

BIPOC Students Write About Pain, White Students Write About Passion: Is it True?

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received  
any unauthorized aid on this thesis

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## **ABSTRACT**

In many high schools across the United States, students grapple with the challenge of selecting the perfect topic for their college essays. Often, it takes only one sentence to understand the direction of a college essay. This study explores the nuanced history of affirmative action from President John F. Kennedy's 1961 Executive Order to recent Supreme Court decisions, analyzing its intersection with race and class status. Through qualitative interviews, this study focuses specifically on BIPOC students, delving into whether they feel compelled to center their college essays around traumatic stories and assesses the potential influence of the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action on their choice of essay topics. Simultaneously, it delves into college essay dynamics, highlighting a strategic shift where students emphasize personal growth over resilience. College counselors potentially influence trauma-related topics, while narratives of failure or community service demonstrate more independent choices.

“In my six years of life, I understood happiness, misery, and homelessness, all in *one* instant.” Often it takes just one sentence to understand the direction of a college essay. This painful line from my personal essay encapsulates the profound impact of adversity on many Blacks, Indigenous, and People of Colors’ (BIPOC) experiences – and in some cases white lower-income people – echoing the practically forced narratives woven into the discourse of college admissions.

Recently, two notable cases, one against Harvard University, a private institution, and one against the University of North Carolina (UNC) a public institution, emerge as the latest chapters in the affirmative action narrative. *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard* (2018) and *SSFA v. UNC* (2018) alleged discriminatory admissions practices disadvantaging Asian American applicants (AAAED: 2024). As a result, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of not allowing race to be part of the college admissions process. Simultaneously, a broader challenge questions the constitutional validity of considering race in admissions at all. These legal clashes exemplify some of the enduring complexities inherent in affirmative action in education today. This paper aims to understand this supreme court decision through the context of high school students writing their college essays.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *Historical Development of Affirmative Action*

The journey of affirmative action in education unfolded through a series of significant milestones written in the history of America. Commencing in 1961 with President John F. Kennedy's groundbreaking Executive Order 10925, which directed federal contractors to ensure equal treatment irrespective of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, the seeds of affirmative action were sown (AAAED 2024). The Civil Rights Act of 1964, a legislative

landmark, not only barred employment discrimination but also gave rise to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which symbolized a commitment to rectify historical injustices (AAAED 2024).

The following year, an expansion of affirmative action occurred in 1965 under President Lyndon B. Johnson's Executive Order 11246, which forced government contractors to take affirmative action and apply it to expand job opportunities to minorities (AAAED 2024). Two years later, affirmative action was extended to women (AAAED 2024). This action solidified its commitment to addressing historical disparities for all underrepresented persons. However, the context shifted when affirmative action encountered its first major challenge in higher education with the case *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). The Supreme Court ruled against racial quotas which led to the declaration that race be considered only as one of many factors in admissions. This shed light on a nuanced era for diversity efforts, from originally having employment be the only part of affirmative action to now include education and considering both race and gender.

The legal cases continued with *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003) and *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), where the Supreme Court upheld the University of Michigan Law School's affirmative action policy for its educational benefits but rejected a quota-like undergraduate admissions approach (AAAED 2024). The challenges persisted in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2013), which underlined the importance of individualized review and the tailoring of affirmative action programs (AAAED 2024). The transformation of affirmative action, intertwined with legal developments and societal shifts, has shaped the context within which BIPOC students navigate the college essay application process, particularly, their college essay choices.

## *Theories of Race and Identity*

Considering the affirmative action decision in 2023 (*SFFA v Harvard v UNC*: June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023), college admissions' expectation for BIPOC students to present narratives of overcoming adversity, as alluded to in an interview with the Assistant Vice President and Dean of Admissions of Colorado College, Karen Kristof, aligns with the concept of abstract liberal frame, as outlined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014). The Supreme Court (*SFFA v Harvard v UNC*: June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023) has suggested that equal opportunity exists. However, this "equal opportunity" may force individuals to still write and focus their BIPOC narratives around trauma-turned-triumph stories. Kristof states, "BIPOC students tend to write about pain." She continues to say, "the essays of pain can really tug at your heart...my advice for those who are writing about pain, I want to see your strength by the end [of the essay]." Kristof's positionality on the topic of writing the college essay supports the claim of practically forcing individuals, typically BIPOC students, to focus their college essays on trauma-turned-triumph.

Bonilla-Silva (2014) coins in his book, "Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America," six key points about the nature of contemporary racism. Of the six, I will focus on two: abstract liberalism and naturalization. Bonilla-Silva (2014:74) suggests that "whites use these frames [frames of color-blind racism] in combination rather than in pure form." For this reason, that is why I have chosen to talk about two. Moreover, rather than adhering to overt and explicit expressions of racial bias, individuals' "whites" may adopt a combination of seemingly neutral or subtle frames that collectively contribute to maintaining racial inequalities. These frames could include ideas such as denying the existence of systemic racism, emphasizing individual meritocracy, or asserting that race is no longer relevant in contemporary society.

Abstract liberalism involves the application of liberal principles, such as equal opportunity, in a way that justifies racial inequalities. Bonilla-Silva asserts that by framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear “reasonable” and even “moral,” while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2014:76). This insight emphasizes the strategic use of liberal language to focus on individual situations and to undermine systemic issues. Hence, he helps demonstrate the subtleties of racial discourse and the ways in which liberal language can be wielded to uphold existing power dynamics without addressing the root causes of systemic racism. Colorblind racism commonly uses abstract liberalism on issues that “range from affirmative action to interracial friendships/marriages, and more” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:78).

The pressure on BIPOC students to frame their experiences within a narrative of personal triumph can inadvertently perpetuate abstract liberal principles. This expectation may divert attention from the systemic barriers and inequalities that persist, which leads to reinforcing a colorblind perspective that downplays the social and structural factors that influences educational opportunities. Abstract liberalism, within the context of college admissions, may contribute to a narrative that individualizes BIPOC students' experiences. This misses the systemic racism that shapes their educational journeys.

In addition to abstract liberalism, Bonilla-Silva also coined the idea of naturalization. Naturalization involves attributing racial disparities to inherent or natural factors rather than acknowledging the role of systemic racism. In his words, “The word ‘natural’ or the phrase ‘that’s the way it is’ is often interjected to normalize events or actions that could otherwise be interpreted as racially motivated...or racist” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:85). In and out of the context of college admissions, this concept aligns with the tendency to view personal trauma experienced



by BIPOC students as a natural consequence of their racial or cultural identity rather than recognizing it as a result of societal inequalities. This mindset of “that’s the way it is” not only diminishes the urgency to address systemic [race] issues but also maintains the color-blind perspective. In doing so, it confirms the false notion that racial disparities in educational outcomes are inherent characteristics of individuals rather than consequences of deeply embedded structural inequalities.

In an interview, Emi F. Nietfeld discusses a result of this color-blind-racism: the pervasive pressure for students to frame their adversities as individual triumph stories for Ivy League admissions. In her memoir “Acceptance (2022),” Nietfeld discloses a narrative expectation, termed the “gospel of grit,” where students facing systemic challenges feel compelled to present themselves as having already conquered deeply ingrained issues (Barry, Cadenhead, et. al. 2022). This aligns with the wider discourse on what has been called the resilience narrative in university admissions, where students, especially those encountering “mental health struggles, financial hardships, or discrimination, may feel pressured to craft an inauthentic triumphant story arc” (Barry, Cadenhead, et. al. 2022). In the context of the Supreme Court decision to abolish affirmative action, this narrative pressure gains heightened significance, because systemic inequalities are made to persist in college admissions, through influencing how BIPOC students choose to portray their lived experiences.

Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of the impression management offers a lens through which one can understand the pressures faced by BIPOC students when constructing their college essays. This theory suggests that individuals strategically present specific aspects of their identity to influence how they are perceived by others. Goffman (1959:258) writes:

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception, we have formed of ourselves - the role we are striving to live up to - this mask is our truer self, the self we

would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality.

In the context of college admissions, BIPOC students may feel compelled to emphasize their "pain story" as a strategic identity presentation. As Goffman highlights, the societal expectation to conform to a narrative of overcoming adversity aligns with the strategic management of impressions. This pressure may arise from a desire to conform to societal expectations and appeal to the implicit biases within the admissions process.

Moreover, Goffman's theory remains highly relevant today, as BIPOC students navigate the complexities of constructing identities which are shaped by historical injustices and ongoing debates on affirmative action. The recent Supreme Court decision (2023) on affirmative action adds an additional layer, by influencing and even limiting the topic choices for BIPOC students. As race ceases to be a checkbox on college applications, the focus on personal narratives becomes heightened and narrowed. BIPOC students may feel compelled to present their pain stories to demonstrate resilience and appeal to the values and expectations embedded in the admissions process. This exemplifies the essence of Goffman's theory in contemporary educational settings.

### ***Race-Conscious Admissions***

Race-conscious admissions is imperative to addressing systemic disadvantages experienced by BIPOC people. This intersects with the broader goal of fostering educational benefits through a racially diverse student body. Legal precedents, notably in the *Grutter* and *Fisher* (2023) cases, emphasized the significance of race-conscious policies when race-neutral alternatives (e.g. increasing dollar of scholarship, giving preference to low-income students, removal of college entrance exams, and more) may prove insufficient. Scholar, Julie Park (2015:15), asserts that the “‘diversity defense,’ a central argument in justifying race-conscious

admissions, is intricately linked to the acknowledgment of historic discrimination.” This defense highlights the positive outcomes associated with engaging with racial diversity in college, including critical thinking, leadership, teamwork, reduction in bias, and overall satisfaction.

Park (2015) further emphasizes the significance of racial diversity in generating positive college outcomes. When considering the experiences of BIPOC students within the framework of race-conscious admissions, the flexibility to consider race alongside other relevant attributes, such as class, becomes crucial when evaluating the racial diversity of an incoming college cohort. While there are institutions such as the University of Georgia and the University of Washington (Park 2015), who have demonstrated success in recruiting BIPOC students through race-neutral preferences, the ongoing need for race-conscious policies emerges when broader diversity goals are not met through race-neutral means. This perspective on race-conscious admissions is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of BIPOC students, emphasizing the importance of crafting college essays that reflect the nuances of their diverse backgrounds and could possibly contribute to the holistic objectives of inclusive admissions practices.

### ***The Importance of the College Essay***

#### *What is the College Essay and its Purpose?*

According to the Harvard Business Review (Allen 2023), the college essay serves as a vital component of the application process, especially in an era where many colleges are going test optional. This essay is positioned as the space where applicants can transition from fixating on numerical metrics such as grades and GPA, to focusing on their character. Due to this shift, the goal is that admission officers gain a better insight on who the student is, what drives them, and why they stand out (Allen 2023). The purpose is to showcase what value an applicant might

bring to the college community and how they can enrich the campus environment making their institution well-rounded. Well-rounded students to colleges often mean seeking a mix of talents and qualities to enrich their campus community, these students contribute to a vibrant and diverse student body. The mention of "pain" in this context suggests that sharing personal challenges or adversities in a college essay can contribute to showcasing a well-rounded individual. While the primary focus of the essay is on character, motivations, and unique qualities, discussing personal struggles or overcoming difficulties can add depth and authenticity to the narrative of the student. Admissions officers may value applicants who not only excel academically but also demonstrate resilience, perseverance, and the ability to navigate challenges.

In the context of the historical outcome(s) of affirmative action, the college essay becomes a medium through which BIPOC students navigate the expectations of admissions boards, often geared towards sharing a "pain story". This insight emphasizes the need for authenticity, which supposedly encourages students to be true to themselves rather than conforming to a standardized storyline. It showcases the importance of the essay in reflecting an applicant's "uniqueness, energy, resilience, leadership, and passion" (Allen 2023). However, the explicit suggestion, to have students "think about challenges [they] have faced and how [they] handled them," transcribes differently to BIPOC students than their white counterparts.

The CommonApp essay's length, which is capped at 650 words, is a constraint that highlights the need for clarity and conciseness. As BIPOC students grapple with the expectation to share their adversities, the essay becomes a platform to convey narratives that rise above mere storytelling, it is a short story of undeveloped trauma formulated for admissions officers. It is an *opportunity* for students to reveal their *true selves*, using vulnerability and honesty to

demonstrate “self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and introspection” (Allen 2023). This aligns with the call for creativity in storytelling, urging applicants to engage the reader's senses and emotions.

### *How Do “Pain Stories” Affect BIPOC Students?*

As the college essay stands as a crucial component to the future education for BIPOC students, it also provides students the opportunity to convey their personal narratives. However, for BIPOC students, the process of crafting their college essay often involves navigating a delicate balance between sharing their adversities, or "pain stories," and conforming to the expectations set by, in general, predominantly white admission boards. In Tina Yong's *TedTalk* from the University of British Columbia (Yong 2022), she asserts one major point, “Black [BIPOC] students share their pain, while white students share their passion”. The act of disclosing personal experiences to anonymous admissions officers introduces a vulnerable dynamic, given the substantial influence these individuals hold over academic futures. The expectation to weave a “trauma-turned-triumph” narrative further complicates matters (Yong 2022). It creates a formulaic storyline where adversity is portrayed as a catalyst for personal growth. This pressure may lead applicants, especially BIPOC students, to conform to a standardized narrative, while at the same time, through a more psychological lens, hint at the suppression of how BIPOC students express their emotions and experiences, in pursuit of furthering their education.

However, Yong's (2022) insights emphasize the paradoxical nature of this process for BIPOC students. While choosing to delve into painful and traumatic topics for their essays, these students often find that the task does not serve as a therapeutic means to process their trauma. Instead, it compels them to relive and recount traumatic experiences, all the while actively

suppressing any negative emotions to fit the narrative of trauma-turned-triumph. This dichotomy highlights the challenges faced by BIPOC students in reconciling their pain-driven experiences with the expectations imposed by the college admission process.

Furthermore, this phenomenon can be analyzed through sociological concepts such as race and socio-economic status. The expectations placed on BIPOC students to articulate their pain stories for admissions officers align with societal narratives that often cast them as perpetual victims or individuals who must overcome exceptional challenges to be deemed successful. The college essay, in turn, reflects the inherent characteristics of broader social trends, wherein systemic biases and prevailing expectations influence the stories told by marginalized groups. Acknowledging and dissecting these sociological implications is crucial for fostering a more equitable and empathetic college admission process that recognizes the diverse and authentic experiences of all applicants.

As race ceases to be a checkbox on college applications following the 2023 Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, I aim to answer two crucial questions: Do BIPOC students feel pressured to write their college essay about a story of personal pain? And how does the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action now influence the topic of choice for BIPOC students when writing their college essays?

## **METHODS**

This study will look at the college essay topics chosen by BIPOC students at Sandfield High School. Sandfield High School is categorized by the state of Colorado as a lower-income institution, where approximately 84 percent of the students have free and reduced lunch. Within the context of this research, I focus on two identifying factors: race and socio-economic status. Participants included juniors and seniors (ages 16 to 18). This approach recognizes that juniors

are actively contemplating their essay topics for college applications, while seniors have already undergone the process, particularly in the post-Supreme Court decision era prohibiting the consideration of race in the college application process. A cohort of nine participants, aged between 16 and 18, was found through purposive sampling, contacted through collaboration with Educating Children of Color, an organization with established community ties at the school. See Appendix A for listing for participants.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) conducted a comprehensive review of research materials, including interview guides (see Appendix B) and consent forms, acknowledging the involvement of minors in the study. All interviews were conducted within Sandfield High School classrooms to ensure a familiar and conducive environment for participants. All interviews were transcribed using Otter.Ai.

The purpose behind conducting these interviews stems from a desire to gain an understanding of whether certain BIPOC students perceive a compulsion to incorporate narratives of trauma into their college application essays. In doing so, I sought to examine the potential influence of the Supreme Court case on affirmative action in shaping the choices made by students regarding the themes of their essays. By delving into these aspects, the intention is to illuminate the multifaceted dynamic at play in the college application process for BIPOC students, shedding light on the intersectionality of personal experiences through their college essays. Through this inquiry, the research aims to contribute insights that might contribute to ongoing discussions surrounding equity, representation, and the lived experiences of BIPOC students seeking college admission.

## **FINDINGS**

### *Exhibiting Growth in College Essays*

In this study, students uniformly depicted a trajectory of growth in their essays or at least wanted to present that way to college admissions. The students may have learned from writing workshops, co-taught by their Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher and college counselor, that growth is important to establish in their college essays. However, college admissions officers are looking for resilience, whereas students seek to exhibit growth in the college essay. This recurrent theme highlights a strategic choice by students to showcase personal development, which suggests a deliberate effort to communicate a different way of showing resilience through the lens of growth. This emphasis on growth not only serves as a testament to individual resilience but also challenges the notion that narratives of adversity must be anchored in trauma or explicitly tied to racial identity. In essence, I found that the interviews suggest that the students had a premature understanding of the college application process as they were confused on how to answer questions related to the topic of admissions. Nonetheless, through their essays they illustrated that resilience could manifest through a narrative of continual growth whether if they chose to write about race, culture, and/or identity related to trauma (RCI) or failure and/or community involvement.

### *Awareness of Supreme Court Case (SFFA v Harvard v UNC)*

When exploring the students' collective awareness of the Supreme Court case from June 29th, 2023, involving SFFA suing Harvard (2018) and UNC (2018), another commonality emerged in their responses. The students were not aware of the case and its implications on affirmative action policies in college admissions. When questioned about whether, given this newfound knowledge, they would reconsider their chosen college essay topics, a noteworthy



pattern surfaced. Among the BIPOC students who were interviewed, five out of eight students affirmed their commitment to their original essay choices. Taking a closer look at the Black students, a notably three out of four expressed a firm decision to retain their initial topics. Additionally, most BIPOC students in this study disclosed they were not first-generation students. Despite not being first-generation students, a paradoxical trend emerged with the majority expressing opposition to affirmative action. This contrasts with the fact that seven out of eight had family members who pursued higher education under affirmative action. These students hope to obtain an acceptance from college admissions based on merit, community, and accomplishments. Denzel, who identifies as black, intends on writing their college essay about their “interests” stating, “I don’t think it’ll [Supreme Court case: *SFFA v. Harvard v. UNC* decision] do anything to my essay... I don’t really need the race thing; I have a bunch of achievements and other things that can go against it [race].” To this point, Denzel identifies a pattern among the students who agree with the decision of the Supreme Court case (2023) on the matter of race not being considered in college admissions. This incongruity points towards a potential knowledge gap and suggests a need for more comprehensive education on affirmative action and its implications. This knowledge gap indicates that the students are still developing their view of the world. This raises concerns about expecting young individuals to provide meaningful insights on complex topics, particularly in the context of trauma related RCI essay topics.

#### *PAIN v. PASSION*

In examining the diversity of college essay topics chosen, there are varying influences and pressures experienced by BIPOC students. The nine interviews revealed a discernible dichotomy among student essay themes. I found that approximately half of the students chose to

narrate their college essays through the lens of RCI, often interwoven with experiences of trauma. Conversely, the other five centered their narratives around personal failures and community involvement. Students' responses to the question about significant influences on their choice of the college essay topic revealed disparities among those who explored themes of trauma related RCI compared to those whose narratives focused on failure and/or community service.

One way of distinguishing the two groups and differentiating students' experiences was specifically asking them, "Were there any individuals, such as teachers, family members, or peers, who played a significant role in influencing your decision on the college essay topic?" Among these influential figures, they emphasized the importance of selecting a topic that personally resonated to the student. I found that three out of the four students within the trauma related RCI group disclosed that their college counselor played a pivotal role in influencing their college essay topics. This suggests that there may be a correlation between the influence of college counselors and BIPOC students who chose to write their college essay about trauma related RCI topics. When college admissions have expectations for BIPOC students, these expectations (e.g. challenges) and guidance may be relayed to BIPOC students through their college counselors in classroom settings and/or one-on-one meeting. Moreover, college counselors have insights into what college admissions officers are looking for when it comes to writing the college essay. To this point, there may be unspoken expectations and/or patterns within the system of college admissions where some students, specifically BIPOC, may feel compelled to write about trauma related RCI topics. Other students who also comprehend this concept may choose to write about other topics such as failure and/or community service, as it

may be assumed by these students that this is the expectation of what college admissions want to see in their college essay.

Among the students focusing on themes of failure and/or community service, students in this category claimed to have no influence by the college counselor. Three students stated they had no influence at all and the other two were influenced by family members. There are two ways of thinking about these findings: (1) this information highlights the potential influence of college counselors in steering students toward certain themes of trauma related RCI; and/or (2) it raises questions about whether these students may feel less pressured or more independent in their choice of essay topics. This adds to the discussion of the expectation of college admissions and their impact on college counselors when guiding BIPOC students with their college essay topics.

As one of the Sandfield High School college counselors aptly expressed, “I always want to encourage kids to do [write] things that feel authentic to them and feel like the right move for them as an individual.” It's noteworthy that this counselor did not actively encourage students to focus on narratives of passion or adversity (pain). At the same time, the counselor did not present opposition to students who wanted to focus on these narratives. Moreover, the same college counselor stated:

I had a lot of conversations with students around like, if they want to talk about something that feels traumatic, there are ways to do that, [however] they aren't used [to] building every single detail of something they've gone through [trauma], right like they can pick an aspect of it that isn't focused on the trauma that is kind of, you know, an orbiting piece of it, because that's really the stuff that influenced them. And so I don't think kids always think about like tackling it from that direction, [like they] think, I just either have to put... , or I can't write about that. And I'm going to write about something really, really safe, that is gonna stand out.

The counselor's guidance not only dissuaded a narrow focus on exclusively traumatic or painful narratives but also encouraged a nuanced and selective approach. By advocating for exploring

aspects that orbit around the trauma without delving into every detail, the counselor provided a strategic perspective. This insight challenges the binary perception students might hold—either fully exposing their trauma or opting for a perceived “safe” topic—and promotes the idea that thoughtful, nuanced storytelling can both stand out and navigate sensitive subjects with care.

Additionally, I found that Natalie was a unique case among students — a Black female student who applied to ten colleges/universities on her own without the assistance of a college counselor or external help. Natalie did not have to write a college essay, but had she written one, it would have fallen into the trauma related RCI category, which heavily focused on a traumatic experience in her life. After hesitation, she disclosed that, “Well, I just feel like it just shows my growth because I was homeless at one point. So, it shows like, it shows like where I am from then to now.” Her potential essay, focused on a traumatic experience, still aligns with the other students, and reflects resilience and personal growth. This case highlights the diverse paths students take in the college application process, emphasizing that some students navigate it independently and may choose to share deeply personal stories to showcase their journey. One may conclude that Natalie understood the expectations of college admissions but deliberately chose to avoid the prevalent trend of trauma related RCI essays, opting for authenticity over conformity.

Furthermore, Steve, the only white participant in this study and who intends on writing his essay about his part in the Boys and Girls Club, offers a profound glimpse into the complexities of the college admissions process. His reluctance to engage with the college essay writing seminar due to an inability to identify challenges at the time emphasizes a broader theme. It highlights the impact of racial identity on the interpretation of expectations within the college admissions process. His understanding transcends a mere fear of inadequacy; it reflects an

awareness of a perceived hierarchy of experiences that may influence admissions decisions. Therefore, Steve becomes a prime example, showcasing how students, regardless of their racial backgrounds, navigate and internalize expectations, particularly surrounding the narratives focused on trauma related RCI topics, within the college admissions.

He expressed hesitation and self-doubt regarding his writing abilities, which may be rooted in a nuanced understanding of societal expectations and the racial dynamics at play. The fear of not being a proficient writer is closely linked to a worry about potential rejection, suggesting an underlying belief that narratives highlighting racial challenges receive preferential treatment in the admissions process. Steve states, "[M]aybe my essay wouldn't be good enough" and "I don't know, I'm not the best writer," which may suggest that there is an internalized belief that without overt racial struggles, his writing might fall short of the expected standard.

In addressing whether BIPOC students feel pressured to write about trauma related RCI and the impact of the Supreme Court's 2023 decision on affirmative action on their essay topics, the findings revealed a complex landscape. While a prevailing trend towards narratives of personal growth exists, students, particularly those influenced by college counselors, may have felt pressured to write their college essays about trauma related RCI themes. This pressure appeared to stem from the expectations set by the college admissions process and therefore, the guidance provided by counselors.

Concerning the influence of the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action, the data indicated a limited awareness among BIPOC students of the legal challenges to affirmative action policies. Despite this, a significant number of students expressed a commitment to their original essay choices, suggesting a preference for merit-based evaluation over considerations

tied solely to racial identity. This inclination is particularly notable among students who did not identify as a first-generation student.

In conclusion, while there is a subtle pressure for BIPOC students to conform to trauma-related narratives in their college essays, the Supreme Court decision on affirmative action appeared to have limited direct influence on their topic choices. The prevailing sentiment leans towards a desire for merit-based evaluations in the college admissions process, especially among students who intend to focus their essays on failure and/or community involvement and have no influence from college counselors.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

If granted more time for my research, a central focus would involve grasping the transformative landscape of college admissions following the 2023 Supreme Court decision on affirmative action. An examination of trends pre and post this decision would be paramount, particularly in understanding the essay-writing experiences of BIPOC students. Understanding the college application processes in both eras (pre and post the Supreme Court decision) offers an opportunity to discern shifts in the themes and narratives chosen by BIPOC students for their personal essays. Additionally, exploring differences in responses from the same group of high school students to when they are in college could add to the discourse around the transformative standing of affirmative action. This could provide a unique lens as the potential data found could be used to understand evolving perspectives and attitudes toward college essay topics within the BIPOC community. This comparative analysis across different age groups may unveil changes in societal expectations, educational priorities, and the influence of historical events on narrative choices in college applications.

Another significant aspect of extended research would involve an examination of racial differences among BIPOC groups and their white counterparts in their choice of essay topics and also class differences, shedding light on the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and personal narratives. Additionally, through a more psychological lens, investigating the potential impact of the Supreme Court decision on the mental health and well-being of BIPOC students could be imperative, particularly in understanding whether the absence of affirmative action considerations may heighten the pressure for BIPOC students from focusing on personal pain and adversity in narratives. Moreover, the inquiry into institutional responses and support systems post the affirmative action decision would be crucial for unveiling how educational institutions adapt to foster inclusivity and equity. Lastly, investigating the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and other identities in college essays may contribute to understanding how BIPOC individuals navigate complex layers of identity in their application narratives. This investigation allows for insights into whether specific aspects, such as race or gender, are deliberately emphasized, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations and choices behind the selected essay topics of BIPOC students.

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APPENDIX A

Student Description Graph

Name	Intended Essay Topic: (RCI/FCS)	View on Affirmative Action (O/A)	Race	Class Status	First Generation (Y/N)/	Age
Denzel	FCS	OPPOSE	Black	Low-income	Y	17
Natalie	RCI	OPPOSE	Black	Low-income	Y	18
Steve	FCS	AGREE	White	Low-income	Y	17

## APPENDIX B

### Student Interview Guide

Can you provide your consent to participate in this research study and confirm that you understand the purpose and nature of the interview?

#### College Essay Topic Selection:

- What was the process you went through in choosing the topic for your college essay?
- Can you describe the factors or considerations that influenced your decision on the specific topic you chose?

#### Influential Figures:

- Were there any individuals, such as teachers, family members, or peers, who played a significant role in influencing your decision on the college essay topic?
- How did the input or guidance from these individuals impact your thought process in selecting your essay topic?

#### Personal Reflections:

- Did you engage in any self-reflection or self-assessment when deciding on your college essay topic? If so, what aspects of your identity, experiences, or aspirations did you consider?
- Were there any personal goals or messages you aimed to convey through your chosen essay topic?

#### External Pressures and Expectations:

- Did you feel any external pressures, expectations, or societal influences that may have influenced your choice of college essay topic?
- How did you navigate external expectations while ensuring authenticity in representing yourself through your essay?

#### Relevance to Current Events or Societal Context:

- Did any current events or societal issues influence your decision on the topic of your college essay? If so, how did you incorporate these influences into your narrative?
- Are you aware of the Affirmative Action case that determined that race was no longer going to be part of college admissions?

#### Decision-Making Process Over Time:

Can you describe your college essay in one sentence?

For seniors: Looking back, how has the choice of your college essay topic impacted your college application process?

For juniors: How do you envision the role of your chosen college essay topic in your upcoming college application process?

