through a writing task, provide a common discourse on writing, and improve students' writing skills and confidence (Isernhagen & Kozisek, 2000; Jarmer, Kozol, Nelson, & Salsberry, 2000; Kowalewski, Murphy, & Starns, 2002). While it would be ideal to have a rubric widely used by college admissions officers, the six traits rubric is a useful tool to assess writing (Dunn, 2000) and systematically scaffold students' writing (Kowalewski et al., 2002).

For this rubric, a total score of a 6 represented the highest quality of writing and indicated "clear and consistent mastery" with only minor errors. An essay with a developed and insightful point of view, coherent and smooth organization, skillful use of language, varied sentence structure, and few convention errors earned a score of a 6. A score of a 3 demonstrated "developing mastery," but also exhibited one or more of the following weaknesses: inconsistent or inadequate development of ideas, limited organization, moderate facility of language, problems in sentence structure, or significant conventions errors. A score of a 1 represented the lowest quality of writing, showed "very little mastery or no mastery," and is hindered by one or more of the following weaknesses: develops no point of view, disorganized or unfocused, fundamental vocabulary issues, or severe flaws in sentence structure or convention use. These ratings are ordinal, representing rankings of the quality of the essays as judged by raters using the descriptors on the rubric. The two former high school English teachers, who were both unfamiliar with the design and intent of the study, independently scored writing quality of the essays. Writers' anonymity was maintained throughout the process. All student names and identifying personal information were stripped from the essays and the essays from both groups were mixed together and sorted randomly prior to scoring.

The essay scores for each rater were significantly correlated with one with another, *Spearman's  $\rho$*  = 0.76,  $p < 0.01$ . As a result, when raters disagreed, an average of their two scores was used instead of either score. Using mean rater scores for each essay, we estimated the internal consistency of the rubric. They were highly, internally consistent, *Cronbach's  $\alpha$*  = 0.87. We proceeded to evaluate the pretest as a covariate.

### 4.3 Treatment Fidelity

To ensure that the content of instruction was delivered as planned, we gathered fidelity of implementation data. Two observers watched each class session and verified that the key elements of the lessons were presented as planned. We measured implementation of the following seven steps: (1) skill-lesson to introduce and define the genre element or skill, (2) use of models/examples, (3) opportunity for students to practice skill(s), (4) opportunity for students to share practice writing, (5) opportunity for students to practice skill again as part of a college admission essay project in progress, (6) opportunity for students to receive feedback from peers or instructors, and (7) opportunity for students to revise. The classroom teacher had a lesson plan containing the step-by-step procedures for each lesson. Instruction on how to implement instruction was provided before the study commenced. One independent observer watched every class in order to verify compliance with the instructional plan. Observations by a second independent observer indicated that the procedure for the instructional plan was followed on every day that it was taught and 100% of the steps in the lesson were implemented. Therefore, the experimental condition was employed as intended.

## 5. Instructional Procedures

A doctoral student in English Education delivered the instruction for the experimental group along with assistance from the regular classroom teacher. The doctoral student is a certified, former high school English teacher. Instruction was provided over the course of six weeks and involved explicit teaching, modeling, and practicing of particular written features connected to the college admission essay genre. Before the study began, the instructor took part in five hours of practice to learn how to implement the curriculum. The instructional sessions for the treatment group took place during the participants' regularly scheduled, 55-minute, first-period senior English class. The instruction was provided two to three days a week over the course of six weeks, for a total of ten instructional sessions.

In total, participants in the treatment group wrote three separate essays. An initial essay that served as the pretest (PE), an instructional essay (IE) that students developed as part of the curriculum unit, and then a third and final essay (FE) which served as the posttest. Students wrote the first essay (PE) during the first week of the writing workshop, prior to any instruction. The instructional essay (IE) was used as part of the curriculum but was not used as a dependent variable. For this essay, students chose from three essay topics selected from various applications from colleges across the country. All three of the essay topics were selected because they were worded similarly to the Common Application prompt. The topics all required students to write about personal experience and all of the topics were open-ended. For example, one of the questions we derived from Whitman College's 2009-2010 first year application asked

students to evaluate a significant experience, achievement, or risk they have taken, or ethical dilemma they have faced and its impact.

Participants worked on the second essay (IE) during the course of the six-week writing workshop where they were guided through the steps of writing college admission essays based on eight specific genre features. These features included: (a) selecting a strong writing topic in which students were asked to consider their personal experiences, issues of importance, or influential individuals while also taking into account the expectations of college admission officers, (b) writing for the appropriate audience in which students were asked to consider the unfamiliar audience of college admission officers, (c) writing an effective introduction in which students were asked to consider effective techniques for a lead, such as beginning with a powerful quote, a series of open-ended questions, or a compelling anecdote, (d) adding dialogue in which students were asked to include specific internal and external dialogue from experiences in their essay, (e) use of description in which students were asked to “show” not “tell” anecdotes from life events through rich details, (f) stepping outside of the narrative to place emphasis on the significance of the particular topic and lessons learned in which students were asked to share their “so what?” or the place where the writer steps away from the narrative to share how or why the story is representative of his or her unique interests and potential contributions to a university community (see Appendix B for an example of the Finding Your “So What?” Instructional Skill Lesson), (g) making connections with outside texts, events, or ideas in which students were asked to explicitly reference outside sources, and (h) writing effective conclusions in which students were asked to end on a powerful and memorable note that may help to separate the applicant from other applicants. To derive these genre features prior to the intervention, the research team collected 50 examples of college admission essays from college students who had applied and been accepted to colleges and universities in Arizona, Maine, California, Texas, Oregon, and Washington. These essays were read and coded by each member of the research team to find specific components and repeated patterns used for this genre.

During the workshop, students in the treatment group were provided time to revise and type the essays (IE), as well as time to take part in feedback sessions with peers and the instructor. The second essay (IE) was not scored or evaluated as part of the data set; instead, it served as an opportunity for students to take part in a process approach to learning about this genre (Atwell, 1987; Early, 2006; Graves, 1979). The lessons were developed by the first author based on an approach to teaching writing she developed as a high school English teacher (Early, 2006; Early, DeCosta-Smith, & Valdespino, 2010). Students were guided through different steps of writing admission essays from invention, drafting, and revising. Each 55-minute class session consisted of seven instructional steps: (1) a skill-lesson to introduce and define the genre feature or skill, (2) use of models/examples, (3) opportunity for students to practice skill(s), (4) opportunity for students to share writing, (5) opportunity for students to practice skill again as part of a college admission essay project in progress (IE), (6) opportunity for

students to receive feedback from peers or instructor, and (7) opportunity for students to revise.

The writing instruction was geared toward creating as authentic a writing experience as possible for students, within the confines of a school classroom, so they could practice writing a high stakes genre for a real purpose. At the beginning of each workshop, students took part in a skill-lesson on a particular genre element associated with writing college admission essays. For example, on the first day of instruction during the skill-lesson on selecting a strong writing topic, students were provided with ten examples of typical college admission essay prompts. The instructor showed similarities between the essay prompts and offered strategies for selecting an essay topic when students were faced with a college or university that provides multiple prompts to choose from within admission packets. Students were then given an opportunity to select an essay prompt they wanted to respond to and the instructor showed them strategies for brainstorming and prewriting before getting started. Although each of the instructional sessions were structured, the writing sessions were also dynamic and creative, meaning the instructor tailored and revised lessons to fit students' needs while also ensuring all conditions of treatment fidelity were met. The final essay (FE) served as a posttest and was written upon completion of the writing workshop. For purposes of evaluating the impact of instruction in a standardized fashion across groups, students wrote the pretest (PE) and the posttest (FE) essays during their scheduled class. (For further detail regarding the treatment see Early, DeCosta-Smith, & Valdespino, 2010).

At the end of the six-week writing workshop intervention, a panel of college students from a local university visited the treatment class to share tips, answer questions, and offer guidance for the high school seniors in the college admission essay writing process and the college application process. The study participants were also provided with college application forms, financial aid information, and scholarship pamphlets for the three public state universities.

## **6. Results**

### **6.1 Overview**

In this section we present the results from two analyses. First, the rubric essay scores were analyzed using ANCOVA, the between-subjects factor being participants' membership in treatment or comparison group, the covariate was a pretest of scored essays, and the outcome measure consisted of another round of essays scored with the same rubric. Below we discuss the assumptions of the model, evaluation of the covariate's feasibility, and the results of the analysis.

Second, students' writing efficacy responses, reported with Likert-type items, were analyzed using ANOVA. Efficacy scores prior to the experiment were not a plausible covariate as we discuss below. Below we also discuss the assumptions of the model and its results.

## 6.2 Pre and Posttest Essays

### Scoring

In order to illustrate the treatment participants' writing progress, excerpts from the leads of pre (PE) and posttest (FE) essays are provided from four students' college admission essays in Appendix C. These four excerpts include an overall score improvement from pre to posttest of three points, two points, and one point respectively on the six traits rubric. Student A and Student B demonstrated an improvement of three points from pre to posttest essay. Student C improved by two points from pre to posttest essay. Student D demonstrated a one point improvement from pre to posttest essay. Appendix D shows an example of one student's pre and posttest essay in its entirety from the treatment group that improved from a score of a 3 to a 6. Five students in the treatment group demonstrated an improvement of two points or more from pre to post essay whereas no students in the comparison group improved their score two points or more.

### Pretest as Covariate

The pretest essay scores were plausible as a covariate for several reasons. Preliminary analysis indicated that the pretest scores on the evaluation of the essays met common criteria for applying them as covariates in ANCOVA. The pretest was linearly related to the dependent variable within all levels of the treatment (treatment or comparison group),  $F(3,38)=1.25$ ,  $p=0.31$ . The pretest was moreover: 1) not a function of the treatment; 2) not related to other covariates (as we did not have any); and 3) had relatively equivalent variances across treatment groups (was within 0.60 of a standardized point). As a result, we proceeded with the analysis, using the pretest as a covariate.

### Assumptions of ANCOVA

We evaluated the assumptions of ANCOVA. The data were nearly normally distributed, with all distributional statistics within  $\pm 0.90$ . The difference in variances between groups was nearly zero, despite the unequal sample sizes. The final assumption was that the sample was representative of the population. Since the sample was one of convenience, we cannot make this assumption fully, and are limited by its violation. With respect to the other minor violations of the assumptions of ANCOVA, we proceeded to estimation.

### Results

First, the descriptive statistics for the treatment and comparison groups are provided in Table 2. Group means for the comparison and treatment group are provided in Table 2. The group means for the comparison and treatment groups on the pretest were 4.25 and 3.97, respectively, and on the posttest 3.68 and 4.91. There was a significant difference between treatment and comparison group on the six traits rubric after treatment after matching groups on the pretest,  $F(1,38) = 29.74$ ,  $p<0.05$ . Specifically,

on the posttest, 45.8% of the variance between groups was accounted for, presumably by the treatment, with an associated effect size  $R^2 = 0.46$ . Lastly, no follow-up tests were possible as there were only two groups in question.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Treatment and Comparison Groups for Essays (adjusted means)

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Comparison	22	4.25	0.90	3.68	0.78
Treatment	17	3.97	0.60	4.91	0.71

### 6.3 Pre and Posttest Self-Efficacy Surveys

#### Self-Efficacy Scoring

These efficacy scores were self-reported via a group of Likert-type items. We were confronted with a group of ordinal values that we ultimately treated as scale values as we did not have the sample size required for more sophisticated scaling techniques. In this case, we used students' total scores across all the Likert-type items as a proxy for their self-efficacy. We included all the items, not only the ones directly connected to treatment. We did this to evaluate efficacy in as general a way as possible, so that efficacy was not simply a reflection of having listened to treatment but a general, latent trait. Again, there were problems associated with this method of measuring efficacy, but the sample size precluded any more sophisticated methods.

#### Pretest as Covariate

The pretest efficacy scores were implausible as a covariate for one primary reason: it violated a critical assumption of how covariates must function. Specifically, it violated the homogeneity of regression slopes assumption of covariates,  $F(5,36) = 4.47$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . In other words, it was linearly related to the treatment and comparison groups in different ways. As a result, to avoid losing the information the pretest provided us, we calculated simple difference scores (posttest-pretest scores) and used those as the outcome measure or dependent variable in ANOVA. Again, we realized there were problems with this method, but the sample size hindered any ability to work around the limitations of the metric.

### Assumptions of ANOVA

We evaluated the assumptions of ANOVA. The data were nearly normally distributed, with all distributional statistics within  $\pm 1.50$ <sup>1</sup>. The difference in variances between groups was problematic due to the unequal sample sizes<sup>2</sup>. As a result, we used Type I sums of squares in our ANOVA in an attempt to correct for this inequality. Because the comparison group had so little variance at all, however, the correction was not sufficient to avoid bias in the estimates. The final assumption was that the sample was representative of the population. Since the sample was one of convenience, we cannot make this assumption fully, and are limited by its violation. With respect to the other violations of the assumptions of ANOVA, we proceeded to estimation.

### Results of ANOVA

First, the descriptive statistics for the treatment and comparison groups are provided in Table 3. Group means for the comparison and treatment groups are provided in Table 3. The group means for the comparison and treatment groups on the pretest were 5.85 and 5.91, respectively, and on the posttest 5.69 and 8.06. There was a statistically significant difference between treatment and comparison group on the reported, efficacy scale difference scores,  $F(1,36) = 48.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . Specifically, on the difference scores, 42.2% of the variance between groups was accounted for, presumably by the treatment, with an associated effect size  $R^2 = 0.42$ . Lastly, no follow-up tests were possible as there were only two groups in question.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics for Treatment and Comparison Groups for Self-Efficacy

Group	Pre-test			Post-test	
	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Comparison	21	5.85	1.79	5.69	1.71
Treatment	16	5.91	1.88	8.06	1.05

## 7. Discussion

College admission essays are difficult for many low-income, diverse students and often serve as a gate-keeping function. Low quality writing may reduce the chances of college admission and may also inhibit students from applying to college (Callahan & Gándara, 2004). In this study, we set out to evaluate the impact of a features-based college admission essay curriculum and direct teaching methods on 12th-grade high school students' writing and writing self-efficacy. We defined the college admission

<sup>1</sup> For the treatment group, skewness = 0.75 and kurtosis = 0.17. For the comparison group, skewness = -0.81 and kurtosis = 1.41.

<sup>2</sup> For the treatment group, variance = 4.29. For the comparison group, variance = 0.10.

essay as a genre and established its defining features through an analysis of 50 admissions essays. Based on this analysis the first author developed an intervention consisting of a set of 10 lessons. Each lesson consisted of a combination of explicit presentation of a genre feature, examples of the feature, and practice with feedback. Students from low-income, diverse backgrounds were encouraged to understand the authenticity of the instructional tasks with explanations of the audience, purpose, and importance of mastering writing in this genre for admission to college.

Students who participated in this explicit genre-based instruction showed gains in writing specific features of college admission essays and in their self-efficacy as writers. These findings support the efficacy of embedding a high stakes writing genre, the college admission essay, into the secondary writing curriculum and point to the merit of a genre-based instructional approach to instruction on college admission essays for low-income, ethnically diverse high school students. This kind of explicit and features-based instruction in the college admission essay may be particularly important for students in schools serving low-income, ethnically diverse students because they may not have the same access to this knowledge as students growing up in middle and upper class homes. For example, students from underserved communities are unlikely to have enrolled in for-profit college preparatory courses that many middle and upper class students in the United States take in preparation for college curriculum and for college entrance exams like the SAT.

Outcomes show the quality of specific features of the college admission essays improved significantly in the treatment group from pre to posttest. By contrast, the essays of the comparison group did not improve based on ratings; these students received instruction as usual in their English class. Treatment group participants also demonstrated a significant increase in writing self-efficacy. At pretest students generally reported that they had little confidence in their ability to write a college admission essay. The improvements in writing self-efficacy may be linked to the authenticity of the writing task as the focus of instruction. These findings suggest that, despite starting out with little self confidence that they could write well in general, it was possible to increase high school students' self confidence as writers as a result of learning to write well in a particularly authentic and high stakes genre. The results indicate that it is possible to provide the instruction necessary to underserved, multi-ethnic classes to support students' writing for gate-keeping writing tasks. Direct instruction with a focus on genre-specific features of an admission essay may be a valuable tool in on-going efforts to increase underserved ethnic minority students' access to post-secondary education. Further, these findings also fall in line with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which suggests that self-efficacy beliefs can be developed by mastery experience, social models and lived experiences, and social persuasion. Specifically, multiple opportunities to practice the genre, along with peer and teacher feedback and interaction during the intervention, may have had an impact on the increase in students' self efficacy beliefs related to the genre.

In recent years, the importance of science-based instructional practices has been placed on the public agenda in the United States partly as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act which emphasizes the need for public schools to adopt empirically supported teaching methods and curricula in teaching low-income students. This study is intended as a contribution to efforts to identify effective instructional approaches to writing. This initial study of a genre-based instructional approach for writing college admission essays suggests that this approach deserves to be further evaluated in future research as a potential promising practice in high schools serving low-income students. The use of curriculum, which also allow for flexibility to meet emerging needs of students, may facilitate the transfer of research to practice so that empirically supported instruction may be passed on to teachers and teacher preparation programs to better serve students' writing needs (Graham & Perin, 2007). More research is needed to understand better ways of serving adolescents at highest risk for writing difficulties, particularly students in underserved schools with a high percentage of English language learners (Falbo, Contreras, & Avalos, 2003; Graham & Harris, 2005; Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003; Rumberger & Gándara, 2000).

Exposing high school writers to a genre-based writing curriculum, in this study, not only increased the quality of specific features of their college admission essays, but it also increased their confidence in writing this genre and perhaps to a more general sense of confidence in their ability to write well. This finding has direct implications for secondary English teachers working with underserved, diverse student populations. First, it suggests the potential benefits that may accrue when teachers monitor students' writing growth as well as their subjective beliefs about specific writing tasks (Calkins, 1994; Pajares et al., 2007). English teachers may easily measure students' self-efficacy beliefs associated with particular genres and writing tasks by incorporating pre and posttest self-evaluations or reflections on their writing confidence into the instructional process (Hansen, 1998). Next, this finding suggests that exposing students to specific features of the college admission essay genre at the high school level may help them feel more confident in this writing task, which is necessary to progress toward post-secondary schooling.

As in any research, this study has certain limitations that should be noted and addressed in future studies. The study used a quasi-experimental design in which two classrooms were randomly assigned to the treatment and comparison conditions. Although the students in the two rooms were similar on several demographic variables and on school achievement prior to the intervention, some threats to internal validity remain in the absence of randomization. Random assignment in future research, if feasible, would allow for more confidence to the findings. A second limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants ( $n = 41$ ). Future studies including participants across multiple school settings are needed to support the generalizability of outcomes. In addition, it is important to acknowledge some improvement in writing the college admission essay and in writing self-efficacy for this study may be a result of incidental learning. Students' continued writing practice or maturity could have

influenced our findings. Moreover, outside writing practice with the college admission essay or writing outside of class over time may have contributed to the results. Although the six trait rubric used to evaluate the quality of the college admission essays in this study is widely used to evaluate writing across the curriculum and across genres at the secondary level in the United States, to date, we could not find or access pre-established rubrics used by colleges or universities for evaluating the college admission essay. In the future, the development of a features-based rubric for college admission essays would make a valuable contribution for researchers, teachers, students, and parents in their work to support secondary students writing successful college admission essays.

One of the underlying goals associated with teaching the college admission essay genre within the secondary curriculum is improving persistence to college, particularly for student populations who have been historically denied opportunities to gain admission and pursue higher education. Further research could expand this curriculum to include instruction on the college application and admission process. Future investigations could also be enhanced by following students through their first year of college to trace the number who gain admission to and go on to pursue post-secondary schooling. Nevertheless, this study's findings point to the importance of demystifying gate-keeping writing genres, like the college admission essay, particularly for low-income, multi-ethnic high school students.

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### **Appendix A: Common Application Personal Essay**

Please write an essay (250 words minimum) on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below. This personal essay helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.
6. Topic of your choice.

Attach your essay on a separate sheet(s) (same size please). You must put your full name, date of birth, and name of secondary school on each sheet.

(The Common Application, 2010)

## Appendix B: Finding Your “So What?” Instructional Skill Lesson

As Thomas Newkirk (1997) argues in his book *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, when students write personal statements or narratives, like the college admission essay, they are performing their identity in a way they think the audience will engage with or relate to. This means that there must always be a point in a narrative where the writer steps away from the story and speaks more directly to the reader. We called this genre element the “So What?” section of the college admission essay. We explained to students that this was the part of the essay where, as writers, they needed to move back from the story and describe the lessons learned or the reason the story resonated in their lives. The “So What?” is the place in the college admission essays where the writer must do more than share personal experience but must also connect to an outside audience.

### Finding Your “So What?” Skill Lesson Steps:

*Step 1:* Spend 5 minutes reviewing all of the notes, outline, and brainstorming you have written so far. Then, clear your desk of everything but a piece of paper. Remove all your notes and all your sources. You won’t use these while doing the rest of this exercise. Trust that you’ll remember what’s important.

*Step 2:* Now fast write about your essay topic for 5 minutes. Tell the story of how your thinking about this topic has evolved. When you began thinking about this project, what did you think? Then what happened, and what happened after that? What were your preconceptions about your topic? How have they changed? This is an open-ended fast write. Don’t let the writing stall out. If you run out of things to say, talk to yourself through writing about your topic, thinking about other trails you might follow. What questions do you have about writing an admission essay? What ideas do you have? What do you want help with?

*Step 3:* Skip a few lines on your page. Write “Moments, Stories, People, and Scenes.” Now fast write for another 5 minutes, this time focusing on more specific case studies, situations, people, experiences, observations, and so on that stand out in your mind about this essay topic. Keep your pen or pencil moving for the whole 5 minutes.

*Step 4:* Finally, skip a few more lines and write these two words in your notebook: “So What?” Now spend a few minutes trying to summarize the most important thing you think people should understand about your topic based on what you’ve learned so far. How has this experience impacted you? What can you tell your reader about yourself that they need to know to understand the person you are? Distill these comments down to a paragraph. This may be hard, but it’s important. Remember, you can change your mind later.

*Step 5:* Share with a partner what you wrote in Step 6. Ask your partner for two suggestions for ways to make your “So What?” paragraph(s) stronger.

*Step 6:* Read through 2 examples of college admission essays with strong “So What?” sections. Notice strategies these writers used to make this section in the essay connect with the reader.

*Step 7:* Using feedback from your partner and the examples of college admission essays with strong “So What?” paragraphs, add to or revise your first attempt at writing this section.

*Step 8:* Read through your current draft of the college admission essay and find a place where it would be appropriate to add the “So What?” paragraph(s).

## Appendix C

### *Student A Excerpt: Pretest*

Everyone should have a person who influences them whether it is bad or good. Personally my mom has had a major positive influence on me. I am the youngest of three children and probably the one who spends the most time with our mom. That is mostly only because I am the only one to have lived with her after my father and her got divorced. I appresheate every moment I spend with my mom because I know when it is time to move on, on my own I will never find as much love and care as she gave to me.

Score: 3

### *Student A Excerpt: Posttest*

Most homes have a father, a mother, and children living under one roof. Unfortunately, that wasn't my case. After my mom and dad got a divorce, I began to live only with my mom. I have lived this way for about twelve years now. For those first nine years my dad never really tried contacting us. At first I didn't know why, but as I got older I didn't care anymore. I was happy just having my mom around. Many would probably think I would need a father figure in my life, but that wasn't necessary for me. My mom filled both sets of shoes just fine.

Score: 6

### *Student B Excerpt: Pretest*

Some of my academic interests are reading, english, and sciene. I enjoy reading a lot during my free time because I sometimes get so involved in the book I forget where I am. Other times it feels like the story is real. I like to read allsorts of books. From fantasy to non fiction. As long as it's a good book, I'll read it.

Score: 3

### *Student B Excerpt: Posttest*

There he was again, in a bad mood. It seemed like he was always in a bad mood. When he had a bad day at work he would let the steam out on us, when we hadn't done anything to deserve it. It was as if we could never make him happy. He always found ways to yell at us and make us feel bad. My dad seemed to never feel proud about my sister and I. I remember the many nights I cried myself to sleep wishing I didn't have a dad.

Score: 6

*Student C Excerpt: Pretest*

Ever since I can remember I have always been around my family. Growing up around them has definitely influenced me. They are always there when I need them, they are constantly teaching, and having younger members I learned responsibility.

Score: 3

*Student C Excerpt: Post-test*

I can still picture her standing in front of the old, comforting house on the hills of New Mexico. My grandmother was one of the most caring, loving women you would have ever met. The day I got the news that she was in the hospital, I didn't know what to think or how to react. Traveling all eight hours to Santa Fe, NM was surly going to affect my school work. What I didn't know, was just how much.

Score: 5

*Student D Excerpt: Pretest*

My mother, Maria, is the person that has influenced me. She is a big part of my life and I'm really glad to have her. She influenced me by telling me her life and now letting me go through the things she had to go through. She never had the opportunity to finish high school until she got older she went to take classes to finish it. She had showed me and encouraged me to never give up my education because it my life would be full of struggles.

Score: 4

*Student D Excerpt: Posttest*

How many different ways can you get into a university? Many people just focus on their grades but not me. I've always been told "Ciera, your a very smart girl and you can get far." Those words motivate me to try to get into a university. I didn't focus only on my grades though. I always signed up for programs that will help me get into a university. Right now I am in the Hispanic Mother Daughter Program, the AVID Program and also the Reach Program. All three of these programs have showed me different ways to achieve my goals.

Score: 5

## Appendix D

*Pre-Test Essay*

*Student Paper*

*Treatment Group*

*Score: 3*

*Student Code: 104A*

Some of my academic interests are reading, english, and sciene. I enjoy reading a lot during my free time because I sometimes get so involved in the book I forget where I am. Other times it feels like the story is real. I like to read allsorts of books. From fantasy to non fiction. As long as it's a good book, I'll read it. Another interest of mine is english. If I din't become an orthodontist I would probably become an english teacher at a high school because I enjoy reading in class and english has always been one of my best subjects. I am also very good at spelling and grammar. My friends always come to me when they need a rough draft edited. My other best subject is science. I don't like the sciences like chemistry or physics but I do like biology and anatomy. I like that it has to do with the human body and the world we live in. Learning about animals and how the body works is what helps me enjoy those classes. Not much people but a lot of thought into the world of the body or what goes on around us but I think it is very interesting to try and figure out why people react differently or why people say what they say.

One of my life experiences that I have learned from was when I used to live with my dad. My mom, sisters, and me used all live very unhappily with my dad. He would lower our self-esteem and confidence whenever I tried to do something that would please him like get good grades or learn something new he would always find a way to get mad about something I did wrong. He never made an attempt to have a better father-daughter relationship with him. Everything about my seemed to dissappoint him. He always had something rude to say or he would order us around and if we didn't do what he wanted it would become a bigger conflict. We never had time to be a real family. It seemed more like if we were just there to do what he wanted us to do and nothing else. He lied with us but he never really had responsibility of us. If something was to happen at school or in our personal live she would just shrug it off and make my mom deal with it. If he was to find out about something wrong that happened he would blame my mom and say it was her fault.

*Post-test Essay*  
*Student Paper*  
*Treatment Group*  
*Score: 6*  
*Student Code: 104A*

There he was again, in a bad mood. It seemed like he was always in a bad mood. When he had a bad day at work he would let the steam out on us, when we hadn't done anything to deserve it. It was as if we could never make him happy. He always found ways to yell at us and make us feel bad. My dad seemed to never feel proud about my sister and I. I remember the many nights I cried myself to sleep wishing I didn't have a dad.

When I was younger I remember my dad as being an alright dad. He wasn't the best but he wasn't the worst. He would take us to the park and buy us ice cream. We always had a lot of fun. But then as I started growing up I noticed that he was always in a bad mood. He would see us playing in our yard and say "instead of being here messing around go clean or help your mom." We would do as we were told but be very unhappy. He could never ask us nicely. He always had to scream or yell at us.

My dad had a party supply business and my sister and I would help him every weekend. When customer would ask if we were his daughters he would say "no, they're just people that get in the way." It was as if he was ashamed of us. My sister and I would get so embarrassed and mad. We would go into the truck and not talk to him. He always thought it was a funny joke and tell us not to be mad. I remember all the times I would cry on our way home after dropping things of because I felt like he hated me. He always found a way to hurt my feelings.

One day my younger sister, Sarah, bought my little sister a hamster. It was gray and was named Darby. My dad was home that day and saw the hamster. He got really mad and started yelling at us. "Why didn't you guys tell me you were buying a hamster?! We already have enough pets! We need to make decisions together!" My dad was yelling at my mom about having a hamster as a pet. After all those years that he had made even more important decisions pertaining our family, he was yelling at my mom about a hamster. "Mario, let's go to the room and talk this out." My mom told him. They went into the room and talked. My sisters and I were in my little sister's room with the hamster when we heard a noise that sounded like someone had been slapped. We heard my mom yell "don't hit me!" and my sister, Sarah, ran to my mom's room. I couldn't believe my dad had just slapped my mom. He had never done any thing like that before and now I knew it was serious. My sister called the police. But when they came my mom didn't tell them the truth. She was afraid. We had all lived afraid of my dad. Any wrong thing we did he would explode.

The following week Sarah and I had had enough we decided to leave our house and went to my aunt house. The following day my mom and little sisters came also. It felt so surreal. Not having my dad breathing down our necks waiting to yell at us. It felt

like freedom we could finally act like the kids we were and didn't have to worry about getting in trouble. That day was the worst and best day of my life.

All in all throughout this whole experience I have learned a lot about myself. I know that I won't hold grudges and I will forgive someone like my dad even though he has caused so much internal pain. When I think about why I was had to be the person to have such a cruel dad I always remember what my grandma says "God only gives you as much as you can handle." That makes me believe that I'm tough and can handle a lot. I still love my dad event though he's never been able to be the #1 dad you see on television and I still hope that soon we can work things out and have a good relationship.