

# THE JOURNAL OF COLLEGE ADMISSION

## TALKING WITH PARENTS

INSIDE

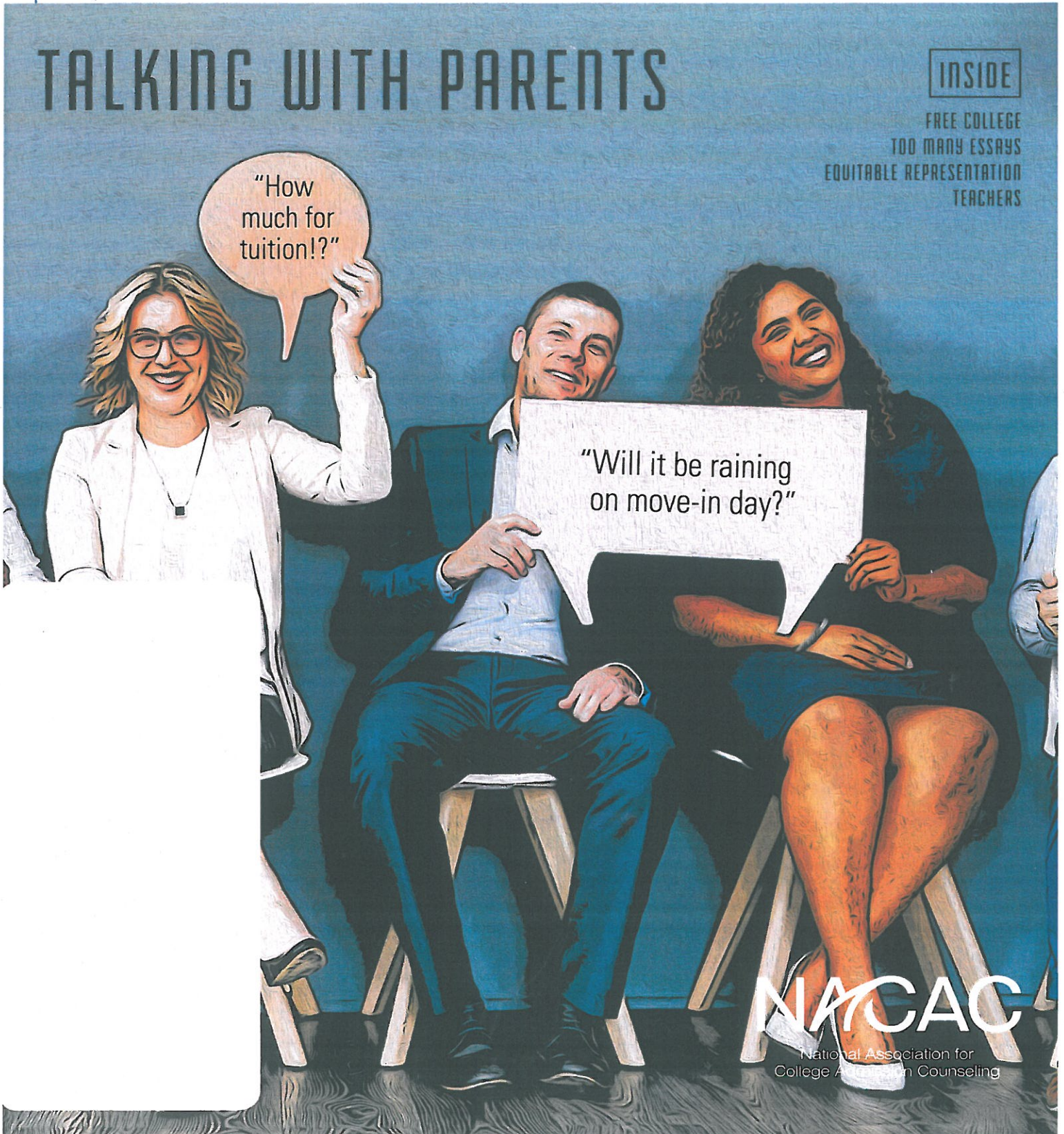
FREE COLLEGE  
TOO MANY ESSAYS  
EQUITABLE REPRESENTATION  
TEACHERS

"How  
much for  
tuition!?"

"Will it be raining  
on move-in day?"

# NACAC

National Association for  
College Admission Counseling





By Trevor Rusert, Chris Reeves,  
Michelle Rasich, and  
John McLaughlin

## RECS THAT CHANGE LIVES

### Using the Organized Narrative

Over the last 70 years, we have seen significant changes in college application formats, the manner in which applications are reviewed, and the number of applications submitted by students. However, many high school counselors and teachers continue to write recommendation letters using a traditional narrative style created over 300 years ago. Clearly we need a little innovation, and probably some inspiration.

Based on our 2017 NACAC National Conference presentation, *Recs That Change Lives*, we recommend, no pun intended, that our colleagues try a new style of letter—the organized narrative—

which has become increasingly popular among college counselors over the past few years. This new style is informed by survey feedback from admission representatives and it allows writers to quickly and effectively draft personal and detailed letters using a hybrid of headers, narratives, and bullet points. A win-win-win for students, writers, and admission reps, this format reduces the time to draft and read letters because it directly speaks to the strengths of students.

Ultimately, using an organized narrative style of letter eliminates the need for counselors and teachers to worry about things like style, creativity, and prose, and allows them to focus on the things that really matter to college admission professionals—relevant information about the student.

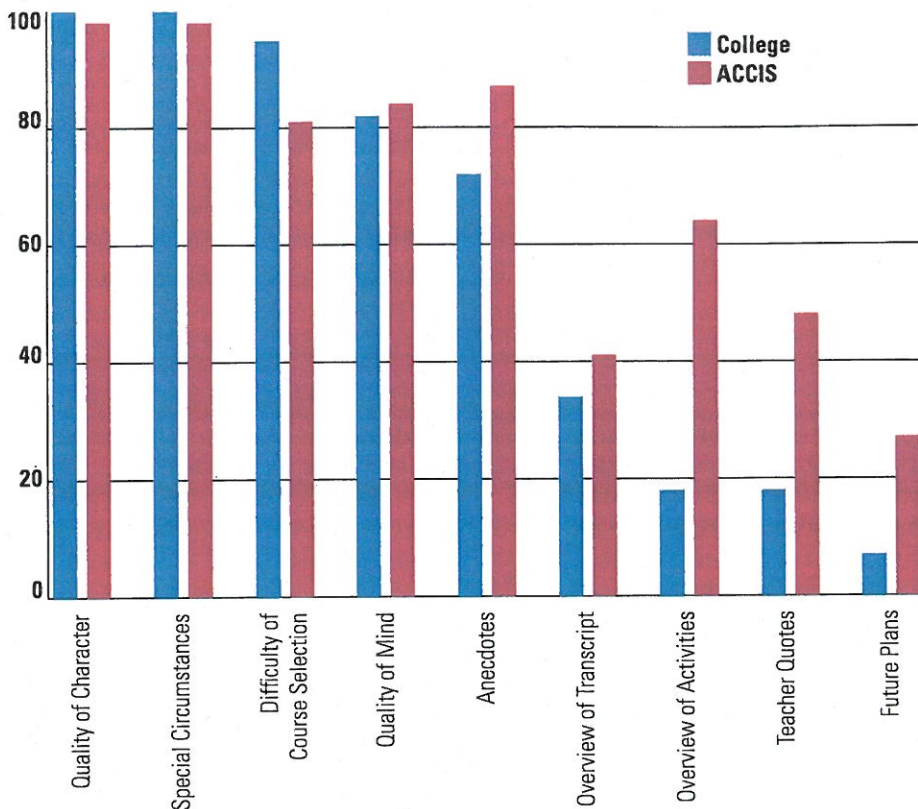
#### WHAT ADMISSION WANTS

*Trevor Rusert*

About five years ago, I met with my previous head of school about our letter writing process. It didn't take long for us to understand that asking the audience was the best way to rethink the approach.

Now assigned to gather the info, I put together a simple survey. I asked colleagues across the desk: What are the essential components of counselor recommendation letters? and listed nine check-all-that-apply categories—overview of transcript, difficulty of course selection, quality of mind, teacher quotes, special circumstances, anecdotes, overview of activities, quality of character, and future plans.

I sent it to college reps at the 25 most common colleges/universities where our students applied



and to the Association of College Counselors at Independent Schools list serve, so I could identify discrepancies between what admission reps need and what we think they need. The results (above) were fascinating, particularly in how the two groups viewed essential information.

Although there were some clear similarities across and within cohorts, the secondary school counselors' opinions about top categories were scattered. However, the college admission reps agreed quality of character and special circumstances were key.

### ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

I'd always believed special circumstances were essential, as well as difficulty of course selection, anecdotes, overview of the transcript, overview of activities, teacher quotes, and future plans. According to the college reps, my last four weren't necessary. The biggest surprise was quality of character taking first place. This revelation made me step back and reevaluate the information I was gathering and conveying about students.

How to best collect information for rec letters could be a whole article, so I'll just share one example of what's working for me. At the end

of the year, we ask faculty and staff to write anecdotes about the juniors they've interacted with. (Very few faculty/staff actually provide these, but the ones we get always help our writing process.) At the beginning of senior year, we ask students to write them about themselves and for at least three classmates, challenging them to pick at least one student they aren't buddies with. (We also hold a contest for the student who writes the most anecdotes.)

The prompt is simple, but effective:

*Share an anecdote about a student in grade X that college counselors can share with colleges (true, positive stories only). We are looking for stories about your classmates that reflect their strength of character, compassion, sportsmanship, maturity, wisdom, and/or leadership, etc.*

Here's a sample of what you get back:

*Jane is one of my best friends who I have known from seventh grade. She is a very comfortable and considerate friend, who listens to my every word when I experience hardship. I usually don't try to reveal my concerns to my peers, and I try to endure and resolve by myself. However, I feel comfortable sharing my concerns with Jane, and she always supports*

*my decisions. She is also a great student, who strives for academic excellence, and she is a great cross-country captain. I am sure that Jane will spread positive energy to the campus that she will join next year.*

You can see how gathering multiple opinions can give a counselor—and therefore an admission rep—a more well-rounded view of an applicant.

### ORGANIZING THE LETTER

*Chris Reeves*

In my school, college admission is a just small part of my job. I have chaired special education meetings, created the master schedule, run state testing, provided personal counseling, and so on.

My day is chopped up into a thousand tiny pieces, and I find it very hard to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes. The organized narrative easily flows into this kind of schedule. (In all candor, it changed my life!)

Each morning in the fall, I begin a letter to complete in the same day. I bounce in and out of the document as the day allows because I don't have to worry about flow like I would in a traditional narrative. I do this until I'm satisfied. By the end of the day, I usually have a solid rec.

This style works well for outstanding students who have numerous activities. I can boil down the aspects of their character and involvement I think will be relevant to the admission committee. No long explanations, which means I can include more substantive content in the space.

This style also works well for not-so-outstanding students or students I don't know well. If I can work a brief narrative to begin the letter, I'll likely be able to find a couple bullet points for each of the other two sections then tie it up with a closing statement. Unlike a traditional letter, I won't be filling in space with whatever I can think of.

Here's the format I find most useful:

### DISTINCTIVE QUALITIES

In my opening paragraph(s), I tell a quick story in a narrative format that begins to paint a picture of this student. What do I notice about her? What theme matters to me? I want the reader to feel about the student the way I do. I keep this section to one to two paragraphs.



EACH MORNING IN THE FALL, I BEGIN A LETTER TO COMPLETE IN THE SAME DAY. I BOUNCE IN AND OUT OF THE DOCUMENT AS THE DAY ALLOWS BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT FLOW LIKE I WOULD IN A TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE. I DO THIS UNTIL I'M SATISFIED. BY THE END OF THE DAY, I USUALLY HAVE A SOLID REC.

### ACADEMIC HISTORY

These are two to five bullet-pointed statements (one or two sentences) that make some sort of point about academics. Here I also try to quantify certain points to give the admission committee context. For example, "John has taken AP Biology, AP Physics, and AP Chemistry" should be "John is one of three students who has taken AP Biology, AP Physics, and AP Chemistry." This small measurable statement changes the story for John. I neither restate transcripts item nor test scores unless I provide some context to go with it. Anything academic is fair game.

### ACTIVITIES, INTERESTS, AND AREAS OF IMPACT

These are two to five bullet-pointed statements (one or two sentences) that add some context beyond a résumé line. For band kids, I try to emphasize how much time they put into it, including leading the younger members if they have done that. I like to have something they do outside of school here as well. Overall, I'm trying to use quick pieces of information that paint an overall picture of the student that leads to the final section.

### STUDENT SELF-REFLECTION

This begins, "We ask students to choose adjectives or phrases that describe them well." Usually the students have a strong sense of self and it's pretty easy to connect the prior three sections to how they see themselves. I admittedly have struggled with this section and how to conclude my recommendation. Lately, I have tried to include a statement to connect their overall story to how I think they will be successful in college.

### INTRODUCING THE IDEA AT YOUR SCHOOL

*Michelle Rasich*

While most people will be receptive to ideas that make their jobs easier, it's best to outline to

your administration and others who write letters why the change is necessary and how it will be implemented.

Again, the opinions of the professional actually making the admission decisions is most convincing. And these opinions aren't difficult to gather. My proof-gathering looks like this:

- Create a sample organized narrative letter.
- Survey high-traffic admission reps about the sample.
- Incorporate their feedback into the draft
- Share the survey results and the sample with school leadership and teachers, convincing them this is the way to go.
- Continue to collect rep feedback throughout the year during school visits in case the format needs to be adjusted.

Within our first year, the teachers were hooked.

- 100 percent reported that the format saved them time.
- 90 percent of them exclusively used the new format.
- 80 percent believed they were better able to advocate for students in this format.

Here's are a few things they said about the new format:

- Headings gave me a structure to focus on.
- I don't get bogged down on transitions and flow.
- Less daunting. Format helped me focus my message.
- It's easier to work on the letter and come back to it later without losing focus or flow. And, it's easier to incorporate info from colleagues and the student.

### READING THE LETTERS

*John McLaughlin*

Admission officers understand the rec letter burden, especially as the number of college applications rises. Furthermore, we know there are many other constraints on school counselors' and teachers' time. Know that we value

whatever you have to say about your students and we carefully review your comments in our admission process. We glean insights into your students from any format you offer.

My colleagues outlined above how organized narrative is useful to recommendation writers, and from a reader's perspective, the organized narrative offers similar benefits. In many selective admission processes, application readers review documents and take notes summarizing information, providing context, and directing subsequent reviewers toward parts of the file.

In other words, we distill the provided information and synthesize it into points that can be easily shared in subsequent reviews or committee conversations. To some extent, the organized narrative lifts some of this work off the reader, guiding us to the major points—the evidence we look for to support overarching themes. Bullet points make it easy for us to pull quotes directly from the letters rather than paraphrase. The structured format also creates reference points that easily can be recalled in notes or conversation.

As admission officers, we work with our partners across the desk to connect students with their best fit. Recommendations provide important perspective on applicants' contributions to their secondary academic communities, which helps us picture how students will contribute to our postsecondary academic communities.

Our work is changing and time is limited. We welcome new ways of thinking about how we can do this work together! [🔗](#)

To view and download two sample letters, visit <https://drive.google.com/file/d/DBxUrWQzLfkxXVOVqVKl1SnJvYTQ/view?usp=sharing>.

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