

50 MBA ESSAYS THAT WORKED

[vol3]

ADMISSIONADO



A SPECIAL THANKS...

A lot of hard work and late nights went into making this book happen. And for that, we want to thank our main contributors: Head Consultant Yaron Dahan, Managing Editor Ann Ford, Senior Editor Sach Orenstein and, of course, the hard-working (and bad-ass) applicants who dedicated themselves to developing kick-ass essays.

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Afterword

WELCOME

...to the third volume of Admissionado's *50 MBA Essays That Worked*.

The aim of this *50 Essays* collection is two-fold: First and foremost, we want to show you snapshots of a successful applicant; how their stories fly off the page, and how they present airtight arguments for why THEY deserve that coveted spot at their target MBA program. Second, but equally important, we want to show that these winning essays rarely (never!) start out perfectly. It takes work. And patience.

A quick overview of who we are and what we do: Our clients are overachievers, just like us. They are aiming for Top 15 MBA programs and, therefore, they are competing with the best the world has to offer. Each client teams up with an expert MBA consultant on our team (also a graduate of a Top 15 MBA program but, more importantly, an expert on the admissions process) as well as an essay specialist. This “power couple” guides the process from start to finish, balancing strategic insights and applicant profile positioning with the challenges of bringing out those insights through clear, well-paced, well-organized prose. Draft after draft, we pound and slash and kick and shred and shape and reshape. The result? Essays that our clients have authored entirely on their own, with smart guidance from us, which lead to admits.

Enclosed are 50 sample essays from applicants now earning their MBA at places like Wharton, Stanford, HBS, etc. While the finished essay speaks for itself, we have also provided quick insights on each essay's effectiveness. Each sample is followed by a high-level diagnosis from our MBA strategy experts on WHY the essay turned heads. You'll also see a structural breakdown from our essay specialists of how each component of the essay strengthens the overall argument, while highlighting specific examples straight from the page.

But wait, there's more!

We selected nine of those essays to reveal a little more of the process that led to those final results. We show you the very first draft and a sample of our feedback. Then we show you the final draft, including commentary from our MBA experts and essay specialists. Through these nine samples, you'll see how each essay starts out as a piece of uncut marble, but ends up transformed into a lifelike sculpture. (Bear in mind, in order to make these easy to read, we've cut out some of the detailed feedback.) If you're curious to see what that might look like, we have included an “unabridged” first edit at the end, so you can get a glimpse into our process.

MBA essay prompts are challenging, folks. Boy do we remember. We have been through exactly what you're going through. But we lived to tell the tale, and so will you. We applaud your ambition and hope this volume gives you a teaspoon of inspiration to accompany you on your exciting journey.

Note: To protect the privacy of our clients, we've made small changes to the identifying details in each essay – names of places, companies, specific products, etc. For instance, we might have changed an essay about Kazakh pear farming to one about Mongolian apple farming. However, we've preserved the style, meaning, and impact of each story on the whole.

And of course, a disclaimer: While essays play a big part in the application process, they're not the only factor admissions committees consider. Each of the essays in this collection was evaluated in the context of the applicant's other essays, test scores, academic and work history, demographic factors, and school-specific considerations. Results (good or bad) are never guaranteed!

PART 1: GOALS

Part 1: Goals

The big picture, the crystal ball

Just about every b-school is gonna ask: “If we give you an MBA, what are you gonna... do with it?” And what they’re really saying is “Assure us that you are going to be successful, which will help to advance our interests one way or another.”

Unfortunately, pulling this off isn’t always easy. As much as applicants want to say that their decision to get an MBA at Stanford is all part of an ironclad 20-year plan full of salary graphs, promotion charts, and the home phone numbers of all their intended future bosses... yeah. Most of the time, it’s not.

There’s no shame in not having it all figured out. But ultimately, the admissions committee (which we will refer to as the “adcom”) is gonna remember the candidate who wants to do “corporate finance management for a media conglomerate like Time Warner” much more than they’re gonna remember the candidate who wants to do “something rewarding.”

The other key to unlock this prompt is to remember that your goals are only as interesting as your ability to pull them off. An idea from a 7-year-old about a magical app that solves some incredible pain point of life is just the result of an active imagination. That same app idea from a proven entrepreneur with a track record begins a bidding war. The only difference is... Who’s the one doing the pitch? You’ve gotta back up your goals with evidence that you’re a guy who can actually make something happen. THAT’s the goal that perks ears.

The applicants included here know that the goals essay is just the first draft of a Life Plan. It’s not a contract. No Goals Essay Review Board is going to revoke an MBA if the graduate isn’t in the job they said they’d be in after graduation (very few are, by the way, and business schools understand this; expect it, even). But nor is it an exploration session, where candidates wander aimlessly through a field of possibilities for 500 words. Pick one potential plan, that somehow ties in to your own strengths and proven track record (even for a career changer), and develop that story.

What do all the essays below have in common? They lay out ambitious end goals, show us their VISIONS for the future... and take us through how they’ll get there.

Let’s take a look.

1

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This candidate just tells a great story about how he came from a modest background in a less developed country, moved forward in life, and wants to do his part through business. What makes this story work is his introspection.

Given your individual background and goals, why are you pursuing a Columbia MBA at this time? (500 words)

Growing up in the Dominican Republic, I saw how inadequate infrastructure halted progress and how development, including paved roads, created jobs in fields from heavy industry, to manufacturing, to “mom and pop” shops - boosting the country’s economy. I especially appreciated how upgraded ports grew trade, increasing government revenue and subsequently, my public servant parents’ paychecks. Now my personal and professional objective is to create similar growth by launching infrastructure investment projects. I will accomplish this by managing a large scale infrastructure project, leveraging three to five years investing in infrastructure assets and achieving operational improvements as an investment associate, post-MBA.

A Columbia MBA is the first step towards my goal, as it will provide the skills I need to be a successful infrastructure investment manager. I need value investment skills to improve both my operational performance and capital management knowledge of infrastructure projects so I can maximize my projects’ returns. In the past, public financing alone met infrastructure needs, but today recent estimates suggest there is an annual half-trillion dollar funding gap in global infrastructure investment. Given the need for private funding, I will become an investment associate at an infrastructure fund like Sentry in the near-term, leveraging my Columbia MBA and credit skills developed at Booz & Co. to source and analyze infrastructure projects as an associate, before ultimately directing my own projects as a senior manager.

As a manager, I will encourage infrastructure investment through improved decision-making on large-scale projects like the JFK Airport upgrade. This project is suffering from “decision paralysis” regarding renovations and is an example of how better management can mean substantive improvements. I will become a difference maker on such projects by developing strategic intuition through Professor Duggan’s “Napoleon’s Glance” class, learning to combine knowledge and experience to gain hidden insights. I will also study Decision, Risk, and Operations with Professor Weintraub to avoid the process analysis, waste and quality control issues plaguing operations like the Second Avenue Subway. Additionally, I will personalize my Columbia experience by exploring non-conventional classes like “Impact Investing,” which will help me attract infrastructure investment to developing countries and highlight the benefits of social responsibility. Furthermore, Columbia’s embrace of Learning Teams and peer feedback mirrors investment committee interactions,

preparing me to build the consensus needed to finance projects. Finally, the Global Immersion group classes will prepare me to handle infrastructure challenges across cultures.

Columbia's leadership practice will also contribute to my personal growth. I hope to use the insights gained from participating in speaker forums at the Chazen Institute to convince skeptical stakeholders to invest in projects like roads, when weighing the trade-off between infrastructure and other near-term needs. Influencing change would mean fulfillment of a personal ambition. I will also learn to understand cross-cultural issues including subtle policy differences between developing and developed nations, transforming my own worldview ahead of working in the developing world. My Columbia experience will provide a deeper understanding of myself, my organization and my community, and my ability to contribute to each.

Structural Breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant connects his long-term goal to his time growing up, highlighting how infrastructure investment changed his life as a child before introducing what he'll do in the field, post-MBA. This establishes a strong personal reason for his ambitions - he's not just another guy who wants a job, and we want to hear more about his plans.
- **Background** – The applicant breaks down some of his essential skill gaps and how a CBS MBA will solve them, but the heart of this paragraph lies in his description of current infrastructure issues and how he hopes to solve them AND gain experience through his post-MBA role. In this paragraph, everything connects from the school to his industry of choice to his short-term goals. That said: how will CBS REALLY help him?
- **Why CBS?** – The next paragraph is dedicated to specific classes and professors, highlighting how he'll leverage each to gain specific skills for specific tasks. Importantly, the applicant isn't just name-dropping here; he's linking CBS to his future role, tying everything together. Now we just need to see a personal connection to the school.
- **Conclusion** – Finally, he connects CBS, the Chazen Institute, and his personal growth, bringing everything back to the essay's initial theme.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

This dude has done his homework. He is a sort of "regular Joe" when it comes to his goals, but he makes himself unique by both showing what these goals MEAN and by showing EXACTLY how Columbia will help him reach them.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Growing up in the Dominican Republic, I saw how inadequate infrastructure halted progress and how development, including paved roads, created jobs in fields from heavy industry, to manufacturing, to ‘mom and pop’ shops - boosting the country’s economy.”* - In this opener the candidate grants us insight into the reasons behind his application, and even if they are “normal” reasons, it just helps us identify with him a whole lot better.
- *“I will become a difference maker on such projects by developing strategic intuition through Professor Duggan’s “Napoleon’s Glance” class, learning to combine knowledge and experience to gain hidden insights.”* - He doesn’t just give us a list of what there is at Columbia, he applies the example to something that HE specifically will need in order to succeed. He is making his MBA relevant.
- *“I will also learn to understand cross-cultural issues including subtle policy differences between developing and developed nations, transforming my own worldview ahead of working in the developing world.”* - And he closes, reminding us that it’s not JUST about the business, but also what he can lead the business to DO. And that makes all the difference.

2

SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Crafting Goals for Tuck

First Version

Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short- and long-term career goals? Why is Tuck the best MBA fit for you and your goals and why are you the best fit for Tuck? (Maximum 500 words)

My interest in a Tuck MBA stems from my goal of entering the renewable energy industry, first with an MBB strategy consulting firm, and later in a senior corporate strategy role with a renewable energy firm. I feel that I’ve honed my research and soft skills during my time at Brahm and PwC, but have not yet had the opportunity to approach business from an academic perspective. Although my professional and academic background has initially enhanced my positioning for a transition into renewable energy, I recognize the need for the theoretical, practical, and leadership education provided by an elite MBA program. With my business acumen and personal

brand enhanced through two years of learning and networking at Tuck, I'm certain I can successfully make the next step down my desired career path.

In college, I pursued courses of personal academic interest but, in doing so, overlooked learning core business skills. My undergraduate experience was not without merit, however, as I was introduced to classes on energy policy and sustainable development that fuel my current career interest. During my senior year, in particular, I developed a keen interest in the geopolitical effects of energy generation and its requisite resources. My professional experience researching utility industry issues for PwC's power and utilities clients, as well as performing due diligence on similar firms while at Brahm, has only furthered my belief in the need for a robust renewable energy sector. These experiences have coalesced to instill in me a desire to work with and lead companies that seek to further the market viability of renewable energy technologies.

I strongly believe my short term career goals can only be accomplished through the educational and networking opportunities provided by an MBA program of Tuck's stature. When speaking with recent alumni, Tuck's emphasis on collaborative work, leadership development, experiential learning immediately becomes apparent. The congenial group environment emphasized at Tuck is the ideal format to debate the myriad ways business problems can be solved by leveraging others' experiences, and is one in which I expect to excel. I believe strongly that success in any endeavor rarely occurs in a vacuum. My own personal and professional successes, whether assisting a client meet a tight regulatory deadline, climbing Mt. Katahdin, or organizing a micro-MBA program for small business owners in a Nigerian village, have all resulted with input from others. I look forward to continuing this trend within the cohesive community fostered by Tuck.

The opportunities to use my Tuck education to address real world problems outside of the classroom while still in school is another reason I wish to attend Tuck. Having been exposed to three different industries during my short career, I've discovered that learning is best done by doing. Being provided hands-on learning through opportunities like the First Year Project and Tuck Global Consultancy, as well as organizations like the Tuck Student Consulting Services and Dartmouth Energy Collaborative, will provide me critical hands-on experience to hone my consulting skillset and energy industry knowledge. Between these two pillars of the Tuck experience, I will be ideally placed to tackle the strategic energy issues of tomorrow.

Notes from our Essay Specialist:

- First major issue here: Where are the goals? There's no way this guy can explain why Tuck is critical SPECIFICALLY for his goals if we have no idea what his goals really are. And "the next step down my desired career path" doesn't really make the cut. So let's have him SHOW us what his goals are (specifically, what job in what industry with examples of potential employers) as well as WHY

these are his goals. Let's have him peel his ideas like an onion, and reveal their true core.

- Second is: Why Tuck? Tuck, being the small intimate school it is, really wants to understand why people REALLY want to go there and not somewhere else. Sure, here the applicant gives us some reasons in the form of Tuck programs, but it doesn't yet feel personal. Any similar MBA program might have a number of similar courses, and remove the word Tuck and replace it with School X, and it'll still be true. So what we need to do here is weave his logic for choosing Tuck into his goals, all while showing the adcom his real excitement for attending the school.

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Spark** – Before we get to your goals, let's show WHY you care so much about renewable energy. Why does THIS drive you instead of say, fighting poverty or working in banking? Let's show the EMOTIONAL CORE of why you want to do this. The adcom is in the business of finding interesting people, so let's spice it up a little by opening with your biggest dreams: Senior corporate strategy at a renewable energy firm.
- **Snapshot** – Then, you can describe your long-term goal, and then your short-term goal. Show how your short-term goal will help you reach your long-term ambition; how do they connect? Then close the paragraph by saying that you need Tuck to achieve these things.
- **Background** – What cool stuff have you done? Let's highlight your skills and achievements and then show the skills you DON'T have. How will Tuck help you get them? We need to convince the adcom that you will change the world... if only you had a Tuck MBA. We shouldn't be vague here either: You don't need "general business skills," you need knowledge of "Central Asian energy markets" and "energy derivatives regulation" (for example).
- **Tuck** – Here we show how Tuck and only Tuck can fill the gaps you have described: things that only Tuck has. Classes, programs, people... how do they link up with your career? Let's avoid anything general that could fit on a brochure or appeal to most students. We want to see the stuff that really works for YOU.
- **Conclusion** – Just a brief (three sentences at most) summary of the essay, closing on the long-term goals you opened with.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: There are two fantastic things in this ambitious essay. Firstly, the candidate exposes his dream of an alternative future of life without greenhouse emissions all while “keeping it real” by targeting the specific consulting job that will allow him to do that. Secondly, he shows great fit with Tuck, not just in how the classes match his needs, but how the whole philosophy of Tuck fits with his personality.

Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short- and long-term career goals? Why is Tuck the best MBA fit for you and your goals and why are you the best fit for Tuck? (Maximum 500 words)

I want greenhouse gas emissions to be a thing of the past. Growing up, I regularly visited Mobile, Alabama where the sulfuric smell of nearby steel operations permeates the air. This lingering memory fueled my interest in making our air cleaner by addressing the industry responsible for a quarter of the world’s emissions: energy. My experience investigating utility responses to climate change on behalf of senior PwC partners left me feeling that not enough is being done. Cheap natural gas has undercut once-vibrant renewable energy efforts. My desire is to make green sources more commercially viable as Chief Development Officer at a diversified renewable energy company like CloudBase Power. There I will work to expand generation plants and sales markets, and then found my own company with a similar emphasis on renewables. To prepare for this role, I need experience working as a consultant at an MBB consulting firm. Working closely with energy clients, I will learn to gauge the effectiveness and viability of emerging sources. Before cleaning up energy, though, I need a Tuck MBA.

In college, I pursued courses in energy policy and sustainable development that fuel my current career interest. But, in doing so, I overlooked core business skills such as finance, accounting, and marketing. Although I have acquired extensive energy industry experience working on business development initiatives and C-suite strategy materials, I strongly believe my career goals can only be accomplished by addressing these gaps at Tuck. Specifically, I need an improved understanding of energy company strategy, marketing, and sustainable business practices. Courses like Professor Alva Taylor’s “Strategy in a Turbulent Environment” will help me navigate the energy industry’s rapidly shifting regulatory environment. Professor Andrew A. King’s “Sustainable Business” will ready me to position a renewable energy firm for environmentally- and socially-conscious customers. The recent emphasis on energy issues through the Revers Energy Initiative is very important to me. Tuck’s demonstrable responsiveness to student interest in energy and the endowment of a professorship focusing on energy through the Revers fund ensures I will have the opportunities I need.

Opportunities like the Tuck Global Consultancy will provide practical experience assisting clients with strategy, market entry, and operational issues. Additionally, the

Dartmouth Energy Collaborative will provide unmatched access to leading energy business and policy leaders. I am also interested in representing Tuck in the Renewable Energy Case Competition and organizing events to keep my classmates apprised of energy industry developments. My research into the labor and security issues faced by utilities and my network of experienced industry professionals will make me a valuable contributor on campus.

Tuck will challenge me and solve my corporate strategy deficiencies, setting me on my desired career trajectory. After Tuck, I will be ideally placed to tackle the strategic renewable energy issues of tomorrow.

Structural breakdown:

- **Long-term and Short-term goals** – This essay kicks off with a “big picture” goal – eliminating greenhouse gases. It’s a noble endeavor, but we need something a bit more attainable to chew on – something that’ll show us HOW he’ll accomplish this. He gives us exactly that, highlighting how he’ll leverage a COO role to accomplish his ambitions, and how a consulting position will prepare him for this journey. It’s a great start, but how do we know he’s capable of accomplishing this?
- **Why Tuck part 1** – He kicks off this paragraph by highlighting how his previous educational experience has prepared him to work in this sector, but he still requires finance, accounting and marketing knowledge. He then breaks down how Tuck will help him acquire these skills through specific courses and initiatives. Now we’re sold that he needs an MBA and that Tuck can help him... but is he a good fit for Tuck?
- **Why Tuck part 2** – He proves that he is indeed a good fit for this school by demonstrating that experiential learning is important to him, demonstrating so through concrete examples. Finally, he demonstrates how his previous experience will allow him to contribute on campus.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because this dude is gonna fit in perfectly at Tuck! He is environmentally and socially conscious. He is a team player and proven leader. Plus, he loves the school!

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“I want greenhouse gas emissions to be a thing of the past.”* – Have you read an essay which began with more lofty, more worthy or more ambitious goals? I know I haven’t.

- *“In college, I pursued courses in energy policy and sustainable development that fuel my current career interest. But, in doing so, I overlooked core business skills such as finance, accounting, and marketing. Although I have acquired extensive energy industry experience working on business development initiatives and C-suite strategy materials, I strongly believe my career goals can only be accomplished by addressing these gaps at Tuck.”* – In exposing his dedication and devotion to sustainable development, he admits that he has passed by other necessary skills, all while showing how gaining these very skills are the primary motivation for his getting an MBA at Tuck.
- *“Tuck’s emphasis on experiential learning is also crucial. Having been exposed to three different industries (accounting, Health Care management, and utilities) during my career, I’ve discovered that learning is best done by doing.”* – By matching up the nature of Tuck’s approach to learning, with his own preferred educational style, he is making the argument for a perfect fit. Which he very well might be.

3

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Starting with a deeply personal story, this candidate hooks the reader right from the start into an essay that will show him to be an innovative and clear thinker, with a good head on his shoulders. He also perfectly weaves the stories he has into what is asked of him, by fitting it into UCLA’s three defining principles. A lovely essay.

UCLA Anderson is distinguished by three defining principles: Share Success, Think Fearlessly, Drive Change. What principles have defined your life and pre-MBA career? How do you believe that UCLA Anderson’s principles, and the environment they create, will help you attain your post-MBA career goals? (750 words maximum)

I was 14 when I lost my father and my family hit rock bottom, emotionally and financially. I had to pick myself back up to take my father's place and ensure that my younger brother and I were well educated in order to have a better future and help my mother with the finances. Today, after graduating from a premium engineering college in India, IIT Kanpur, I work at Starllys, one of the most innovative companies in the world, to support my family. In order to survive, I've lived by the principles of 'muscling through the problem,' seeking solutions rather than shying away, and 'learning persistently,' arming myself against unforeseen challenges by being curious, observant, and analytical.

As such, when making the decision to pursue an MBA, I had to take my family into account since I will no longer be able to support them financially. The observation

skills I developed to 'learn persistently' helped me out. During my internship in Holland, it caught my eye that waffles and pancakes were very simple and casual dishes in Europe. Unlike burgers and pizzas, they were not yet available at affordable prices in my hometown of Bangalore, an IT hub with an ever-growing middle-class population aspiring to enjoy Western culture. Realizing the market space, I decided to take the plunge and start a restaurant serving Western breakfast to help my family stand on its own. After a year's research and hard work and using up all my savings, the restaurant is now about to open in mid-January. 'Thinking fearlessly' helped me identify and realize this new opportunity.

These principles have also guided me through one of my greatest professional achievements. Starlys' flagship product Limitless, which generates \$250 million in yearly revenue, has vast functionality and required a steep learning curve for even simple engineering analyses. After several failed attempts to address this issue, the management felt that revamping Limitless with a simpler interface would require huge resources and could alienate existing customers. Having struggled to use Limitless myself as a beginner, I was confident that a user-friendly interface could be a game changer, attracting new users and retaining novice users to help sustain the product in the long-term and rejuvenate its stagnated sales. Though new to Limitless, I muscled through the problem. I spoke with Limitless' development team to understand its complex algorithms. My experience of working on another product with a simpler interface and my understanding of its design helped me to come up with a prototype and design. The design could be implemented in a phase-by-phase manner, keeping the advanced users interested and leaving other development features untouched to exponentially reduce costs. The design was approved and it will be the biggest feature in the next version of Limitless. I was given an award for my innovative thinking and promoted to Technology Specialist. My motivation to drive change in Limitless' user experience helped me fight through the problem to find an out-of-the-box solution. This experience taught me the value of 'driving change' - a principle that attracts me to UCLA.

Having understood the power of innovation by seeing ideas come to life and stretch the business boundaries at Starlys, my dream is to become a Chief Innovation Officer (CINO) at a tech firm like Facebook or Spotify. In this role, I'll need to 'think fearlessly' to encourage and implement transformational ideas and strategies that expand business horizons, and 'drive change' so that my organization evolves at pace to stay ahead of the competition. With customers constantly looking for new and easy-to-use solutions, it excites me to the core to help find innovative solutions to the challenges of increasing competition, tighter budgets, and new technology. Located in the technology hub of the world, UCLA can connect me with a tech network to collaborate with and learn from as I witness firsthand how new ideas evolve. Post-MBA, I would like to become a Product Manager (PM) at a tech firm like Amazon or Microsoft to better understand and predict customer needs and behavior, to design effective short- and long-term strategies, and to oversee product evolution. In a PM role, I'll also learn to

create effective communication channels across teams to identify and solve problems, preparing me to be a CINO.

UCLA will empower me to achieve my goals by complementing not only my technical skills with general management skills, but also my principles with its principles.

Structural Breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant has had a challenging and inspiring life story so he frames this essay around his personal experience: surviving the death of a parent. After introducing the context, he goes on to list three principles he's lived by - essentially boiling the stories he'll use in this application down to keywords. Great - so let's see some examples for these principles.
- **Example 1** – Small business - As you can imagine, the applicant probably knew he was going to use a variation on this story before he knew how he'd articulate the principles that drove him. That's alright: he perfectly adapts this story to the prompt and connects the experience to the values and principles he's stated above. OK, so he's opened a business, but he also mentioned working for a major company. Now, we want to see a professional achievement reflecting these principles on a larger scale.
- **Example 2** – Big business - Here, the applicant breaks down a story of how he convinced his firm to trust him on a major project, a move that went on to make an impact. Importantly, he keeps the language as simple as possible, avoiding engineering jargon in favor of a breakdown of how he managed the project. We're convinced he's got what it takes, but what does he want to do?
- **Goals and how UCLA will help him reach them** – The applicant explicitly states his long-term goal and highlights how his principles will be of use in this potential role. He then highlights how UCLA will help him reach this ambition and maps out a career plan including a short-term goal and the skills he'll learn there. Then, all he has to do is conclude with one last sentence.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because despite whatever challenge he is up against, he has ideas of how to move things forward, and also the courage and strength to do so.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"I was 14 when I lost my father and my family hit rock bottom, emotionally and financially. I had to pick myself back up to take my father's place and ensure that my younger brother and I were well educated in order to have a better future and help my mother with the finances"* - Although he had a hard time, he doesn't try

and exploit the story in any way, but uses it as a trampoline for innovation and entrepreneurship.

- *“As such, when making the decision to pursue an MBA, I had to take my family into account since I will no longer be able to support them financially.”* - As he prepares to tell the story of the restaurant he is helping his family open, he shows us that he is able to think strategically while being an extremely considerate person.
- *“The design was approved and it will be the biggest feature in the next version of Limitless. I was given an award for my innovative thinking and promoted to Technology Specialist.”* - There are few better ways to end an essay than with a promotion.

4

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This candidate has an obsession with getting a job at one only place - Arclight. Now sometimes an obsession can be a bad thing, but here he uses it as a driving force to show his dedication to his goals. And his experience, in both consulting and non-profit, really does make his obsession convincing.

Haas: What is your desired post-MBA role and at what company or organization? In your response, please specifically address sub-questions a., b., and c. (500-600 word maximum for 3a, 3b, and 3c combined)

A. How is your background compelling to this company?

Post-MBA I will serve as a consultant at the Arclight Group, a nonprofit strategy consulting firm focusing on NGOs seeking to alleviate poverty. Like private consulting firms, Arclight looks for proven leaders with consulting experience and strong communication skills. The ideal Arclight employee has a sharp, analytical mind, and a passion for fighting poverty.

My unique combination of non-profit and for-profit consulting experience makes me a perfect fit for Arclight. I've consulted at the University of Arizona Center for Economic Development, a mission-focused, non-profit organization whose clients include a diverse mix of governments, for-profit, non-profit, and tribal entities, an exception in a consulting world focusing on large, for-profit businesses. Notably, I've worked with both private corporations whose revenues exceed \$2.8 billion annually, and small tribal communities of 60 people. This will allow me to navigate diverse organizational cultures and go beyond simple cost-reduction and profit issues to see the big picture,

essential skills when working with mission-based non-profit organizations and foundations.

My one-year term in the Peace Corps in a poverty alleviation volunteer program, also highlights my strong passion for this cause. It is unlikely that many people will have both consulting experience and an entire year of direct volunteering experience in this sector.

These experiences have also allowed me to gain significant leadership skills. For example, in my current role, I have led 5-person teams of MBA students on consulting projects, an opportunity not typically available to consultants early in their careers. This leadership experience also involves several client and conference presentations, honing my communication skills.

B. What is something you would do better for this company than any other employee?

Most Arclight applicants come from one of two groups: those with private sector consulting experience, and those with extensive nonprofit sector backgrounds. My professional experience, a unique fusion of both, will allow me to understand our clients' need to balance profits and social impact better than any other Arclight consultant.

When working with mission-based clients like the YMCA, for example, I will be able to analyze issues with an eye on both financial objectives and mission objectives, allowing for maximum impact. In my current role, I have worked with a homeless youth shelter that approached me to close a \$200,000 operating deficit. There, I developed a social enterprise model that would not only close their deficit within three years, but would also provide workforce development for shelter youth to help them get back on their feet. This solution solved their financial issues while also expanding the services they offered to their constituents. I look forward to engineering such win-win scenarios when I'm working with large non-profits or philanthropies at Arclight.

C. Why is an MBA necessary and how will Haas specifically help you succeed at this company?

To lead teams of associates and conduct strategic planning for complex clients with multiple stakeholders, my prospective position at Arclight requires an MBA, and the leadership and problem-solving skills available only through a highly recognized program.

Haas's Social Sector Solutions program provides the best opportunity to gain these skills by providing consulting experience under the direct supervision of a McKinsey consultant. This opportunity to work on projects similar Chemline's recent expansion

into new global regions will teach me how to plan for potential pitfalls, essential preparation for leading comprehensive planning efforts with clients at Arclight.

I will also take advantage of Strategic Management of Nonprofit Organizations and Nonprofit Boards, courses teaching me my future clients' thought processes in regards to resource development and governing board leadership. These courses would further develop my ability to handle issues like inactive boards and inadequate performance measurement, allowing me to further differentiate myself from other Arclight applicants and employees.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he knows what he wants, and he knows what he needs to do to get there.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Post-MBA I will serve as a consultant at the Arclight Group, a nonprofit strategy consulting firm focusing on NGOs seeking to alleviate poverty.”* - Even just using the word “will” when providing his goals shows us this candidate’s confidence.
- *“For example, in my current role, I have led 5-person teams of MBA students on consulting projects, an opportunity not typically available to consultants early in their careers.”* - What he is writing here is that since he has already LED people who have their MBA, wouldn’t he be a perfect candidate for one?
- *“Most Arclight applicants come from one of two groups: those with private sector consulting experience, and those with extensive nonprofit sector backgrounds. My professional experience, a unique fusion of both, will allow me to understand our clients’ need to balance profits and social impact better than any other Arclight consultant.”* - His confidence is more than just confidence. Because this dude actually has all that necessary experience to back it up.

5

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This candidate hits all the right notes here - highlighting ambitious goals, an impressive career, a knowledge of Wharton, and not forgetting to take the time to get personal. All this combines into making a powerhouse essay.

What do you hope to gain both personally and professionally from the Wharton MBA? (500 words)

Brazil is in the middle of liberalizing its financial market and formalizing short trading. This mechanism transition will provide more investment strategies and attract market inflow globally. I believe a combination of hedge fund-style event-driven trading and mutual fund-style value investing would optimally capture Brazil's opportunities, beating the currently dominant one-sided speculative trading. That's why I aspire to found my own investment fund, focusing on Brazil's new economy industries (healthcare, energy, internet, etc.) and using this combination investment style. To realize my vision, I require the Wharton MBA.

I plan to return to Brazil post-MBA and join an energy-focused hedge fund with US\$2-5bn under management at a firm like Atlantic Energy Ventures. There I will expand my sector exposures and generate event-driven trading ideas. Five years later, I aspire to be a portfolio manager establishing a record of success in preparation for my own fund. My experience positions me well to achieve my goal. I started my financial career as the youngest account manager at Standard Chartered Bank (SCB) Brazil ever. As the top-performing corporate account manager, I led a three-member team to generate more than US\$8mn profit. I then joined Credit France Americus (CFA) as the youngest writing equity analyst, initiating a non-consensus positive recommendation on the Brazil auto dealer sector that delivered returns up to 50%. I recently moved to MJA Asset Management where, establishing the offshore investment portfolio for MJA Brazil, my returns exceeded our internal investment target by 9%.

To be a hedge fund analyst, however, I need to hone my financial knowledge, especially in technical analysis. Fundamental research can only tell you what to buy—technical analysis will tell you when to buy it. I also need to expand my marketing and general management knowledge and broaden my cultural horizons to better lead in Brazil's increasingly international market.

After attending the Rio info session and consulting with six current and former students, I determined that Wharton is the best choice for me. The Leadership Development Workshop Series is uniquely innovative: "Managing Conflict with Power & Presence," taught through the martial art Jujitsu, is indicative of Wharton's approach. Further afield, I'd like to lead the Antarctica Leadership Venture and learn to make effective decisions in a unique environment. To ensure that I am ready for buy-side, I will take courses like "Investment Management" and become a Vice President of the Wharton Investment Management Club. I would contribute my expertise in financial modeling and stock pitching to club members while learning directly from important fund managers like Ali Namvar at the annual conference.

Personally, as a volunteer teacher and marathon runner, I want to help lead Say Yes to Education and compete in the Philadelphia marathon for the program. As a gormandizer and avid Brazilian chef, Oscar Costa (WG 2016) advises me to run for president of the Wharton Food Club. Wharton will make me a successful hedge fund manager and expand my life to the largest extent.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro and long-term goal** – The applicant works in a pretty technical industry, but this introduction does a good job at spelling out how Brazil's economy will change and how he wants to capitalize on that change. But how will he reach his main goal?
- **Post-MBA goal** – This roadmaps his post-MBA aspirations and details how they'll lead to his long-term goal. Great, but this is ambitious: What qualifications does he have?
- **Professional experience** – The applicant goes for the 1-2 punch here, delivering a series of achievements that immediately set him apart from the average person in his industry. Crucially, he uses quantifiable metrics to really sell us on what he's done. So why does he need Wharton?
- **Skill gaps** – The applicant lists out what he needs to transition to his short-term goal. Now we need to know how Wharton will fill those gaps.
- **Why Wharton** – He starts off by showing us why HE's interested in the school and how he'd like to contribute, in addition to highlighting how certain classes will prepare him. Then, he wraps everything up by showcasing some extracurricular and non-finance related offerings he'd like to get involved with.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

He has moved forward quickly in a great industry that is in-line with his goals and also one of the stronger industries at Wharton.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"That's why I aspire to found my own investment fund, focusing on Brazil's new economy industries (healthcare, energy, internet, etc.) and using this combination investment style. To realize my vision, I require the Wharton MBA."* – He's direct. He's to the point. He's visionary. And he admits that he needs help.
- *"I started my financial career as the youngest account manager at Standard Chartered Bank (SCB) Brazil ever. As the top-performing corporate account manager, I led a three-member team to generate more than US\$8mn profit."* – We see once again how by making a show of outperforming his peers, this candidate makes the most out of his past experience.
- *"After attending the Rio info session and consulting with six current and former students, I determined that Wharton is the best choice for me."* – By showing us

the effort he made to learn about the school, he is showing himself to be a serious candidate.

6

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this straightforward career essay, the candidate combines proof of prior achievements with a clear and ambitious goal and a deep knowledge of the MBA she is applying to, pulling off one heck of a smooth essay.

What do you hope to gain both personally and professionally from the Wharton MBA? (Limit: 500)

Landing in Bangkok, you see a blue ocean of solar panels covering and powering the international airport. I co-led the financing of this solar project, winning Thai Greentech Award in 2012. Seeing my impact of enabling emerging markets to grow sustainably solidified my drive to pursue a career in clean energy.

My goal is to start my own clean technology company that is integrated from generation to consumption in order to increase energy access and consumption in emerging markets such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, where the feasibility and impact of disruption is higher. I desire to move into financing innovative solutions to the dual problem of generation and distribution of sustainable energy in emerging markets. Post-MBA, I intend to continue funding clean-tech deals as a senior associate and progress to senior executive level on the equity side at VCs such as Fenox Ventures, and Green VC.

Living and working across Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America, I have devoted my career to energy financing in emerging markets. I discovered a problem with energy generation and consumption inefficiencies such as lack of distributed generation to empower remote communities, unavoidable transmission loss, increasing fuel cost, and inefficient retail metering to enable demand response; clean tech offers a solution.

A Wharton MBA is the essential next step to obtaining skills around equity financing of complex project ventures so I can achieve my short and long term goal. At Wharton I will sharpen my profile by majoring in Entrepreneurial Management. I will focus my strategic and entrepreneurial management skills required by VCs via classes such as Venture Capital and Entrepreneurial Management. Joining and leading Founders Club, Energy Club and PE/VC Club will expand my alumni networks and hone my leadership skills. I will leverage my network to pursue a summer internship with a reputable VC like Fenox Ventures as well as explore existing contacts with VCs and major incubators, such as Venrock, SingTel and Plug and Play in San Francisco. As an advisor to The Co-Foundry where I serve in a consulting role, I already appreciate the

essentials of venture pitching and filtering deals, which combined with a Wharton MBA, will make me an attractive VC candidate.

Wharton is also an environment where I can strengthen my leadership skills. For example, by taking the Leadership Trek to Antarctica, I will improve my teamwork skills and push the limits of my mind and spirit, all characteristics I need to be strong for a future entrepreneurial career. As I believe that extraordinary value is often generated by bringing together different viewpoints I would organize trips to Brazil or to Brittany, where I have good connections as a certified wine taster, and accomplished Salsa dancer.

I am confident that the Wharton MBA would be an enriching experience that is both timely and relevant to my long-term aspirations. Increasing efficient clean energy to sub-Saharan Africa and Asia is an attainable goal that requires all the help I can get.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This intro kicks off with a BIG achievement - immediately grabbing the adcom's attention. From there, we see how it ties into her goals, something we want to know more about.
- **Goals** – This is a no-nonsense breakdown of her long-term ambitions and post-MBA plans. We see where she wants to work and what she wants to do. Now we want to know why.
- **Deep background** – The applicant shows us some of her professional history and how she developed an interest in clean tech. OK, we get it - so how will Wharton help?
- **Why Wharton** – Here we see the applicant specify what she'll learn in which classes/clubs/contexts, tying her needs to the school. She also ties these potential classes to her past career experience, proving she's ready to contribute, while also showcasing her extracurricular interests in leadership and travel. Excellent, now to bring it home.
- **Conclusion** – A quick summary detailing her interest in the school and what she hopes to contribute to the world.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Since she has already had measurable success in her industry, and since she shows a great long-term vision, we believe she has the wherewithal to make her dreams come true.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“Landing in Bangkok, you see a blue ocean of solar panels covering and powering the international airport. I co-led the financing of this solar project, winning Thai Greentech Award in 2012.”* - Kicking the essay off with success in financing what is obviously a prestige project is a great way to build confidence in the ability to reach your goals.
- *“Living and working across Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America, I have devoted my career to energy financing in emerging markets.”* - It doesn't get any more international than this. And good thing too, because solar is a mighty international industry.
- *“I am confident that the Wharton MBA would be an enriching experience that is both timely and relevant to my long-term aspirations. Increasing efficient clean energy to sub-Saharan Africa and Asia is an attainable goal that requires all the help I can get.”* - Once again, we see how a strong essay goes beyond just the simple “technical success” of her goals, but taps into business' ability to make an impact on the world.

7

Showcase: First to Final

Building Structure for Columbia

First Version

Given your individual background, why are you pursuing a Columbia MBA at this time? (Maximum 500 words)

My career is currently defined by two jobs that, though different, have each positioned me to succeed in reaching my long term goals. I was exposed to retail at a very granular level at Northface and most recently have seen the industry through a wider lens while working as a consumer analyst. After earning my MBA from Columbia, I want to return to retail and help grow an early stage retail company into a publically listed small cap company. I aim to have a distinct contribution to the company's bottom line, while also working to develop and motivate a strong team that will bring the organization forward.

I began with the men's buying team a merchandise assistant, a role that emphasized the operational significance of the retail business. I was responsible for overseeing the allocation of product for a \$70 million men's sportswear brand and also worked with several teams within the organization to open four Los Angeles based stores that

annually generate \$80 million in revenue today. Promotion to a buying position was critical as it exposed me to a younger business that was more challenging to manage. In being tasked with handling the growth of existing brands while also overseeing the launch of a new one, I had the opportunity to think strategically and focus more on product rather than distribution. My experience at Northface provided crucial exposure to the inner workings of a successful retailer. Yet, a desire to reach my goal of establishing a critical executive level role at a retail company lead me to focus on what shortcomings would hold me back. In realizing my lack of exposure to financials, I transferred out of retail and into a consumer analyst position.

A liberal arts education with a focus on English literature allowed me to develop a strong analytical approach to problem solving. Pursuit of the CFA charter has provided me with the financial foundation that I did not receive while in college. Yet, I know the demanding curriculum I would endure at CBS is what is required for me to successfully marry the skills I have obtained from my exposure to the finance and fashion industries. After meeting with Professor Cohen this past winter and learning about his class Retailing Leadership, I immediately saw how it would allow me develop the crucial management skills I would need to effectively serve in an executive role at a retail company. Additionally, a course such as Managing the Growing Company would give me exposure to all of the variables that must be considered when successfully transitioning a company to the next phase of growth.

History shows that successful retail companies require creative visionaries to become relevant and remain in favor with consumers. Yet, I have seen first-hand that it is impossible for these brands to grow without executives that can think strategically and lead effectively. I will leverage my CBS experience to contribute to the growth and development of young retail company I join. The exposure and knowledge that I take away from Columbia are what I require in order to achieve this future success.

Notes from our Essay Specialist:

- Moving forward we've got two major points to work on in order for this story to have the impact we want it to have. First, we need to separate and clarify her short-term goals. Right now, they're a bit muddled and we need to be clear on what she wants to do and how she wants to do it. These goals need to be more than a just a PART of the essay, they need to be its HEART. Because without these specific goals, we can never understand why she is applying to Columbia or why now.
- Which brings us to our second point: We need to provide PLENTY of supporting information showing how she'll accomplish these goals and HOW they connect to her past. There's some great stuff about her prior achievements here, and we can use that to prove her skills, but these past achievements aren't the focus here. They serve only to support her plans for the future - to become a fashion leader.

Guideline:

- **Spark** – Nice start summing up your achievements in two industries. What you need to do moving forward is connect to both your SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM goals, right from the start.
- **Career** – Then, we can list your greatest hits in finance and fashion and showcase the skills these experiences provided and how they'll help you achieve your goals. Right now we're spending a LOT of time on fashion and don't really get a sense of your financial credentials: We need to strike a balance here AND show how this will help you accomplish your goals.
- **CBS** – Let's dig deep and specify how CBS will help enhance your previous experience through classes and extracurricular opportunities, preparing you to make the leap to your short-term goal. What SPECIFICALLY, are you missing, and which classes will help you fill those gaps?
- **Conclusion** – Let's be short and sweet here: what you'll do and how CBS will help you do it.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: The combination of goals in a rare industry (Men's Fashion), plus the evidence of deep knowledge and experience in that industry is enough to tell us that this gal is gonna get where she is going.

Given your individual background, why are you pursuing a Columbia MBA at this time? (500 words)

In a world of informed consumers and competitive landscapes, retailer adaptability has never been more crucial. Where others see challenges however, I see opportunity. Post MBA, I will become VP of finance at a small retailer such as Kendricks, a role that will allow me to acquire strategic and managerial skills. This professional experience will act as a crucial stepping-stone towards my long-term goal of serving as CFO to eventually take an early stage retail company public.

I have taken a nontraditional path towards these goals, combining retail and finance. I began my career with Northface's men's buying team as a merchandise assistant, a role in which I oversaw product allocation for a \$70 million sportswear brand while also working across the organization to open four Los Angeles based stores generating over \$80 million in annual revenue. At Northface, focusing on merchandising and planning, I learned how to grow existing brands such as the women's Aventura label, launch new ones including LEAF, and understand customer trends - skills crucial when I will be tasked with improving gross margins and profits as a finance VP.

I knew that in order to reach the C-Suite at an apparel company, I needed to combine this understanding of merchandising with strong financial acumen. In order to develop this skillset, I transitioned to a consumer analyst role and spent the past two years at Sure Palm Investors, a value-oriented family office, working with their portfolio manager to invest twenty million dollars in various small cap retail companies.

Now is the time to leverage the merchandise expertise I acquired growing various brands at Tommy Hilfiger and the analytical skills I established investing in small cap retailers at Sure Palm to capitalize on the benefits of a CBS education. My career experience has continuously emphasized that impactful leaders must adjust to fast changing environments while maintaining a clear vision for their company - something I witnessed at Tommy Hilfiger as its executives quickly adopted an omni-channel initiative. In meeting with Professor Cohen and discussing his Retailing Leadership course, I immediately saw that its focus on strategic planning would prepare me to effectively steer the tactical and operational aspects of my business as a finance VP. Furthermore, in observing a Managing the Growing Company class, I noticed how its curriculum pushes students to understand the skills leaders require to effectively manage growth. I am particularly interested in learning about crisis management, as I will need to recommend and develop corrective actions as VP of finance for a rapidly expanding business. This class' focus on operational and leadership concepts will provide me with knowledge that will benefit me throughout my career, serving me well as I pursue my ultimate goal of becoming a retail CFO. The perspective, knowledge, and exposure I will take away from Columbia will not only allow me to progress in my career, but also prepare me to serve my future company in the best way possible.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro & Goals** – This introduction establishes two things. First, the applicant knows the challenges facing retail today, and second, she has a clear career path including a long-term goal and a short-term goal preparing her to reach these long-term ambitions. It's a great start, but now we're wondering what qualifies her to accomplish these goals?
- **Accomplishments** – The next two paragraphs highlight accomplishments along what the applicant calls a “nontraditional path.” First we see her substantial retail experience, then we see how she ALSO has the finance experience necessary to lead a company. So how will she combine these skill sets?
- **Why an MBA? Why CBS?** – She needs leadership, knowledge about managing a growing company, and crisis management - all of which she proves she can get at CBS. This sums up how she'll leverage CBS to accomplish her goals outlined at the top of this essay.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because she is able to successfully relate to the uninformed reader the detail and specifics of what is necessary for success in her industry, and she is then able to draw a very clear line from her vast experience in this industry to her future leadership as a CFO.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“Post MBA, I will become VP of finance at a small retailer such as Kendricks, a role that will allow me to acquire strategic and managerial skills. This professional experience will act as a crucial stepping-stone towards my long-term goal of serving as CFO to eventually take an early stage retail company public.”* – These goals may seem modest, but they are carefully selected to get the candidate the exact experience she will need in order to reach her long-term goal, all while keeping things real.
- *“In order to develop this skillset, I transitioned to a consumer analyst role and spent the past two years at Sure Palm Investors, a value-oriented family office, working with their portfolio manager to invest twenty million dollars in various small cap retail companies.”* – What’s great here is she gives us concrete detail which allows us to SEE her progress. And her progress is quick, impressive, and well thought out.
- *“In meeting with Professor Cohen and discussing his Retailing Leadership course, I immediately saw that its focus on strategic planning would prepare me to effectively steer the tactical and operational aspects of my business as a finance VP.”* – Wait? She knows Professor Cohen? And his class was helpful? Well, she’s so much like one of our students already, she might as well become one!

8

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Starting an essay with the words “Navy SEAL” will never do anyone wrong. But when we learn that our candidate is not only someone who wants to make a real difference, who has leadership experience in tough situations, but who also knows where his weaknesses and needs lie on his way to his goals, then we know that he is one of the good guys. And we want him on our side.

Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short- and long-term career goals? Why is Tuck the best MBA fit for you and your goals and why are you the best fit for Tuck? (500 word limit encouraged)

"Dad, I am going to be a Navy SEAL after I graduate so that I can lead where it really matters." My mom, concerned for my safety and terrified of the unknown, hung up the phone in tears. The decision to turn down a job offer from Bank of America and pursue the Navy was not easy, but I knew I wanted to make the world a better and safer place and joining the Navy was the best way to do that. That same passion for service now informs my long term goal of starting a non-profit to help veterans find meaningful employment. By teaching me the art of socially-aware business practices and giving me a strong community foundation to build from, Tuck is the link in the chain that will leverage my past experiences and propel me to accomplish my goals.

Over the last five years in the Navy, I have gained extensive experience in leading teams, learning quickly, responding under pressure and making decisions in ever-changing and dangerous environments. I have gained these skills through leading large multinational teams in training and in combat. However, to accomplish my long term goal, I need to acquire skills in finance, accounting and marketing. Additionally, a short-term career in management consulting at Bain & Company working in their social sector will give me essential experience in how to organize a non-profit company that matches skills with employers' needs, and how to understand and evaluate growth.

Many MBA programs can teach the "science" of business by providing courses on entrepreneurship, brand management and finance. Through Tuck's curriculum that combines classroom based learning with experiential learning through the First Year Project, I can learn the "art" of business. In addition to applying skills in the real world, I will develop a better understanding of human connections and relationships in the business world.

Through Tuck's unique First Year Project (FYP) I will explore the effectiveness and long-term viability of non-profits training veterans for the workforce at a non-profit company such as The Mission Continues. Through this experience, I will get meaningful hands-on experience along with developing relationships with other first-year students who share similar non-profit career aspirations. I will also be able extend my network for when I go to start my own company.

Tuck's famously loyal and active network of alums is also essential to the creation of my company. Acting as a sounding board, the numerous Tuck alumni that have pursued careers in the non-profit sector will help me transform and perfect my business plan. While many schools claim to have a loyal network of alumni, Tuck is the only school where over 70% of its alumni are so dedicated to the institution, and satisfied with their experience, that they donate to it every year.

Five years ago I went against the status-quo of what Brown graduates “do” and joined the Navy to be part of a community that values teamwork and is committed to making the world a better place. Those same desires now bring me back to Hanover to pursue a Tuck MBA.

Structural breakdown:

- **Deep background and long-term goal** – This applicant starts by highlighting his military experience – this emphasizes that he’s disciplined, isn’t afraid of a challenge and is willing to take the road less traveled in order to do the right thing. It also ties in directly to his socially conscious long-term goal, a goal he needs Tuck to accomplish. So how will he do so?
- **Skills and skill gaps** – He then highlights the skills he gained working as a Navy SEAL, and how they apply to business. He also highlights his skill gaps and how his short-term consulting ambitions will allow him to fill those gaps. But how will he get to that consulting job?
- **Why an MBA? Why Tuck?** – The applicant highlights how any business school can teach him hard skills, but that Tuck’s unique character is perfect in terms of helping him learn the intangibles and soft skills he needs. He also connects his ambitions to Tuck’s long history of non-profit engagement, proving he’s the right fit for the school. We’re sold on this, now we just need him to wrap it up with a banging conclusion.
- **Conclusion** – He ends this essay by reiterating his commitment to making a difference and taking the path less traveled.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he made a real sacrifice and made a tough choice to join the Navy SEALs, going against the accepted practices where he came from. Because his long-term goals resonate with anyone who cares about what happens to people. And because he has the humility and wisdom to understand what he can take away from Tuck to become a stronger leader than he already is.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“The decision to turn down a job offer from Bank of America and pursue the Navy was not easy, but I knew I wanted to make the world a better and safer place and joining the Navy was the best way to do that.”* – By emphasizing his CHOICE in the matter, this candidate shows us the strength of character that allowed him to make the sacrifices necessary to follow a military career for five years. He also showcases his strong other alternatives – he could have just gotten a good finance job like most of his peers. And finally, he shows introspection and

allows us to understand why he made the choice he did. And we can't help but agree with him.

- *“Five years ago I went against the status-quo of what Brown graduates ‘do’ and joined the Navy to be part of a community that values teamwork and is committed to making the world a better place. Those same desires now bring me back to Hanover to pursue a Tuck MBA.”* - In this masterful closer, our candidate drives home his uniqueness and ability to take risks, all while matching it up with the school's style. Well done!

9

KEEP THIS IN MIND: With a story aimed at leadership through liberating the press in a country that is often perceived as having a state-controlled press, there's no way this candidate could go wrong. The fact that he has an ambitious, passionate goal to create a new online news company, and that this goal ties in perfectly to his work history, only makes the story better.

What are your short-term and long term personal and/or professional goals following graduation from USC Marshall? How will USC Marshall enable you to develop or improve your skills in order to reach your goals? (500-700 words)

Two years ago, I wrote a story proving corruption on the part of the president of Goldstar Mining, a state-owned enterprise worth \$700B RMB. In three weeks, I interviewed the whistle-blower, and accessed documents covering suspicious deals between Goldstar and a private company. The day I handed in my report however, I was told it would be left unpublished by top executives since they were afraid that the news might cause trouble or even lead to our company being suspended. That was the day I decided to start my own media company to encourage freedom of the press in China.

Most China's media is state-owned and subject to strict controls, but the Internet is, comparatively speaking, loosely regulated. Thus I aim to build a major online newsroom catering to the Chinese public. My vision is to shift China's media from heavy regulations to a freer, market-oriented model, providing a real choice of information sources for Chinese citizens, instead of unified statements published by a few media groups.

Short-term, I'll become General Manager of news content at an online-focused news company like Al Jazeera or The Guardian. There, I'll manage, develop and execute digital video production, gaining the skills to manage an online newsroom, and develop a long-term strategy for my future platform.

My prior work experience provides a solid foundation to write, report TV news, and produce programs; experiences I'll need as a media content manager and entrepreneur. I was the editor of Resonant TV's financial team for three years and have been responsible for financial news reporting and producing a program named "China Stock Watch". Thanks to my efforts, my program's audience rating hit the station's top 3 and we sold our naming rights for \$15M. This experience taught me to create market-oriented video content, manage a production studio, and coordinate a crew including editors to directors. Building on my career, I then accepted a position at CNN China where I was responsible for all Shanghai business content including anchoring in the newsroom, and reporting news and features. Notably, I received the "Best Team" award from my company in 2012 for my outstanding performance, and developed my interview and news reporting skills.

I'll leverage this content creation experience to access a General Manager of video content position, post-graduation. This front-line experience will ensure I understand every link of the video production chain in my future role, however I still need to develop a strategic vision in the media industry, a sound knowledge of business and finance, and a professional network in media.

USC Marshall's strength in entrepreneurship and the digital media industry will help me fill these gaps. Specifically, "Business Models for Interactive Digital Media & Services" by Prof. Omar El Sawy, will enhance my knowledge of strategy of business development in digital media. Concurrently, "Cases in New Venture Management" with Prof. Steve Mednick, an expert in entrepreneurship, will teach me how to prepare myself ahead of launching my venture. Finally, "Corporate Finance" and "Managerial Statistics" will help me monitor the financial status of my video department and my own company.

I will take full advantage of Marshall's resources. I am excited to join in activities held by The Institute for Communication Technology Management (CTM). There, I will learn how technology impacts and brings life to the media industry. I'm particularly interested in developing software to transform video scripts and newspaper articles into formats suitable for mobile devices, so journalists can avoid adapting their stories for different platforms. CTM's activities will inspire me to focus on new technology options during my future career.

Marshall's unique Trojan network is another appeal to me. As a future Chinese media entrepreneur, I expect China will be a major market to expand my business. I have seen alumni like John Steiner, who worked at Columbia for 20 years, start up his entertainment company in Hong Kong and I can't wait to connect with such visionaries ahead of launching my firm.

I believe Marshall's MBA will be the final piece of the puzzle needed to finalize my company's vision.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro and long-term goal** – This applicant uses a short story from his professional life to introduce his long-term goal, while also showing the adcom his character, right from the start. He then breaks down his entrepreneurial ambitions in a succinct, easy-to-understand paragraph. This isn't your standard business school story, so we're interested... How will he launch his company?
- **Short-term goal** – He introduces his short-term ambition, highlighting how he'll gain the skills to launch his news platform. OK, but what qualifies him to succeed?
- **Professional experience** – The applicant breaks down his previous success in media and news, along with what he's achieved and the skills he's gained. He also ties this experience to his short-term goals and highlights his remaining skill gaps. Now we need to see how USC will help him fill those gaps.
- **Why USC?** – He breaks down Marshall's classes, professors and resources and points out how he'll use them to prepare himself for his future career. Notably, he finds a specific offering (CTM) which is PERFECT for his needs, and dedicates a paragraph to it. Now he needs to bring it home.
- **Conclusion** – Finally, the applicant highlights that he knows about the school and its alumni, showing he wants to really be a part of the USC community.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

We want this dude at our school because he sounds like he is ready to change the way the Chinese press is run, and he gives a very convincing story which shows that he is capable of at least trying, if not succeeding.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"That was the day I decided to start my own media company to encourage freedom of the press in China."* – A bold sentence that shows where he stands and what his true mission is.
- *"Thanks to my efforts, my program's audience rating hit the station's top 3 and we sold our naming rights for \$15M."* – This impressive business result along with the later positive journalistic achievements are the concrete foundation upon which his ambitious goals rest. Thanks to these accomplishments, we believe that he can make the changes he proposes.

- *“USC Marshall’s strength in entrepreneurship and the digital media industry will help me fill these gaps.”* – It helps that when he points out the major advantages of attending this specific school, that they are EXACTLY what HE needs in order to succeed. He’s sealed the essay [here](#).

10

SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Crafting Goals for Tuck

First Version

**Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short and long-term career goals?
Why is Tuck the best fit for you and your goals and why are you the best fit for Tuck?
(500 words max)**

Born in a family with cultural background, I have built a life-long relationship with arts and culture since childhood: traveling to countryside to sketch; learning teaism from Master Wu; practicing calligraphy after my grandfather... Such activities endowed me with the gift of creativity and the wisdom of calm. After I joined DVT Group, I have paid special attention to cultural companies. What I saw was unprecedented business opportunity with favorable government policies targeting such areas as art, design, animation and entertainment, and various creative cultural Industry Parks like 798 Art District thriving national-wide. Despite the flourishing environment, the cultural industry was experiencing extreme shortage of capital and lacking in originality and effective marketing to compete overseas. My roots in arts and culture have thus shaped my ambition to provide efficient long-term funding to cultural companies and help Chinese cultural industry shine in the global arena.

I aspire to establish my own private equity firm not only focused on designing innovative financing options for cultural companies like Shaw Bros. and Red Rose Culture, but also help initiate cross-border M&A for these companies as a funder and strategic partner. Through acquisition of foreign peers, we can help Chinese cultural companies to obtain experienced creative teams and advanced digital technology as Disney did in acquiring Lucas Arts, and expand international marketing channels as Time did in acquiring Warner Bros.

Starting my career at HSBC specializing in financial products has allowed me to gain deep knowledge with various finance plans such as trust plans and QFII products. My creativity and solid quantitative skill have enabled me to take a leading role in designing the first “option-like product” and initiating cooperation with Wang Chen

Mutual Fund to develop the first “structured grading fund product”. I have developed an innovative mindset and a strong network with major financial institutions necessary for my future startup plan. I transferred to DVT Group subsequently and quickly rose to lead debt and equity investments. The experience has strengthened my business acumen and industry analysis techniques that will be critical to become a leader in PE industry.

To fulfill my long-term career aspiration, I need to join a leading private equity firm such as Siegel Capital, where they already have deal executions in cultural industry and where I can learn key evaluation models of the industry. I will also take initiatives in M&A deals for culture companies to gain experience in dealing with potential difficulties, such as cultural barriers. Despite experiences in financial product design and capital investment, I still have to enhance my strategic thinking and negotiation skills and gain more diversified global exposure, all of which an MBA from Tuck can offer.

A Fan of “Why Smart Executives Fail”, I cannot wait to meet Professor Finkelstein and attend his class Strategic Leadership. I value particularly the opportunity to discuss optimal strategic decisions for cultural companies during cross-border buyout transactions. I am also excited to explore other innovative programs like Research to Practice Seminar: M&A Strategy and International Expansion that will teach me how to negotiate with different interest parties and how to think critically facing multi-side issue in an M&A deal, skills essential to my short-term goal. With numerous globalizing opportunities such as Global Insights Speaker Series, Tuck will enable me to meet cultural industry pioneers and dig deep about the industry from their perspectives.

I’m also drawn by the super collaborative tradition of Tuck. I keep close relationship with my family and friends, and I look forward to form close bond with classmates and make life-long friends. I am eager to share my well-rounded knowledge in finance with students who plan to switch to finance industry and offer them advice regarding choosing courses. I will also found a drama club as chief writer and director to help us better cope with intensive b-school life.

NOTES FROM OUR ESSAY SPECIALIST:

- The first thing we need to really define here is what EXACTLY she wants to do. Cultural company/cultural industry will not cut it, as that’s not a real term and it is way too broad. We need to pick a specific industry and type of company and roll with it. Also, we need to define the problem she sees. Does she want to help art houses in China become mainstream in the U.S.? Does she think Chinese media companies could grow by purchasing U.S. companies? We need to replace every generic statement with a super specific one so that the adcom is left with no question as to what she wants to do.

- Additionally, we need to really dig into why TUCK, specifically, is the only school she wants to attend. Butter them up. Show she's done her research. Make us believers.
- Finally we could beef up the section about why SHE is a good fit for Tuck. We need to emphasize what she brings to the table and what makes her special.

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Spark** – Nice start connecting your background to your goals, but let's scale this back and simplify. Forget introducing stuff like 798, which the adcom won't know about: Let's identify the problem and introduce how YOUR goals will help solve it.
- **Career** – Nice job stating your goals here... but we need to see HOW you'll do this. Let's make sure we show off your PLAN to achieve this: "My long-term aspiration is to do X, which I'll achieve through Y and Z." THEN, let's move your short-term goal here to show HOW you'll reach your long-term goal. We want everything to connect!
- **Background** – Show off the COOLEST stuff you've done here, but keep in mind this isn't your resume. Walk us through the challenges you faced, link this to the industry you're GOING INTO and show us how your passion for art and finance will come together. Fill in the all the details that AREN'T on your resume, which will focus on the financial part. Finally, let's end with what the skills you need and how an MBA will help you fill those gaps.
- **Tuck** – You do a GREAT job of showing us the programs and people who draw you to Tuck, now let's connect them to what YOU want to do: Why are these the best options to take your career to the next level?
- **Conclusion** - Let's bring it all back to art: we want to hear more about this drama club idea.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: What works really well here is the uniqueness of her (still realistic) goals. She wants to combine experience in two great industries - finance and media - while emphasizing the real-life cultural significance and impact of the arts.

**Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short and long-term career goals?
Why is Tuck the best fit for you and your goals and why are you the best fit for Tuck?
(500 words max)**

Growing up with a painter grandfather and violinist father, my family has always instilled in me the importance of the arts. As a child, I traveled to the countryside to sketch and practiced calligraphy after Master Wu. While I pursued a finance career, I've paid special attention to the financing of arts and media companies, such as Shaw Bros, a film production company. As a senior associate at DVT, I saw how most professional investment firms wouldn't specialize in media or arts because of their high investment risk and asset-light nature. My roots in arts and my passion for private equity shaped my ambition to provide long-term funding to art and media companies and to help the Chinese media industry shine in the global arena.

My fund would focus on providing innovative financing options and initiating cross-border M&A for companies as a funder and strategic partner. Through acquiring US peers, we could help domestic media companies obtain experienced creative teams and expand their international marketing channels, as Time Inc. did in acquiring Warner Bros.

The solid quantitative skills and financial derivatives knowledge I gained as a financial product analyst has prepared me to develop innovative financing plans for portfolio companies of my future fund. At DVT Group, I led a team to help a portfolio real estate company raise \$150 million by structuring an ABS against the ticket sales of its funfair. Such experiences strengthened my ability to lead leverage buyout projects, a skill essential to my long-term goal.

To fulfill my career aspirations, I would like to join a leading private equity firm with media deals such as Siegel Capital, as participating in M&A deals will show me how to deal with possible divergences in the management philosophy of acquired companies. To step into a leading PE shop and accomplish my long-term startup plan, I need a Tuck MBA to further enhance my leadership ability, strengthen my strategic thinking skills, and gain more diversified global exposure to become an expert in cross-border M&A.

A fan of "Why Smart Executives Fail," I cannot wait to meet Professor Finkelstein and attend "Strategic Leadership" to enhance my leadership skills in addressing problems within the management team of my future fund. In "M&A Strategy and International Expansion" I will learn critical thinking for multi-sided issues like transaction structuring and corporate culture convergence. Through globalizing opportunities at Tuck such as the Annual Private Equity Conference, I can meet PE pioneers like Anna Patel (T'98) to learn her perspective on taking advantage of international art and media markets.

In business school I plan to get very involved and I am looking for a tight-knit, collaborative community to meet my future partners and supporters. I am eager to share my investment banking experience with students who can help initiate business trips to China learn from their business models like V-Square. I aspire to establish an

art club to give art appreciation sessions to help classmates better cope with intensive b-school life.

Structural breakdown:

- **Deep background & long-term goal** – The applicant uses this essay’s introduction to highlight her longstanding background in the arts, and how it has shaped her professional career in finance. This shows us that she’s coming at this field with experience before she highlights issues in the Chinese media industry while establishing her long-term ambitions as a solution. But how will she REALLY make an impact?
- **Detailed vision** – This is the nuts and bolts of her plan: she keeps things moving quickly to avoid getting bogged down in technical details, but provides enough background to let us know she thought this through. Now we want to know how she’s qualified to execute this vision.
- **Professional experience** – This leads directly to her finance experience. She’s led substantial real estate projects and proves she’s qualified for buyout work. Awesome, we’re sold on her vision and background. What are her next steps?
- **Short-term vision and Tuck** – She needs to join a PE firm to gain additional M&A experience ahead of launching her own fund, and to do this, she first needs leadership, strategic thinking skills, and additional exposure to her field. With that established, she points out specific classes/professors and initiatives at Tuck that will provide this PE and M&A experience. This is the key step in establishing her credibility: she’s taken us from an overall vision, to the experiences that prove she can succeed, to the next steps she’ll take. Now all she needs is to wrap things up.
- **Conclusion** – She ends things on a personal note by stating the kind of community she’s looking for and how she’ll give back, tying things back to the arts.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because her goal to “help the Chinese media industry shine in the global arena” is appropriate, timely and unique. And because she also realizes the difficulties she is up against, and how she will attenuate those difficulties by attending Tuck.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“My roots in arts and my passion for private equity shaped my ambition to provide long-term funding to art and media companies and to help the Chinese*

media industry shine in the global arena.” – This is a perfect one-two combo that follows business up with passion to create great goals.

- *“At DVT Group, I led a team to help a portfolio real estate company raise \$150 million by structuring an ABS against the ticket sales of its funfair. Such experiences strengthened my ability to lead leverage buyout projects, a skill essential to my long-term goal.” – By discreetly dropping in a single line about the results of an impressive achievement, this candidate SHOWS us that she is capable of reaching her goals.*
- *“A fan of ‘Why Smart Executives Fail,’ I cannot wait to meet Professor Finkelstein and attend “Strategic Leadership” to enhance my leadership skills in addressing problems within the management team of my future fund.” – As far as proving she knows the school, it doesn't get much better than this. She shows that she has already read one of Tuck's professors' books, and shows how his class at Tuck will help her address a specific need in her leadership of a media fund.*

11

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This ambitious candidate takes a risk in selecting entrepreneurial goals that are on the road less taken. Yet, through a clear and precise explanation of what his goals are and why, as well as a solid narrative explaining his reasoning for moving from job to job in his career, he is able to make his ambitious vision CONCRETE, even to the layman who has no idea about Big Data.

What is your career objective and how will the Wharton MBA Program for Executives contribute to your attainment of these objectives? (750 words)

Cloud computing gives IT managers great flexibility to increase capacity without investing in new infrastructure. At the same time, it limits access to important information such as visibility into end-to-end service delivery, which means enterprises cannot identify problems with their services. I want to create a company that will help enterprise IT effectively manage their cloud-based services by providing truly end-to-end service delivery monitoring. Currently, enterprises don't know if the performance is poor due to bad server performance, bad routing between cloud services and enterprises, or bad local enterprise networking. For example, NewSales.com is a cloud-based service. This service gets delivered to enterprises via layers of private and public networks. If Newsales.com performance is slow, IT and ultimately the CIO are answerable to their enterprise users. Yet IT cannot identify where the performance issues lie. There is need for a hosted service that can help identify issues in a hybrid environment and can pinpoint the cause and location of problems.

I joined Idea.Com Technologies in China, a world-renowned IT consulting firm, with the goal of learning contemporary technologies and customer interactions. This provided me with a technical foundation in networking and unified communication domains. In addition, during four years at Idea.Com, I managed a team of four in Beijing while consulting Google. While consulting, however, I realized I needed experience working at a startup where I could witness the full product cycle. So I joined Walrus Systems, an early-stage startup, in Jan. 2007; within a year, I took over as engineering manager. Trying to grow quickly, Walrus created an offshore team at Pertinent Systems in Shenzhen, China. I volunteered to manage this team so I could learn how to build a team from scratch. My experience at Idea.Com helped me bridge cultural differences and establish a process that worked for both teams. This experience will behoove me going forward as I work with larger, multicultural, multi-site teams.

My three years at Walrus were both challenging and fulfilling. Smaller teams meant everyone needed to step up. I took over additional responsibility for both the pre-sales and professional services teams. I built key client relationships with technical decision makers that led to several product sales, including the first million-dollar sale with Morgan Chase. I presented my product in front of different audiences ranging, from technical engineers to CIOs. The experience introduced me to pre-sales and illustrated the importance of building long-term relationships, which are critical to building a trustworthy business.

Upon graduation, I want to manage a multi-product portfolio in the networking/storage world as a Senior Director. I have managed teams of 10-20 engineers but don't have experience managing larger, multi-product teams. This will teach me how to take a big project and delegate it into many smaller projects as well as how to manage supervisors. Within three years, I will join an early-stage startup as VP of Products, overseeing the engineering and product management groups. Here, I will develop skills such as business strategy, product planning and launch, annual budgeting, and building channel partners - all skills that a senior executive needs to lead a startup.

Wharton's courses, such as "Microeconomics and Regression Analysis for Business" and "Formation and Implementation of Entrepreneurial Ventures," will teach me finance and business analysis skills needed for product management, as well as entrepreneurial skills, such as raising capital and hiring the right team, that I'll eventually need. "Responsibility in Global Management" by Professor David Hauck and "Corporate Finance" will give me an insight into selecting business partners and wisely spending capital. I plan to join "Leadership Learning Team" at Wharton, which will catalyze new insights, collaboration, and a lifelong network. I would love to go on an international "Global Experience" modular course and work on topics relevant to that region. These activities will give me a unique opportunity to both learn from each unique individual in a group setting and establish strong friendships and potential business partners. My desire to be a part of Wharton's EMBA was confirmed when I attended a guest class with Professor Karl Ulrich. He used very simple real-life examples to illustrate complex concepts around patents and intellectual property.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro/ Background** – This applicant is in a very technical field, so he introduces and breaks down some of the wonkier concepts he’s dealing with right from the start, to establish what he’s doing. Now that we’ve got the basics, what does that mean in professional terms?
- **Professional experience** – His field established, the applicant breaks down his leadership experience and career path. He’s had quite a few positions across multiple companies already, so he takes a step-by-step approach to demonstrate what he gained from each job and how they’ve prepared him for his next step. He’s definitely got strong credentials, so what does he want to do now?
- **Goals** – The applicant then DIRECTLY connects this experience in tech to his short-term goal in networking and storage, ahead of his long-term goal to become a VP in the same field. These goals make perfect sense given his experience, so why does he need Wharton?
- **Why an MBA? Why Wharton?** – With this strong tech background, he needs the finance and leadership skills to leverage his technical knowledge and scale up his impact. He proves that Wharton is the place for him to gain these skills by tying specific courses to his needs, going into significant detail to highlight his passion for the school.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because through his work and his knowledge of business and IT, he has identified a specific area which needs a solution to help efficiency and oversight, and convincingly establishes himself as the right person to solve this problem as an entrepreneurial leader.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“I joined Idea.Com Technologies in China, a world-renowned IT consulting firm, with the goal of learning contemporary technologies and customer interactions. [...] While consulting, however, I realized I needed experience working at a startup where I could witness the full product cycle”* – Here the candidate lays bare the reasoning behind his career choices, and how he hoped to grow towards his goals, showing us that he has a very clear career plan in mind.
- *“I volunteered to manage this team so I could learn how to build a team from scratch.”* – Here we can really see his go-getter attitude. He goes out of his way to seek the management experience he knows he will need to move forward!

- *“I have managed teams of 10-20 engineers but don’t have experience managing larger, multi-product teams.”* – In this modestly phrased statement, the candidate shows how he considers his already vast leadership of large teams to be insufficient, and his desire to learn how he can move on to larger and more complex teams. Three words: naturally born leader.

12

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This candidate shows deep insight into the specifics of his industry and presents a convincing story of how he plans on exploiting a specific untapped niche in PE to build his future. And Columbia would truly be one of the best places for him to pursue these goals.

Given your individual background and goals, why are you pursuing a Columbia MBA at this time? (500 words)

Watching the financial crisis rage compelled me to want to find a way to direct investors towards investments that actively grow businesses. In corporate development, I worked extensively with private equity (PE) firms through evaluating acquisitions of PE-backed companies. However, I found that PE firms are deterred from large-scale investing in small businesses (SMB), as the PE firms’ small size cannot justify the high fixed labor costs of evaluating and managing small companies. Short and long term, I plan to create and grow a financial-technology company – like Venson in size and scope – that integrates big data and analytics to automate the operations of SMB investments, incentivizing PE clients to invest in small businesses. This will increase growth-spurring investments, making a less crisis-prone economy.

From my experience with start-ups, financial institutions, and business services technology, I have a strong strategy development and M&A skillset, which will help me run a company in the future. For example, I helped lead Enginuity Services’ effort to enter the equipment warranty services market by developing strategies to increase the target’s profit from \$1.5M to \$9M in 5 years. Terry Buckowski, Enginuity Services founder and CEO, taught me that effective CEOs develop great strategies then execute them well. Execution requires management of all organizational functions, deep understanding of the industry, and leadership. While strong in strategy, I need a Columbia MBA to grow these execution capabilities to launch my venture.

Through taking the core curriculum, I will grow my marketing and operations management knowledge as the core’s integrated case studies will teach me to make strategy and managements decisions like a CEO. The ‘Future of Financial Services’ is perfect for me to enhance my understanding of the industry and improve my ‘newtech idea by learning from thought leaders like Dean Hubbard. I will take advantage of the Lang Center to launch my ‘newtech venture. By taking ‘Launching New Ventures’ my

first year I will transform my idea into a business plan under the guidance of CEOs and venture investors like Professor Burns and apply my second year to the 'Greenhouse Program'. The Greenhouse Program and the support of fellow entrepreneurs will be the perfect platform I need to launch a company that provides technology to accelerate PE SMB investing.

Additionally, I plan to join the Columbia Entrepreneurs Organization to build friendships with like-minded classmates, share my experiences working at an early stage start-up and raising \$85M at Sem Aviation. I also plan to recruit classmates and alumni to potentially join as partners or board members for my venture. These new relationships will help build an excellent team, and keep me up-to-date on the latest technology innovations as these friends become experts across the entrepreneurial and technology world.

Columbia's academic leadership in financial services and entrepreneurship makes it the only MBA experience that will grow me into a leader capable of growing the country's investments in small businesses - our economic core - ultimately leading to a more productive, stable economy. The sooner this happens, the better!

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro and Goals** – The applicant starts by summing up his professional experience in PE and a problem he identified. He then outlines his short and long-term goals and how he'll help solve these problems in these positions. This sets the stage, now we need to see a more detailed plan.
- **Professional accomplishments** – The writer then breaks down what he's accomplished professionally, and what he's learned doing so. He ends by highlighting that he needs an MBA to go further. Great, now let's see how that MBA will help him.
- **Why CBS** – He then breaks down specific classes and programs and - crucially - how he'll leverage them in his future career. In a separate paragraph, he also highlights how he'll leverage CBS outside the class to accomplish his goals. OK, we're convinced. Now he just needs to wrap it up with a bow.
- **Conclusion** – He reiterates what he wants to do and how CBS will help him.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because reacting to the evolution of the markets within his industry has inspired him to have clear and precise financial startup goals, and by exposing his experience and what he can gain from Columbia, he convinces us that he can make these goals happen.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Short and long term, I plan to create and grow a financial-technology company – like Venson in size and scope – that integrates big data and analytics to automate the operations of SMB investments, incentivizing PE clients to invest in small businesses.”* – He doesn’t just want to create a PE firm, but has identified the specific niche and method in which he will operate. Sure, this may change over time, but the precision of his goals makes his story solid.
- *“By taking ‘Launching New Ventures’ my first year I will transform my idea into a business plan under the guidance of CEOs and venture investors like Professor Burns and apply my second year to the ‘Greenhouse Program.’”* – He owns up to his gaps and shows some precise examples of how he can make the most of his MBA at Columbia.
- *“I also plan to recruit classmates and alumni to potentially join as partners or board members for my venture. These new relationships will help build an excellent team, and keep me up-to-date on the latest technology innovations as these friends become experts across the entrepreneurial and technology world.”* – He hasn’t been accepted yet, but is already thinking about what he can contribute back to the school. That’s thinking ahead!

13

Showcase: First to Final

Building Career Trajectory for Wharton

First Version

Prompt for Essay 1: What do you hope to gain both personally and professionally from the Wharton MBA? (500 words)

“An IT job – again?” That thought jumped out at me when I was assigned my first e-governance project, for the Government of China, at BCG. I steeled myself for dull work and endless cups of “oolong” (tea) with government officials! I couldn’t have been more wrong.

For the past two years, I have worked with BCG’s Government and Not-for-Profit Advisory team which helps Government agencies in designing and implementing transformational IT solutions to streamline public service delivery. I have had the

opportunity to work on cutting-edge technology solutions behind the world's largest security enhancement program - Quik or Fast ID program - which stands to revolutionize not only the way in which people can be identified but also the platforms through which they can access public services. Along the way, my work on the Quik project has diversified to enabling financial inclusion through electronic Government-to-Person benefit transfers and last-mile access to finance for millions of unbanked people. This journey from designing technology solutions to enabling development has helped me define my long term vision - to serve in a leadership role at a non-profit organization. Through the unique experiences gleaned from my "hands-on" operational experience in consulting for governments and global foundations, I believe I have developed a more nuanced understanding of how businesses and governments can collaborate to drive social inclusion.

In the short term after Wharton, I envision myself in a strategy consulting role in the Social Sector practice at a global firm such as Bain, BCG or Accenture. Specific areas that I would like to focus on include designing philanthropic strategy for multi-lateral foundations and program implementation strategies for donors & governments. While I expect to work across sectors, some that I have experience in and can therefore build on include pharmaceuticals & m-health (mobile technology for health), security platforms and access to finance.

I believe that Wharton's Strategic Management major will help me build a strong foundation for my career. Through Professor Leonard Lodish's course, Global Consulting Practicum (GCP), which focuses on applying concepts from the classroom to real-world consulting assignments for non-profit/ for-profit clients, I will be able to take the first step towards a post-MBA career at a global consulting firm. To me, this truly exemplifies the Wharton anthem of 'Knowledge for Action'. The broad range of electives I will be able to select in the first year itself reinforces my enthusiasm to be at Wharton.

I also hope to grow personally through Wharton's focus on developing global leaders who have an impact on the larger community. I have demonstrated both leadership and a commitment to my immediate community through my ability to manage expectations of client personnel, often at the equivalent of CIO level, relatively independently and my work on large-scale government consulting engagements that impact millions of Chinese citizens. A Mount Fuji mountaineering expedition, as part of the Wharton Leadership Ventures program, or a role as a Board Fellow on one of Philadelphia's non-profit organizations, as part of the Non-Profit Board Leadership Program, will allow me to grow as a leader not only for a professional career but also for my engagement with the non-profit community. Lastly, through clubs such as 'Rebuilding Together' and 'Say Yes to Education', which are part of Wharton's Social Impact Initiative, I'd like to continue to learn and engage in creating impact for my immediate community. As Fannie Lou Hamer, the civil rights activist, once said "Nobody's free until everybody's free" and this sums up my personal and professional aspirations from a career in creating social impact.

I want my MBA experience to be about stepping outside my comfort zone in order to be better equipped to transition to a global career – taking part in new activities whilst building on my current ones, strengthening my leadership capabilities and applying my learnings from the classroom to a career in social impact consulting. To gain all this and more, I see myself at Wharton for the next two years.

Notes from the Essay Specialist:

- Notice how the goals and achievements all feel like... a big old shopping list? It's hard to tell what is important and what is not, and even the good stuff ends up falling through the cracks. I don't yet see the intimate connection between his career history and his goals, and if this story is going to work, we need to weave a logical, rational and clear narrative that shows that every decision and every achievement is a choice that is bringing him one step closer to his goals.
- Once we whittle down the list to the most relevant points, it's really important that we EXPAND those points with the most important details. I mean, how can we know either what he did, or how impressive it is, if we don't really know anything about how many people he is collaborating with, how big his projects are, what the CONCRETE results are...? Each of these facts is an opportunity to impress, so let's make sure we do that!

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Spark** – What do you LOVE about social impact/non-profits? Think of your ambition as a drill - we wanna know what's POWERING that drill. Don't afraid to be emotional here - we want to see PASSION. This is what you NEED to do in life, not just a job.
- **Snapshot** – Let's be direct: state your short-term and long-term goals as plainly as possible, i.e. First I'm gonna do X as a stepping stone toward Y. This way, the school will understand WHY your previous achievements are important, and how they connect to your future.
- **Background** – Show off the COOLEST stuff you've done here, but don't rehash your resume. Walk us through the challenges you faced, contextualize your achievements against your peers so someone outside your industry "gets it." And most importantly: let us know your thought process. Fill in the all the details that AREN'T on your resume. Finally, let's end with what you're MISSING - the skills you need to go further, which you'll get through an MBA.
- **Wharton** – Imagine getting free rides from Stanford, HBS, and Wharton. Explain why you'd pick Wharton. Show a few specific examples of how Wharton addresses your needs.

- **Conclusion** – Don't worry about buttoning up an ending on your first draft. First things first, let's get clear arguments on paper, iron clad. The ending will write itself.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Here the candidate lays out his IT experience perfectly, and shows the SPECIFIC skills and opportunities he hopes to gain from Wharton, all of which to lead him to a higher goal - strategy leadership in the social sector.

What do you hope to gain both personally and professionally from the Wharton MBA? (500 words)

I have always been captivated by Victor Hugo's adage that nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come, a phrase David Ross, ex-Chairman of the security enhancement project I worked on, used to describe the program. This program, Quik, is the world's largest - revolutionizing how 1.2 Bn people access financial services. In the future, I want to foster the next big idea that powers solutions to provide mainstream financial services to the world's poor.

As a Senior Consultant at BCG's Government Advisory sector, I executed the procurement process for the \$500 Mn IT services contract to implement Quik. When the Walton Foundation decided to leverage Quik to enable financial inclusion in rural communities, I applied my understanding of Quik's platforms to design technology to make e-payments to 200 Mn beneficiaries of China's 'Cash-for-Work' program. The opportunity to exchange ideas with the Foundation's leadership sparked my interest in a career in venture philanthropy. Long term, I intend to serve in a strategy leadership role at an organization such as the Walton Foundation or the IMF. There I can apply the nuanced understanding I developed while working on Quik of how governments, businesses and funding agencies collaborate to drive social impact using ubiquitous technology or business solutions.

To reach this goal, I will become a consultant in the Social Sector practice at BCG, Bain or Accenture after graduating from Wharton; and design funding and program implementation plans for multi-lateral organizations and governments. I will learn to manage grants and strategize development objectives across sectors, building on my knowledge of e-payment platforms. Consulting will teach me to apply analytical techniques to development challenges, and I am especially enthusiastic about 'externship' opportunities, such as those at BCG, whereby I can learn by working at a non-profit.

While my technology experience and IT education give me the know-how to reengineer processes and design technology solutions, Wharton's Strategic Management major will help build the management and analytical skills required for strategic

philanthropic consulting. Through Professor Lodish's Global Consulting Practicum, I will learn to apply theoretical problem-solving techniques for real-world clients. Professor Weigelt's Strategies for Economic Inclusion will demonstrate innovations and challenges in aiding developing communities.

Reading interviews with Jenna Lam, C'92, WG'98, head of BCG's Global Development program, has bolstered my desire for a consulting career effecting socio-economic change. I hope to grow personally through Wharton's focus on nurturing impactful leaders. As a Venture Fellow leading a Mount Fuji expedition or as a Board Fellow on Make-A-Wish Philadelphia, I will build skills in teamwork, communication and diplomacy, as well as technical knowledge in non-profit governance. I'd also like to contribute to Philadelphia's community as a volunteer with 'Rebuilding Together' or 'Say Yes to Education.'

Wharton's multi-cultural nature will let me share my experiences in grassroots consulting whilst learning other students' international business perspectives, thus equipping myself for a global career. Wharton's leadership opportunities, coursework, alumni network and social impact initiatives reaffirm my enthusiasm to be a part of its community.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant starts with a powerful quote to lead into his professional experience. He's accomplished some impressive things in technology, and we're curious to hear more after this brief paragraph.
- **Professional experience & long-term goal** – He then goes deeper into the nuts and bolts of his role in this project, and how this experience sparked his long-term goal in finance. He also demonstrates how this experience will be applicable to his future role - now we're wondering how he'll make the transition.
- **Short-term goal** – To reach this goal, he needs consulting experience, which he details concisely and directly. He's also very specific about the kind of consulting experience he wants and where/how he'll gain it. So why does he need Wharton?
- **Why an MBA? Why Wharton?** – He needs the management and analytical skills to become a consultant, and demonstrates which classes will provide those skills. He then outlines the research he undertook to find out the school was right for him, including speaking with an alum, as well as the initiatives he intends to join. Finally, he sums up how Wharton will help him achieve his goals.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

He makes a very convincing argument for his industry shift from pure IT to social impact, and identifies the reasons leading us to both understand and believe his proposed career plan.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“As a Senior Consultant at BCG’s Government Advisory sector, I executed the procurement process for the \$500 Mn IT services contract to implement Quik. [...] The opportunity to exchange ideas with the Foundation’s leadership sparked my interest in a career in venture philanthropy.”* – Here, he not only shows one of his greatest achievements, but gives us insight into how this specific experience led him to develop his goals.
- *“While my technology experience and IT education give me the know-how to reengineer processes and design technology solutions, Wharton’s Strategic Management major will help build the management and analytical skills required for strategic philanthropic consulting.”* – By admitting that he is missing the strategy and management aspects of his goals, he shows us that he is willing and able to learn at Wharton, and that this program will help him get to where he needs to be.
- *“As a Venture Fellow leading a Mount Fuji expedition or as a Board Fellow on Make-A-Wish Philadelphia, I will build skills in teamwork, communication and diplomacy, as well as technical knowledge in non-profit governance.”* – Even when he is imagining hypothetical contributions at Wharton, they are specific, and he is always the leader.

PART 2: LEADERSHIP

Part 2: Leadership

The spotlight

When you've drafted your leadership essay, ask yourself just one question:

"Are there other people in it?"

If the answer is no, find a new story. "But what about..." Nope. Find a new story. "But this story shows..." Nyet. Find a new story. The key to a leadership essay — and by "key" we mean "the only possible way to unlock this sucker" — is that you must be interacting with people on some level to show true leadership.

Of course, there's more to interaction than just managing a team or running a company. You can be a leader in your family, in your community, or even on a work team where everyone has a higher rank than you. But don't make the mistake of thinking succeeding is the same as leading. Even if you're in a leadership position — say, managing a sales team — that doesn't automatically guarantee you have a good leadership story. If you're just the middleman passing along orders from on high to your subordinates, it doesn't count.

That's because the second key to a leadership essay is uncertainty. We don't want to see you following a recipe... we want to see you making decisions. True leadership is risky, and we want to see that you've got what it takes to shoulder those risks.

The following essays show that leadership has many sides — but it's never a paint-by-numbers experience.

14

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this masterful essay, take a look at how the applicant conjoins the best of his experiences in volunteer work and in his professional life to come up with ambitious, precise, realistic goals, all the while getting the most out of his best achievements.

The mission of the MIT Sloan School of Management is to develop principled, innovative leaders who improve the world and generate ideas that advance management practice. Discuss how you will contribute toward advancing the mission based on examples of past work and activities. (500 words)

When I was elected as a Labour Party Chairman in Jamaica, we had been in the minority for decades, barely achieving a vote share above 15%. One Saturday morning I

led a small, tentative group to the notoriously crime-ridden Tivoli Estate in Kingston, where the opposition parties were strongest. The risk paid off – our membership quickly swelled as we recruited volunteers we'd never targeted before, such as low-income and single parent families. Even though we didn't win after increasing our membership, it was more satisfying to realize the difference we could make in these communities. Within three months I had instilled ten local 'Ward Chairmen', whose job was to generate redevelopment ideas such as removing unsightly graffiti and closing drug dens. This new approach ultimately resulted in one of the largest vote gains of any main party in Kingston in the 2012 elections, increasing 51% to over 7,600 votes.

My work in social development has made me realize I want to start my own social development fund focused on providing financing to social enterprise start-ups who are working to improve lives, but are unable to raise traditional funding. My work sponsoring BARRINGTON, a start-up that coordinates the distribution of leftover food to the needy across Brazil, highlighted that traditional forms of financing such as bank loans or capital investment are unsuitable for many social enterprises. Discovering this funding gap was a revelation as I recognized how my financial expertise could be used to truly make a difference in the world!

I am well qualified for my goal given my experience building innovative financing solutions totaling over \$1.7bn for the Brazilian shipping industry as First Vice President of TEC. Following the global economic collapse, Brazilian ship owners who had invested heavily in building ships in Japan and Vietnam were left with a big funding gap. While brainstorming other sources of capital I discovered the multi-billion dollar Extra Fund Agency (EFA) provided by Japanese and Vietnamese governments to support exports from their shipbuilders. Although the bureaucracy associated with doing business in Asia made my idea to partner with EFAs initially unpopular, I stuck with my conviction and successfully won over CEOs and CFOs by demonstrating how we could structure a TEC-controlled deal to give them comfort. My risk paid off and our partnerships with Chinese and Korean EFAs led to TEC becoming the leading EFA bank in Brazil.

An MIT Sloan MBA will allow me to gain immediate professional skills in impact investing and measurement, while expanding my knowledge of small enterprises that will allow me to achieve my vision of starting a new social venture to provide alternative forms of funding to companies invested in building a better world. I look forward to sharing my experiences with my classmates in classes such as Designing and Leading the Entrepreneurial Organization (15.394). I will use this experience to propel me toward my goals while building my entrepreneurial competence through action-led projects within Sloan Entrepreneurs for International Development (SEID).

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant starts with an “against the odds” story, establishing that he isn't afraid of a challenge and that he's a LEADER who can leverage political

connections and people power to make a concrete difference. We're sold on his potential. Now we wonder: how will he use this potential in the future?"

- **Long-term goal** – The applicant then DIRECTLY connects this experience in social development to his long-term ambition of starting a social development fund. He also mentions professional experience at Barrington to complement his political career, and highlights how and why this led to this particular goal. The big picture itch is scratched, but now we wonder if he really has what it takes to execute on this ambition.
- **Deep Background** – Now we examine the nuts and bolts of his professional experience to prove he has the leadership and problem-solving skills to succeed. He's worked with public funding, international business and complex bureaucracy - all skills he'll need in the future to launch a development fund. Awesome, big picture vision SOLD, background abilities SOLD. So what's missing?
- **Why an MBA? Why MIT?** – He needs the impact investing skills a top program can provide, and MIT's Entrepreneurial Organization courses are the perfect starting point to design his venture while still in business school. This is a very concise and direct demonstration of how he'll use specific resources to achieve the goals he's outlined above.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because this guy wants to lead others to make the world (or more precisely, his slice of the world) a better place. Sound familiar? Here's the difference: He is already involved in a major political party, which shows us that he has the network capital to make this a reality. He knows how to bind his strengths in finance with his experience leading in the community to make a real tangible change. His vision is clear, precise and logical. And if he successfully accomplishes even a portion of what he sets out to do, he will make our school look great.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"When I was elected as a Labour Party Chairman in Jamaica..."* - This POWERFUL opening shows us not only that he is politically involved in his community, but has the force to get elected, and has a strong network in one of his country's largest political parties. We realize that he has the potential to be an important political player.
- *"This new approach ultimately resulted in one of the largest vote gains of any main party in Kingston in the 2012 elections, increasing 51% to over 7,600 votes."* - Here he shows us how his political understanding of the on-the-ground situation led him to make the necessary change to bring his party back from a

loss to a win, and do so on a very impressive scale. So we know that this guy is not just politically involved, but that he has **PROVEN** success, and we believe that he can continue to succeed in the future.

- *“I am well qualified for my goal given my experience building innovative financing solutions totaling over \$1.7bn for the Brazilian shipping industry as First Vice President of TEC.”* - With this paragraph, he proves to us his ability and knowledge to carry forward the technical side of his goals - i.e. the finance side. And now we are fully sure that he can lead others to develop a successful social development fund, and we would love to have him as a part of our class.

15

SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Creating Action for Ross

First Version

What are you most proud of professionally and why? What did you learn from that experience? (400 words)

In 2009, post-graduation, I joined Orange Light Church as their business administrator. However I believed that this church had tremendous untapped potential: five world-class pastors and a city hungry for engaging teaching.

When I arrived, the church was surviving week-to-week and pastors hadn't been paid in two months. I introduced new budgeting systems and created hiring plans for future growth, structuring church operations. I also developed a revenue forecast model that accounted for the radical weekly fluctuations in revenue that come with a non-membership church where congregants don't pay dues. Furthermore, the all-church business meetings I instituted earned the trust of our congregation through improved financial transparency, consequently encouraging more consistent donations. Recognizing that our pastors were extremely effective and highly sought-after, I designed retention plans that offered low-cost, high-value incentives to retain top pastoral talent. These efforts paid off: during my first two years, the church enjoyed 0% staff turnover and put nearly \$1.3M in the bank, all while quadrupling staff, adding four major ministries, and growing our congregation by over 1000 people. By 2012, church membership exceeded 4000 and we had outgrown our building. My colleagues envisioned building a \$21M mega-campus, typical for churches our size. However, I projected this plan would leave us deeply in debt and reduce our flexibility. I instead proposed a “multi-site” strategy: establishing satellite campuses to reach a wider geography, at approximately 18% cost of the mega-campus plan. I emphasized the

importance of the Orange Light' culture among our congregants: we were successful because we invested in people, not marble floors or giant auditoriums. In 2013, our church opened the first of five planned satellite campuses, and today our second campus hosts over 3500 people per week. We will open three more campuses in the Denver area by the end of 2016.

Stephen, Laurie, and Earl: these are the names of three of my colleagues at Orange Light Church who I helped to succeed and find their passion in ministry. As the business manager, I believe I helped the Church in a variety of quantifiable ways: the congregation grew, profit margins increased, and staff retention plans works. I am most proud, however, of the impact I had on my teammates and most specifically, Stephen, Laurie, and Earl.

Stephen was a youth pastor at a small church in Mississippi before he moved to Arizona. He desperately wanted to be a pastor at Orange Light, but the only open position we had was a janitorial one. He wanted to quit almost every day as a church janitor. I constantly encouraged Stephen and painted a vision of what his youth ministry at Orange Light could look like. I helped Stephen find value in his job and pushed him to work hard and get noticed. I am proud that just last week I saw Stephen take a break from his 800-person youth group to preach to the entire 11,000-person congregation.

Laurie joined Orange Light as an administrator, dead-set on starting a ministry for the women in the church. I believed in her, but I thought her strength was with connecting with college students. Before starting her ministry, I encouraged her to do outreach events to local colleges and speak at their events. Once she was sold on the idea, I helped Laurie get approval from the senior leadership team to start a college ministry. I am proud that Laurie now leads that college group of over 1000 people and that she was recently voted Alumna of the Year at her Christian college in Phoenix.

I found Earl at a small church in Kentucky while I was visiting family. From the moment he started singing, I saw brilliance in Earl, and I knew his talent warranted a bigger stage. I found money in the budget to hire Earl and I pleaded with Earl and his wife to take a leap of faith and move to Phoenix. My wife and I took them in and were a surrogate family as they made the transition. I am beyond proud that on Easter Sunday, 2013 I saw Earl lead 15,000 people in song at one of Phoenix's largest concert venues.

I thrive on developing relationships and helping people focus on their passions. I feel immense joy when I see my peers succeed in ways they never thought possible. I am proud that saw greatness in these three people and in others, and that I took a chance to help them see that greatness.

Notes from Our Essay Specialist:

- This applicant has a great story with great potential. It has a nice combination of business and religion. And due to its nature, it is very easy to understand the real-world significance of his achievement, and thus why he is so proud of it, too.
- However, so far it's not really translating as a BUSINESS story. And that's what we want.
- We need to focus down on business ACTION - leading, managing, negotiating, convincing, strategizing, inspiring, working in teams, etc. And then on the RESULTS - Did the church grow? Did they make more money? You want a BIG accomplishment here and turning a business around is just the ticket - let's not shoot ourselves in the foot by going left field when we've got a GREAT story right in front of us.

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Spark** – Nice start setting the stage here, but let's really show how BAD things were for the church, not just its potential: How close were they to shutting down? THEN, we can jump into how you fixed things.
- **Fixing the problem** – Right now, we're losing the forest for the trees. Let's focus on identifying individual problems and then linking them to the actions you took to solve them. That way, we can showcase how you saved this church, step by step.
- **Expansion** – Next, we can give the expansion story its own space: HOW did you convince the church leadership to follow your plan?
- **Conclusion** – Let's axe the second half of this essay. It just doesn't fit and isn't as compelling from a professional point of view as your principle achievement: turning an organization around and expanding it.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Here, the candidate shows how he applied no-nonsense business solutions to his church, dedicating his time to his community, using his vast business acumen, and helping his church grow from 30 congregants to over 5000! That's what we call results.

What are you most proud of professionally and why? What did you learn from that experience? (400 words)

In 2008, post-graduation, I joined Orange Light Church as their business administrator. With no money and 30 congregants, this was no dream job, but I shared the founders' passion for helping others, and believed that the church had tremendous untapped potential: five world-class pastors and a city hungry for engaging teaching. Orange Light needed more than better administration however; it needed leadership. I built a powerful business behind the scenes, and helped create a growth strategy that would propel Orange Light Church into the ranks of largest churches in the country.

When I arrived, the church was surviving week-to-week and the pastors hadn't been paid in three months. I introduced budget systems and created hiring plans for future growth to build structure into church operations. I also developed a revenue forecast model that accounted for the radical weekly changes in revenue that come with a non-membership church where congregants don't pay dues. The all-church business meetings I instituted earned the trust of our congregation through improved financial transparency, and in turn, encouraged more consistent donations. Recognizing that our pastors were extremely effective and highly sought-after, I designed retention plans that offered low-cost, high-value incentives to retain our top pastoral talent. These efforts paid off: during my first two years, the church enjoyed 0% staff turnover and put nearly \$1.5M in the bank, all while quadrupling staff and adding five major ministries, and growing the congregation by over 2500 people.

Financial issues solved, I shifted focus to growing membership and building a greater sense of community. Since the Orange Light population was primarily young, active adults, I recognized that any effective community building initiative would have to match that culture. I proposed a "Sports Ministry" concept. Sports and competition, I argued, were a fantastic way to strength community. After demonstrating the growth potential this Sports Ministry represented, I raised \$150k in grant money, and hired and trained staff. Sports Ministry now hosts 40 leagues for over 3500 church participants. More than 1000 of those participants found Orange Light Church through Sports Ministry leagues.

By 2012, church membership exceeded 5000 and we had outgrown our building. My colleagues envisioned building a \$25M mega-campus, typical for churches our size. However, I projected this plan would leave us deeply in debt and reduce our flexibility. In contrast, I argued for a "multi-site" strategy of establishing several satellite campuses, which would cost approximately 18% of the mega-campus plan, while allowing us to reach a wider geography. I also emphasized the importance of the Orange Light' culture among our congregants: we were successful because we invested in people, not marble floors or giant auditoriums. In 2013, the church opened the first of five planned satellite campuses, and today our second campus hosts over 2000 people per week, and the church is in the process of opening three more campuses in the Denver area by the end of 2014.

Moving forward, I want to help revitalize other churches all over the country the way I did at Orange Light Church. More importantly, I want to revolutionize the way new

churches start up. In a sense, I hope to become a “church venture capitalist”: making impactful investments into promising church markets and pastoral teams.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This intro sets up the story in a nice concise manner: we see the “big picture problem” with this church and where the applicant sees potential. Then he tells us he transformed it and leaves us hanging: we’re intrigued.
- **Crisis management** – The applicant then goes into the actions he took to turn around this business. We see what he did and why, and what the results were. The crisis averted, we want to know where he takes things now that he’s in a position for growth.
- **Expansion** – He follows this up with a concise but detailed explanation of his expansion efforts (sports ministry) - this shows us how he gained additional credibility within the church ahead of weighing in on their overall expansion plans. Then, faced with a difficult choice, we see how the applicant convinces the church’s leadership to take the road less traveled (satellite campuses over a mega church), and how his vision leads to a huge success. Now he just needs to connect this experience to his future plans.
- **Conclusion** – He then connects this leadership experience to his long-term goal.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because we like candidates who make effort to give back to their community. Because we like candidates who care about the people more than the money. Because we like candidates who know how to use the money in the right way to get the most for people. And because we like candidates who succeed impressively in doing all of the above.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“With no money and 30 congregants, this was no dream job, but I shared the founders’ passion for helping others”* - We see that his challenge is immense, which will make its overcoming even more impressive. And we also see how his approach to the challenge is one of dedication and passion for something he believes in.
- *“These efforts paid off: during my first two years, the church enjoyed 0% staff turnover and put nearly \$1.5M in the bank, all while quadrupling staff and adding five major ministries, and growing the congregation by over 2500 people.”* - He could end the essay here and we would be impressed with his ability to bring about such results. But this is only the half of it.

- *“In 2013, the church opened the first of five planned satellite campuses, and today our second campus hosts over 2000 people per week, and the church is in the process of opening three more campuses in the Denver area by the end of 2014.” – And here we can see how his impact on his congregation was more than just a short-term blip in the past, but a long-term effect that will help grow this congregation for years, even decades to come.*

16

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This essay just radiates leadership. Leadership, and a deep understanding of how people tick, which is what makes this candidate the great leader that he is. The great writing style doesn't hurt either. 😊

Kellogg: Leadership requires an ability to collaborate with and motivate others. Describe a professional experience that required you to influence people. What did this experience teach you about working with others, and how will it make you a better leader? (450 words)

Jotting down final notes, I dropped my pen, raked my fingers through my hair, and exhaled. Mid-year calls with my twelve national Institute leadership team members had uncovered two startling themes: unhappiness and disappointment. As the Institute Co-Lead, I was responsible for empowering my team to create meaningful networking and professional development programming for over 560 BCG Associates. Yet my team was disenchanted: confined in their roles, stretched by their full-time client work, and disappointed in their accomplishments. I had to motivate them or risk losing member involvement, our \$138,000 budget, and the senior partners' trust.

I made a second round of calls to build morale and create individual plans. We had already accomplished great things, but reminders were needed. I started with the facts: “Jim, you launched our Partner book club and project spotlight events for over 250 of your peers...,” or, “Samantha, you formed 40 mentorship pairs for our Mentorship Program...” Then I turned to personal motivators: “What drew you to the Institute? What are you passionate about? How could we use the Institute as a platform for sharing your passion with others?” Through targeted questioning, I guided my team to define their own paths forward.

These conversations sparked redefined roles. I broadened Education Lead and Mentorship Program Lead, for example, to Innovation Lead and Connections Lead to encourage pursuit of more diverse and enjoyable initiatives. Jim loved TED Talks, so we created an Institute version called CHATURDAY, which drew over 150 members and even senior executives. Samantha loved building personal networks, so we created KONNEKT, an initiative that randomly paired over 400 individuals in local offices.

Encouraging my team to pursue their passions had a multiplier effect: more inspired teammates, stronger relationships, better Institute initiatives, and 40% more member participation in attendance at Institute programming.

The experience taught me three major lessons about leadership. First, the ability to reframe situations is an invaluable tool for influencing people. Asking targeted questions changed viewpoints and encouraged my team to be open. Second, everyone is motivated by something different. Understanding and channeling my team's desires increased enthusiasm by aligning those interests with the Institute's. Third, collaboration catalyzes achievement. My team and I worked together to redefine and open their roles, resulting in greater investment and accomplishments.

These lessons have already made me a better leader. I recently used them to integrate a new Associate into an existing client project. The Associate felt appreciated and engaged, and this translated into high quality work that impressed the client. The lessons are applicable in all aspects of life, and I will continue to hone each at Kellogg.

Structural breakdown:

- **Introduction** – This essay starts by establishing a challenge: the applicant is responsible for empowering a team that's frustrated and disappointed. As readers, we wonder how he'll turn this situation around.
- **Actions taken** – The applicant uses conversational language (quotes) to bring this story to life. Thanks to his use of the present tense, we feel like we're right there with him, and we see how he really used his people skills to motivate his team. THEN, we see that he's not all talk as he launches several custom initiatives to help his team deliver results. He continues to employ a personal tone, using his team members' names to help us connect to the story. Now what did he learn from this experience?
- **The takeaway** – The applicant sums up what he learned from the actions taken in the previous paragraph, complementing the previous conversational language with a step-by-step breakdown of his reasoning. We're sold on this story - but how did it pay off for him?
- **Conclusion** – Finally, he concludes by highlighting how these lessons are applicable in other situations.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because almost every word in this essay is about leadership. It's about the problems of leadership, the candidate's solutions to these problems, his success in implementing these leadership solutions, and his takeaways about leadership in general as a result.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Jotting down final notes, I dropped my pen, raked my fingers through my hair, and exhaled.”* – No introduction. No explanation. We are THROWN smack into the middle of the story.
- *“These conversations sparked redefined roles. I broadened Education Lead and Mentorship Program Lead, for example, to Innovation Lead and Connections Lead to encourage pursuit of more diverse and enjoyable initiatives. Jim loved TED Talks, so we created an Institute version called CHATURDAY, which drew over 150 members and even senior executives. Samantha loved building personal networks, so we created KONNEKT, an initiative that randomly paired over 400 individuals in local offices.”* – Here he gets away from the generalities of one-size-fits-all leadership and shows us how in understanding each individual person’s needs and characters, he was able to tailor his leadership to each member of his team.
- *“The experience taught me three major lessons about leadership. First, the ability to reframe situations is an invaluable tool for influencing people. Asking targeted questions changed viewpoints and encouraged my team to be open. Second, everyone is motivated by something different. Understanding and channeling my team’s desires increased enthusiasm by aligning those interests with the Institute’s. Third, collaboration catalyzes achievement.”* – Such understanding! This ending doesn’t even need a comment it’s so great.

17

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This story is as effective as it is straightforward. It’s in many ways a classic achievement narrative, but it’s just solo smoothly and soooo efficiently told. She takes a failing brand of a huge company and leads her team to make it a success, and gets lots of nice concrete results out at the end.

Kellogg: Leadership requires an ability to collaborate with and motivate others. Describe a professional experience that required you to influence people. What did this experience teach you about working with others, and how will it make you a better leader? (450 words)

“Excellent! \$7M budget granted and you will be lead on this project” said Johnson & Johnson’s (J&J) General Manager for India. Three years ago, I led a team to propose a

promising Gen-Y solution, an e-commerce market-entry plan, and took the lead on this project with only twelve month's experience at the company.

I joined the company as brand manager of the skincare business unit. In the past three years our brand had failed in Gen-Y market: Market shares declined 12% and the average age of brand users rose from 30 to 35. As a Gen-Yer and guru online shopper, I felt we should explore e-commerce. My initial findings – 80% of Gen-Y shopped online – supported my intuition. I then assembled a cross-functional team with 4 senior managers and told them about the unique e-commerce opportunity. In the kickoff meeting, the team voiced strong approval for my vision and orally committed to finish a proposal in three months.

However, with no formal influence on their annual performance evaluation, it was a challenge for me to motivate a team with all senior members. After only two weeks, the project started to fall behind. I immediately called a meeting to identify barriers. The team blamed unclear task arrangement, no time to work on this side project and lack of distribution channel knowledge. Consequently, I tailored the project and created specific work plans for each manager so that everyone had specific goals/deliverables. Second, respecting members' schedules, I deployed a timeline that matched the original project due date and their schedules. I then followed up with daily updates and weekly meetings to keep the pace of the team. Third, to resolve the team's inexperience in e-commerce, I invited external experts for knowledge sharing to challenge the team to beat best-in-class standards. The growing sense of responsibility, timeline and knowledge kept our team moving fast towards the finish line.

The result was exceptional. In the first year, we achieved No.1 online market share (8% increase in national share) and the success in Gen-Y market (average brand user age decreased to 33). My line manager was proud, as our team was awarded J&J Best Organization. All members were excited to be awarded "Power of You" from J&J as outstanding performers of each function.

The experience taught me that making people believe in a visionary goal is a way to group people together without formal authority. By coordinating meetings and updates, I learnt how to effectively communicate with senior managers. I also learnt that providing resources and building encouraging context would enable a team without e-commerce experience to learn and try. The success was transformative - I reapplied these learnings to a cleansing device launch project in which I managed a cross-functional team of 20 to study the new skincare device market, effectively work with global R&D managers and achieved 150% sales revenues target.

Structural Breakdown:

- **Intro** – This essay kicks off with a quote to highlight the scope/budget of the project the applicant will work on in the essay. Then she adds just a bit more

context. It's a short and sweet way to set the stage, but it's just the basics we need to know about the problem she'll solve.

- **Background** – The applicant then uses numbers to break down what was going wrong at this company. This is a great way to highlight the situation to someone who might not be familiar with this industry. She ends the paragraph by setting up her team – so far so good, now we want to see how they handle this project.
- **Obstacles and solutions** – This paragraph is dedicated to highlighting how the applicant manages her team, overcoming obstacles through proper planning and soft skills. It's fairly detailed and showcases her leadership – a major plus in a business school application. We're sold on her skills, now let's see the result.
- **Results** – Again, we get easily quantifiable metrics and awards, breaking down this success. This was clearly a big deal. All she needs to do now is take us home.
- **Lesson** – The applicant ends this essay by showcasing what she learned through this experience and how she applied the lessons to an even larger project, which she also details with some metrics. This is an extra-impressive way to end this essay, since it hints at even MORE success.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because she has shown us that she really knows that LEADERSHIP is about PEOPLE, and that she knows how to lead these people from failure to success, despite much hardship.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“Excellent! \$7M budget granted and you will be lead on this project”* – This opener is enthusiastic and impressive. AND it tells us that the candidate was selected for a big project for a big company, which in itself is mighty cool.
- *“In the past three years our brand had failed in Gen-Y market: Market shares declined 12% and the average age of brand users rose from 30 to 35.”* – By showing how BAD the brand has been doing recently, she is setting herself up for a great achievement. She is not just leading a brand to make great sales, but taking a failing brand and TRANSFORMING it into a successful one.
- *“The experience taught me that making people believe in a visionary goal is a way to group people together without formal authority.”* – She understands how people tick, and that's what makes her a great team leader.

18

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this fantastic family business turnaround, the candidate shows how time and again she was a real leader and visionary to lead her family business from disaster to success.

The mission of the MIT Sloan School of Management is to develop principled, innovative leaders who improve the world and to generate ideas that advance management practice. Discuss how you will contribute toward advancing the mission based on examples of past work and activities. (500 words or fewer)

The day I decided to work in my family business was the day it had to shut down... but what might be bad luck to some, was an opportunity for me.

My family founded Ilumininvest, a Mexican brokerage firm whose main business line was currency exchanges through swap transactions. While we owned a side operation in Costa Rica, everything depended on income from our Mexican business. In 2011 however, Mexico's national assembly launched tough new regulation making these transactions illegal. Overnight, Ilumininvest's profits dropped to zero.

While we were desperate, our firm turned down participating in the illegal currency exchange market, a popular go-to business for struggling firms at the time. We insisted on avoiding dishonest work, and seeing an opportunity to turn the company around, I officially joined Ilumininvest in 2013.

My first project was a new approach towards sales, I was going to create, train and lead a new sales team, taking the time to work hand in hand with each member instead of waiting for referrals. In this line of work the product is not as important as client trust, this new method would ensure that every salesman could take the time to understand clients and adapt our products to their specific needs. By the end of my first year I had hired, trained and worked with over 17 different salesmen, negotiated and created their commission packages, and helped with client relations. Our company grew over 1200% in its first year.

Following this success, I transitioned to our Costa Rican offices, realizing they presented an untapped growth opportunity. After researching our previous activities, I discovered that numerous operational inefficiencies were increasing our costs. I explained to our shareholders that our current warranty deposits were poorly invested and that our operations department could be optimized, by bettering our system we could invest idle funds and create income with virtually no cost. Soon after I was on a flight to Costa Rica!

Despite my initial confidence, nothing could prepare me for the disarray in our Costa Rica offices: our computers couldn't register our investments correctly; our current system was essentially useless. Assembling a team of 3 people, I scrapped our operating model, and started from scratch. I spoke with our traders and account managers to understand what would help them make better decisions in less time and divided the work among my team, keeping track of all progress through weekly meetings with our stakeholders. Within a month of my arrival, the new system had launched and we were breaking even.

I have seen a company close due to regulations, created a new business model, returned an organization to profitability and restructured an international office. I learned to manage a sales force by understanding what motivates each person, and using these drivers to help them succeed, product innovation is key to maintaining and recruiting new clients. MIT's real world challenges will be an opportunity to understand other industries and business opportunities within. I also understood the importance of information in a corporate decision-making processes and have learned that problem-solving is improved with the understanding of small business details, but I need the network and industry experience to do so on the world stage. I believe I can help my MIT class grow by bringing a different perspective from a financial background.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The writer kicks off this essay by introducing her family's financial firm, something that will immediately grab the school's interest. This isn't just name-dropping, however, as she then proceeds to show how new regulations threatened the business. She also displays ethics by highlighting how they rejected illegal practices. Now we want to see her turn the company around.
- **Professional experience part 1** – The applicant displays her ability to lead a team, while tying her role to significant company growth. This is a great start, but we want to see more of what she did at this firm.
- **Professional experience part 2** – Her second project sees her reorganize an entire office, a truly significant project that involved putting together a team and reinventing processes. She ends by highlighting how within a year, she made this office profitable. Now all we need to know is why she needs a business degree.
- **Conclusion** – This writer ends by highlighting what she's seen in her professional life and how those experiences have highlighted her needs for a deeper understanding of business. She then breaks down how an MIT MBA will help her.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

First of all, the fact that her family runs a financial firm is a good basis to work from. But even better is that she shows her leadership abilities in two separate achievements, which display her long-term capacity to grow the family business into a great success. And what could be more appealing than that?

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *"In 2011 however, Mexico's national assembly launched tough new regulation making these transactions illegal. Overnight, Ilumininvest's profits dropped to zero." - A good achievement story can become even better with a tough challenge. And admittedly, this challenge seems pretty daunting.*
- *"By the end of my first year I had hired, trained and worked with over 17 different salesmen, negotiated and created their commission packages, and helped with client relations. Our company grew over 1200% in its first year." - Here, the facts simply speak for themselves.*
- *"I have seen a company close due to regulations, created a new business model, returned an organization to profitability and restructured an international office. I learned to manage a sales force by understanding what motivates each person, and using these drivers to help them succeed, product innovation is key to maintaining and recruiting new clients." - Quite simply, the list of things she has learned during her leadership of the family business is astounding, and gives us confidence in her future.*

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: Here, the candidate shows us how he pulls himself and company out of a difficult hierarchical mire, and how through standing by what he believes in and careful diplomacy, he was able to navigate company structure to be nominated for an executive award.

Tuck: Tell us about your most meaningful leadership experience and what role you played. What did you learn about your own individual strengths and weaknesses through this experience? (500 words)

As Project Finance Manager, I serve as the liaison between two major organizations within Samsung: The Operations department, concerned with day-to-day business, and the Global Finance group, responsible for financial control. Due to this dynamic, I must

make unpopular decisions by juggling the needs of both organizations. In one particular instance, I worked with an Operations program director who was off his revenue target for the year. Concerned with his job security, he found an additional source of revenue that allowed him to reach his goal. I had to approve it.

As a gatekeeper for his portfolio's financials, I realized he lacked evidence of work completed within financial guidelines. Without it, the project would fail an external audit, so I could not recognize the millions in additional sales. Because my job entails making judgment calls in financial matters, I explained to the program director that he would not meet his goal. He became irate, and my own manager suggested that I ignore the lack of documentation and blame the director later. Instead, I reached out to a high-level controller in the global finance organization, whose input bought me additional time. I also connected with the program manager, eventually finding the documentation needed. I guided him through his technical information and in the end we recognized the sale. I felt that I had damaged my relationship with the director, however, by initially refusing to comply. We continued to work together throughout the year, and I was careful to explain my reasoning of any future decision. Much to my surprise, eight months later the program director nominated me for an executive award because he respected my work and valued future collaboration.

One of my strengths here was doing the right thing. I've always felt that how one conducts themselves in a professional setting is a reflection of their personal values. Even though it made my life more difficult, I held firm because I caught an important detail. I understand that I am still young and impressionable and feared that compromise, might lead to expectations of several more, slowly tarnishing the values once instilled at church. It didn't feel right.

I must improve on several weaknesses. Firstly, I must be direct. If I had been more forthright with the director, I would have saved two weeks looking for information. Today, I ask more probing questions to uncover any pertinent details. Secondly, I must set responsibilities in the beginning. Not doing so caused confusion when it was unclear who was supposed to have the documentation. I have learned now to be firm in a tactful way, but to also have clear guidelines on the expectations and responsibilities of my role. I proactively approach the beginning of projects by anticipating future issues and clarifying the actions of which each individual should take ownership. Because I oversee 120+ projects, spending too much time on matters outside of my scope takes away from the other projects I manage.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant has a unique role with a lot of responsibility. In this intro, he succinctly defines what he had to do and a tough situation where he had to do it. We're left wondering how everything turns out.

- **Professional experience** – In this tough situation, the applicant has the option of doing something unethical, but he refuses and instead shows us how he went the extra mile to find a win-win situation for all involved. He's also realistic about how he damaged his reputation with a superior, but then shows us how this ultimately won him this same person's respect. Great! What did he learn from this?
- **Self-assessment** – Here, the applicant analyzes what he did right and wrong, noting how he succeeded and points where he could have done things differently. Finally, he points out how he's improved on this matter now that he's overseeing a (much) larger number of projects.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because his vast executive experience and deep understanding of how to diplomatically navigate corporate structure will be invaluable skills to any company once he graduates from his MBA.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"We continued to work together throughout the year, and I was careful to explain my reasoning of any future decision."* – Through collaboration and transparency, the candidate defuses what could be a potentially heated situation.
- *"One of my strengths here was doing the ring thing. I've always felt that how one conducts themselves in a professional setting is a reflection of your personal values. Even though it made my life more difficult, I held firm because I caught an important detail. I understand that I am still young and impressionable and feared that compromise, might lead to expectations of several more, slowly tarnishing the values once instilled at church. It didn't feel right."* – He just sounds like an incredibly honest guy with a solid backbone and belief system. And this integrity gives us confidence in him.
- *"I must improve on several weaknesses. Firstly, I must be direct. [...] Secondly, I must set responsibilities in the beginning."* – He doesn't mince his words here. His weaknesses are weaknesses, and by identifying them explicitly we believe that he will be able to grow as a leader.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: What works so well in this essay is that the candidate takes a small action (basically she talked to someone), and uses this little detail to build an essay about leadership and understanding. She makes the most out of what she has, and that's why this essay rocks.

Kellogg: Leadership requires an ability to collaborate with and motivate others. Describe a professional experience that required you to influence people. What did this experience teach you about working with others, and how will it make you a better leader? (450 words)

Trust and collaboration are vital in the fast-paced environment of film production, and as an Associate Producer on *A Shot in the Dark*, I bridged a rift between the producers and art department that threatened to jeopardize the entire production. Our shoot was only fifteen days long, so in order to avoid expensive delays, all of the departments needed to be perfectly in sync. But art and the producers were barely speaking—miscommunications during pre-production led to unusable set pieces and a ruined special effects test, and tensions were high.

I took charge of our props list before production, but our props master Dmitri avoided me every time I tried to meet with him. As the lowest-ranking producer, I couldn't use my position to influence Dmitri, so I decided to build trust with him instead. I went back to Dmitri's workspace, this time to focus on how I could help him. I asked about his process and learned how much work went into every visual detail of our film. I also got to know Dmitri on a personal level. I wanted him to see that I wasn't siding with the producers—we were our own team now, and we had work to do. Dmitri appreciated my dedication to our little team and finally opened the lines of communication.

As I worked with Dmitri, I got to know the rest of the art department. They started coming to me with questions for the producers, and I bridged the departments by going back and forth, clarifying assignments and clearly communicating everyone's needs to avoid flare-ups. Tensions eased, and I was thrilled to see that morale increased as the departments repaired their relationship.

Working on *A Shot in the Dark* taught me to keep cross-functional team members focused on their shared goal, especially when they are at odds. I learned how to work efficiently with different departments by immersing myself in their processes and learning their languages and needs. This dedication to collaboration has made me a linchpin on other films such as *Project Windows* and has helped defuse tense situations during other high-pressure shoots.

I'm excited to apply the skills I gained during *A Shot in the Dark* to my post-MBA transition into marketing for a digital distributor such as Netflix. My production experience has trained me for the broad cross-functional teamwork that will be needed

as entertainment marketing becomes more data-centric, and I plan to bring my perspective to marketing teams, working seamlessly with content creators and data scientists alike. My experience has given me a solid foundation that, elevated by a Kellogg education in marketing and analytics, will make me an impactful leader in TV marketing as streaming becomes an increasingly vital form of distribution.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This intro is brief and to the point, introducing the applicant’s industry, role and the issue on this project in just a few sentences; particularly impressive since this isn’t a standard line of work. But does film experience translate to business school?
- **Solution & less** – It turns out that...yes, this experience is VERY applicable to business, as she demonstrates how she used her soft skills to solve a conflict, building trust. She then breaks down what she learned from this experience and how she leveraged this learning.
- **Goals** – The applicant states her post-MBA goals, and how her previously learned skills apply to this role. She then concludes by highlighting how the school can help her reach this goal.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because of two things: 1. She made herself come across as a diplomatic negotiator, which made her a good manager, and 2. Because she exploits the uniqueness and coolness of her industry to maximum effect.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“I bridged a rift between the producers and art department that threatened to jeopardize the entire production.”* – It may have been just a prop master, but she shows an understanding of how every person on the team is vital.
- *“As I worked with Dmitri, I got to know the rest of the art department.”* – And here the chain reaction begins. She solved one small personal problem with one team member, and this brought her closer to the rest of the team.
- *“This dedication to collaboration has made me a linchpin on other films such as Project Windows and has helped defuse tense situations during other high-pressure shoots.”* – And here she is, getting the most out of her totally unique experience as a manager on film sets.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this fantastically strong leadership essay, the candidate comes clean about the difficulty of leading bigger teams, while showing how he learned from his mistakes, bringing his project to an impressive success.

Tuck: Tell us about your most meaningful leadership experience and what role you played. What did you learn about your own individual strengths and weaknesses through this experience? (Maximum 500 words)

“1,700 accounts in 50 days. Can we handle it?” That was how my managing director at Brahm greeted me on a mid-March day in 2012. The firm’s second-largest client, a Wall Street bulge bank for which I oversaw a long-running compliance project, had come under regulatory pressure to review hundreds of accounts for potential money laundering issues. This project was a significant revenue driver for our group, worth nearly \$3 million annually, and increased attention from management raised the personal stakes. To address work volume that had increased threefold with limited notice, our office brought in new hires. As the project manager, the task of preparing the personnel and resources needed fell to me. Once the initial setup phase was complete, I managed daily research tasks, quality control, and client interaction. In short, I was in charge of nearly every facet of the project.

I had managed this project without issue for more than 20 months, and felt comfortable moving forward without significant changes to my approach. But by the end of our first week, I realized I could not expect to manage a 40-person team like one half that size. That first week some reports went out as late as 10 pm, couched in apology-laden emails. Something had to change. I met with my managing directors and requested further staff to help identify the disconnect between our prior successes and current issues. By the next week, I had given a crash course to another associate and a senior analyst, and was leveraging their insights to streamline processes and eliminate backlogs. Under my supervision, they helped guide the research staff and freed up time for me to address more pressing report review and delivery problems. This experience taught me the importance of recognizing when my efforts are stretched to a counterproductive degree.

As the project progressed, I was able to help my staff hone their own skills. I used questions as teaching opportunities to help junior staff better appreciate the importance of our work, public record issues to look out for, and more efficient workflow methods. I got to know my team better and regularly expressed gratitude for their hard work. The benefits of this human investment were quickly realized when the client began prioritizing certain account reviews through rush requests. With less than 15 hours to deliver, my team and I were forced to regularly redirect our focus as more and more of these requests came in. Thanks to effective training, my team was ready

and able to handle these new demands with no drop in quality. We had gone from struggling to make the COB deadline to routinely meeting client rush requests in the span of less than a month. I learned the value of a personable management style and witnessed the hard work it encourages.

Many of my former team members are still with Brahm a year later, and have progressed to more advanced responsibilities. And those 1,700 accounts? All successfully reviewed.

Structural breakdown:

- **Introducing the challenge** – The applicant starts off by explaining the challenge, why it was so important to the company, and his specific role as a leader. Specifically, we can see that he truly owns this project and is responsible for its success. Of course, no “challenge” story can go entirely smoothly - now we’re wondering what obstacles he faced.
- **Overcoming obstacles** – Having established the scope of the challenge, we now see how the applicant deals with obstacles - training resources and delegating work when the situation proves untenable. He also tells the reader what he learned from this experience where he was stretched to a breaking point. So will this change in strategy allow him to succeed?
- **Demonstrating leadership** – Finally, we see how he uses these challenging situations as an opportunity to teach junior staff, and how this paid off during crunch time when his team needed to give 110%. Finally, he demonstrates how his team successfully completed the project, how it benefited his juniors, and what he learned from this experience.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he led a huge team of 40 people to successfully review a huge amount of client accounts in a very short time, and praises the abilities of his team like any true leader would.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“1,700 accounts in 50 days. Can we handle it?” That was how my managing director at Brahm greeted me on a mid-March day in 2012.”* - THIS is how you begin an essay - by diving straight into the problem in a way that hooks the reader.
- *“As the project progressed, I was able to help my staff hone their own skills. I used questions as teaching opportunities to help junior staff better appreciate the importance of our work, public record issues to look out for, and more efficient*

workflow methods. I got to know my team better and regularly expressed gratitude for their hard work.” - Here he shows himself to be more than just a leader, but a nice-guy leader who can show his appreciation for his team.

- *“And those 1,700 accounts? All successfully reviewed.” - And THIS is how you end an essay. With a grand slam in two short phrases that drive the ball home.*

22

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this insightful and introspective essay, the candidate not only highlights one of his great achievements, but he does so in a way that emphasizes the difficult challenges he had to overcome, as well as his takeaways from these moments.

The mission of the MIT Sloan School of Management is to develop principled, innovative leaders who improve the world and to generate ideas that advance management practice. Discuss how you will contribute toward advancing the mission based on examples of past work and activities. (500 words or fewer)

As I look up from my work, straining to see through the shimmers of heat radiating from the asphalt and the sweat soaked corners of my eyes, I see Hamza frantically summoning me. I am on the blistering port of Doha in early August, making final preparations for offshore work for Qatar’s National Oil Company, QO&E. I am a field engineer for Fischer, the world’s largest oilfield services company, with little more than a years’ experience under my belt. Hamza is a solely Arabic speaking forklift driver at the port. My job is to complete a well: to bridge the gap between when the well is drilled and when it begins to produce oil. Due to personnel shortages, I am tasked with executing this intricate job alone - normally assigned to three or more Fischer engineers.

Unfortunately, I understand no more than 20 words of Arabic. Once offshore, incorrect steps carry a massive risk - jeopardizing a well that costs \$17 million to drill and complete or worse, the potential loss of life. Overcoming language barriers, I led a multinational, multidisciplinary team of rig and port workers through challenges I initially saw as insurmountable. By determining each contributor’s skillset and delegating responsibility, I successfully completed the well, earning Fischer over \$750,000 and adding nearly 12,000 barrels per day to QO&E’s production. After this successful experience, I realized the qualities a leader must embody - resilience, confidence and the ability to delegate.

Working on three continents in my first fifteen months I discovered the important, yet often overlooked, quality of independence - required to make autonomous and

objectively efficient decisions on-the-fly with distance separating me from my superiors. My communication skills and resourcefulness were tried and tested while working without the luxury of a shared language and forced to apply unconventional solutions, such as translating from English to Arabic with a Spanish/English manual and a Spanish and Arabic speaking translator. I learned to take necessary risks while swinging from a crane hundreds of feet above hurricane seas and apply that quality beyond just physical risks. I gained an appreciation for biodiversity between working in the Bolivian Amazon jungle and under the Yukon's Aurora Borealis sky, fortifying my commitment to pursuing environmentally sustainable solutions to a global industry. Reflecting on a few of my experiences, each challenge has provided me the opportunity to lead and learn in creative ways. While I learned more than I would have ever imagined as I stood on that sweltering dock in Doha, I still lack some business skills, such as finance and management strategy, needed to be a developed leader in the oil and gas industry. These are skills I can gain through courses such as Strategic Management for Global Enterprises or Managing in Adversity at the MIT Sloan School of Management. A MIT MBA, in conjunction with my global engineering knowledge and experience, is what will make me an innovative and successful, yet progressive, leader in the energy industry.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant starts this essay with some extremely visual language - we can practically FEEL the sweltering heat. He then breaks down his role, and the challenge ahead of him. So how will he accomplish this task?
- **The task** – We see the applicant demonstrate leadership in the face of a tough cross-cultural situation. Notably, we see how he leverages his team and he proves how important this project was by using numbers. Finally, he shows us what he learned about leadership through this experience. Great, but we're not 100% sold yet - we need to see a bit more of him reflecting on this experience.
- **The lesson** – Here, the applicant breaks down what he's learned from his professional experiences, both in the Middle East and in other locations. We learn he's well-traveled, has demonstrated leadership in several situations and shows an understanding of himself. Great! Why does he need an MBA?
- **Conclusion** – He demonstrates how he needs specific business skills to advance to the next level in his career.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

We want this fellow with us because he has taken on some pretty tough and impressive challenges, and has done so with great understanding about himself, and about how he must and should develop during his MBA in order to transform himself into a real business leader.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“As I look up from my work, straining to see through the shimmers of heat radiating from the asphalt and the sweat soaked corners of my eyes, I see Hamza frantically summoning me.”* – One of the best ways to start any essay is to engage the reader, and by starting with a description that places us there in the place and moment of the story, that is exactly what he does.
- *“By determining each contributor’s skillset and delegating responsibility, I successfully completed the well, earning Fischer over \$750,000 and adding nearly 12,000 barrels per day to QO&E’s production. After this successful experience, I realized the qualities a leader must embody – resilience, confidence and the ability to delegate.”* – By giving us a concrete rundown of the benefits of his leadership, he drives the success home before showing us his understanding of what a leader needs.
- *“I learned to take necessary risks while swinging from a crane hundreds of feet above hurricane seas and apply that quality beyond just physical risks. I gained an appreciation for biodiversity between working in the Bolivian Amazon jungle and under the Yukon’s Aurora Borealis sky, fortifying my commitment to pursuing environmentally sustainable solutions to a global industry.”* – In describing his takeaways from his achievements, he does a fantastic job once again of bringing out small (and impressive) detail, which makes this essay more than just a good essay, but an exciting one, too.

23

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Through a detailed account of true leadership, this candidate shows us, step-by-step, everything he did to lead his team to save a flailing product.

The Yale School of Management educates individuals who will have deep and lasting impact on the organizations they lead. Describe how you have positively influenced an organization—as an employee, a member, or an outside constituent. (500 words maximum)

“CompuDoc will not be developed further because it didn’t pick up in Taiwan.” The Group CTO’s announcement was bad news for me, CompuDoc’s Product Manager in Malaysia. CompuDoc is an application for computer speedup and antivirus that faced strong competition and bad reviews in Taiwan. Management had little hope for the

Malaysia market and, operating on a tight startup schedule, planned to kill CompuDoc completely in two months.

I led a team of five to carry out product development, marketing and operations in Malaysia. Achieving concrete results in such a short time with scarce resources and uncertainty about the future of the product was daunting. Morale was low: the team felt directionless without a vision from management. Leadership's skepticism also limited the budget and made it difficult to implement any ideas we might have.

The first step I took was to set a clear vision. I disagreed with management's pessimistic view of CompuDoc. Despite the existence of big competitors, the Malaysia market was still fairly open. Available products covered only a small portion of potential customers, specifically tech-savvy users. Identifying CompuDoc's strengths as a free, simple and user-friendly software, I positioned the product to focus on less tech-savvy customers. Along the way, I engaged team members in market research and competitor analysis. This gave them a positive outlook and motivated them to prove the product's potential to management.

With limited budget and human resources, I decided that the most cost-effective way to acquire customers would be to build strong digital marketing channels. I rolled up my sleeves and led by example, teaching myself different digital marketing channels (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) and training the marketing team on them. I built content strategy for our website and Fanpage to offer not only helpful but also fun and interactive material. This marketing strategy proved effective and increased management's confidence, allowing us to embark on other ideas.

I also built up a culture of sharing and proactive learning in my team. I organized weekly update meetings on overall progress, encouraging team members to discuss their problems and exchange ideas. I also met one-on-one with members and worked to assess and acquire any support they needed from management. I even reached out to other Product Managers with different specialties to provide training for the team.

Within 5 months, CompuDoc reached 100,000 users—10% of the maximum user base in Malaysia. Our team impressed by maintaining our cost per acquisition at only one-fifth that of the firm's key product. In a department meeting, the Group CTO expressed his surprise and satisfaction about our results with such limited resources. Convinced by the growth projection, management decided in January 2015 to develop major features again and double my marketing budget. Our goal is to establish CompuDoc as the most popular PC care application in Malaysia with 30 million users, and consequently monetize the user base. With the strong team I have built and my increased resources, I am confident we can achieve this ambitious goal.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This one kicks off with a quote illustrating a dire situation: we're immediately thrown into the thick of things and get a sense of the urgency at play. Then, the applicant breaks down the obstacles his team faced, including low morale. How will he save this project?
- **Step by step breakdown** – The applicant takes us, step by step, through his actions to save this project. He keeps the language simple and focuses on his strategy rather than any technical details - this makes it easy to understand the stakes and his leadership without knowing what the software even does! So, did it work?
- **The result** – We see how this turnaround led to substantial results for the company: this is doubly impressive considering the project was going to be shelved entirely.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because against all odds, and with very limited resources, he was able to lead a team not just to save, but to re-invent a product to make it profitable within a very short time.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"The first step I took was to set a clear vision. I disagreed with management's pessimistic view of CompuDoc."* - His optimistic and visionary perspective allowed him to bring the product to success, even when management had thrown in the towel!
- *"I also built up a culture of sharing and proactive learning in my team."* - By emphasizing the leadership ACTIONS he took, he is making himself look like a leader.
- *"Within 5 months, CompuDoc reached 100,000 users—10% of the maximum user base in Malaysia. Our team impressed by maintaining our cost per acquisition at only one-fifth that of the firm's key product."* - There are few things more convincing than fantastic results to close off a great story.

PART 3: PROGRAM

Part 3: Program

The fitting room

Let's say you're looking for a new pair of pants and you come across a stylish pair of jeans that you fall in love with instantly. However, the jeans are Extra Small, and when you go to try them on, you can't get the pant legs up past your knees. Let's face it: the jeans may be amazing, but they're not a good fit.

When schools ask you why you're interested in their program, and how you think it will help you achieve your goals, they want to know two things. First, that you've even looked into the program – if your essay only includes generic thoughts and phrases like “top-notch curriculum” and “various clubs,” they'll assume that you never looked any deeper than a rankings list. And if you didn't care, why should they? Believe us when we say that research is key here. At the very least, lose yourself in their website for a few hours, following link after link.

But that's only half of the equation. All your research should go towards demonstrating that you and this program are a good fit. Do they really have what you need? Are you the kind of student they're looking for? A good fit (say, an aspiring tech entrepreneur and a school famed for its tech classes and entrepreneurial program) means that you're more likely to attend if they accept you, and more likely to achieve your goals once you've been through their program. A bad fit means... the opposite. If you're aiming to become a consultant or a project manager, it'll be hard to find a bad fit, but equally hard to prove a good one. The more nonstandard your goals are, the more polarized your responses will be.

Our best advice is this: if you have no idea why a school is a good fit for you (or how they'll help you achieve your goals), you need to do more digging. Email a student, read a campus blog, research alumni, comb through course descriptions. But don't try to fake it!

The essays showcased here demonstrate that the applicants have specific knowledge of the programs they're applying for and a real desire to attend, steeped in more than an itch for a fancy school name on their resume.

24

KEEP THIS IN MIND: A better fit for Duke would be harder to find. This candidate is a team player, entrepreneurial, comes from a big family business, and in healthcare to boot. All of these connections and her family's work in the healthcare industry all

contribute to making her a “part of the family” (and the \$500 Million in annual turnover doesn't hurt either).

When asked by your family, friends, and colleagues why you want to go to Duke, what do you tell them? Share the reasons that are most meaningful to you. (Your response to either essay question should be no more than 2 pages in length. Please respond fully and concisely using 1.5 line spacing)

I grew up in a family of doctors and entrepreneurs. My grandmother is a doctor with extensive knowledge of Chinese traditional medicine who established the first clinic in her village. My uncle started his nutritional supplement company from scratch the year I was born. With a current annual revenue of 500 million USD, the company is now a leading provider of bulk vitamins, nutritional products and pharmaceuticals in China. It was through his business partner, the chairman of RSW, that I first became acquainted with the idea of “hidden hunger.” I learned from him that one in three people in the world suffer from this micronutrient deficiency, which can lead to mental impairment, poor health and low productivity. My aspiration is to do my part to improve the people's health and follow the footsteps of my grandmother and father in devoting myself to the health industry. My goal is to lead and expand my family's business overseas, manufacturing and marketing innovative and affordable health and nutrition products for people in developing countries.

My parents often discuss my future plans with me, and I explain to them that I am not prepared to transition into this role yet. Even though I've gained operations and financial knowledge through working in Deloitte Consulting and investment banking, I still need general management skills in the health and life-sciences industry, more strategic thinking ability and an empowering network with strong industry connections to leverage, none of which I've fully been exposed to in my career. Therefore, I am looking for a top-notch MBA education to bridge my skill gaps.

At Fuqua, I will attain the best combination of business and health industry educations. The HSM program will be particularly valuable for me because it prepares students for management and leadership roles within the health industry. I will benefit from the program's close connection with industry giants like Merck, Pfizer and Eli Lilly, which will offer me abundant pharmaceutical learning resources through company visits and hearing speeches from management. I will learn first-hand the most advanced corporate strategies and operational frameworks to apply to my family's business to optimize its internal processes and expansion strategies. By getting industry-specific skills that I can only obtain from HSM coursework, I will be better prepared to lead my family-owned enterprises.

I'm also looking forward to enhancing my global perspective through the Global Academic Travel Experience (GATE), as it will take me to my targeted areas for expansion: South Asia and Latin America. Visits to these regions will help me get an idea of the local health industry market and what products will most likely succeed. I

will also learn possible ways to market and distribute my family's products. I believe that an applied learning experience like this is especially critical for me as a young professional seeking to make a big transition into her family business.

My father often talked about the importance of having a strong network to successfully lead a privately owned enterprise. Fuqua's close proximity to the Research Triangle Park will get me access to entrepreneurs and executives in my targeted industry. Post-MBA, I'll have the foundation not only to recruit talent, but also to access innovative ideas to refine business strategies and optimize operations for a pharmaceutical enterprise through Fuqua's elite alumni network.

Furthermore, I am impressed by the Team Fuqua Spirit. My experience as a consultant taught me that teamwork is an absolutely indispensable part of success. In Fuqua's info session in Singapore, I talked to Wendy Tang and her husband, Jason Hsu, both graduates of Fuqua who are now leading their family's healthcare business. They told me that the close-knit community is what they like the most. The unparalleled devotion of Fuqua alumni to their alma mater and their willingness to assist prospective students truly show that Fuqua is a very special place.

There are also many personal reasons I'd like to attend Fuqua. I want to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity to build houses for the Durham local community. I want to participate in the Fuqua MBA Wine Club, so I can share some of the best wines my family has collected with my classmates and professors. I'd love to hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains again, an activity I enjoyed most on crisp, colorful autumn days while an undergraduate at the University of Virginia.

As I consider the network, credentials and skills to achieve my long-term career aspirations, the Fuqua School of Business is exactly where I want to be. I look forward to being at Fuqua next year and am confident I will be a valuable addition to the community.

Structural breakdown:

- **Deep Background/long-term goals** – Duke is HUGE on community and personal details, so this applicant kicks off her essay by introducing her family background. This allows her to highlight that she's the heir to a MASSIVE healthcare company and introduce her long-term ambitions to lead that company. This is definitely enough to grab the school's interest; now all she has to do is prove that she's capable of delivering on her plan.
- **Needs** – She then outlines the skill gaps she needs to fill to lead her family firm into the future, and says an MBA is necessary to fill them. Great, now why is Duke the best school for her?

- **Why Duke?** – The applicant then highlights Duke’s dual focus on healthcare and business, pointing out how this will be of particular use given her family firm’s direction, and how Duke’s coursework will fill out her skill gaps. From there, she goes into more specifics, including GATE and Duke’s network, concisely breaking down how she’ll leverage these Duke-specific features to improve her skillset. We’re pretty much sold on her professional reasoning. Now all she needs to do is show she’s a good fit for Duke on a personal level.
- **Community/personal reasons** – The applicant then shows us that she’s really researched Duke through info sessions and personal connections with alumni. This is particularly important given Fuqua’s strong emphasis on a tight-knit group. She then ends the essay by highlighting a program she’d like to participate in while in Durham, and another personal reason for attending the school. In short, she proves to Fuqua that she belongs there.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

She is deeply involved in one of the industries that we most cater towards. She will also bring to the school as much knowledge, prestige and connections as she will take away from it.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“With a current annual revenue of 500 million USD, the company is now a leading provider of bulk vitamins, nutritional products and pharmaceuticals in China.”* – You might be telling yourself “Oh well, good for her! But I’m not that lucky!” But it’s not just about luck. Even more important than the fact her family runs quite a large business is that she has understood how to play the essay towards the school’s needs.
- *“My parents often discuss my future plans with me, and I explain to them that I am not prepared to transition into this role yet.”* – Here she is basically modestly saying: “I’m not ready to be a CEO, because I haven’t yet attended Duke.” BAM!
- *“Post-MBA, I’ll have the foundation not only to recruit talent, but also to access innovative ideas to refine business strategies and optimize operations for a pharmaceutical enterprise through Fuqua’s elite alumni network.”* – While praising the school, she shows that she knows just how important networking is, and how Fuqua is the perfect place for her to do this.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This dude has a great “cool hand Luke” Marlboro man way of writing an essay, making us feel that he’ll be in charge wherever he goes.

Imagine that you are at the Texas MBA Orientation for the Class of 2017. Please introduce yourself to your new classmates, and include information you feel relevant to both your personal and professional life. (250 words)

Hi my name is John. I work in private equity real estate and specialize in hotel investments at one of the largest real estate private equity firms in the U.S., Blackstone. Yeah, most people haven’t heard of it, either.

Why hotels? I saw it as an opportunity to combine my interest in real estate finance with my passion for the outdoors, hiking, fishing and golf. I enjoy working on hotels that have an outdoor element. Ever heard of the Green Dragon? It’s a famous golf course at a Hilton Resort in Hawaii; my firm sold it to Rupert Murdoch in 2011.

Traveling to these hotels is part of what I love about hotel investing. I especially like doing due diligence on the golf courses at resorts we look at buying – just to make sure it’s a good investment, of course.

I’m a born-and-raised Texan. I grew up in a family of outdoorsman and therefore environmental conservation has always been important to me. Hotels are notoriously wasteful with water and energy, which is why I took a LEED certification course in 2012. Since taking the course, I have integrated green features to the operations of several hotels. Giving the customer the option of foregoing turndown service when staying more than one night has allowed some of our hotels to cut water usage by 25% alone.

Oh, you play golf too? Seeing that orientation is over for the day, I know a great local course. I’ll drive.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This prompt emphasizes a personal tone, and the applicant nails it from the start with the colloquial introduction and lighthearted tone. Nevertheless, it also conveys crucial information about the industry he works in. Long story short – we like this guy and want to know more.
- **Professional details** – The applicant continues with the anecdotes and personal tone while also dropping key details about his industry (his firm sold a golf course to Rupert Murdoch!). He does a great job at catering this essay to the prompt by interweaving why he’s passionate about his job, his personal history

and professional details – just like in a conversation. He also includes an achievement by highlighting how he cut water usage down in some his firm's hotels. Now all he needs to do is wrap it up.

- **Conclusion** – Brief and to the point. Even if you don't play golf, wouldn't you want to hang out with this guy?

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

He's not just cool, but he occupies a unique niche in a great industry, and well, just seems like a great guy to play a round of golf with.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"Yeah, most people haven't heard of it, either."* – That's some nonchalant stuff right there..
- *"I especially like doing due diligence on the golf courses at resorts we look at buying – just to make sure it's a good investment, of course."* – A little bit of tongue-in-cheek humor while working can go a looong way.
- *"I'm a born-and-raised Texan."* – How could any Texan school say no to that?

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This short essay is an actual surprise, which shows us not just how the candidate took on new responsibilities, but gained a real insight into his life and a true respect for his parent's profession, all whilst showing its applicability to his MBA.

Columbia: What will the people in your Cluster be pleasantly surprised to learn about you? (250 words)

My cluster will be surprised that I taught at an all-boys high school full-time during my gap year between high school and college. I got this job through a quirky rule in Lithuania's education system allowing schools to appoint a select number of instructors without formal training based on academic record and I was thrilled to share my knowledge with kids only a year or two younger than I was!

Creating lesson plans forced me to examine how learning takes place, a thought processes I still employ when preparing presentations for colleagues. Furthermore,

having discipline students no more mischievous than I had been a few semesters earlier also made me mature more quickly. Being in front of the classroom gave me a new perspective on behavior, literally and figuratively.

The best part of being a teacher however, was learning to appreciate my parents' profession. I never realized how difficult managing a classroom could be and compared to presenting complex math to rowdy high school students, addressing a group of my colleagues today is a breeze. I can't wait to bring the patience I learned in this role to my learning team at CBS, using clear thoughtful communication to build consensus and overcome disagreements. I also hope to assume a cluster leadership position and use the emotional, social and interpersonal skills I learned as a teacher. Finally, I hope to give back to CBS by becoming a guest classroom speaker or panelist as an alumnus, building on this experience.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant succinctly explains the situation and why he was excited to become a teacher. So what did he gain from this experience?
- **The lesson** - He then breaks down the skills he gained and how they apply to his professional life. He also highlights how this made him mature and how it made him appreciate his parents' profession.
- **Conclusion** – Finally, he breaks down how he'll use the skills he gained in this role to demonstrate leadership at CBS.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

In becoming a teacher at a very young age, he was able to pick up leadership by mentoring at schools, allowing him a better understanding of himself and of his parents as well.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Creating lesson plans forced me to examine how learning takes place, a thought processes I still employ when preparing presentations for colleagues.”* - Here, he shows how a one-time experience built leadership and mentoring skills which helped throughout his entire career.
- *“I also hope to assume a cluster leadership position and use the emotional, social and interpersonal skills I learned as a teacher. Finally, I hope to give back to CBS by becoming a guest classroom speaker or panelist as an alumnus, building on this experience.”* - By already projecting himself as someone who contributes to

CBS in the future, he is showing how he can apply his skills, and also give back to the place, all while making his candidacy seem all the more secure.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this straightforward essay, our client comes across as tough, aggressive, and ambitious. And he knows what working in finance in NYC can really bring him, not forgetting to point out NYC's other qualities as a hub of politics and culture.

Please view the video below: The Center: How will you take advantage of being “at the very center of business”? (Maximum 250 words)

Having started a retail business in college, I know the importance of learning management from those who went before. Located in Manhattan, Columbia has more business executives visit than any other top MBA program, a huge advantage to gain firsthand insights into the changing financial industry. I look forward to having networking opportunities with corporate executives and portfolio managers. My Los Angeles Colleague even said “Pierce, I have met 6 different portfolio managers last 3 years in LA. Do you know how many I met last Friday in New York? 17!”

New York will give me unparalleled opportunities to internship with PWM departments of every leading financial institution where I would have the opportunity to learn from practitioners like Reggie Sermon (MBA,'91), A top exec at Bank of America PWM. I am eager to experience New York's innovative, aggressive U.S banking culture to counter HSBC's more conservative, low risk-taking banking culture.

Columbia will enrich my life experience and encourage me to think like a world leader. For example, participating in the Columbia University World Leader Forum in New York will provide different perspectives on political and economic issues and help me navigate the global world of PWM. I will have the opportunity to witness how world leaders communicate and deal with conflict, as more wealth goes into the hands of the few.

New York is not just a city, but an access point for business cultures from around the world, and I believe cultural intelligence is critical to lead a cross-cultural organization like HSBC.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant starts by connecting his goals to CBS and NYC in a way that highlights the school's advantages without seeming like needless praise.

Notably, he mentions how New York's investment culture is an attractive opportunity. But what else makes a NYC school (and CBS in particular) his top choice?

- **New York** – The applicant then transitions to an overall look at New York's advantages in regards to his career path: access to financial institutions (including specific people, proving he's done his research) and a more aggressive trading culture. Now he needs to give us specifics regarding why he'll fit in at CBS.
- **CBS** – Here, the applicant names a specific CBS forum that he'll leverage and points out how this ties into his career, before concluding with a final sentence, summarizing his interest in the school.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he shows us that he really knows what Columbia can add to his career, while exhibiting his drive to participate in Columbia and NYC life.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"New York will give me unparalleled opportunities to internship with PWM departments of every leading financial institution where I would have the opportunity to learn from."* – Here, he shows Columbia how much he appreciates what they have to offer him on his way to his goals, and how well he knows what the school has to offer.
- *"Columbia will enrich my life experience and encourage me to think like a world leader."* – At first this argument might seem a bit cliché, but it's actually a really solid argument, as here the candidate shows us a) that he knows the deep importance of seeing the bigger picture b) gives us an example, to drive home his ability to SEE this bigger picture.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This essay works fantastically because the candidate REALLY knows his stuff about the school he is applying to - he shows precisely how Fuqua will help him reach his specific goals, all while showing his love for the school. A winner.

When asked by your family, friends, and colleagues why you want to go to Duke, what do you tell them? Share the reasons that are most meaningful to you.

In the past three years I have managed over 12 smarter planet consulting projects worth over \$15M. As project manager, I designed more efficient urban planning blueprints, guiding millions of dollars of investment by governments and real estate companies. I love what I am doing, but I would rather realize these projects myself, from planning to operation. I see huge market demand for emerging smart citizen services and smart enterprise support services like online logistics support and e-government in industry parks. But there are few experienced service providers in the market that can execute these creative designs from start to finish. After 7 years in management consulting, I am prepared to take an MBA and turn my visions into reality.

I need MBA study in two specific areas to realize my career transition and become a business development manager. Practical marketing and operations management skills in technological services like healthcare and e-commerce are needed for me to synthesize technology, customer, and market forces together and create growth opportunities. I also require more experience working outside China to enhance my business planning and effectively cooperate with overseas partners.

My first encounter with Fuqua was at a Duke MBA Singapore information session in 2008, at the very beginning of my MBA research. From then on, Fuqua was always at the top of my list. A big factor was Fuqua's global business emphasis. Nearly 40% of my classmates will be from outside of the U.S., among the highest proportion at a top U.S. MBA program. What excites me most is that Fuqua designs a specific global experience track and roadmap based on personal goals, helping prioritize courses, programs, extracurricular activities and resources. My customized small group tutoring, Global Academic Travel Experience (GATE) and Fuqua Client Consulting Practicum (FCCP) will rotate me through different countries and hone my ability to work in multi-cultural environments. I would like to travel to Frankfurt, one of the smartest cities in the world, with GATE and visit the "Smart Cities Expo World Congress", local government and corporations, and alumni there. This will help me understand better European business culture, all while deepening the scope of my smart consulting expertise. I would also develop and apply a vendor / partner assessment framework for a Silicon Valley IT service provider with FCCP. With a Fuqua MBA, I know I will have the international experience to succeed in a multi-cultural environment.

Only Duke can provide me the unique smart technology competencies I need. Healthcare is one of the most important smart city services and will become more so as urbanization increases demand. Duke University Medical Center is a leader in healthcare delivery while the Triangle is home to approximately three dozen leading biotechnology and healthcare organizations. There is no better place for me to learn healthcare technology management. I will take part in the Duke MBA Health Sector Management (HSM) program, the largest health industry program at top U.S. business schools. This will greatly enhance my ability to work on smart developments for health-related industries. I will also study electives from the "Duke Center for Health Informatics" and "Duke Center for Community Research (DCCR)" to study the

management of technology more broadly, and how to move proven technologies into healthcare and community implementation. My Fuqua MBA student status will help open doors to intern with technology companies in the Research Triangle such as GE, one of my target employers.

Beyond the courses and programs, I felt something at Fuqua that I did not feel at any other school, something hard to put into words. I thought that if I was going to spending two years at a school, it must be an environment like Fuqua where I got along with people incredibly well. Since 2008, I have taken part in three Fuqua information sessions and alumni talks. I met admissions director Russell Davis, and spoke to alumni Wyatt Gibson and Clark Patel. I found that all Duke people share the same traits: friendly, helpful, and incredibly smart. But what really spoke to me was a 2011 Fuqua alumni talk, where Wyatt explained how his Fuqua study was a “transformative experience”. He said that while he could not remember every formula he learned or the name of everyone he met, he would never forget the sleepless nights when people helped and encouraged each other, the invariably kind greetings he received in the hallways, and the practical suggestions he got every time when he met difficulties in the job search. Looking back, he said, what he was really left with was a very unique confidence to face the future, and a lot of lifelong friends. This convinced me that Fuqua is a place where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts: “Team Fuqua” is real! I want to be part of it, to learn and contribute, to care and be cared about, and to make an impact. I want to have my own transformative experience in Fuqua. I am sure a Duke MBA will enable me to make my ideas a reality.

Structural Breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant lets us know he’s already managed several big projects worth a sizeable amount of money from line one, grabbing the adcom’s attention from the start. He then identifies a gap in the market, and tells us he needs an MBA to take advantage of it. We’re intrigued, now he needs to convince us.
- **Skill gaps** – He adds detail to his reasoning for an MBA, identifying key skill gaps that an MBA can fill. So far so good, but how will DUKE fill them?
- **Why Duke?** - He breaks down how he learned about Duke on a personal level, and why the school is his top choice, tying Duke’s programs and classes to the skill gaps he mentioned above. Specifically, he breaks down how he’ll gain international experience. But what about the technology portion of his needs?
- **Why Duke? Part 2** – Here, he names specific programs and classes and demonstrates how they’ll help him fill in his technology skill gaps. OK, we’re sold on the hard facts - now we just need to see if he’s the right “fit” for Duke, which is crucial for this school.

- **Why Duke, intangibles** – To wrap things up, the applicant breaks down his personal reasons for wanting to attend FUQUA, including alumni meetings, all told in a personal story. It's the perfect way to wrap up this essay, now that he's established how he'll leverage the school's core curriculum and optional programs.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he knows exactly what he lacks in order to reach his goals, and he knows that he can get exactly that at Fuqua. He also does a fantastic job of transferring his enthusiasm to the reader, and enthusiasm, as we all know, is addictive.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"After 7 years in management consulting, I am prepared to take an MBA and turn my visions into reality."* – That is what we call determination.
- *"I need MBA study in two specific areas to realize my career transition and become a business development manager."* – His identification of specific areas that he needs to reach his specific goals is the basis that makes his self-analysis particularly convincing.
- *"Beyond the courses and programs, I felt something at Fuqua that I did not feel at any other school, something hard to put into words. I thought that if I was going to spending two years at a school, it must be an environment like Fuqua where I got along with people incredibly well."* – And here, he goes the extra mile and shows the school his love. IT wouldn't work without all the concrete and logical justifications, but in combination with them, it's a powerful catalyst.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This guy does something truly unique here – he comes across as both thoroughly confident and thoroughly nice at the same time, all while playing himself up as one of the best team players, ever. And we believe him!

When asked by your family, friends, and colleagues why you want to go to Duke, what do you tell them? Share the reasons that are most meaningful to you. (2 pages)

When I found myself navigating to The Fuqua School of Business website while trying to write essays for other schools, I understood that its supportive ambition attracts me so much that Fuqua is a perfect fit for me. At the end of my MBA at Fuqua I'm going to win an award for supportive ambition.

When I joined the Quicksilver company, I hired 11 local people in Nigeria and Ghana to build 3 teams for 3 mines in West Africa. I faced a challenge to build supportive ambition among my team because of the competitive environment in Nigeria, where working for a few mining companies is almost the only opportunity for them to make their way in life for some. They would do almost anything to get and to keep the job. Team members were arguing constantly over why one person was doing an exciting project to improve mining efficiency, while the others were engaged in less challenging safety methodologies implementation. They tried to keep their activities on the projects from each other, as they thought that if they stood out, performed better than the other team members, then they had a chance to get a fast promotion and reward. Unfortunately, they didn't realize that the success of one member of the team with failure of the rest of the team didn't lead to the achievement of our department's ambitious goals. It was an inefficient and disturbing atmosphere, which had to be changed.

In order to overcome it, I decided to organize the team based on principles of helping each other, open expression of opinion, and constant personal development. I designed and delivered a 3-week training course focused on safety, business improvement practices, and the importance of teamwork, which provided them with the knowledge required to succeed as a team and with real life examples of team success. The importance of team-work was in their minds afterwards, and they started to be more open to each other. In order to draw the team together, create a noncompetitive environment, and make sure that none of team members were disadvantaged in their projects, I devoted one hour per week to speak about all the projects, allowing everyone to understand and contribute to what was being done by each employee in the department. I moderated the meeting and noticed they were proud to present their achievements, teach the others, and obtain feedback and ideas for improvements from the team. After a few months, they realized that these team meetings not only gave information about different projects, but also brought the team together and more importantly generated positive results. Everyone on the team was engaged in team actions, felt support from others, and understood how each employee's actions completed our ambitious goals. We would not have been able to deliver a 18% profitability improvement in the 3 West African mines working as individual parts.

This experience with my team in Africa is why I am so attracted by the supportive ambition principle of team Fuqua. I believe I could excel with "Supportive Ambition" engaging in lots of the activities in Duke. I'm interested in a career in consulting and would like to join the Consulting Club to develop my networking skills, prepare for interviews, and support other students in case solving practice. In addition I would be glad to join the Fuqua team in the Deloitte National MBA Case Competition and help the school to fight back to first place.

I am excited to learn strategy from Aaron Chatterji, former adviser to the administration of a U.S. president. His course could help me significantly in pursuing

my ambitious career goals in strategy consulting. I hope one day, after developing growth strategy for the biggest mining company in the world, I will be able to send him a note of thanks for his help developing my skills: the most rewarding moment for him as a professor, as he mentioned in his interview to “Poets and Quants”.

Moreover, I would like to mentor MMS students in the recruitment process for positions similar to my previous experience. I am eager to improve my knowledge of Mandarin and would be glad to share my knowledge of Russian with other students seeking an international career by organizing a foreign language club where we teach each other our native language.

You should have seen the smile on my face when I discovered the Running and Triathlon Club at Duke. I do my best to popularize sports among my friends, dragging classmates, colleagues, relatives, and even my girlfriend into this lifestyle with running, swimming, or cycling. We can improve the club by attracting more people, helping each other with the secrets of getting faster with less training, and bike maintenance. I would like to organize an MBA triathlon challenge and help the Fuqua team fight for the win. In addition, I would love to use my experience organizing a soccer championship in University to contribute to the MBA games and help to fundraise for the Special Olympics in North Carolina.

Being a leader who has already managed to change a competitive atmosphere into a supportive environment, I would like to join Fuqua and help strengthen its supportive ambition principle even more.

Imagine that it is May of 2018. Who do you think will win the award exemplifying the “supportive ambition” principle?

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – Points for honesty: this applicant starts by describing his actual process researching schools, and his gradual realization that Fuqua's best for him. He may not be someone who's dreamed about Fuqua his whole life, but he's honest and shows a connection. Now we want to know WHY he's right for Duke and how he ties into their “supportive ambition” principle.
- **Story** - To show us the connection to this principle, the applicant then goes into a story detailing a challenging business situation. Importantly, this isn't a standard challenge; it keeps the focus on the human side of things and how his team wasn't supporting their overall objectives, instead seeking personal gain. So how did he resolve this scenario? He answers this in a subsequent paragraph - breaking down his exact steps to remedy this toxic business environment. He also uses an easy-to-understand metric to highlight how this made a measurable impact. Great - so how can he tie it back to the school?

- **Why Duke** – He goes on to name a number of clubs he'd like to participate in and professors he'd like to work with. Importantly, he mentions WHY, going into significant detail for each one, rather than rattling off a list of potential interests without explaining his reasoning. By now, we're sold on both his abilities and his fit for the school, and he just needs to bring it all home.
- **Conclusion** – Finally, he wraps everything up by looping back to his initial idea of winning an award for "supportive ambition."

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he sounds like a real leader who knows how to tap into people's best instincts to build them into a cohesive team.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"I faced a challenge to build supportive ambition among my team because of the competitive environment in Nigeria, where working for a few mining companies is almost the only opportunity for them to make their way in life for some."* – By showing an understanding of their economic situation and by caring about their lives, he shows himself to be more than just a regular manager, but a true leader.
- *"We would not have been able to deliver a 18% profitability improvement in the 3 West African mines working as individual parts."* – He gets great results while exposing his faith in teamwork! What a great fit for Duke.
- *"Imagine that it is May of 2018. Who do you think will win the award exemplifying the "supportive ambition" principle?"* – After reading this essay, I'm guessing it'll be him. He's made a real convincing argument for it, that we already accept his ambitious conclusion. And he did it while sounding like a nice guy.

PART 4: PERSONAL

Part 4: Personal

The inside look

The biggest obstacle you'll face in penning a personal essay is the mistaken belief that your story has to be of epic proportions. Touring with Cirque du Soleil, moving to Myanmar to give volunteer medical aid to refugees, rising out of poverty to become your nation's first internationally acclaimed flautist... *everyone* knows that those are the kinds of stories that lead to acceptances. And so they are! They aren't just exciting - they also demonstrate qualities like devotion, persistence, and ambition that b-schools are looking for.

The truth is, however, that these aren't the **ONLY** kinds of personal stories that will help you get into b-school. Your story doesn't have to have a winning tagline. It doesn't have to have international characters, an exotic setting, or a shiny Aston Martin. Schools don't ask for personal stories because they've run out of good books to read – they ask because they want to see more of who you are. In fact, adcoms find these essays so beneficial that these essays figure more and more prominently into applications every year. Scores and resumes are a start, but with the stiff competition for spots in these schools, you'll need to bring some of your personal flair to the app—and this essay is where the magic happens. And that's why you'll find this section is the largest section of the book; personal essays are in.

The applicants in this section don't all have astonishing human-interest stories to share. Their essays succeed because they highlight features and experiences that were important to **THEM** – and give us a peek behind the 9-5 curtain. Peeks that portend success as future business leaders.

Let's check it out...

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SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Demonstrating Leadership for Harvard

First Version

You're applying to Harvard Business School. We can see your resume, school transcripts, extra-curricular activities, awards, post-MBA career goals, test scores and what your recommenders have to say about you. What else would you like us to know as we consider your candidacy? (No word limit)

"I'm sorry the year didn't go as you had hoped." There I was sitting at a 4 star restaurant in the heart of New York's financial district as my manager firmly stated that the firm would not be extending me a full time offer. My stomach sank. A piercing sense of hopelessness rushed to my head. I was ashamed. For the first time in my life, my best wasn't good enough. I had been a winter intern at Source Direct Consulting for the group that developed Executive Compensation packages for Fortune 500 companies, a role that quite honestly sounded preposterous when I first heard of it. I had worked nights and weekends and took on project after project in hopes of winning the approval and admiration of the management team. Within seconds, my dream of sitting in a corporate boardroom making impactful decisions seemed like a far-flung fantasy.

Looking back, I now understand that I was not prepared to succeed in my internship. As Dr. Clarke of Brown University stated in an essay for NewEducation.Net "in order to ensure optimal career success in the growing group of first-generation college students, the specific needs of these young people must be addressed... first-generation students often come from low-income, minority or immigrant families and do not have the same set of life skills and personal capital of middle-to-high income bracket students. Parents of first-generation students also do not have the life experience to adequately guide their children to the next step in succeeding in the college-educated workforce."

I was one of those people that lacked the life skills and personal capital required to succeed in a professional setting. I also didn't have anyone to help guide me during my transition from school to work. My parents were born and raised in rural Indonesia and did not have the means to attend college. I was raised in the Southwest part of San Diego, a blue collar immigrant community. Growing up, I didn't have access to an educated professional network. I also didn't know it was important to have such a network. I was wrong. I also now understand that my experiences are not unique.

According to the Department of Education, nearly 50% of the college population is made up of first generation students. This means that, every year hundreds of

thousands of students graduate without being fully prepared to succeed in their respective careers. For many graduates this means missing out on significant opportunities at work and delayed promotions. For others, it sadly means that they will never be able to reach their full career potential. There is a substantial economic and social cost for this negligence. This lack of preparedness leaves the world with far fewer business leaders who can lead their communities. These are college graduates that universities and communities have already invested in. But there is a gap that is preventing the world from maximizing returns on this investment. We must bridge this gap and nurture this talent. We must provide the mentorship and infrastructure required for first generation college graduates to reach their full career potential.

I have taken the first step by taking an active role in the Forward-Leadership Programs. The Forward-Leadership Programs is an outreach group hosted by Berkeley's House School of Business.

"The Forward-Leadership Programs motivates high school students, college students, and college graduates from under-served communities to prepare for careers in management through education, mentorship, job development, and leadership training." I was a Forward-Leadership Fellow (a program for college graduates) in 2011 and remain committed to the mission. Every year Forward-Leadership Scholars, a group of rising High School seniors visit technology companies in the Bay Area. In 2012, I hosted the Scholars at BuzzFeed. I coordinated sessions with current BuzzFeed Engineers, Designers, Marketers and Account Executives to introduce the Scholars to the variety of roles available in technology. The first step towards reaching one's career potential is envisioning oneself in the desired role. It is impossible to envision yourself in a career when you don't even know what jobs exist. I thought back to my days in high school, I didn't know anyone with a professional career and was intimidated by highly educated professionals. My goal was to humanize the different careers and show the Scholars that professionals are not different and that these careers are within reach.

The second step in realizing one's career potential is having the right support structure. The Forward-Leadership Fellows are young professionals that have passed the initial hurdles of entering a career path, and so I make sure we have the support we need to enter the ranks of leadership. I coordinate quarterly dinners and networking happy hours for Fellows of the program that live in the Bay Area. This has proved to be an effective way of working through general career problems and holding each other accountable for goals like applying for new jobs or Business School. We even help each other with resume edits and are always eager to leverage our personal networks to help out fellow Forward-Leadership alums.

However, I realize that hosting high school students and organizing support sessions can only go so far in helping the thousands of underutilized young professionals. I need to have a greater impact. My professional goal is to be an Operating Partner at a growth focused Private Equity firm. My professional and personal goals are not dissimilar. Companies succeed because of the people that build, operate and manage them. In

order to see a return on investment, one must invest in the right people to lead. As an Operating Partner, I will have a portfolio of companies that I advise. I will leverage my relationship with the Forward-Leadership Programs to hire recent college graduates and match them up with managers from my portfolio companies. The young professionals will receive direct guidance in the very workplace in which they work. This ensures the advice is timely and applicable.

While I am optimistic I am also realistic. My goal will require me to convince my colleagues to reconsider how to manage a Private Equity firm and our portfolio companies. It will force us to rethink our obligations. This will not be easy. HBS is the only school that can provide me with the education and resources I need. I look forward to “Reimagining Capitalism: Business and Big Problems” course so I can carefully examine the approach companies have taken to inject social initiatives as part of their company’s ethos. I especially look forward to learning from my future peers in the Social Enterprise Club and will eagerly seek out people from the Shared Value Interest Group – those who believe that combining the interests of a company and society will unleash a new period of economic growth.

HBS can also provide something no other school can, the Harvard brand. The Harvard MBA comes with incredible credibility and a legacy. All of which I will need as I change the culture of my firm and recruit the best managers and mentors. If I develop 5 executives who then each go on to their own communities and develop 5 leaders of their own, we will have 25 business leaders helping uplift their communities. A few generations from now we will have thousands of business leaders all working to improve the conditions of their communities. I realize that this will take time, but with the backing of an HBS degree and my future classmates I know I will have the education and the resources to make this happen. I have my plan and I can’t wait to execute.

Notes from our Essay Specialist:

- We have a great backstory. I want to see 70% of this as a bold, brilliant, brash idea of how this guy is going to use his incredible abilities and attributes to re-engineer some serious issue that faces our times. AND he needs to do this in a way that reflects his immediate short term (pragmatic goal) and long-term goals..
- The second main thing here is that this is Harvard. And applying to HBS without leadership doesn’t fly. We want him to get down and dirty about how he is going to LEAD CHANGE in the world. We want to understand his PLAN, his REASONS, and we want to see proof that will allow us to BELIEVE he can be a world-changing leader. If he does that, he will be golden.

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Spark** – There's some nice storytelling here and we really get a sense of how you felt during this rejection... but it's WAY too long and that means it comes off as whiny. Let's be direct here – what happened and how you felt – then we can show how you overcame this setback.
- **The problem** – Much like your intro, this section needs to be cut down to the essential, and that means cutting out that quote and conveying this information in your OWN voice. That will not only be punchier, but it'll feel more meaningful as well.
- **Background** – You do a great job at illustrating how your background was a disadvantage – but what did you gain from your family's values? Let's get a well-rounded picture of who you are, how you OVERCAME this disadvantage to go on and do great things.
- **Snapshot** – Then we can move away from the personal details and onto the overall problem you hope to solve and how you plan to solve it. We'll want to be concise in identifying the problem, identifying the solution and then demonstrating examples of how you've contributed to solving this issue. We want to keep things step by step to make your story as easy as possible to understand.
- **Career** – Right now, we have to clarify that link between your portfolio and helping the professionals you recruit: it's not too clear right now and that's a key point in your essay. Basically, we need to convey that you're scaling up your impact by doing this.
- **HBS** – Let's show that you won't just be someone who uses Harvard as a springboard; you're the guy who's going to use Harvard to change the culture and make sure these kids get the prep they need to move on to bigger things.
- **Conclusion** – 1 or 2 sentences summarizing that you'll help people who'll help their communities, all you need is an HBS degree to do it.

Final Version:

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this story, keep an eye out for how this client thinks introspectively about his failure and success to show us how he is going to become an impactful leader.

You're applying to Harvard Business School. We can see your resume, school transcripts, extra-curricular activities, awards, post-MBA career goals, test scores

and what your recommenders have to say about you. What else would you like us to know as we consider your candidacy? (No word limit)

"I'm sorry, we just don't think you are a good fit for us." Those were the only words I heard the Senior Manager of my winter internship at Source Direct Consulting say. A sense of hopelessness rushed through me and all of the sacrifices my parents made, the work done through long nights and short weekends, the goals I set ceased to exist.

The rejection from Source Direct was crushing. The experience led me to believe that I wasn't suited for business, so I applied to law school. I thought I would pursue a field that required the kind of formal training I could obtain in a classroom. Upon applying, I travelled to Indonesia. The trip fundamentally altered my path.

My grandfather opened up to me about working as a rice farmer at ten years old, planting fields for another fourteen years before buying his own land. He spoke about building his business, welling up with pride when he remembered the farmers he felt were brothers. It took him more than a decade to finally realize his dream, and I had given up after just one disappointing summer. I had to be stronger; first-generation graduates needed people like me to succeed. I realized that I, too, wished to uplift my brothers and sisters.

I participated in a The Forward-Leadership Programs at the Berkeley's Haas School of Management. The mission was to prepare underserved college graduates for careers in consulting. At orientation, Ali opened up about the lack of a professional support network. This struck a deep chord. I, too, lacked a support system during my internship at Source Direct. I could sense my story had been lived time and time again.

Through Forward-Leadership, I uncovered four keys to reaching one's career potential: self-awareness, meaningful values, individual motivation, and a supportive team. My rejection from Source Direct and the stories of other fellows reflected the systemic problem that first-generation college graduates face: we lack the social capital and experiences needed to fulfill these criteria. We were smart and driven, but something beyond our control hindered our ability to achieve. I decided that I wanted to make business leadership more accessible to those from underprivileged backgrounds.

During the end of the program, I felt compelled to help Ali, working together to identify companies that would allow him to realize his passion for education and technology. He secured a role at SnapChat, developing innovating and engaging content he cared about. He naturally relied on his Forward-Leadership family for support. His promotion to Manager of Product Development emboldened him to aim higher with hopes to start his own education advisory firm. My experiences with Forward-Leadership, and particularly with Ali, convinced me it is possible to develop strong and capable leaders, with the right approach.

This approach lies in a software solution I have developed at Elephant Labs. It will enable millions to lead with diverse perspectives, testing each person's ability to lead, and designing a unique curriculum to address weaknesses. The implications are far-reaching. Given their backgrounds, these leaders will bring new methodologies to solve problems and provide creative solutions across the spectrum.

I cannot contribute to a generation of creative and innovative leaders if I don't have the essential leadership training myself. Harvard Business School is the only institution that can provide the experiences and education necessary to empower me to become the business leader I seek to become. The Immersion Program will drive me to a new level of self-awareness. Still, I must ensure that my ideas withstand the scrutiny of Harvard leaders, thinkers, and difference-makers. Professor Bill George's leadership research is especially inspiring to me and can move my own research further.

Harvard educates leaders who make a real difference in the world. After widening company doors to capable but underprivileged leaders, my software solution will become an indispensable tool in leadership development. I know that I need the formal general management training that will allow me to scale this business alongside the integrated support network that a Harvard MBA provides.

Every year, thousands of first generation students graduate without the preparation to succeed. It is possible to provide the type of solution I tailored to Ali for others. Having worked at Buzzfeed and Roll Web Development, I recognize the incredible power technology has to scale and serve the needs of many. If we are serious about addressing the challenges of our time, we need as many capable leaders as possible collaborating towards innovative ideas and solutions to take us into the next stage of possibility. Harvard is the ideal place for me to realize the potential for this kind of impact.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant starts with a failure, establishing an emotional connection with the reader and setting up the background for his long-term goal to launch a company helping college graduates develop leadership and maximize their strengths. We see that he really CARES about helping people land the right job and WHY. This initial failure sets up a journey of self-discovery that eventually leads to his HBS application.
- **Deep Background** – Then, he gives a taste of his background and the values his family instilled in him; his grandfather's work ethic, for example. This shows us he understands the value of persistence. NOW, we want to know how he'll use that persistence to make a difference: How will he use these values?
- **Big Picture Vision** – We see how the applicant finds his OVERALL vision through a TOUGH leadership program. Not only does he now understand that he

didn't have the tools to succeed previously, but he realizes he wants to help OTHERS succeed - providing those tools to his peers, THAT's what he wants to achieve. We also see a first success with Ali, setting a track record. So, what then is missing?

- **What he needs** – He's ALREADY developed a technical solution to the issues he wants to solve. NOW - he needs leadership training himself. How is he gonna get that? By attending HBS, of course!
- **Why an MBA? Why Harvard?** – He wants to stress test his plans against the best and brightest, and Harvard's immersion program offers the perfect space to do just that. We're basically satisfied at this point, but for good measure, we wanna tie it up with a bow, and end on a deliberate note to emphasize his big-picture reasons for pursuing this path.
- **Wrap Up** – We're sold on the idea, so now he brings it back to HELPING OTHERS, specifically first-generation college kids who don't have the tools and resources their richer peers had, thanks to their upbringing. He uses this conclusion to remind us that he's going to make a DIFFERENCE.

Here's why we want this guy at our business school based on this essay:

Because this guy always aimed to be a leader, and when it didn't work out, he had the courage to show us his weak side. And like Rocky, after he took that beating he came bouncing right back out in the leadership ring, landing uppercuts. We see that he not only wants to win, he wants to win the title belt. And he doesn't stop there. He wants to make OTHERS into leadership heavyweights too. And that's why he will fit in perfectly at HBS.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"I realized that I, too, wished to uplift my brothers and sisters."* - When he realizes that the lack of a support system brought him down, he wants to fix it, not just for him but for every other person without the advantage of that professional support.
- *"Through Forward-Leadership, I uncovered four keys to reaching one's career potential: self-awareness, meaningful values, individual motivation, and a supportive team."* - The way he unpacks a complicated concept into four discrete pieces is telling. Real LEADERS have that kind of easy access to clarity.
- *"My experiences with Forward-Leadership, and particularly with Ali, convinced me it is possible to develop strong and capable leaders, with the right approach."* - Here he is showing us, pragmatically, how he learned through a real-life

experience that leaders can be MADE. That's why when he tells us his goal is to make others into leaders, we believe him.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This candidate is a ninja-master in his field, and as knowledgeable as any expert. When he tells us his goals, we are SURE he is gonna make it.

Georgetown: Why You? (Hint: we are looking for an answer that cannot be found from research on our website) (750 words)

As a child, I spent a year at the one and only public pre-school in my hometown. Taught by endless repetition, I rapidly lost interest. Worried, my parents sent me to the provincial capital Nanchang, where, under good guidance, I mastered my studies and developed an interest in piano and boxing. The education market is huge in China, but pre-education for those under seven has been severely overlooked. Only 35% of these kids are ever educated in China, far behind the over 77% international standard. In small cities, the percentage is even lower. As a consequence, a surfeit of robotic test-takers with zero creativity enters the workplace and produces only low-end products, slowing the development of China. I intend to change this situation.

My family runs private preschools in Fuzhou, a small city in Southwestern China. Under new policies that support private education in West China, we recently began receiving tax breaks and subsidies which funded two new kindergartens. With some provinces loosening their single-child policy and expectations that the easing will extend nationwide shortly, the number of newborn kids will rise to 1 million annually. New figures have shown a jump in enrollment for 3- to 6-year-olds in big cities from 39.8% in 2004 to 62.5% in 2012. Education from age 0 to 3, currently at an early stage, is getting more attention from parents. Now is the right time for me to pursue an MSB MBA and seize this golden opportunity.

My post-MBA path will start back at my family business. I will use new teaching methods based on the Randolph Approach, a "child-centered way of learning" that integrates music to spark kids' creativity. With this distinctive model and help from my existing network in the pre-school industry, I will grow the business from four pre-schools in two cities and spread throughout Southwestern China within 5-7 years. I will then duplicate the matured model in small cities nationwide and enter first/second-tier cities where I will position myself to undercut international and foreign language schools with a similar quality of education. Ultimately, my dream is to build the best

“Made in China” pre-education model that can spread our special advantages in math and science to the kids worldwide.

A MSB MBA will provide the nuts-and-bolts expertise needed to grow my brand. With formal training in strategy, I can realistically evaluate pros and cons for growth in different markets. Learning from Prof. Eric Koester, a serial entrepreneur who runs startup development tools for small businesses, I can get first-hand advice on the difficulties I might face. Georgetown has an enviable reputation of global vision and foreign study comparing with other competitive MBA programs. I am eager to tap into that collective expertise and learn business preferences in different cultures. I will also study governmental behaviors, essential for Chinese private business and the education industry in general.

I can be a complement to the MSB community. By sharing my practical experience in financial consulting, I will provide an original perspective and real-world cases during class discussions or Entrepreneurship Club events. Leveraging my network with SME-focused investors, I can also connect peers who are keen to launch their start-up ideas in China with potential investors in the world’s biggest emerging market. I also bring a wealth of multicultural team experience and a record of successful international leadership. My interest in MSB is not purely academic. I will contribute to the school’s service vision by getting involved in the Month of Volunteerism. After my volunteering experience in schools affected by the 2014 Monsoon, I am able to recognize what suffering kids need mentally.

As a near victim of pool pre-school education, I feel a strong personal conviction to improve the situation. Children’s interests and creativities can develop China’s economy in a long run if freed from the stifling status quo. With an MBA from MSB, I will learn more efficient ways to deliver my services in an increasingly competitive market. In turn, I will offer my numerous strengths to the program: My SME experience, multicultural background and volunteering enthusiasm. After a lifetime of preparation, I am ready to embrace everything that a MSB MBA has to offer.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro/identifying the problem** – The best goals are the ones that tie the personal and professional. Here, the applicant uses his childhood’s rote learning as the foundation for introducing a national problem in China, and he then follows up that anecdotal evidence with hard statistics. So what will he do about this problem?
- **Background** – Wow! His family runs preschools, which means he’s at the front line of this problem and has plenty more statistics to back up his arguments. He showcases the opportunities in this sector, and notes that he needs an MBA to seize them. A strong argument, but we need to find out about exactly what he’ll do to really believe him.

- **Short-term and long-term goals** – He breaks down his post-MBA career with an approximate timeline. Because of his family resources, this seems realistic and we believe him. But why does he need an MBA to do this?
- **Why Georgetown?** – Here, he breaks down why Georgetown is attractive to him – including specific courses and a professor. It's a bit brief, so the adcom will need a bit more to really be sold on his candidacy.
- **How he'll contribute** – This applicant really shines here – he showcases how he'll give back to MSB, both personally and professionally. This is a great example of how an applicant can show his interest in a school without listing endless classes. OK, so the adcom's sold, he just needs to bring it home.
- **Conclusion** – He sums up both his goals, and how he'll contribute to the school – his two strongest arguments for joining MSB.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

By using vast amounts of precise information – including teaching methodologies, market studies and education statistics, this candidate has proven to us that he knows his industry inside-out. And that's the first step to succeeding at his goals.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Only 35% of these kids are ever educated in China, far behind the over 77% international standard.”* – This is more than just a vague goal of “Oh I'm really passionate about xxxx.” This guy knows his market!
- *“New figures have shown a jump in enrollment for 3- to 6-year-olds in big cities from 39.8% in 2004 to 62.5% in 2012.”* – AND he is tracking the changes.
- *“I will use new teaching methods based on the Randolph Approach, a ‘child-centered way of learning’ that integrates music to spark kids’ creativity.”* – AND he has identified a specific methodology he believes in and will use to solve the problem of educating children to be more creative.
- *“After a lifetime of preparation, I am ready to embrace everything that a MSB MBA has to offer.”* – He really HAS been preparing for a lifetime. And he is almost ready to lead. Once he gets that MBA, that is...

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This essay tells what seems to be a regular old achievement, but it's quick and effective and highlights the candidate's skills, as well as his joy at succeeding.

Tepper: Describe a defining moment in your life, and explain how it shaped you as a person. (Maximum 300 words)

The moment that defined my life? Seeing a manufacturer's face burst into a smile after I helped his company save \$15M annually. This was the moment that I realized my professional sourcing knowledge and analytical skills could help local mid-sized companies identify and solve their supply chain problems, ultimately shifting my career path toward my long-term goal of establishing my own sourcing and supply management consultancy.

This story began in 2013 when I joined an audit on a \$200M manufacturer, thoroughly examining its operations. Shocked by how chaotic management and isolated production planning were limiting this manufacturer's competitiveness, I went above and beyond ordinary visits and suggestions, instead analyzing this firm's entire operations. I also suggested several contingency plans and sourcing strategies to secure stock enhance supplier management.

I was confident my work had helped this company, but nothing had prepared me for the founder excitedly telling me that my suggestions would save him \$15M per year, helping the company attain sustainable growth. Recognizing an opportunity, I then reached out to additional mid-sized suppliers and learned that they were eager to improve their sourcing and supply practices, but couldn't afford top consultancies, spurring my ambition to launch my own firm.

I still feel a rush when recall this moment, as that was when I discovered my passion and potential by going above and beyond what was expected on an assignment to truly make a difference. Since then, I've continued to broaden my knowledge beyond sourcing on assignments such as annual agreement negotiations, in order to deliver the best results possible. Furthermore, this moment defined my ability to go beyond my comfort zone, an ability that now pushes me to acquire a Tepper MBA to take my next step towards my goal of launching my own consultancy.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant starts this essay by answering the question as directly as possible: we learn about the defining moment and we find out WHY it defined him. Now all we need to find out is what he did, and how he did it.

- **Background** – We then go back to the events leading up to this defining moment. The applicant shows us that he goes above and beyond what's called for when faced with tough situations. As a reader, this shows me that he's the type of person I want at my school or on my team.
- **The epiphany** – As a result of his hard work, the applicant is not only rewarded, but realizes there's an opportunity to repeat this sort of success, long-term: other companies would love for him to help them change their practices. So how will he take advantage of this?
- **The takeaway** – He then ends the essay by reflecting on how going the extra mile paid off, how he's made subsequent efforts to broaden his knowledge to contribute even more value to his clients, and why he needs a Tepper MBA to accomplish his goals.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because we can feel his pleasure at consulting others towards a successful result, and since this is his goal, we're pretty sure he'll be good at it.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"The moment that defined my life? Seeing a manufacturer's face burst into a smile after I helped his company save \$15M annually."* – It's simple. It's happy. It's to the point. And it works.
- *"I was confident my work had helped this company, but nothing had prepared me for the founder excitedly telling me that my suggestions would save him \$15M per year, helping the company attain sustainable growth."* – Plus he takes a humble attitude about the results! (Although he DID get them 😊)
- *"I still feel a rush when recall this moment, as that was when I discovered my passion and potential by going above and beyond what was expected on an assignment to truly make a difference."* – Even his description of how this story shaped him is fun, simple, clear and just makes him sound like a great guy.

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SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Showcasing Personality for Duke

First Version

Duke: The Admissions Committee also wants to get to know you - beyond the professional and academic achievements listed in your resume and transcript. You can share with us important life experiences, your likes/dislikes, hobbies, achievements, fun facts, or anything that helps us understand what makes you who you are. Share with us your list of “25 Random Things” about YOU

1. I am right handed but I taught myself to write with my left hand as well, simply because being called ambidextrous sounded cool.
2. Fine gourmet food and street food - I love them both equally. I am a self proclaimed food connoisseur.
3. My favorite hobby is to edit and enhance 3D renderings. I enjoy working with lighting, brush strokes, frames, etc.
4. I am a fitness freak and I enjoy outdoor activities. Recently, I went para-gliding in Koh Phagnan in Thailand, and snorkeling in Vietnam.
5. Although people tell me I sing well in public, my best impression of Whitney Houston only comes when I'm driving or in the shower.
6. My grandfather passed away unexpectedly one morning in 2009 and my biggest regret in life is not visiting him the previous night due to some (now silly) work assignment.
7. I play a mean game of tennis. While on holiday, I practice regularly with my mom.
8. Since my parents are entrepreneurs, growing up we never had the time to take many family vacations. I've always wanted to travel the world. Someday.
9. I became a vegan by choice over 8 years ago, only because I got bored of eating meat one fine day I recently got back to eating it just to increase my protein intake but I still stick to vegetarian food mostly.

10. I've played many strong characters in plays and skits in school, college and church festivals, such as Penelope, Ella Fitzgerald, Queen Mary, and Jane Austin.
11. I'm a certified grade 5 piano player. I also try my hand at the drums occasionally.
12. In a parallel universe, I'd be a lifestyle consultant, because I love giving advise. A little improvement goes a long way!
13. My family owned 5 elephants in Chiang Mai province, Thailand and I've fond memories of my childhood riding them in the rubber plantations. I've even fed eggs to a king cobra once.
14. I am agoraphobic and generally afraid of crowds but the World Cup is definitely on my bucket list.
15. My mom is my role model and she has taught me all of life's lessons during what we now fondly call our "couch sessions" and I miss them. After high school, there have been times when I thought that I've outgrown the "couch sessions" but you never stop learning and the right guidance is forever priceless.
16. I have a great memory for remembering names (not matching them with faces though) and acronyms.
17. My brother and I were arch enemies when we were small but as we grew older, we got really close. Discovering that he wrote her national award winning essay on me as his role model was a speechless and truly touching moment for me.
18. I am irritatingly punctual and I expect the rest of the world to follow suit.
19. When I was asked to fill up a medical form in 4th grade in school, I listed my allergies as "work" and emergency contact as "doctor" - pretty clever, huh?
20. I think you can tell more about a person by who they keep in their imaginary audience and friends than you can by any other means.
21. I believe appearance and actions speak louder than words - your stance, confidence and carriage can create lifelong impressions at first glance.
22. I can make alphabets out of origami!
23. I am super organized. I run through my lists in my head even in my sleep!
24. My childhood dream was to either be a politician or a midwife.

25. I love puzzles and mind games! I have a ton of them at home. Its just another reason to never sit idle.
26. I am a firm believer in the God Almighty - "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." (2 Tim 2:15)
27. Last year on Independence Day, I was attending the flag hoisting ceremony at GVTI's local School, when a little boy walked up to me and gave me a small lapel pin of the Thai flag. While pinning it on, I smiled, thanked him and asked him where his was, upon which he replied that they were each given only one and he wanted to give shiny new pin to me. I was so moved by his love! I wore the same pin to this year's ceremony and saw him beaming when he noticed it.
28. Once a month, a few of the wives, mothers and other women from Intel Connected Women gather to cook a themed lunch and watch Master Chef. I find this a brilliant opportunity to connect with them, share recipes and show off some of my cooking skills!
29. I love surfing and I was thrilled to ride the fastest surfing beach in the world, at Bali's Kuta Beach. 3 times!
30. I collect vases. My collection ranges from utilitarian antiques to tall slender urns.
31. I love watching anti-war themed movies. Some of my favourite ones are Saving Private Ryan, Jar Head and Life is Beautiful.
32. I love everything about Qatar - the people, their culture, the city's landscape architecture, the rapid advancement in the last few years and so much more.

Notes from our Essay Specialist:

- This is a great start. What we'd like to do for this first round is narrow down the list to 25. To do this, we'll categorize each point into one of three categories: Yes, No, or Maybe. The 'yes' and 'no' categories are self-explanatory; we left some in the 'maybe' section because it's important that SHE choose how she appears to the adcom, too:

Yes: 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14, 16, 20, 21, 26, 27, 28, 30, 32

Maybe: 1, 2, 5, 9, 12, 15, 18, 23, 24, 25, 29, 31

No: 13, 17, 19, 22, 33

- As we revise, the key principles to remember are: 1. UNIQUENESS – For every item, she’s gotta ask herself whether the point applies to anyone but her. If yes, then we need to add more... 2. DETAILS – Specificity is how make this list uniquely you. For example: “I like to climb mountains” is blah. “I once climbed K2 in a blizzard just to prove it could be done” adds specificity on character as well. Finally, 3. FUN – This prompt is all about drawing out those quirky things that are hard to find in the type-A business professional.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this vivid and funny essay, the applicant shows us all of her best sides: her great humor, faith, dedication to her family, cultivation, friendliness, sportiness and zest. She even goes the extra (and creative) mile to add nice images to her text. At the end we get the feeling we know her well, and she seems like one pretty cool cat.

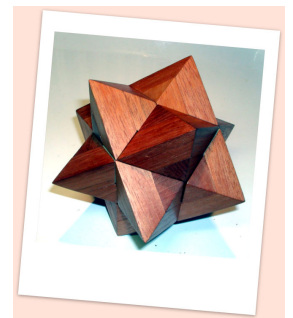
Duke: The Admissions Committee also wants to get to know you - beyond the professional and academic achievements listed in your resume and transcript. You can share with us important life experiences, your likes/dislikes, hobbies, achievements, fun facts, or anything that helps us understand what makes you who you are. Share with us your list of “25 Random Things” about YOU

1. Penelope, Ella Fitzgerald, Queen Mary, and Jane Austin are just a few of the many strong female leads I’ve played. I am hoping to join FuquaVision and reignite my passion for theatre.
2. My family owned 5 elephants in Chiang Mai province, Thailand, and I have fond childhood memories of riding these giant-tusked gentle creatures in the rubber plantation. I loved feeding them bananas and coconuts.
3. My granddad passed away unexpectedly one morning in 2009 and my biggest regret in life is not visiting him the previous night due to some (now silly) work assignment. From then on, I’ve always made it a point to stay more connected with my loved ones, near and far, by calling them twice as often and visiting them whenever I can.
4. I am a grade V piano player. I failed to pass this grade because I couldn’t speed up one of Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas (Sonata A minor op. 9,2).
5. Beware my backhand smash to the left corner! I play a mean game of tennis. It all started with my dad and me playing on holiday and, once I began to show potential, he bought me a club membership. I’ve won district-level tournaments in the Qatar.

6. My childhood dream was to become a midwife. Most girls dream of having children, but I wanted to be the visionary woman responsible for making their important day just perfect.
7. I am agoraphobic. I can't stand large crowds at sporting events. I can't even imagine going to a music festival and going up front. I'm breathing harder just thinking about it!
8. Although people tell me I sing well in public, my best take on Whitney Houston's "I'll always love you" comes only when I'm driving or in the shower.
9. I have a collection of vases ranging from bulky utilitarian antiques to tall slender urns. I scour antique stores and EBay for them. My most exquisite one is made of blue Elizabethan glass, used to store only Indian tea.
10. I enjoy watching anti-war movies, especially ones that nonetheless glorify the strength, courage, companionship, brotherhood and unselfish acts that make us human. Some of my favorites are Saving Private Ryan, Jar Head and Life is Beautiful.
11. Last Independence Day, a little boy from a local school I volunteer at gave me a small lapel pin of the Thai flag. They were each given only one, and he wanted to give his to me. I was so moved that I wore the same pin to this year's ceremony and saw him beaming when he noticed it.
12. I love surfing! I've surfed Bali's Kuta Beach, the fastest surfing beach on the planet, 3 days back to back. The adrenaline rush lasted for a good month, but I couldn't feel my neck afterwards.
13. When I was asked to fill out a medical form in 5th grade, I listed my allergies as "work" and emergency contact as "doctor" - pretty clever, huh?
14. When I was growing up, my entrepreneurial parents never had the opportunity to take much time off. Someday, I would love to take them around the world. At Fuqua, I'll convince them to take some well-deserved time off and experience the Blue Ridge Parkway.
15. My favorite hobby is to enhance digital images and 3D renderings. A quick tip - always perfect the digital lighting in a landscape picture. Did you know that light has temperature? Adding more red tone makes a picture warmer, and a cloudy day needs more warmth. Similarly, adding more blue tone will make a picture of a hot scene cooler.



16. I am a firm believer in God- “Do your best to present yourself to Yaweh as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” (2 Tim 2:15)
17. If I had a chance to pick 3 people to have dinner with, they would be my favorite talk show host (Oprah Winfrey), the greatest spy (James Bond) and the wittiest actor (George Clooney). Imagine the range of topics in THAT conversation! Bartender, 4 martinis, shaken not stirred!
18. I need lists. I haven't figured out whether I make them because I am an organized genius, or I have a bad memory. I have a master list of my other lists: important dates, goals, recommended books, discount coupons, and many more.
19. Fine gourmet food and street food - I love them both equally. My favorite street food is Singaporean chicken rice served with broth. Yummm!
20. I am right handed, but I taught myself to write with my left hand as well, simply because being called ambidextrous sounded cool at one point.
21. My mom is my role model. She has taught me many life lessons during what we fondly call our “couch sessions”. She would tell me inspiring stories when I was disappointed and humbling ones when I was getting too full of myself, all over a cup of chai. I sometimes miss those sessions.
22. Last summer, I went paragliding at Koh Phangan in Thailand. I ran into the clouds from the cliff top and was immediately hit by a surge of adrenaline when I felt the ground vanish from beneath my feet! For what seemed like a divine 20 minutes, I was flying with the birds and witnessing the island in all its magnificence.
23. The women in Intel Connected Women group have a tradition of gathering once a month to cook a themed lunch and watch Iron Chef. In a recent effort to improve our French cuisine, we made some delicious Bouillabaisse!
24. My brother and I were archenemies when we were small, but as we grew older, we became partners in crime. He wrote a national award-winning essay on me as his role model—one of the high points of my life.



25. I am addicted to Korean pocket puzzles. I have about 20 of them at home. I have currently been struggling to solve this metal 3D puzzle. I refuse to cheat and look at tips online!

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because she is gonna fit in perfectly at Duke. She's enthusiastic, friendly and outgoing, and has a great sense of humor. But that's not all. Look at how she discreetly tells us that she comes from a relatively wealthy family (five elephants!); of experienced business-people (they are entrepreneurs); that she is an involved socialite (paragliding, tennis and surfing) who would put to shame many at any country club; and is deeply cultivated as well (vase collection, theater, and gourmet food). Wow.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *"Beware my backhand smash to the left corner! I play a mean game of tennis. It all started with my dad and me playing on holiday and, once I began to show potential, he bought me a club membership. I've won district-level tournaments in the Qatar."* - Look at just how much she gets out of a mere 45 words - she plays tennis. She plays it competitively and internationally. She wins. And she is a family woman!
- *"Although people tell me I sing well in public, my best take on Whitney Houston's "I'll always love you" comes only when I'm driving or in the shower."* - This one may not seem like much, but actually, it's great. We know that she doesn't have to take herself too seriously, is capable of showing her weak points, and of having a laugh at her own expense.
- *"My childhood dream was to become a midwife. Most girls dream of having children, but I wanted to be the visionary woman responsible for making their important day just perfect."* - Here she is going against the grain, giving us something that in no way will help her get accepted, but that tells us a lot about who she is - her love for life, her courage, her desire to be a visionary, and appreciation of others.

34

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this culturally savvy essay, our candidate shows how he steps up to take the lead and solve what could be a complex problem across international teams to everyone's satisfaction.

Ross: What are you most proud of and why? How does it shape who you are today? (400 words)

"We are four months behind schedule and our suppliers keep pushing back delivery. Who has the answer? This young man?" Our CEO was not serious, but everyone looked at me. It was my first meeting as the youngest project manager on a \$70M program to launch a production line in India. "Sure! Why not?" I said.

I was now side-by-side with some of the most experienced company executives, handpicked to directly lead a \$5.5M project. The journey was intimidating, but I was excited to work with a strong team across five countries. I knew the opportunity would be an important step toward my goal of being COO at a Germany-based global automotive giant.

The challenge was immense. The Indian team was taking days to release raw materials, causing delays that threatened the German supplier's planned vacation. Having lived in both places, I understood the cultural differences: Europeans will not compromise work-life balance, while in hierarchical India requiring many approvals is standard. I worked with both sides to negotiate a solution. I explained the Indian process to European suppliers, requesting them to work with the logistics team to plan ahead. I also convinced local Indian management that streamlining the approval process would prevent catastrophic delays.

In the final phase, the German suppliers suggested to release substandard equipment. Under pressure, local management was willing to let the proposal slide. However, I learned from prior experience that this compromise would lead to an operational bottleneck, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. I presented a cost-benefit analysis, and persuaded management to allocate additional resources to alleviate the bottleneck. Both suppliers and company leadership applauded my insistence on long-term benefits over short-term haste.

The program was delivered on time, and our executives praised me for pulling the team together. I am proud of my contribution, combining technical expertise and business acumen, building international bridges, and rallying resources from different functions.

This experience taught me the importance of listening to other's perspectives. My current position requires working with suppliers and clients in 24 time zones. When our

suppliers are not shipping quality products, I listen, identify conflicts of interest, and present solutions for long-term success. Looking forward, I want to combine my industry experience with Ross business skills to lead a top Indian automaker and build it into a major global player.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – We're thrown right into the thick of things with this introduction. The conversational tone gives it a lot of energy, and we see that the applicant is a real "go getter" who isn't afraid to throw his hat in the ring. Then, we get a sense of the project he's working on, and he even connects it to his long-term goal.
- **The issue** – From there, the applicant concisely breaks down the human issues behind the problem. By focusing on the cultural aspects over anything technical, he ensures this essay is easy to read. Now we understand the problem, and want to see how he solves it.
- **The solution** – We see him balance the concerns of multiple stakeholders while using data to ensure people buy into his vision. He then shows us how he succeeds and we're sold on his potential. Now we want to see how he can apply this experience to future situations.
- **Conclusion** – Finally, we see the lessons he learned from this experience and how he applies them to his current position. He ends by connecting this experience to how he'll work at Ross.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because the candidate had the courage to take the lead on a project that was way beyond his experience, and was able to pull it off successfully. Because he led this success by showing that he deeply understood the specific differences and the specific needs and expectations of two teams from two very different countries.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"We are four months behind schedule and our suppliers keep pushing back delivery. Who has the answer? This young man?" Our CEO was not serious, but everyone looked at me.* – Wait, so this guy is sitting in the board room with the CEO? And when he's called on half-jokingly to lead a project, he has the moxie to actually go ahead and do it? Oh yeah! He's the man.
- *"Having lived in both places, I understood the cultural differences: Europeans will not compromise work-life balance, while in hierarchical India requiring many*

approvals is standard.” – Here he shows us what we may not have known as readers – the veeeery specific cultural differences he was aware of as a potential cause of big problems. And thanks to his sharp eye, he was able to defuse these problems before they even cropped up.

- *“This experience taught me the importance of listening to other’s perspectives.”* – Here, despite his courage and his leadership, he shows us how important it is for him to take a step back and gather feedback from others before he moves forward. A true leadership quality!

35

KEEP THIS IN MIND: When we are through reading this very personal essay, we feel like we know the candidate as well as we would know a good friend, and that is what makes this essay a real winner.

Haas: Please tell us about yourself and your background. Include information about your family, where you grew up, your interests, or any other people or experiences that have influenced you. The goal of this essay is to get a sense of who you are, rather than what you have achieved professionally. (1,000 word maximum)

I always remember what my Mom told me when I was young: “be truthful and wrestle with reality”. Born in a traditional military family, I was raised like a boy. I could easily tell the military rank by looking at badge on the suit at a very young age but couldn’t name a fashion model or movie star. Like most of the Russian families at that time, though hardworking, my parents didn’t have lots of money. I was very interested in drawing but my parents couldn’t afford the drawing class. My mom improvised and made my sketching books with anything she can find: old wall calendars and wrapping paper so I could draw at home. But I did have something other kids didn’t have: a computer. Due to my father’s work, I had the privilege to play with computers in his office. I still remember the first time I drew the Russia’s new three colored national flag, on the old monitor with several lines of Pascal codes- the very first computer language I learned from my Dad. It felt like the computer opened a new world for me. From a young age, I knew technology was my wonderland. While the road to working in technology both professionally and personally has not always been easy, I have pushed through every challenge and grown into a strong and professional woman.

Despite consistent great scores in school, I failed the most important, one-shot-exam of Russian students: college entrance examination. I was so nervous that I didn’t perform well on the exam day and didn’t get into my dream college. Although disappointed, I didn’t let the despondent mode rule over me. I talked to myself, “I have to deal with it

and everything has a positive side.” And I did enjoy my college very much. Besides extracurricular activities such as leading Student Union and championing College students’ Debating Competition, I joined several research projects, one of which is a fingerprint recognition project that identifies and authenticates fingerprints based on the patterns and characteristics of the input fingerprint. It was challenging but tackling the difficult problem was fun to me. I stayed in the lab day and night, reading papers and experimenting, and eventually I created a new algorithm. Leading 10 people from different technical backgrounds, I prototyped a real fingerprint locker that is ready to operationalize. At that time, although fingerprint sensor started to gain popularity in the market, only big companies such as IBM and Dell had the mature technology. The success gained interest of a local tech company “Adavat”, who decided to incorporate the technology into their product. When graduated, I realized that although I didn’t go to my dream school, my college was such an invaluable lesson to me: keep your faith and keep having fun, the effort will be fruitful.

After college, I was the only one who got an offer from Sunsoft Russia, out of 400 graduate candidates with computer science major. I brought all my energy and enthusiasm to my first Sunsoft project: a graphics application on windows CE system. However, things changed rapidly and one and a half years later, my project was cancelled due to Sunsoft’s strategy change and I was laid off. What a shock. Instead of panicking, I acted quickly and found myself a Development Engineer job at Apple. Two month later, I moved to the States, where a culture shock was waiting for me. I didn’t know how to use the coffee machine in my rented apartment; I didn’t understand the jokes punctuated in the hallway office; and I was the only one who didn’t wear green on St Patrick’s Day. However I did anything I could to close the culture gap such as bringing traditional Russian baklava to office on Fridays. I learned ski, scuba diving and I even picked up my childhood hobby: drawing. Although I can’t say that I integrated myself deeply into American culture, I made my peace with it and made a lot of good friends. I found that as long as you open the door first, the world is more than welcome to accept you.

Along with the professional challenges I have faced, after my horse accident I learned that even a terrible accident could become a sweet memory. On a visit to Russia, I took a vacation in the Siberian prairie with friends. It is a very beautiful rural place and I planned to learn horse riding with local herders. My horse suddenly lost control and I fell off the running horse. I went into coma for two days and stayed in hospital for two weeks. While a terrible experience, this accident led me to my true love as I later married the guide who saved my life!

Although terrified, I was not paralyzed by the fear. With the help of my husband, I eventually became a good rider. This return trip to Russia gave me a great chance to see the fast growth and huge potential of Russian tech market as well as the different preference of technology product between Russian and Americans because of the cultural difference. I realized the true value I can provide to technology world by utilizing my multi-national experience to help new Russian technology businesses

connect to the best resource in the states and create best-customized product for Russian market. I would like to use my rest of my life to pursue this dream.

From the little girl who was obsessed with computers to a mature and professional woman who clearly knows her true calling, I hit multiple obstacles but I never let them stop me. Instead I believe I benefited from each challenge and they all paved the necessary road for me to the next level. As an old Russian saying goes: “The road ahead is long and has no ending; yet high and low I will search with my will unbending”, I am ready to open a new chapter at a business school.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant illustrates how she was different from most girls growing up due to her military upbringing, and highlights how she was exposed to computers at a young age, unusual for children of her generation in Russia. She then links this to her professional success. This packs a lot of information into the paragraph and we're left wondering - who did she grow up to be?
- **Educational experience** – She highlights how she overcame a personal setback in not going to her dream school, and how she used college to her advantage by furthering her passion for computers and problem solving. She also highlights her soft skills through extracurricular activities like the debate club. This shows the school that the applicant is able to bounce back from setbacks. So far so good, now we need to know about her professional life.
- **Professional experience** – The applicant then uses the resilience she learned in high school to adapt to a shifting job market, and to overcome culture shock in the United States. She doesn't oversell her passion for American culture here, instead showing us how she grew personally and what she learned.
- **Personal experience and professional goals** – Finally, she shows us how she once again used her resilience to overcome a horse-riding accident, even meeting her husband in the process! She uses this experience as a means to transition to her professional goals in Russia, and how she can add value to this market. Great, all we need is a conclusion.
- **Conclusion** – She emphasizes her ability to overcome obstacles, this essay's main theme.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

We want her at our school because she is honest and personable, and has a clear vision about who she is, and how she can and has overcome failure.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“I still remember the first time I drew the Russia’s new three colored national flag, on the old monitor with several lines of Pascal codes- the very first computer language I learned from my Dad. It felt like the computer opened a new world for me. From a young age, I knew technology was my wonderland.”* – Through a cute personal anecdote, she shows us her precocity and skill in tech, giving us insight to her career choice and boosting her profile in our eyes.
- *“Leading 10 people from different technical backgrounds, I prototyped a real fingerprint locker that is ready to operationalize.”* – Sure, it’s not a professional essay, but it doesn’t mean that professional achievements aren’t a part of your life. And her success here is getting out some of these impressive facts, while weaving them into the personal story of who she is.
- *“As an old Russian saying goes: ‘The road ahead is long and has no ending; yet high and low I will search with my will unbending,’ I am ready to open a new chapter at a business school.”* – A great ending to an essay is worth its weight in gold, as this lovely flourish proves.

36

SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Building Identity for UNC

First Version

**What personal qualities or life experiences distinguish you from other applicants?
How do these qualities or experiences equip you to contribute to Kenan-Flagler? (300 words maximum)**

Working in Barclays Securities, the largest investment bank in India enabled me to develop deep understanding of various financial services, such as fixed-income, asset management, and brokerage, through initiating cooperation among different departments in designing innovative financial products. I have taken a leading role in designing the first “equity swap” of our company and negotiated with both hedge fund clients and our R&D Department to design a unique strategy in which our company paid return of a strategic index developed by the R&D Department and the client paid a fixed interest rate plus a strategy consulting fee. I also combined the “equity swap” with

our margin trading business of brokerage department so that our clients were able to lever up returns. I have also built a close relationship with other major financial institutions like Bank of America and BNP Paribas through conferences and business interactions. I want to share my well-rounded knowledge of finance with students who plan to switch to finance industry and help them choose courses and navigate their career paths. I also aspire to utilize my domestic network to help organize business trips to India for the Global Immersion Electives Program.

Personally, I am a painter and I like painting landscapes. It is my favorite way to get close to a country. When I paint, I like to incorporate into the portrait my own understanding and imagination about the past and future of the place I'm painting, as I see the painting as a window into the world. Such painting habit has equipped me with an inquiry mind and the ability to uncover the good side of everyday life. While UNC has a solid reputation for sports games, I hope to add some artistic moments to Kenan-Flagler such as an appreciation session to discuss the self-portraits of several painting masters such as Manet and Kadinsky.

I am also an amateur actor and filmmaker. My love of drama and acting was solidified in college when I helped my best friend Amy overcome a difficult time in her life by writing a short film for her to star in. Since then, I have appreciated the healing power of film and I hope to bring it to Kenan-Flagler. I plan to establish a cinema club at Kenan-Flagler and write scripts based on real life experiences shared by future classmates. I hope the club will help us better cope with the intensity of b-school life and enhance our relationship as a family.

Notes from our Essay Specialist:

- So the first thing to do here is to get rid of the professional story. This here is a PERSONAL essay, and we want to get to know HER better - who she is, what her life is like, what she believes in.
- It would be great to focus on a life experience where she either LED or perhaps brought together a diverse group of people. Is there anything in her background that demonstrates this besides the drama story? Volunteer-type activities? We'll noodle on it and see if she can write a paragraph that describes that experience, what qualities it inspired in her, how it set her apart from her classmates, and how she will bring that quality to UNC.
- The painting and drama examples are great, but they are similar to one another. And this is a good example of when LESS = MORE. So let's limit ourselves to that painting story, and find another personal story which has some leadership in it.

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Intro** – Let’s cut this out. We’ll be talking about your professional life in your main essay and this is about PERSONAL qualities, so we want to focus on those. Instead, let’s start with what DRIVES you: What makes you excited about life when you wake up in the morning?
- **Painting** – Walk us through WHY you love painting. You’re scratching the surface here and we can go deeper: How does painting make you FEEL? Are you happiest while you’re painting, or after it’s finished? Why? Let’s really explore the feelings behind your art.
- **Film** – We’ve got some added space here since we’ll cut out the first part of this essay, so let’s detail this: What was the tough situation? How did the play help your friend get through this? How did that make YOU feel? Let’s add some more meat here.

Final Version

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This essay here is surprising AND effective. The candidate gets down and real about her artistic passions, and although it may not be a classical “grand achievement” in the MBA sense, it sounds honest and heartfelt, making this essay exceptionally memorable.

What personal qualities or life experiences distinguish you from other applicants? How do these qualities or experiences equip you to contribute to Kenan-Flagler? (300 words maximum)

Painting landscapes is my favorite way to get close to a place. I like to incorporate into the painting my own understanding and imagination about the experiences of the people living there, as I see landscapes as a window into a country’s soul. Painting enables me to stay creative, which is what distinguishes me from other candidates. Being creative is important in my professional life- it enables me to think outside the box to come up with innovative solutions to business problems. Moreover, painting also serves as a stress reliever and helps me find peace for self-reflection. While UNC has a solid reputation for sports games, I hope to add an artistic influence to Kenan-Flagler, such as an appreciation session on works of masters like Da Vinci and Manet to help students better cope with the intensity of b-school life.

My commitment to helping the less fortunate also makes me stand out. Last year, I co-founded a “livelihood-support charity program” to help victims of the 2013 Pakistani earthquake support themselves. Our first project was to help one of the victim groups who had the skills to make handbags design logos for the bag. I was able to utilize my resources at the India Artist Association to persuade one graphic designer and two illustrators to work with me on the logos. I then negotiated with a handbag wholesaler

with whom my employer had done business to secure market channels for the bags, which helped double the group's revenue. The joy I felt when I saw the group able to regain their livelihoods reinforced my determination to continue delivering more on social work. I aspire to bring this energy to Kenan-Flagler by taking a leading role in student community service club and helping students to better fit in the great Kenan-Flagler community.

Structural Breakdown:

- **Art** – The applicant starts by naming her passion for art, and then lists how it differentiates her through creativity and self-reflection. She doesn't shy away from the fact that this is unusual for the school, embracing it to answer the question.
- **Community work** – Here, the applicant highlights her volunteering. This isn't exceptional, but she does a great job at tying it to both art (the handbag design) and business (helping people regain their livelihood through business). Finally, she wraps things up by pointing out how she'll leverage this experience at UNC.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because she answers the question with two stories that together build a unique picture of a unique person – someone who is thoughtful, sensitive, and generous.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *"I like to incorporate into the painting my own understanding and imagination about the experiences of the people living there, as I see landscapes as a window into a country's soul."* – By showing the meaning of her art to us, the candidate shows us not just her creativity, but how this creativity is a window to deeper understanding.
- *"Last year, I co-founded a "livelihood-support charity program" to help victims of the 2013 Pakistani earthquake support themselves."* – She didn't just participate in community service, but LED. And she led using her unique abilities to help others in dire straits.

37

KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this inspiring and emotional essay, the candidate shows how she transforms a tragedy that obliged her to return to India into an opportunity that would define the rest of her career.

Tepper: Describe a defining moment in your life and explain how it has shaped you as a person.

(300 words)

During my junior year in college, my mother called from Mumbai. “Your auntie has terminal cancer and doesn’t have much time left.” I held my breath and my mind went blank. My auntie was my beloved caregiver and guided me to explore new things: singing, violin, new haircuts. I realized my career would be always be there, but she won’t—I have to move back to India. That moment changed my life forever. I rediscovered myself in India as an intermediary between two cultures.

After I arrived in Mumbai, my auntie was in intensive care. I travelled between campus and the hospital, juggling Hindi and English coursework. I felt exhausted and withdrew from my classes and friends. My world turned gray. But sitting by my auntie’s bedside watching her ferociously fight for her life, her strength amazed me. I can do this. I will fight to make the best out of Mumbai just as auntie is fighting for each breath she takes.

As I emerged from my grief, I became acutely aware of my position as the middleman between east and west. I mediated debates on topics from how career women are perceived to Indian economic policies. I co-founded and lead Mumbai Connect, a cross-cultural platform for organizing events like TEDx Mumbai. I discovered my passion for bridging the culture gap between the U.S. and India.

At work, I leveraged my understanding of both cultures to broker business conversations between my colleagues and foreign partners. As the youngest in my department and the only American in HSBC’s India headquarters, I was selected based on my international experience to travel to Egypt with board members to lobby for speedy approval of our transaction with the Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister.

My auntie loved giving me her adventurous stories. Her last gift to me was her love that brought me back to India, an adventure that made me into who I am today.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This story centers around an emotional moment, and the applicant does a great job of showing us how this affected her without overdoing it. Concretely,

she also ends this paragraph by hinting at how it affected her long-term: How was she a link between two cultures?

- **The Challenge** – The applicant highlights how difficult this was for her, showing us she can handle tough situations. She also highlights the lesson she learned from this experience, and how it made her realize her own strength. So how did she leverage this in the future?
- **The result** – Here, we see how she becomes an intermediary between east and west through a number of events, and how she reconnected with her culture. She also highlighted how she leveraged this newfound sense of self at work. Great, we're sold - now all she needs to do is wrap it up...
- **Conclusion** – ...with one quick sentence, summing up the connection between her personal growth and her aunt's passing.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

She went through a tough time, and instead of falling into despair, found the courage to do the right thing, and to make the most of things.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *"I realized my career would be always be there, but she won't—I have to move back to India. That moment changed my life forever."* - This candidate makes the "right choice," even if, at first, it doesn't seem to be right for her career.
- *"As I emerged from my grief, I became acutely aware of my position as the middleman between east and west. [...] I co-founded and lead Mumbai Connect, a cross-cultural platform for organizing events like TEDx Mumbai."* - By explicitly showing the RESULTS of her actions in relation to her return to India, this candidate is driving home the main point - that doing the right thing can become an opportunity, a point she drives home here:
- *"As the youngest in my department and the only American in HSBC's India headquarters, I was selected based on my international experience to travel to Egypt with board members to lobby for speedy approval of our transaction with the Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister."* - By being the YOUNGEST and the ONLY, she is making a really good case for being a very unique candidate.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: This candidate has done an amazing job in this very open-ended essay. First of all, he has come up with 25 things that are all exciting and different from one another that play up all of his good qualities. And secondly, he does it with such humor and in such a good mood, that you can't help but like him.

Duke: The Admissions Committee also wants to get to know you - beyond the professional and academic achievements listed in your resume and transcript. You can share with us important life experiences, your likes/dislikes, hobbies, achievements, fun facts, or anything that helps us understand what makes you who you are. Share with us your list of "25 Random Things" about YOU

1. When my mom asked me in high school what I would like to study at university, I answered without hesitation that it would be Finance. I clearly remember my thoughts at that moment: if I knew how Finance worked, I would be able to make a fortune quickly. ☺
2. I'm afraid of flying in airplanes but take more than 100 flights per year. I loved it as a child, but after flying in a 5-seat turboprop plane and seeing the ground through the windshield at 7000 feet, my attitude changed significantly.
3. At Boeing I developed a mathematical model to normalize spare parts consumption in production. The model saved the company around \$100 million and then was sold to other clients.
4. I left my small hometown to study at a top 3 Finance school in Russia located in St Petersburg. During first class of study, a Chinese guy sat near me. I asked him where he was from, expecting to hear the name of some Asian country in response (European parts of Russia are not multiculturally diverse). But his reply was the name of my hometown. That moment I realized how small the world is. It was one of the reasons that led to my desire to pursue an international career. Minh became one of my best friends.
5. I love Russian classic literature. My favorite book is "War & Peace" by Tolstoy. I have read it 4 times. This book made me a guy who enjoys the company of a book more than computer games.
6. I spent the summer of 2005 in Boston with a "work and travel" program. It was my first long-term trip outside Russia all by myself. I had to find living, job, and make friends with people from different cultures to prove myself that I'm independent and can live on my own. As a result now I'm proficient at mowing the lawn ☺. I look forward to sharing this expertise with Net Impact Club.

7. I'm the 354th Triathlete in Russia! Training for the Triathlon taught me to value every minute of my time and do only things that move me forward.
8. All my life I was a huge fan of the most popular game in the world – soccer. Until my cousin introduced me to the NFL. Now my girlfriend never asks what we are going to do on Sunday night, because she knows that this time we spend with the Vikings 😊.
9. I grew up in a large family with siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles nearby and love being surrounded by people.
10. I like Karaoke, but my friends beg me not to sing. Nevertheless, I still think I'm a good singer. You should hear my rendition of "Living on a Dream".
11. I volunteer at running events to give back all the support and help I received while racing. If I had known what a magnificent feeling I would experience while helping people to accomplish their running goals, I would have started many years ago.
12. In 2010 I called my father and suggested to invest in Russian fund market while share prices were very low. He transferred his savings to my broker account, and with some luck and patience, I have doubled the investments within 12 months. It was an amazing feeling to be able to take care of my father.
13. During the latest years of university I had to work full-time, as my mom was struggling with financial difficulties and needed my support. Thus, I was cutting some classes but was always ready for the exams. After getting an excellent mark on one exam, the professor took a look at my grades and told me: "Boris, I didn't know that you are a smart guy." It was the sweetest insult I have experienced.
14. My friends and I have organized a triathlon team called "2050 Mega Champions." Yup, we will win the Ironman World Championship in Hawaii in the age group of 60-64.
15. I like trekking, sleeping in a tent, hot tea from herbs collected nearby, and guitar songs around a campfire.
16. I swam across the Bosphorus from Asia to Europe.
17. When I was in middle school I had a few dreams: study Finance, work as a bartender (inspired by the film "Coyote Ugly"), and play in KVN, a popular Russian humor TV competition show where teams compete by giving funny answers to questions and preparing sketches. So when I went to University I

enrolled in Finance, started working as a bartender (and learned how make a show with the bottles), and joined the department KVN team, where we won University championship. My 15-year-old self would be proud.

18. In my first year at the University I was an active member of student council and was selected to lead the organization of sport events. It was my first taste of leadership and first realization of how hard it is. If one of the students dropped out, I was the one who had to shelf my plans to referee a game.
19. I always blink my eyes in photos. My friends hate me for this quality and have learned to take a few photos in a row to make a good shot.
20. I was rescued late at night in the Alps while practicing free ride skiing. I have never been so close to death as on that cold night when my weak, overweight body wasn't able to climb back up. It was scariest day of my life and led me to change my attitude to my health and put more value on my life. I realized that I want to give to the world and accomplish something good in my life. I want to be someone who makes the life of people better and about whom people speak with pleasant smile.
21. Working at mines with people from 24 different countries (US, Canada, South Africa, Australia, France, New Zealand, Indonesia, India, Bulgaria...) was the greatest multicultural experience for me. The biggest thing I learned was that to deliver the message you should be exceptionally clear. In different countries people use different structure for sentences and gestures, have different traditions, and even English words have different meanings.
22. My friends told me that I have infectious laughter, that they never see me in a bad mood, and that most of them have funny nicknames created by me. So don't be surprised to find Tiny (2 Meter Guy), Powder, Baldhead, Viking, and Slimzee among my friends.
23. I'm usually running or cycling with my cell phone to voice-record all interesting ideas that come to my mind. I wrote a large part of this list during sport.
24. My father taught me to love playing chess. We spent hundreds of hours playing in my childhood, and even now when I visit him in my hometown we play at least once. He always played without one or two figures to give me a fighting chance, until last year when I read a few books on the game and downloaded chess applications on my phone, allowing me to practice constantly. The next time I visited, the student surpassed the teacher. ☺
25. I was always interested in poker. When I had an offer from Bain I had one month before the start of work, so I spent my free time reading several books about poker and practiced playing online. I registered for a few free tournaments with

\$15-100 prize funds, and to my surprise, I won one tournament with 10K participants and took 10th place in another. I believe I could be a successful poker player because I enjoy the intellectual challenge of counting the probability of your stakes and being extremely disciplined.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he has done soooo many totally amazing things - from the Iron Man competition to literature, to skiing and chess, and inventing mathematical models, and the list goes on and on....

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"I like Karaoke, but my friends beg me not to sing."* - You can't get much more "good guy" than this...
- *"My friends told me that I have infectious laughter, that they never see me in a bad mood, and that most of them have funny nicknames created by me. So don't be surprised to find Tiny (2 Meter Guy), Powder, Baldhead, Viking, and Slimzee among my friends."* - Oh wait... yes you can.
- *"Working at mines with people from 24 different countries..."* - In half a phrase he gets more international experience out of his application than most do in all the essays combined.
- *"I swam across the Bosphorus from Asia to Europe."* - Waaaaait... he did WHAT? Wow...

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this courageous essay, the candidate questions the system of prestige and the expectations of all around her, not only to forge her own way forward, but to inspire others that they too can be honest with themselves in making their life and career choices.

Stanford: What matters most to you, and why? (750 word limit suggested)

What matters most to me is helping young people define their own success by following intrinsic passions rather than external expectations. I've struggled with this throughout my life - my teachers wanted the "perfect student", my peers expected me to scale the corporate ladder, and my parents demanded grandchildren. I've learned to

acknowledge outside expectations, but stay true to my heart. More importantly, I realized I share this struggle an entire generation.

My Dad's visiting professorship brought me from our hometown of Hyderabad, to Singapore and Montreal. When I returned to India in 10th grade however, getting into a top college was the only measure of success for students - and I was on the brink of failure. Struggling to adapt to the curriculum, the headmaster asked me to stay back a year. Ashamed that I'd let my parents down, I refused to give up. Pouring over mock tests, I finished 2 years' work in 10 months and scored top of my province in the College Entrance Exam. Upon receiving the acceptance letter that validated my "success", however, my sense of achievement was short-lived. That entire year, I felt reduced to a test score, a ranking posted in school hallways. I'd sneak out of study sessions to play cricket, but eventually gave up after repeated warnings from my teachers. I became the "perfect student" but I'd lost myself in the process.

This "herd mentality" continued in college when investment banking became the new benchmark for "top students". Peers and alumni reinforced this expectation and by junior year, I was set to join Bank of America...until my internship with McKinsey. I sat in a session where Daughter's Hope (a non-profit dedicated to helping teenage mothers) shared how McKinsey's recommendations helped save 2,500+ Indian girls every year. I was intrigued: I could see myself improving lives through nonprofit projects by doing what I enjoy - solving business problems. Consulting felt right, but a part of me clung to investment banking. Struggling, I consulted my mentor at McKinsey: "Be honest with yourself...it's your life." She was right; I had been so focused on being seen as "the best" that I forgot about what was right for me.

My graduating year, I realized that increasingly in India, finance-related careers were the only "real" options for students. In response, I launched a mentorship program with 20 peer mentors and 20 alumni highlighting a day-in-the-life for different sectors to 550+ freshmen. My most fulfilling experience was helping my mentee April switch from finance, her "default" choice, to Particle Engineering, her true passion. April was concerned a PhD meant an academia-only career and a huge financial burden. In response, I connected her with relevant professors, alumni and current students to address her concerns. Working with April, I saw how role-models and like-minded peers went a long way to clarifying misconceptions and inspiring courage.

As professionals, we also need to decide how we want to lead, rather than relying on what others expect of us. My second year at McKinsey, I was caught in a conflict between my project manager and the consultants. The consultants felt pestered and micro-managed, but their manager felt that no one had her back. "I juggle partners, clients and the team ...somehow someone always ends up disappointed!" Listening to her predicament, I saw she'd tried to be the "perfect manager" as I'd been a "perfect student". Instead of defining how she wanted to lead, she was pulled in all directions by expectations. Asked to simply collate recommendations to boost morale, I was convinced that this wouldn't address the problem's root-cause, and wanted to share my

honest observations with company partners. However, as the youngest member on the team, I was warned about going over my supervisor's heads. I hesitated briefly, but as issues escalated, I followed my instincts. The partners turned out to be very appreciative of my "bravery"; and with their guidance, I helped re-align client timelines, setting up new team norms and better team priorities to solve this issue.

As an Indian citizen, I've seen the perils of a worldview where we box ourselves into external expectations and punish non-conformity. Stifling passions and talent costs us too much, emotionally and in terms of misallocated resources, lower workplace productivity and a lack of innovation. Through providing access to mentors that I've once been blessed with, I hope to inspire more students to chart their own paths. This is the change that I vow to bring - and what matters most to me.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The writer kicks this one off by showing that she struggled with a problem - a bold start that humanizes her from the start. She then ends her intro by widening the scope and showing how this affects a generation - how will she help solve this?
- **Educational Background** – The applicant then continues with some personal details and illustrates how she overcame a difficult time in school, highlighting her work ethic. PLENTY of applicants tell stories along these lines... but then she surprises us by demonstrating how this didn't make her happy, and that she lost herself in the process. That's surprising! Now we're really curious about who this person is.
- **Professional Background** – She then continues to demonstrate critical thinking skills and individualism. We see how she discovered a way to combine her business credentials with her personal goals to help others. How will she help others do the same?
- **Early goals** – She expands on her own realizations by founding an organization helping others do the same - demonstrating initial success. Wow! This is great, now how will she scale up her impact?
- **Professional success** – We then get one last story highlighting how she uses her people skills and nonconformity to help solve professional conflicts. Great - now she just needs to wrap things up.
- **Conclusion** – She ends by highlighting the professional cost of misplaced talent and emphasizes her goal to help others maximize their potential.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because she was able to look around her and question the way things work. She questioned what people think about her career, about what is important and what is prestigious, and what is necessary, and makes her own choices. She shows us that she is aware of the bigger picture, and highlights her courage without being immodest about it. And the fact that she was able to help others find their own inner truth and pursue this as well makes her a candidate of great promise.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“Upon receiving the acceptance letter that validated my ‘success,’ however, my sense of achievement was short-lived. That entire year, I felt reduced to a test score, a ranking posted in school hallways.”* - Here the candidate takes a real risk by showing us in a specific manner how she questions her success.
- *“My graduating year, I realized that increasingly in India, finance-related careers were the only ‘real’ options for students. In response, I launched a mentorship program with 20 peer mentors and 20 alumni highlighting a day-in-the-life for different sectors to 550+ freshmen.”* - And not only was she able to solve this problem for herself, but she took action to LEAD a group and aid others who found themselves in a similar conundrum.
- *“As an Indian citizen, I’ve seen the perils of a worldview where we box ourselves into external expectations and punish non-conformity.”* - And the cherry on top is that she shows that she understands the perceptions of admissions committees about her and her compatriots, and is able to be self-critical about a vision of success which is limited to testing, and by doing so, shows how she is truly different, and courageous.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: What works great in this essay is how by showing himself to be a tinkerer, he builds a picture of himself as a talented, creative, risk-taking individual who shies away from no challenge. When he exposes his dream of leading one of the world’s most cutting edge manufacturing companies, we believe that he would be a great fit.

Haas: Please tell us about yourself and your background. Include information about your family, where you grew up, your interests, or any other people or experiences

that have influenced you. The goal of this essay is to get a sense of who you are, rather than what you have achieved professionally. (1,000 word maximum)

Poof! A puff of smoke signaled my failure. The plasma screen I had just taken apart was smoking. I noticed I had mis-wired a cable. In trying to improve the boot-up time of the TV, I'd caused a power surge and made multiple internal processors blow up. Searching eBay, I bought the same screen, and mixed and matched processors until I got the screen working again.

I am a tinkerer. My parents immigrated to the U.S. from Hong Kong, where both had studied computer science. My dad found a job as a professor teaching computer science at South Carolina State University, so I grew up in the suburbs of Charleston. Beginning in elementary school, my dad would bring home computers for me to tinker with. I programmed my first software program when I was 9; an application to boot up the computer from a floppy disk, which allowed me to select and run any of my games. Over the years, I taught myself different programming languages by digging through the books my dad brought home. By the time I was in high school, I was running several webpages.

In addition to computer programming, I would take apart everything clocks to lawnmowers, sometimes re-building them into new things; I made my first motorcycle out of a lawnmower engine and some spare pieces of metal from the scrap yard. Just last summer, I went back to Charleston to help my parents clean out their basement and found boxes of spare parts including lights for ATVs and fiber optic network cards. My parents would be upset when something new ended up in pieces, but they always encouraged my passion for learning how things work.

As a tinkerer, I love learning how to repair things, which came in handy when I bought my home two years ago. I renovated the garage by installing a new gravel floor, painting the walls, and adding custom built shelving; installed an underground sprinkler system, digging all the trenches with a ditch witch and even adding underground power cables for future landscape lighting; built an outdoor shed, learning to build a foundation, frame, roof trusses, and shingling; and replaced my galvanized steel plumbing with copper, learning to sweat copper joints. Additionally, I performed countless other repairs, such as installing a new dishwasher and using a snake to clear out drains, saving tons on having handymen come out. Even though some of these projects were tiring, I always enjoyed the challenge.

Having a home of my own has always been important to me. After my siblings went to college and while I was still in high school, my family moved ten times - once all the way back to Hong Kong for my dad's job. Moving while in high school was tough. I'd make new friends but never had enough time to really solidify a bond, and I always felt like an outcast. From these experiences, I felt I needed to have somewhere I belong, and for me that meant owning a home of my own.

In college, I began saving in hopes I would have enough for a down payment after graduating. I worked three jobs, at Intel, Glad strong, and the university, and in my

spare time I bought, repaired and sold used cars, earning up to \$4,000 per vehicle. Everything I earned went into the fund for my first down payment. After graduating, I found a job in Silicon Valley and moved there with just two suitcases, selling everything else I owned. I soon found that the Bay Area had the highest standard of living in the nation, and suddenly my savings for a house seemed paltry. While the amount of money I had saved was enough for Minnesota, it was far from enough for San Francisco. My dream was getting further and further out of my reach.

I was disappointed, but I knew I needed to start the savings process over again and get creative with my home search. I tinkered with my house criteria, finding small pockets in the market for me to exploit. The one that seemed most promising was areas with high elementary and middle school scores, low high school scores, and occupied by families with a higher tendency to stay. These home prices would be lower, but would have a higher chance of gaining value over time. I identified several areas that met my new criteria and scrupulously looked at several hundred homes. After several years, my stars finally aligned. The economy and interest rates were at their lowest points, and I found a house in the area I most wanted. It needed work but could still be comfortably lived in.

The price of the house was more than I could afford, but I made it work by selling my car and my motorcycle. For the first few months of home ownership, I spent two hours on the bus to and from work. I spent all my spare time fixing the house, unable to afford to go out with my friends. I sometimes questioned my decision to give away everything for this house, but its doubling in value has quelled my doubts.

Through my home buying experience, I learned that I can persevere through any number of obstacles, as long as I keep my goals in sight, and that tinkering with anything, such as my home criteria, can give me a different perspective to solving my problems. These two qualities make me a formidable force in achieving my goal of leading Tesla Motors, creating new research projects to increase affordability and gain government contracts, and entering new markets to expand Tesla's customers beyond the retail sector.

Structural Breakdown:

- **Intro/deep background** – The applicant shows us a scene from his teenage years, and tells us about how he grew up and what he was passionate about as a child. He goes into detail about how he'd tinker with electronics, going beyond the standard rhetoric: We REALLY believe that this kid was into finding out how stuff works. This sets the stage for his adulthood - how will this passion express itself?
- **Fixing up a home** – We see how this passion continues through adulthood when we see how he renovates his own home. There's a clear continuity

between the introduction and his current life. Beyond his passion for tinkering, however, what does this say about the applicant?

- **Buying a home** – He connects his desire to own a home to his childhood (which he'd previously mentioned). From there, he shows us the sacrifices he made in his goal of home ownership, including a major setback when he moved to California where home prices were much higher than the Midwest. How will he overcome this?
- **Problem solving** – We then see his methodical and analytical approach to finding the perfect property. This isn't a professional story, but it highlights skills that ARE applicable to business school. We also see that he's willing to make tough decisions and sacrifices to achieve his goals. Great, what did he learn from this?
- **Conclusion** – He ends the essay by highlighting his personal qualities and linking them to his professional goals.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he has the creative and entrepreneurial mindset necessary to lead a young startup, and because he has the real hands-on skills that are needed to succeed in his goals.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"Poof! A puff of smoke signaled my failure. The plasma screen I had just taken apart was smoking."* - We read this, and we are hooked. We don't know what's coming yet, but it piques our curiosity.
- *"I renovated the garage by installing a new gravel floor, painting the walls, and adding custom built shelving; installed an underground sprinkler system, digging all the trenches with a ditch witch and even adding underground power cables for future landscape lighting; built an outdoor shed, learning to build a foundation, frame, roof trusses, and shingling; and replaced my galvanized steel plumbing with copper, learning to sweat copper joints."* - This list of household repairs may seem insignificant and irrelevant to the business school application, but by giving a long and *detailed* list of specific improvements he is PROVING in a single sentence his capacities and fearlessness.

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SHOWCASE: FIRST TO FINAL

Creating a Full Picture for INSEAD

First Version

INSEAD: Give a candid description of yourself (who are you as a person), stressing the personal characteristics you feel to be your strengths and weaknesses and the main factors which have influenced your personal development, giving examples when necessary. (600 words)

I am a naturally curious person with a passion for innovation as well as a thoughtful leader with a keen community spirit. Due to my enthusiastic nature, at time I find myself taking on too many conflicting commitments, which can make me appear disorganised and inefficient.

Ever since I was small, I have had an insatiable appetite for understanding how things worked – clocks, televisions, computers, you name it, I have managed to dismantle it and (almost always) succeeded in putting it back together, typically with improved features installed. Over time this curiosity and inventive streak led me to focus on creating new ventures to solve peoples' problems.

One memorable summer I made a small fortune designing, printing and selling shortcut maps to frustrated tourists trying to escape my hometown (a popular seaside resort in Spain) on busy weekends. While ventures like these ultimately wound down when I went back to school, they instilled in me an endearing passion for seeking new ways to approach problems and innovate. They led me to realise that I wanted to study and work in an environment surrounded by people from all backgrounds, and where curiosity and innovation were rewarded skills.

Shortly after I started at La Universidad de Madrid, I was drawn into the diverse community of the student union, where 20,000 people perfected existing or developed new skills in a wide range of student-led activities. I met many people from all backgrounds who were united by a sporting, recreational or social interest, and discovered a talent for leading clubs, starting with the Swimming club where I was most active. By the start of my second year in college, I was chairing a committee with over 20 clubs and 4,000 members, helping students navigate the union rules to organise activities and overseeing a budget of several million Euros. Through this leadership experience, I understood how a diverse population thrives when they have

the right balance of ambition, individual empowerment and core support. My keen spirit for community involvement was well and truly kindled.

After graduating, I served four years as a Partido Popular Party Chairman, leading 250 activists on transformative community projects in the poorest parts of Madrid. Since moving to Greece, I have continued to invest time and money in local charities and non-profit organisations with an increasing focus on community involvement and social enterprise.

Given my focus on whatever activities I'm currently engaged in – be they personal or professional ones – in the heat of the moment, I have sometimes over-extended myself and experienced significant pressure trying to balance my various commitments. When recently negotiating a \$250m deal with public transport company YPL, I felt that an early ability to commit to the deal would distinguish us from the competition. Sensing this opportunity and being worried about the deal escaping from me, I committed the bank to a tight deadline, putting significant pressure on decision-makers and the resources of our small team. The tough timeline meant that I risked my reputation in front of my client by failing to deliver on time.

In these situations, I have typically relied on my resourcefulness and thoughtful leadership style – as exemplified above – to find solutions to problems and motivate people to work on these deals. This has been achieved through simply explaining my predicament to decision-makers, transferring my passion (and, hence, obtaining their flexibility) for the project and by demonstrating a willingness to roll up my sleeves and fill in for my colleagues to get us over the finish line.

I now want to magnify my influence in the local community and leverage my background as an innovative, thoughtful and enthusiastic finance executive to make a career switch to social enterprise financing – perhaps a social venture fund or Corporate Social Responsibility function within a large financial institution like YPL. In the long term, I want to start my own social enterprise fund focused on financing and helping grassroots community assistance organisations in emerging economies.

An MBA from INSEAD will help me achieve my vision by allowing me to: a) practice and crystallise my passion for entrepreneurship; b) learn the workings of small companies through an immersive experience with over 1,000 classmates who've done similarly amazing things all over the world; c) boost my marketing skills and operational knowledge of non-profits/start ups; and d) expand my network in social impact.

Notes from our Essay Specialist:

- [What we have here is not yet an essay, but an assembly of ideas. And right now our main mission is to take all of these disparate stories, and weave them together into a single cloth. We want these stories to build a picture of a](#)

candidate who will come alive in the flesh from this essay. And I think the best way to do that is to link these stories to his very reason for applying to INSEAD in the first place - i.e. his professional goals.

- At the same time we want to be careful to keep the essay personal and diverse, and retain the variety and excitement of this guy's writing.

Sample outline to guide the next draft:

- **Spark** – Right now we have a number of strengths (innovator, thoughtful leader, possessing a keen community spirit), which are supported by a number of examples, but there's no unifying theme to your qualities. This makes the essay feel disjointed. Let's find a central underlying focus to these strengths: something to group them under as a one-word representation of who you are.
- **Snapshot** – Now describe your summer of profitable innovation, your Imperial College London experience - but connecting this to the central theme from your introduction. The idea is that your innovative desire to fix and improve the world is linked to, say, your "community spirit."
- **Weaknesses** – Now we need to smoothly transition from strengths to weaknesses through an example. Something like "I had discovered an innovative way to X, but that overstrained our company's resources, making it difficult to live up to our commitments."
- **Conclusion** – Nice job here. Let's just add more detail: we want to branch out toward your goals here.

Final Version

Keep this in mind: This essay just hits ALL the high notes - the candidate not only comes across as a diverse leader who is "passionate about giving back to society," but he also seems fun, creative, and talented. More than enough to get ANY adcom on his side.

INSEAD: Give a candid description of yourself (who are you as a person), stressing the personal characteristics you feel to be your strengths and weaknesses and the main factors which have influenced your personal development, giving examples when necessary. (600 words)

Ever since I was young, I have had an insatiable appetite for understanding how things work. Clocks, televisions, computers, you name it, I have managed to dismantle it and (almost always) succeeded in putting it back together. Gradually I began to incorporate

improved features too, installing a remote switch for turning off my PC monitor whenever somebody opened my bedroom door. Since then, innovation has always been a strength of mine.

During my school years, I fed my passion for learning and innovation by creating new business ventures. One memorable summer, I designed and sold 'shortcut' roadmaps to frustrated tourists trying to escape the beach traffic in my hometown, a popular Spanish seaside resort. Using a crude fax copier, we churned out hundreds of maps, highlighting all of the shortcuts we knew and charging for each copy.

I carried this innovative spirit and passion for helping others with me to La Universidad de Madrid. Shortly after arriving at UDM, I discovered that few of our 20 clubs knew how the funding system worked and many were significantly overspending. I designed a new system that allowed clubs to plan their budgets effectively, factoring in any reimbursements and tax benefits they were entitled to, while also allowing them to record and claim expenses on a weekly basis. This streamlined system helped our 20,000 members get the most value out of their extra-curricular activities and spend less time preparing budgets and filing expenses. It was so successful that, at the start of my second year, I was elected as MDC Chairman, a position that led to several further Union leadership roles right up until I graduated.

While my strengths for leading innovative projects and challenging the norm have seen me elected to leadership positions, they have also seen me commit to tight deadlines in the heat of the moment - a weakness of mine. When recently negotiating a \$250m cargo finance transaction with a demanding client, I felt that an early ability to commit to the deal was key to distinguish us from our competitors. This deal was a great opportunity for my company, YPL, since the ships' charterer was a Brazilian oil major looking to do its first deal in Europe. While we landed the deal, agreeing to the tough deadline meant that I risked damaging YPL's reputation and embarrassing myself if we failed to deliver on time. Luckily, I was able to meet the deadline by rolling up my sleeves and working directly alongside my junior team. Ultimately, the deal was a major success for YPL in Brazil, allowing us to add a new client while showing our prowess in dealing with multi-billion dollar companies.

I'm now looking to put my strengths in financial analysis and innovation to use in social enterprise. The motivation behind this comes from an influential experience I had when I was 16. I was selected to receive a scholarship for students from low-income families to attend an elite private school. This remarkable academic environment led to me graduating with strong exam results and as a result, I became the first of my family to go to college. That experience of how one opportunity led to such an educational and personal development made an indelible mark on my view of the world. As such, I am passionate about giving back to society in a way that improves disadvantaged communities.

Structural breakdown:

- **Deep background** – This applicant introduces us to a childhood passion for learning how things work, providing examples of how he tinkered with electronics. He ends the paragraph by tying this passion to an overall value: innovation. So how does he innovate in his personal life?
- **Early business experience** – He then complements his passion for technology by showing us how he innovated as an entrepreneur, even as a teenager. So we've seen his tech skills and his business skills; how good is he with people?
- **Academic experience** – He follows this up by showing us how he streamlined funding for student clubs at his school, highlighting the results and how this led to further achievement in student government. OK, now we know this kid's a rock star, but he's got to show us some weaknesses to answer the prompt.
- **Weakness** – We see the applicant commit to an overly aggressive deadline, which is a genuine weakness. However we also see that he manages to turn the situation around by working hard (another strength!) Now all we need is to see some intangible qualities (non-business related) to seal the deal.
- **Conclusion** – He ends this essay by highlighting how his personal experience receiving a scholarship now pushes him to help other disadvantaged individuals access education.

Here's why we want this guy at our business school based on this essay:

Because he successfully translates his curiosity and appetite for knowledge into clear and precise business terms, and shows how he wants to use the most 'businessy' of skills, financial analysis, to benefit all.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"Ever since I was young, I have had an insatiable appetite for understanding how things work. Clocks, televisions, computers, you name it, I have managed to dismantle it and (almost always) succeeded in putting it back together."* – This may seem insignificant, but from the get-go he comes at us from a personal angle, giving us a slice of who he really is, and we like him.
- *"It was so successful that, at the start of my second year, I was elected as MDC Chairman, a position that led to several further Union leadership roles right up until I graduated."* – His innovative mind brings REAL results – results that allow him to carry his leadership on to the next stage.

- *"I'm now looking to put my strengths in financial analysis and innovation to use in social enterprise. The motivation behind this comes from an influential experience I had when I was 16."* - Often MBA applicants will write about their ideas to "make the world a better place." But sometimes, this comes across as a weak ploy to increase admissions chances at worst, or a half-baked pipe dream at best. But here, by giving us INSIGHT into his real reasons through a motivational, concrete story, we believe what he is telling us.

PART 5: OTHER

Part 5: Other

A different angle

You've hammered out your post-MBA goals, presented crackling arguments for why you're a great fit for their program, even expounded on your "special sauce" of leadership. But adcoms have a few more essay prompts up their sleeves.

"Tell us about your greatest accomplishment":

They may ask it directly, but as you'll see in this section, sometimes the prompts use subtler wording, but are essentially asking for the same info. The game plan: unsettle us with the challenge, relieve us with tangible results, and inspire us with the personal significance. We don't want a general overview of your day-to-day, but rather, a curveball, a time everything was going wrong (until you swept in), or when you were given a project that put you way out of your depth... that you managed to crush anyway. And then tell us why you're proud - It's impressive on its own, but it's not complete without an indication of how this connects to greatness in your future.

Failure (or "Challenge"):

This is not a trick question. Repeat: this is not a trick question! They really want to hear about a failure, because they want to know that all your ambitious and noble plans aren't going to fall to pieces the first time you hit a setback. So don't beat around the bush or imply that you've never really failed at all. However, it's also not a time to get gloomy like Eeyore. A failure story is a comeback story, simple as that. If, after failing, you didn't make amends, do better next time, learn an important lesson, change your attitude, or take the experience to heart... back to the drawing board. And remember, big belly flops often make for the MOST compelling failure stories.

Optional and Re-applicant:

Any kind of "special" essay is probably going to be read at the end of the application; the last thing you want to do is drag this sucker out. Keep it short and on target. It doesn't take long to explain "My recommendation comes from a former supervisor because I just switched jobs," so if you find yourself slipping in one last achievement, or a few words you couldn't fit into another essay... stop. Get in, get out - that's our motto.

When you have to explain away a blemish, the most successful essays will involve concrete proof that you've got what it takes, despite your slip-up. "I got a C in every math course ever but I've always loved math" won't cut it. Rather, "I got a C in every math course ever but a perfect score on the GMAT quant section and a promotion to Lead Accountant" will.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: She pulls off a tough exploit here – she writes a recommendation letter for herself that not only displays her best business qualities, but also her best human qualities, without sounding overly proud.

Write a professional letter of recommendation on behalf of yourself. Answer the following questions as if you were your most recent supervisor recommending yourself for admission to the MIT Sloan MBA Program: (750 words or fewer)

- **How long and in what capacity have you known the applicant?**
- **How does the applicant stand out from others in a similar capacity?**
- **Please give an example of the applicant’s impact on a person, group, or organization.**
- **Please give a representative example of how the applicant interacts with other people.**
- **Which of the applicant’s personal or professional characteristics would you change?**
- **Please tell us anything else you think we should know about this applicant.**

My name is Jessica Hernandez and I am a general manager at Ilumininvest Finance in Mexico City. I am writing on behalf of Penny Lopez who I have known for the past seven years and have been working with closely during the past 9 months.

From taking over all operations at our Costa Rican offices when I had to take a sudden leave of absence, to donating her time and sharing her knowledge to help organ donation organizations in Mexico, Penny has demonstrated passion and leadership. I’ve seen this personally over the past months during which we worked on the launch of two new business lines: a personal investment site and a sovereign fund administration unit.

Costa Rica’s financial markets are very competitive but we saw an opportunity in small investment accounts. Our goal was to create a webpage allowing people to leverage the low interests on their bank deposits by investing them into ready-made portfolios, maximizing their returns. We created our business model, began programming and were ready for launch when suddenly, disaster struck: due to a change in international banking laws, we were not able to open an account that allowed us to manage third party funds.

We had put the project on hold and were moving towards other possibilities when Penny came to Costa Rica with a solution to our banking problem. Analyzing

regulatory hurdles to find a win-win solution, Penny discovered that by making our webpage clients beneficiaries of investment trust funds, we would comply with all international laws. However, this new model required additional starting capital because we needed a trust fund license. With this in mind, Penny approached our principal investor for a meeting.

When our potential investor walked in the room, Penny greeted him and took the time to clearly describe, our new project, took him through the plans, and explained that we could begin our operations with 600,000 dollars. Walking him through the business model, she convinced him that his return on investment would come by year's end using a case study and explaining our potential in this fast growing market. Finally, he agreed to our plan: the project would launch by year's end and has already made significant impact in our firm's national recognition given its innovative approach.

In this way, Penny made a significant impact on our organization: this project went from dead in the water to ready to launch under her watch. No other employee proposed such radical ideas, and Penny stood apart from her peers through her refusal to take no for an answer, her ability to convince stakeholders of her ideas and her outside the box thinking. Whereas the rest of us had given up on this project, Penny methodically worked towards a solution

Penny loves a challenge: she enjoys developing new projects and reinventing outdated processes. However, she has high expectations of herself and others and believes that everyone should be as fast-paced and passionate as she is. Given this, she's occasionally frustrated by delays. Recently however, I've seen her take potential contingencies into account, modifying her timelines in order to compensate for variables outside of her control.

Penny has also been a leader outside of work. Since her father received a spleen transplant fourteen years ago, Penny has been actively involved in helping organ donor organizations. Notably, during her free time, she organizes meetings with the leaders of a children's heart transplant foundation in Mexico City: Fundación Lussos, one of the first and only organizations working in this area. She has helped them organize awareness campaigns and prepare presentations for the ministry of health, currently all transplants must be done internationally, this efforts, although slow, are working towards training and adapting hospitals to operate in Mexico. I've seen firsthand how she believes that organizations should not only work towards profitability and innovation, but also towards improving the lives of people.

For these reasons, I wholeheartedly endorse Penny's candidacy to MIT, but I'd also like to share a personal story. In May my son was diagnosed with malaria, and spent one full month in coma, meaning I had to suddenly leave the business for an extended time. With zero notice, Penny took over to handle ongoing issues, met with clients and bank representatives, took charge of the company's administrative duties and spoke to our

lawyers to find the best approach to my absence. This made it possible for me to take care of my son during this difficult time.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Like a true leader, this gal understands that her workforce is made up of people, and she has shown the consideration, attention and generosity to her workers that has allowed her to keep them happy and lead her business to success.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“From taking over all operations at our Costa Rican offices when I had to take a sudden leave of absence, to donating her time and sharing her knowledge to help organ donation organizations in Mexico, Penny has demonstrated passion and leadership.”* – From the get-go, this essay starts off with a combination of personal and professional qualities that will combine to make a really powerful recommendation.
- *“No other employee proposed such radical ideas, and Penny stood apart from her peers through her refusal to take no for an answer, her ability to convince stakeholders of her ideas and her outside the box thinking. Whereas the rest of us had given up on this project, Penny methodically worked towards a solution.”* – In showing how Penny is more daring, more determined and more convincing than her peers, the recommender makes her seem like an exceptional candidate. Which she is.
- *“I’ve seen firsthand how she believes that organizations should not only work towards profitability and innovation, but also towards improving the lives of people.”* – This quality of making people’s lives better is exactly what we are looking for when we are recruiting tomorrow’s leaders.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: Good Guy Businessman here. This candidate uses two great examples to illustrate his own personal belief: that a business is only as good as what it does. And he makes it hard to disagree.

Oxford: The business of business is business. Is this true? (500 words)

From my 5 years’ work experience in assessing and valuing businesses, I have witnessed that it is equally imperative for businesses to look beyond profit and returns, and view the people involved in that business as a priority. Profits are, and should

always be, important to a business as they provide opportunity for growth which is important to a business's continued existence and ability to compete with its peers. However, at its root, people are the essence of business as businesses are accountable to their shareholders, employees, customers and suppliers. A business's existence is compromised if these relationships are not nurtured.

During my work with Otangi, South Africa's sovereign fund, one of my portfolio companies was a South African leisure and tourism company that, on paper, had the tools to become a successful business. Yet this company floundered for years due to its inability to create a corporate culture that retained employees and faced resistance from the local community where it was trying to develop its hotels. For the former, the company should have created a more transparent environment, where employees were not over-worked or were rewarded in proportionate to work output. But the company maintained a conservative view on career advancement and thus lost bright employees. For the latter, the company found that some of its developments were deliberately slowed by local politicians who feared that the local community's resistance to the projects would diminish their harm their reputation. This could have been managed by early stakeholder management or corporate social responsibility initiatives to win the community's trust. Both of these factors affected the company's bottom line, and their common factor was that the company neglected its "people".

It is challenging to find the delicate balance between focusing on profit, giving shareholders sufficient returns, and investing in employees. One company that seems to have struck this balance is the US-based dialysis service provider Mañana Healthcare Partners, which is the second largest blood transfusion provider in the world and has a market capitalisation of US\$15bn. Its share price has grown at a compounded rate of 22% over the past 6 years, outperforming its competitors. Mañana invests in continuous learning for its employees, fosters a "family-like" atmosphere, actively leads corporate social responsibility projects, and during investor presentations, focuses on clinical quality indicators before financial indicators. The company's unique company culture has been the subject of business school case studies and Mañana credits its culture as its major differentiator from its competitors. A business can be more than a profit-generating institution: indeed, in Mañana's case, it is Mañana's ethical considerations and focus on people that has driven its success.

A business's success depends on people and profits, which are not mutually exclusive. This question calls into debate the ethics or purpose of a business itself (which I look forward to debating in the MBA's Responsible Leadership module). I believe in leading ethically, responsibly and intend to carry through these principles when I lead a company. A business's success and ability to generate profit is dependent on these factors.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro/thesis** – This essay has a really unique prompt, but it's also open-ended, in that it remains open to interpretation. In response, the applicant lays out a clear vision for how he views profits and people in business. So we've got the theory, what about the practice?
- **Negative Example** – The applicant gives a concrete example of how this applied to a real business and how a lack of focus on people can backfire and lead to problems. Basically: this is an example of what can go wrong, and we now want to see how this balance between people and profit can be done right.
- **Positive Example** – The applicant shows us how a different business focuses on its employees, and how this in turn pays off for the company. In other words, this focus isn't framed as charity or even social responsibility - it's good business (the business of business!). Now he just needs to take us home.
- **Conclusion** – The applicant sums up his points once more, but he also ties it into an Oxford module, a nice extra point that keeps this conclusion from sounding redundant.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because while championing business, this candidate still comes across as thoughtful, ethical and visionary.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"From my 5 years' work experience in assessing and valuing businesses..."* – By starting off the essay sounding like an expert and providing two great examples to back this up, he builds our faith in him.
- *"However, at its root, people are the essence of business..."* – What a great guy!
- *"A business's success depends on people and profits, which are not mutually exclusive."* – There's no single right way to answer this question, but one thing that really helps this essay out is that he fearlessly writes what he believes, explicitly and efficiently.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: What the candidate does right in writing up a recommendation about himself is to use a plethora of great concrete EXAMPLES to prove time and again that he is cream of the crop. Rather than just empty praise, we have a mock recommendation that highlights all of the candidate's best stories.

Write a professional letter of recommendation on behalf of yourself. Answer the following questions as if you were your most recent supervisor recommending yourself for admission to the MIT Sloan MBA Program: (750 words or fewer)

My name is Elijah Johnson. I have known Lucas since July 2011 when I transferred to the Checkout and Cart team as the senior QA manager. Lucas directly reports to me. He manages the India QA team of 7 engineers and indirectly manages the US QA team of 4 engineers. Compared to his peers, Lucas stands out as effectively coordinating a multifunctional/large team.

Contributing to 52% of Amazon's revenue, the online retail business depends on its technique department to construct and maintain the foundation of online shopping experience, including 15 shopping websites and apps in 20 countries. Our team is responsible for the Shopping Cart and Checkout features serving worldwide users. Amazon ensures fast response to customer feedbacks, such as the need to avoid the creation of unintentional duplicate orders. Consequently, the teams in Amazon have to adapt their schedule to respond to customer feedbacks. Our team also interacts with many other teams, such as the team of wish list page. It is not easy to be the team interface of QA, but Lucas nailed the work with his coordinating skills.

Lucas drove continuous process improvements to enable the team to handle fast changing priorities. He reduced the planning time by 50% for new QA requests by defining the rules for how the new requests should be prioritized and dispatched. He also reduced the potential cost of complex problems by conducting a close trace of project status. When one of our QA engineers had been stuck for two days clarifying the conflicting requirements of the Kindle India launch, Lucas organized a conference call where the confusion was removed in thirty minutes. I heard quite a few positive feedbacks from his counterpart project managers and development managers on his effective coordination.

Besides, Lucas is very good at recruiting. While other hiring managers spend six months on average to fill one QA engineer opening, Lucas kept his recruiting window short, filling the position in three months by defining accurate standards for screening. His new hires were rated high performers in the bi-annual reviews.

In late 2013, management decided to unify the shopping experience of Amazon users for desktop and mobile devices in twelve months. It was estimated that this would triple the workload of our team, which meant adding at least 4 more staff. However, Lucas came up with an alternative approach to save these extra headcounts. He reused the test automation tools to minimize the manual test effort for newly-added platforms. He implemented his plan on time and tripled the team's output in less than two years without extra head count added, saving Amazon \$3m.

When Lucas was pushing to increase test automation, one of the team members was hostile to him, because she believed that Lucas was giving another team member all the credit. Lucas invited the team member for a coffee, where he started a light-hearted conversation, uncovered the misunderstanding, and won himself trust. This was not the only tough situation he faced, but Lucas could always approach these situations in a mature way.

Lucas is an effective problem resolver, but because of this, he does not communicate his reasoning to his team. When he drove the automation project he assigned all the related tasks to one engineer who is best at automation in our team. Historically, such tasks were assigned equally to each team member to ensure everybody has the chance to practice their programming skills. Lucas's decision therefore caused some concerns in the team about not participating in high-credit tasks, although he did this to ensure all team members could focus on the tasks they were best at. If he communicated his reasoning and got supports before he put his plan into practice, he would avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

I surprisingly discovered that Lucas is a fan of a TV program called Star Sing, a reality show similar to American Idol. It was amazing to know his reasons: He shared with me his findings about the differentiation strategies of the competitors. From this, I saw a kid who is pursuing stars, as well as a strategist. I see his hunger for excellence, which will help him uncover and successfully implement new business opportunities.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This “mock” letter of recommendation letter follows a very set format, so, much as in a real LOR, the “recommender” states his relationship to the applicant here. A good start – now we want to see some achievements.
- **QA statement and proof** – From there, the “recommender” makes a statement about the candidate's abilities and backs it up with proof, including factual data and figures. He makes a strong statement by breaking down his role and how he excels at it, emphasizing his soft skills including recruitment – an area not touched on by most candidates.
- **Automation** – The “recommender” then follows up this first story with one demonstrating the applicant's ability to conceptualize overall projects and deal

with conflict. Much as in an actual letter of recommendation, this paints a strong overall picture of the candidate. But what about weaknesses?

- **Issues** – The letter then demonstrates an area where the candidate could improve, and steps he could take to resolve these skills gaps. OK, we believe in this guy - now we just need to wrap things up.
- **Conclusion** – Finally, this letter ends on a personal (and unique) note - introducing him as a person, and not just an employee.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

We see him time and again leading in a way that shows us that he understands what the school is looking for - not just reams of praise, but concrete proof that he can lead a team to contribute to the business success of his employer.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“He reduced the planning time by 50% for new QA requests by defining the rules for how the new requests should be prioritized and dispatched.”* - This is the first concrete achievement, which showcases his technical abilities
- *“While other hiring managers spend six months on average to fill one QA engineer opening, Lucas kept his recruiting window short, filling the position in three months by defining accurate standards for screening. His new hires were rated high performers in the bi-annual reviews.”* - This is the second, showcasing his recruiting abilities.
- *“He implemented his plan on time and tripled the team's output in less than two years without extra head count added, saving Amazon \$3m.”* - And this is the third, showcasing his leadership.

45

KEEP THIS IN MIND: Besides delivering two really strong team stories where the candidate was working on big projects, he does a beautiful thing here - he connects both stories, so that not only does he give us a team failure and success, but he SHOWS us how he grew from one story to the next, and how his team overcame their tough challenges to become an even better team, leading him to... *ta da*... getting promoted!

IESE: Discuss two experiences you have had working in a team. In one example, you should discuss the challenges faced which led you to not meet your objectives. The other experience should describe what you believe to have been a successful team

endeavor. In both instances, you should focus on your specific role in addressing the problems and/or solutions encountered and what you learned from the experience. (500 words)

In 2012, Oceanstar awarded a US\$120 million drilling rig construction project to a new shipyard, PBK, in Vietnam. This was our first time working with PBK and my first with the new shipyard site team. I prepared the budget, including the estimated value of contract changes and site expenses. I based my budget on past projects of similar size in India. Unfortunately, I did not sufficiently consider Vietnamese shipyard practices and PBK's inexperience.

New to this type of project, PBK asked for lots of contract changes. My duty was to keep the project within budget, so I negotiated hard to keep the price of each change low. The bureaucratic and hierarchical corporate structure in Vietnam prevents swift decision-making, and I was liaising with the Oceanstar rig manager, an extra link to the client, for each change. The lengthy negotiations delayed decisions and affected construction progress. The project was delayed by three months, costing \$15 million in lost revenue.

I realized that a project in a new market must be evaluated with relevant cultural differences factored in. If difficulties arise, prompt decisions are key in complex projects. I lost valuable time negotiating to save a few hundred thousand dollars while I lost millions in revenue. With these lessons, I successfully delivered all subsequent PBK projects, worth \$350 million, on time and within budget. This also prepared me for the busiest and most successful year of my life.

During 2014, our small "Contracts and Commercial" team of ten members completed 20 projects, worth \$3.9 billion – more than double the completions at sector leader Sealine LTD. We also started 10 new projects, worth \$4.5 billion, compared with Sealine's three starts. Handling so many projects at once was unprecedented for Oceanstar and my team was at the helm from start to finish.

To counter my team's heavy workload, I helped develop members' skills through training. I trained my document controller in procurement so that she could help me with the additional purchasing and processing. I trained my contracts advisor in industry and shipyard practices, and she contributed more in drafting technical letters. Through cross-training, I optimized the strengths of team members, and supported them in their weaknesses.

The great number of projects required me to multitask more as well. I was not only managing project expenses and changes with shipyards, but also arranging prompt payments with our treasury team. It did not end there. Huge amounts of paperwork were required to register our vessels in different countries (Costa Rica, Jamaica, Finland or South Korea). I needed to be very effective in communicating decisions to the stakeholders: shipyards, site teams, clients, operations and treasury. My PBK experience helped in this regard.

Managing these projects within constraints, with such a small team, is my most significant achievement. Oceanstar promoted me to divisional manager for my efforts, and our team received praise from leadership. This rapid expansion took us ahead of our competitors and Oceanstar became the second largest drilling company after Sealine Ltd.

Structural breakdown:

Story 1 - *This essay asks for two separate stories.*

- **Intro** – This applicant uses the intro to sum up as much information as possible in as concise a manner as he can: we get the costs, his role, what he did and a hint at where he failed – we’re hooked from the start and want to know what went wrong.
- **The challenge** – The applicant continues his concise breakdown of the situation, including how it might frustrate him and what the consequences were. He doesn’t sugarcoat or cover up the situation, which works to his advantage – now we’re wondering what he learned from this situation.
- **The lesson** – To end the first part of this essay, the applicant sums up what he could have done better, how he applied the lessons he learned in the future, and connects this story to his second topic, and the latter half of this essay.

Story 2

- **Intro/challenge** – Much as in his first story, the applicant breaks down the situation, using concrete numbers and concisely showing us the issue (an overabundance of new projects). We’ve seen how he learned from failure, so now we want to see him succeed.
- **Response** – In response to this challenge, the applicant trains and delegates to his team members, improving his multitasking. This highlights his management skills and leadership, and he subtly connects this success to the previous story’s failure. Now he just needs to wrap it up by showing us the results of his successful management.
- **The Result** – He ties this up in a bow by showing how he grew professionally thanks to this project and how the company benefited.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

He is on a high-stress team working on huge global deals worth tremendous sums of money. And while on this team, he is able to show us how he worked as an individual,

how he led within the team AND how he followed. And this global team experience brought both his team and company success.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“This was our first time working with PBK and my first with the new shipyard site team.”* - A simple description, yes, but he does two really nice things here: 1. He writes about both his team’s novice status and about his own status within the team. 2. He allows us to see the source of the challenges he will present later in the essay.
- *“With these lessons, I successfully delivered all subsequent PBK projects, worth \$350 million, on time and within budget. This also prepared me for the busiest and most successful year of my life.”* - This amazingly smooth transition from failure to “the most successful year of his life” is what makes this essay SOAR.
- *“Oceanstar promoted me to divisional manager for my efforts, and our team received praise from leadership.”* - Here, by showing great results for his team, and even better ones for himself, he is showing himself to be not ONLY a team player, but also, a team leader.

46

KEEP THIS IN MIND: This story of resilience, which begins with the candidate as a high school student and ends with his success in landing a fantastic job at KPMG, is exactly the type of story that this prompt is looking for.

Kellogg: Resilience. Perseverance. Grit. Call it what you will... Challenges can build character. Describe a challenging experience you've had. How were you tested? What did you learn? (450 words)

Leaving middle school in India as an exchange student, I expected to learn English and have fun, but from the moment I landed, I was in for a shock: after excelling at a pre-enrollment test, I was placed into 12th grade despite just completing 9th grade in India, skipping two full years. Suddenly, I was in class with kids a foot taller and barely spoke the language, but I soon fell in love with American culture and had the time of my life. Overcoming academic and cultural challenges, I felt never so confident and inspired.

Several month later however, I faced a dilemma: going back to India meant dropping back down 2 grades, but what would I do in America? I wrestled with my situation: if I already passed senior classes here, why not major in business at a US college right

now? But, pursuing college half a world away at 17 meant even more academic pressure, and I'd also be giving up an opportunity to attend a top Indian University down the road, a dream among my peers. After contemplating my options, I went with the harder but more rewarding road in America.

Emailing 15 top universities, I was constantly declined for not having a high school diploma as I'd only completed 1 year of American high school. I was extremely disappointed, but didn't give up: I just needed a chance to strategically present myself. I visited several Idaho universities, selling my story and persuading each school that I could succeed. When asked what made me want to pursue a degree so soon, I responded that I had overcome language barriers, skipped 2 grades, adapted to western culture, and lived independently half a world away from home - all in less than 12 months. I was as prepared as everyone else, both academically and personally.

Against all odds, I was offered admission with scholarships to The University of Boise and Fresno Jesuit University. Excited for my college experience in the US, I seized this opportunity and matriculated in accounting, a decision that eventually paid off when I graduated from Fresno Jesuit University with a double major in less than three and a half years, receiving a pre-graduation offer from KPMG, the only Big Four accounting firm in Idaho.

Those tough decisions as a teenager shaped me into a confident individual and a risk-taker, providing perseverance and character, which then inspired me to tackle challenging engagements at KPMG. Thanks to these experiences, when tough issues come up, I'm not afraid to be the first to attack them. Now, blessed with these gifts, I am ready to take on my next challenge: an MBA education, before leading my family business.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant doesn't have much breathing room in this essay, so he concisely breaks down the basics of his trip to America including: how he felt about it initially, the culture shock he experienced, and how he came to love America. Great - this shows us how ahead of the curve he is! But if that's just the intro, what's the real story?
- **The decision** – The applicant identifies a major challenge, and shows us his thought process leading to his decision, including the pros and cons. It also proves he's not afraid of taking the road less traveled. OK, now what kind of challenge will he face attempting his task?
- **The challenge** – The applicant shows us his disappointment after facing rejection, but also how he didn't give up and found a way to sell his story, proving his perseverance. So what happened?

- **Success** – He gets in! He then shows us how he triumphed academically and got a GREAT job to boot. Now all he needs to do is reflect on this accomplishment.
- **Conclusion** – The applicant ends by showing us how this period of his life shaped him professionally and personally.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because this cat really did take the “road less travelled,” and, with a maturity and resilience that is astounding for his age, succeeding in doing it.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“Several month later however, I faced a dilemma: going back to India meant dropping back down 2 grades, but what would I do in America? I wrestled with my situation: if I already passed senior classes here, why not major in business at a US college right now?”* – By presenting us his thoughts at the time, the candidate allows us to access his inner dilemma - the decision he would make was never a sure thing.
- *“Emailing 15 top universities, I was constantly declined for not having a high school diploma as I'd only completed 1 year of American high school. I was extremely disappointed, but didn't give up: I just needed a chance to strategically present myself. I visited several Idaho universities, selling my story and persuading each school that I could succeed.”* – And even against all odds and bureaucratic regulations, this candidate still believed in his improbable goal enough to push himself into college two years early. This is one tough dude.
- *“Excited for my college experience in the US, I seized this opportunity and matriculated in accounting, a decision that eventually paid off when I graduated from Fresno Jesuit University with a double major in less than three and a half years, receiving a pre-graduation offer from KPMG, the only Big Four accounting firm in Idaho.”* – And BAM! The killing blow delivered at the end of the essay just drives his success home.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: In this moving story of self-discovery and perseverance, the candidate shows how he never gave up, despite FOUR failures at reaching the school of his dreams. His ability to succeed through sheer determination is what makes this essay SING.

Kellogg: Resilience. Perseverance. Grit. Call it what you will.... Challenges can build character. Describe a challenging experience you've had. How were you tested? What did you learn? (450 words)

I walked downstairs and saw the envelope sitting on the empty counter. My heart sank. I already knew the contents - it was a small envelope, and I had received two others just like it before. For the third time, Georgetown had rejected me.

I had always envisioned Georgetown as my path to bigger things. Growing up in West Virginia, it seemed that people did not stray far from their roots. All 35 of my relatives studied, worked and lived within ten miles of me - the one cousin who enrolled at West Virginia State became an instant celebrity, living a monumental four hours away before returning home. Family vacations to Texas marked the furthest I had been from home by high school, and I felt obligated to transcend the sense of resignation that permeated my surroundings. The status quo was not enough for me; I was uncomfortable being comfortable. I felt Georgetown would deliver on everything I sought: rigorous academics, engaged community, D-I athletics, moral teachings, and international reach.

The rejections during my high school senior, college freshman and college sophomore years tested my resolve. The notion that I would never walk the Georgetown campus as a student was inconceivable, yet that certainty was incessantly juxtaposed with failure. My friends could not understand why I wore Hoyas shirts every week, why I hung each rejection letter on my wall, and why I continued to push for something that seemed out of reach. They conveyed a palpable sense of "why are you doing this to yourself," and I constantly had to balance living in the present with keeping my dream alive.

The journey of reapplying led to self-discovery. Connecting with the admissions office after the second and third rejections, I discovered that I did not have the adequate Calculus I & II pre-requisites for an Economics major. While Brown University accepted my high school AP Calculus credits, Georgetown would not; thus, I retook credits that I already had, ignoring my academic advisor's guidance and loading my credit hours to the max. It paid off. I was admitted on my fourth attempt for my junior year.

I've learned to deal with failure, seeing it not as absolute, but rather the impetus and catalyst for success. I am not the guy that Georgetown rejected three times - I am the guy that attended Georgetown, founded a student organization, led the bowling team, graduated with honors, and secured a job in management consulting. This mentality is now embedded within my being and has allowed me to succeed. It will continue to serve me well as I progress professionally.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro and a challenge** – The applicant kicks this story off with a failure, showing us that he’s faced rejection three times and still bounced back, directly answering the prompt. This leads directly into his rural background and WHY attending this school was so important to him: It was his path out of a difficult environment. By the end of the second paragraph, we already feel like we know him, and we’re wondering what he’ll do next to overcome this setback.
- **How he was tested** – The third paragraph addresses how this applicant was tested - he’s convinced he’ll attend his dream school, but his previous failures weigh on his mind. We also see how external factors including his friends’ opinions affect him, and how he remains focused and motivated despite the odds. Things seem grim, and now our curiosity is truly piqued: how will he succeed?
- **What he learned** – By now, we KNOW this kid has the heart to attend his dream school, so the reasons for his rejection must be technical. We find out that he needs extra credits and we’ve established he’ll do anything to get in - even ignoring an academic advisor. Thanks to this essay’s set up, this move comes off as understandable instead of reckless, particularly when he succeeds and gets admitted to Georgetown.
- **The takeaway** – He ends this essay by telling us that the ultimate takeaway is that he won’t be defined by his failures, but instead by his successes. Then, as a bonus, he lists all the cool things he did while at his dream school, proving he’ll be an active contributor while at Kellogg.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he never gave up. Even after failing not one, not two, not three, but four times. He believed in something and followed this belief to the end, despite all obstacles in his way.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“I walked downstairs and saw the envelope sitting on the empty counter. My heart sank. I already knew the contents - it was a small envelope, and I had received two others just like it before. For the third time, Georgetown had rejected me.”* - In this gripping start, we can’t help but identify with his plight. We just want him to get in.
- *“The journey of reapplying led to self-discovery. Connecting with the admissions office after the second and third rejections, I discovered that I did not have the adequate Calculus I & II pre-requisites for an Economics major.”* - And his perseverance was more than JUST blind will. Here we see how his perseverance

led him to understand better each time exactly what was needed, and for him to answer those needs.

- *“I am not the guy that Georgetown rejected three times – I am the guy that attended Georgetown, founded a student organization, led the bowling team, graduated with honors, and secured a job in management consulting.” – What’s great here is that he doesn’t just end with his getting in, but with his ultimate CONTRIBUTIONS to the school. What he is proud about is not just being a member of some school, but he shows how his pride in belonging brought him to be an ACTIVE contributor to the institution.*

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: Both the failure and accomplishment stories here are in some ways quite “normal.” What makes this essay really work is that she shows how she continuously takes on leadership responsibilities, and is assigned more and more important tasks, despite her being the youngest. Every business school loves a shooting star.

INSEAD: Describe the achievement of which you are most proud and explain why. In addition, describe a situation where you failed. How did these experiences impact your relationships with others? Comment on what you learned. (400 words max.)

“The initial layout of workshops and warehouses in our Chengdu plant are finally settled.” After this call with new plant manager, I took a relieved breath. As the youngest finance controller in Michelin, my proudest accomplishment is to help the company establish its first branch in western China. I engaged from the initial business analysis over customer needs, and project evaluation to continuous operation optimization. I love the feeling of holding on the steering wheel of the company and making strategic decisions such as forming potential joint ventures with US leading brand Ford, tripling our sales in three years.

Through establishing Chengdu branch, I started considering an entity’s long-term development beyond financial data. Proper training to retain key employees, strategic concession on ROI to gain clients and smooth relationship with government all affect a company’s future success. I also won the respect from coworkers through providing training courses in finance and English after the branch was established. On my way to office, they would say “morning, teacher”. I felt so proud when I saw the English drama show performed during annual dinner, when I know I bring a new chance of learning to their lives.

At Chengdu, I also encountered my biggest failure. When I looked at the inventory report, my heart sunk: our inventory provision had doubled! When I first noticed body

sealing (BDS) BU's resale stock increase from \$2M to \$2.8M, I explained to GM that BDS was expanding into new business in Chongqing. Three months later, I discovered \$500K of imported parts from Argentina were totally unusable because of failure to meet Chrysler's leakage tests. I failed to notice the signs in stock balance and to communicate timely with logistic and quality departments.

Through this experience, I learned a senior manager should be prepared for market changes to make quick decisions and save costs. To figure out the effects of clients demand, quality issues and even the political environment, I enlisted the customer service teams help to keep me abreast of trend changes.

Despite the mishap in stock control, my boss was so pleased with my work, he gave me greater responsibility to report to French SVP and attend key meetings on the company's strategic alliances in Northeastern China with Audi. Through these experiences, I'm confident to handle the strategic alliance and bring a positive synergy to the automotive industry.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – The applicant introduces this story with a quote, which does a good job of throwing us right in the middle of the action. From there, the applicant then describes her job, what it entails and how she's succeeded in this role. This is impressive from the start, and we want to know more.
- **Success** – Here we see the nuts of bolts of what this applicant does, how she engages with employees and how she thinks in broader terms than your average employee: We get the sense that she's MBA ready. Now we want to see how she handles failure.
- **Failure** – This is a nice concise failure: direct, quantifiable and it's easy for someone outside her field to see what she did wrong. What did she learn from this experience?
- **The lesson and conclusion** – This is a nice concise summary of what she did to avoid her mistake in the future and how she bounced back to achieve more.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because she is the youngest and most successful in what she does. AND she knows how to learn from her experiences. No more need be said.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how she does this:

- *“As the youngest finance controller in Michelin, my proudest accomplishment is to help the company establish its first branch in western China.”* – This is the sort

of thing every adcom wants to read – great achievements, while being very young.

- *“I also won the respect from coworkers through providing training courses in finance and English after the branch was established. On my way to office, they would say ‘morning, teacher.’”* – And here she establishes herself as a natural mentor, a great type of leader, and perfect for business school.
- *“Despite the mishap in stock control, my boss was so pleased with my work, he gave me greater responsibility to report to French SVP and attend key meetings on the company’s strategic alliances in North eastern China with Audi.”* – It sure doesn’t hurt none that at the end of her failure she is getting more important responsibilities, because the rest of her work is so great.

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: By going out of his way to show us how much he has learned from his superiors and peers, the candidate shows he is modest and a team player, and one who, when the time comes to step up and take the lead, is ready to do so.

Please use the space below to highlight any additional information that you would like the Admissions Committee to know about your candidacy. (400 words)

My summer internships became defining experiences: the six months spent as a strategy analyst at clean-technology start-up Sem Aviation molded my business and leadership philosophies. Sem’s vision was bold, to manufacture a ‘green’ plane with an unbelievably low \$1.5M price-tag. A price achievable by reinventing the aviation industry’s sales model: selling through direct orders instead of a costly, inefficient dealership network. Through Sem I learned to critically scan industries and value chains for opportunities to drastically change models.

More importantly, my Sem experience inspired me to lead people. My supervisors, freshly graduated MBAs Joshua McCormick and Rashad Haroldson, showed me you can’t fake real leadership. Leadership boils down to caring. If you spend time with your team, trust, grow, and protect them – they reciprocate with the same commitment. That’s how you build great teams. Josh and Rashad spent hours teaching me business and strategy, assigned me meaningful projects, and entrusted me with surprisingly significant responsibility. For example, at a meeting to evaluate a proposal recommending our energy choice be natural gas, Shell partner and ex-Oracle CEO Geoffrey Lipwig asked a question about legislation, research I conducted. Rashad deferred to me: providing a 5-second answer to Geoffrey, who was pondering a substantial decision, was my first adrenaline-filled professional moment. All these

experiences – including drafting sections of a \$351M loan application and building a NPV model for an \$80M deal – culminated in me falling in love with business and giving my all on projects.

Last summer, I relished supervising the corporate development interns at Enginuity Services, a chance to care as Rashad and Josh had. I taught weekly classes on business basics such as DCF valuations and market sizing – not only to increase their productivity but also to stir their excitement about business. I also took time to develop personal connections by learning about their interests, family, and aspirations. I gave them opportunities for meaningful work, having them write and present their own business proposal to the corporate development head. The interns delivered such an outstanding proposal of a complex 3-company ‘roll-up’ acquisition that my boss showed the CEO. Their last page filled me with pride: Dedicated to our fearless leader, Barry Smith.

This is why I lead. At the-end-of-the-day, if I create strong relationships and teams – helping people to uncover their passion for business and ability to think big, I know I created value.

Structural breakdown:

- **Intro** – This applicant is extremely direct and to the point, breaking things down in 3 steps: his most defining experience, what the company was doing and how that inspired him. It’s a great start – now let’s see how he grew from this starting point
- **Professional experience** – From this direct starting point, the writer then turns personal, mentioning real people, emphasizing how they took the time to teach him leadership principles, and finally showing scenarios where he put those principles into action. This is GREAT stuff considering he was an intern, and he gives us crucial scenarios with both people skills AND hard skills, including figures to back up his points. Now we’re wondering what kind of leadership he’s displayed later in his career.
- **Lessons into action** – The applicant shows us how he took what he learned from his mentors to help others in a new role, and breaks down why leadership is important to him. We’re sold on this guy.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he shows us the process of advancement, from learning from his mentors to how he becomes one himself, much appreciated by his peers and subordinates.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *“More importantly, my Sem experience inspired me to lead people. My supervisors, freshly graduated MBAs Joshua McCormick and Rashad Haroldson, showed me you can’t fake real leadership. Leadership boils down to caring.”* – He praises those who taught him to lead, while identifying the most important and human aspects of doing so.
- *“All these experiences - including drafting sections of a \$351M loan application and building a NPV model for an \$80M deal - culminated in me falling in love with business and giving my all on projects.”* – And dropping a few impressive achievements along the way can never hurt 😊
- *“The interns delivered such an outstanding proposal of a complex 3-company ‘roll-up’ acquisition that my boss showed the CEO. Their last page filled me with pride: Dedicated to our fearless leader, Barry Smith.”* – And the leadership cycle comes full circle. From him being the respectful trainee, to being respected trainer. Well done!

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KEEP THIS IN MIND: Optional essays are always tough, because they are often about ‘coming clean’ to the adcom about your weaknesses, never an easy thing to do. But here, the candidate hits the perfect tone between giving reasons and showing regret without either making excuses or trying to exploit his story. And that’s why this works so well.

Please use the space below to highlight any additional information that you would like the Admissions Committee to know about your candidacy. (400 words)

I graduated college with a GPA of 4.14 out of 7. I know that everyone faces challenges in their lives, but unfortunately I was not adequately prepared to face the challenges thrust my way. First, my eldest sister passed away, succumbing to an addiction that had plagued her 20's. Secondly, I was diagnosed with severe chronic polyglandular autoimmune syndrome, an autoimmune disorder that had significant implications for my health. This resulted in hospitalization for extended periods throughout the academic semester for symptomatic treatment. During this time, my energies were focused on health management at the detriment of academic performance. In hindsight, I should have taken a break from my studies, but at the time I was simply too eager to complete my qualifications.

It is my deep regret that I was not able to achieve my potential during this time. I have sought to make up for this failure through the completion of my masters degree. My

return to University was initially challenging as I lacked some of the prerequisite knowledge required for the course. This did not prove a hindrance as I was diligent in my studies and eager to succeed. My efforts resulted in excellent performance in my postgraduate work, where I graduated with distinction, third in my class of 53, and achieved first place in two subjects.

This appetite for excellence continued into my career. At McKinsey I have become one of the top performing associates, earning the "Insight of the Year" award in 2013 which is awarded to the person who makes the most impactful insight at McKinsey Australia/New Zealand. Fortunately in recent years treatments have developed so that I can manage my condition and sustain high performance. This experience has made me incredibly grateful for the opportunities I have received, and has instilled in me a passion for improving the lives of others who are not as fortunate.

Structural Breakdown:

- **The issue** – The key here is the tone: the applicant soberly breaks down the difficult circumstances he faced during his undergraduate years WITHOUT making excuses. It's very matter-of-fact and includes a brief reflection on what he should have done instead. So how did he bounce back?
- **The turnaround** – Here, we see the applicant subsequently succeeding and demonstrating strong academic competence. This assuages any doubts regarding his abilities. We're left wondering: Did he succeed professionally?
- **Professional life and assurance** – The applicant demonstrates professional success and assures us his health is under control and won't be an issue in the future.

Here's why we want this applicant at our business school based on this essay:

Because he shows wisdom about having underperformed in school and finishes off the essay with a flourish of success.

And here are some SPECIFIC examples in the essay of how he does this:

- *"In hindsight, I should have taken a break from my studies, but at the time I was simply too eager to complete my qualifications."* – Very importantly, he takes the blame upon himself. Just as importantly, he doesn't dwell on it.
- *"It is my deep regret that I was not able to achieve my potential during this time. I have sought to make up for this failure through the completion of my masters degree."* – Beyond simply "regretting" his poor grades, he shows here that he has proven himself to be capable of getting good ones. Combined with his owning up to his errors, this makes for a far more effective optional essay.

- *“At McKinsey I have become one of the top performing associates, earning the “Insight of the Year” award in 2013 which is awarded to the person who makes the most impactful insight at McKinsey Australia/New Zealand.”* - The candidate does a great job here of weaving into this narrative a seemingly unrelated achievement, so that even though this essay is about him owning up to his weaknesses, we are left with a feeling of having read an essay from a very strong candidate.

Afterword

Oh hey – Admissionado here, at your service. Over the past decade or so, we’ve guided clients through more than 25,000 applications to elite schools like HBS, Wharton, INSEAD, and LBS. We’ve seen a LOT of b-school essays.

As you saw in this collection, we highlighted a wide range of different subjects, applicant backgrounds, writing approaches, and fluency levels. Not only for variety’s sake, but so you can see that many different stories and career paths can earn admits to top schools—there is no b-school mold to fit into.

Our revision process is hard, but rewarding (this is what our clients tell us, anyway). And while the introspective journey can be fun and exploratory simply as an exercise, we also like it because it works, and leads to successful outcomes. Deep introspection is step one. Once we uncover the gold in an applicant’s background, the next (most difficult step) is making it clear. Even professional writers at the height of their career struggle with clarity. Just be patient. You’ll get there.

Our process is bloody. We shred early drafts in the interest of probing for more impactful story points, or missed opportunities. We ask tough questions to expose the incomprehensibility of jargon-rich text. We’ve included a sample here of a typical v1 “edit” so you can see just how we challenge our clients to dig deep and deliver better, sharper, more persuasive pitches:

What is your most significant professional accomplishment? (200-300 word maximum)

In my first year as Program Manager at Amazon, I undertook a security project that involved renewing all expiring certificates in AWS [okay, let’s pause and get some context. First: What is AWS?? Let’s get a sense for how BIG this is, does it service ALL of Amazon’s users? A certain %? And then, what is a certificate? Is it for certain apps/games?]. The stakes were high and deadlines were tight. There were more than 200 certificates across services owned by different teams [within Amazon? With 3rd party vendors?] and failure to renew any of those certificates could have resulted in a widespread platform outage [sounds scary! What does this mean? Let’s really get a sense for the scale here—does it mean people can’t buy stuff online, and get mad? Does it mean x number of companies/vendors that build apps through AWS jump ship for the competitor? Let’s really see some NUMBERS, to get the reader nervous about how you’re gonna pull this off]. Given AWS was relatively new [let’s get a number here—months? Weeks? Days?] at the time, nobody on the team had prior experience that I could rely on. However, none of these reasons make this my most significant professional achievement. I stepped up to take over this project from my team mate, who died in a car accident a few days after being assigned the project. [wow, hold the

phone. This sounds really intense, and VERY noble of you to volunteer. We really want to see this info sooner though, this curveball is pretty jarring. So let's get the personal motivation, and the stakes, so "In my first year, I stepped up to take on a friend's project..."] It was a crushing moment for our team and more so for my manager and I, since the three of us, aside from being colleagues, were good friends. With less than 2 weeks to the deadline, I wanted to see my teammate's last project through. My manager initially hesitated handing the project over to me; he didn't want my lack of experience to become the reason for the failure of the project as that would have raised serious concerns against my capabilities and his credibility. [okay, so let's flesh this out. You were reaching pretty high with this project, so let's just paint a little contrast, like "I was used to doing xx kinds of projects, and this was yy." Or "This project was usually done by someone with yy more years of experience..." we don't need to go into how it would look bad if you failed, but rather, we just need to see this was an ambitious undertaking!] I knew I was capable. [okay, so here's where we want to see that you've got a strategy to get him on board—did you know that you needed to show you understood the scale/etc. of the project? Demonstrate your commitment? Let's see the gears turning in your head.] I spent the next two days piecing together the work that had already been done, getting up to speed [how big was the team?], and documenting an action plan for the project. My manager reviewed the plan and decided that he would give me a chance. I coordinated across teams [how many teams? Cross-functional?] and took guidance from my manager whenever I hit a brick wall. Amidst it all, I made sure that I didn't let any of my own work suffer. Through hands-on execution and cross-team collaboration [alright, let's dig into this. We want to see how CHALLENGING this was, but as it stands, it sounds like a walk in the park once you got approval! So just how demanding was this, what new skills/areas of expertise did you need to hit the ground running on?], I was able to renew all certificates in time thus preventing a global outage. My contributions to this project were recognized in the subsequent annual review and I was also awarded a second promotion in consecutive reviews. [nice! Let's also round this out by discussing how it changed you as a leader—were you more prepared to take risks? Did you adopt xyz new strategies, as a result of this experience?]

Really excellent story choice here. We've got a great skeleton of a story, but our main mission is going to be grabbing some details to explain these technical terms. You say the stakes are high, but for the folks not in this world, we have no idea what a 'platform outage' would lead to (it sounds bad, but let's realllly drive that point home!) Our other mission is to show the points where you overcame obstacles. For instance, your manager's initial hesitation: We want to see your thought process for how you were going to win his approval—let's see the gears turning in your head!

Here's an outline for ya:

INTRO—GETTING THE PROJECT: Let's get right to the meat here, by explaining you took on this project after your colleague's crash. The fact we don't see this until a little way through really throws the reader, so we want to get it all upfront, and then talk a bit

more about the stakes—a platform outage means lost revenue? A dip in customer satisfaction? what IS AWS? (50-75 words)

INITIAL OBSTACLE, GETTING APPROVAL: Let's show that first of all, you WANTED to do this project, but needed to earn your stripes. Let's show that your strategy was to pull together an action plan, to show you had what it takes. (50-75 words)

GETTING IT DONE: The key to making this really fly off the page as your MOST impressive accomplishment is to talk about what you HADN'T done before that you were doing for the first time. For instance, had you never managed cross-functional teams? Had you never managed a project with this many end-users? Never had such a tight deadline? Let's see what was NEW, and why it was so tough ("I hadn't worked with IT AND Customer Service, and it was difficult in xyz ways, and I solved this issue through blablabla") (50-75 words)

SUCCESS!: Finishing on time, and some awesome recognition and promotions makes for a solid conclusion, sir! We just also want to see your 'takeaways'—what did you learn here? (50-75 words)

To all you applicants... we know you're going to rock that b-school application. And in case you need any help along the way (school guides, essay analysis, editing help or just someone to chat with), feel free to check out our website at **www.admissionado.com**.

Rock on, folks.

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