

application process. Every time a high school student views a college student's application materials, that college student is paid a stipend by AdmitSee.

AdmitSee found students whose application essays had a sad tone were more likely to be accepted to Harvard than Stanford. Specifically, essays written by students who were later admitted to Harvard focused on overcoming challenging moments in life. These essays frequently included words such as "cancer," "difficult," "hard" and "tough."

This finding proved to be almost the exact opposite of what admissions officers from Stanford were looking for. Essays featuring a creative personal story or an issue the student was passionate about were among those accepted to the California-based school as opposed to Harvard, according to AdmitSee. These acceptance-winning essays often featured words like "happy," "passion," "better," and "improve."

AdmitSee also found surprising differences in the way Harvard and Stanford handle legacy applicants. AdmitSee cofounder Lydia Fayal said that these differences play out primarily in the SAT scores and grade point averages of legacy versus non-legacy candidates.

"Harvard gives more preferential treatment to legacy candidates than Stanford," Fayal said in an email interview. "Based on our preliminary data, the average SAT score at Harvard is 2150 for legacy students and 2240 for non-legacy; meanwhile at Stanford it's 2260 for both legacy and non-legacy."

Fayal also said based on AdmitSee's data, she found that the average GPA is three-tenths of a point lower for Harvard's legacy students than it is for non-legacies. At Stanford, the average GPA of legacy students versus non-legacy students is just one-tenth of a point lower.

"If you take out diversity candidates and student athletes, the difference between legacy and non-legacy students gets really scary," Fayal said.

Fayal was unable to provide exact numbers on this data – she said AdmitSee needs to wait to receive more applications containing this type of information.

Upon further quantitative analysis, AdmitSee found the most common words used in Harvard and Stanford essays have similar themes but are nonetheless different. For the Massachusetts-based Ivy, these words were "experience," "society," "world," "success" and "opportunity." For Stanford, they were "research," "community," "knowledge," "future" and "skill."

College admissions counselor Katherine Cohen didn't find the differences between the application essays written by students admitted to Harvard and those admitted to Stanford surprising.

“Stanford and Harvard, while both extremely prestigious universities, actually don’t have that much in common when it comes to the feel on campus, their under-lying values, etc,” Cohen, who is also the founder and CEO of college admissions counseling company IvyWise, said in an email interview. “So it makes sense that they would be looking for different types of students, and therefore different kinds of essays.”

While the data collected from students admitted to Harvard and Stanford is the most specific, AdmitSee also collected interesting information on other Ivy League schools.

“There are 745 colleges with at least 1 application file on [AdmitSee.com](https://www.admitsee.com), and 286 colleges with 10+ application files on the site,” Fayal said.

For example, AdmitSee’s data indicates the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell favor essays about a student’s career goals. Like Harvard, Princeton tends to admit students who write about overcoming adversity. Essays that discuss a student’s experience with race, ethnicity or sexual orientation are well-received by Stanford, Yale and Brown.

Further, when looking specifically between Yale and Brown, AdmitSee found that Brown admitted more students who wrote about their volunteer experience, whereas there was no conclusive data that confirmed Yale favored essays of this type.

While AdmitSee’s findings focused specifically on applications submitted by students who were accepted to Ivy League institutions, the site has application materials for a wide variety of schools on its site. AdmitSee co-founder Stephanie Shyu said, according to Fast Company, students who are gearing up to apply to college can learn two major lessons from the company’s data. One of these lessons: it is a good idea to craft unique essays for each school.

Fayal said that she wasn’t surprised that AdmitSee’s data reflected this tactic. It was a lesson she also learned during her time as a college consultant.

“I’ve worked with enough students to know that students should customize their application essay by university,” Fayal said. “I hope that, by releasing AdmitSee data, we’re leveling the playing field for students who can’t afford private college consultants.”

And Cohen agreed.

“Each school has slightly different values and focuses on different attributes, so the words, attitudes and themes expressed in a student’s application and college essays do matter when it comes to their chances of admission at one college vs. another,” Cohen said. “That’s why it is usually rare for a student to get accepted to every single Ivy League even if they have straight A’s, perfect SAT/ACT scores and 5’s across all their AP exams.”

The second lesson: students should aim to make their essays reflect the culture of the school they are applying to.

“The essays of admitted students are also a reflection of the community at these institutions,” Shyu told Fast Company. “It can provide insight into whether or not the school is a good fit for that student.”

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