

Moira McCullough: Welcome Hamada and thank you for joining us today on the College Scoops podcast.

Hamada Zahawi: Thank you for having me.

Moira McCullough: Can you tell us a little bit more about you and your story and how you developed this incredible gift and love of writing?

Moira McCullough: To be frank, the writing is just a mechanism of communication and it's incredible how many of the people we work with that we've come across don't put an emphasis enough on writing. And I think writing and strong communication skills start not just in what you say but what you put down on paper. I think if you're an effective writer, you can be a much more effective communicator. I've worked with clients where I've literally said, look, I can help you edit what you've given me or I can walk you through what edits I made, so you have a better sense of how to write more effectively. And I think that's what I strive for is really effective writing to be a more effective communicator. I wouldn't say it for languages per say, but if my love for the English language and its ability to sway opinions and its ability to convince me to form beliefs has been paramount in the way I've approached my education. Hence why I majored in history, minored in political science and then did two masters both in writing intensive fields. One was international relations, public policy, and then my law degree, which obviously has a ton of research and writing as well. So a lot of what I've done is really down that field of writing. But the legal aspect of writing, as you can imagine, is much more logical, there's a clause and then there's another clause and then it concludes with a logical conclusion. But what you have here, and what I was able to do is translate what were otherwise, and now analytical papers or studies into something that I felt was even more interesting to me, which was how do you market people better on paper? But even before you can market them on paper, you've got to help them build a story to then allow them to market themselves on paper. And that's what I've been really focused on in the last 10 years with Wright Track, was really how you build narratives. How do you surface narratives? How do you surface experiences into a cohesive narrative that you can then translate onto paper?

Moira McCullough: Well, it's something that is so relevant and it should be so easy for us to do. We know our story the best, but at times you go to sit down and try to write that essay and you draw a blank. You don't even know where to start. So it's so hard to help other students, to sit down and figure out what it is that you want to tell; and in this short amount of space, how do you even begin? So how do you do that when you say, write your story and put it succinctly in a way that will engage, inspire, and get that admissions person to advocate for you. How do you do that? And do it well.

Hamada Zahawi: Well let me ask you this - your audience is people applying to college, but tell me Who's the youngest person that you think listens to your podcast?

Moira McCullough: I would hope it wouldn't be in middle school. I would hope it would be high school students. I do believe that there's a time and place. So we are hoping it's high school students and their parents and educators.

Hamada Zahawi: So the reason I asked that question to be honest is, your story when you say like, how do I sit down? Let's give an example. You know Janet is writing her personal statement. She is a rising senior. She's sitting down and she gets the questions for let's say University of Chicago. The question asks her, for example, to talk about a time where you exhibited leadership in high school. Or tell me about a time that you really created an organization or you followed a belief you had and were able to create into some kind of an organization. Now, what happens if she doesn't have that experience? Simply she says, I was too busy studying and far more focused on my academics than I was on any extracurricular or their extracurricular I had been very solitary. Maybe I phone banked, maybe I did something, but I really didn't have contact with people. So the story that you have of being able to put it on paper, I'm talking to people in your audience is not just rising seniors but also sophomores, freshmen, even juniors. We've got to figure out how do you write your story, and the way you write your story is by living your story. And what I mean by living your story is you sit back and say, okay, I'm a sophomore, and I want to go to, let's just say my goal is to go to a four-year University; and my goal is to go to a four-year university in let's say California. And my goal is to go to four-year University, California. That's maybe private and public. So let me take a look at the UC applications, and their sophomores. Let them take a look at the UC application. They'll see the questions that are frequently asked every year in the UC application. Question being how have you given back to your community? So what do you do [Inaudible 00:05:14]? You reverse engineer the questions in the life you're leading at that moment.

Moira McCullough: Exactly.

Hamada Zahawi: Questions like that. Then you need to start creating experiences. Exactly. You want to answer those questions with the life that you lead. So you start getting more involved in the community. You start taking on those volunteer activities, start doing those leadership initiatives, if you have a challenge in your life, if you don't just say, well it is what it is. You write it down in a journal. I had this challenge, this person said X to me. I experienced this medical issue. My parents went through this and they keep writing it down and taking note of all the challenges they went through, their life experiences, everything. And usually that more lies in the CV in terms of what you and I know, as professionals, but they put it down into a journal that they just keep writing and building up. When it comes to senior year, now they've got ammunition. So basically as you go through your life

experiences as a sophomore junior, even early senior, you're going to come across different things are going to happen to you, whether they're great experiences, leadership opportunities, challenges you faced, issues that you encounter as you go through your high school career. Now you could either choose to just live them and then let them go and then try your best two years later to recall them, so that you can put them into the essays, or you can just jot them down in some kind of like an easy way of doing it, is just put in a Google doc, so you can access it from anywhere. You can add to it anywhere and you just add in there. Just maybe categorize it by different areas, like maybe sports, leadership, volunteer personal and then just pop in there. If anything happens to you, just put it in there. It seems contrived, but it's an easy way of developing a document. So if we go back to your original question, which is as you sit there and you have to answer a question from one of the schools, where do you start? Well now you have a very strong platform to start from because you've created a one, two, three, four or five-page document. And these experiences will be the ones that inform the different questions that are being provided to you. And that is how you avoid that writer's block not knowing where to start.

Moira McCullough: So would you say most of the students you meet with the first mistake, or most common mistake you see is that the planning aspect of the essay writing didn't take place? And once they start at a young enough age or they're able to document that, it's far easier than to sit and develop that story in a way that's meaningful, engaging and authentic to who they really are?

Hamada Zahawi: Yeah. Well, here's how it started. When we were doing the services, we'd get the student as a senior and they're struggling. A lot of them, I don't know where to start, I don't know how to answer this question on leadership. I don't know how to answer this question on challenges. I don't know how to answer this question on a belief that I've stood for. And so then we stopped and said, hang on a second, maybe we can't start with them as a senior. Maybe we should start with our clients as juniors and sophomores. So we created this service called COMPASS, which is the College Orientation and Mentorship, Pre-application Services. And the whole concept here is helping the student develop and helping the student better live their story. So when they do come to us as seniors, we've got, as I said, a whole arsenal full of awesome experiences that we can leverage to be able to put into the applications. And that's proven to be very effective for folks that we work with. So that we don't just start them when they're panicking and they're like, I just don't know what ideas to put together. And then we are working with them trying to dig deep into the recesses of their brain, to find that experience that they completely had forgotten about, and then put it onto paper and then translate it and make it into something beautiful. In this case now will actually help them develop those ideas as they're living it, and that's been a huge game changer for us.

Moira McCullough: So I see how successful you've been in terms of looking at, okay, here's where the student is at and here's where they could be at; had they

planned accordingly and taken in some of the steps that you've developed as part of that compass program. For a lot of the students who sit down and you have this incredible array of experiences that they've had, how do you dig deep? How do you help them? Start it, write it, fine tune it, to show that you are the right candidate, that you will thrive, succeed at the school of your choice?

Hamada Zahawi: Yes. At the end of the day, you're right, there's going to be quite a few different ideas and you're just not sure which one to lead with. And this is something that I experienced. I feel like you're best at what you do when you've gone through it yourself. So I've done it four different times to get into Berkeley and UCLA, Harvard, Cambridge in England. Every one of those times I'll have to come up with a lead story. Something that really was the anchor story that I could carry through throughout. But getting to that lead story takes time. And so the way that we do it is, again, once we put aside the living your story, then what I call free storming, your free flowing ideas and brainstorming at the same time. And so we just do a data dump of different ideas that you really need to make sure come across. So maybe you put down five ideas or 10 ideas that have to be articulated somewhere on your application. And then from there you see where there's a common thread. Where is the anchor story that really you can kind of, pivot off of, springboard from. So that everything flows beautifully as an element of continuity from one statement to the next, from one paragraph to the next, really from one sentence to the next. If you get granular.

So once you free storm your idea and you put it all down onto paper, you get to think also, and once you get that central idea that comes from that, you surface it, you're like, you know what? I really liked this one idea. I think this is the one I'm going to lead with because it makes me stand out. It makes me unique. It makes me a promising candidate, and it makes me an attractive memorable candidate. This is the one that really distinguishes me. And it may not be the one where you won the Pulitzer prize, but it may be the one where you helped save X person. It's not just the bells and whistles, it's the one that really makes you stand out. It's the one that is really authentic to you, and if we define authenticity as living what you believe, then that's the idea you want to lead with. Once you put that down, you have that central idea. Think about your story like a movie, right? How many times have we seen this plot develop Mora? You have the opening scene, typically the opening scenes, a hell of a lot of action, boom, action, and then it takes a step back, it fades to black, and then it takes a step back to provide us with context. That context goes gradually, chronologically almost; until halfway through the movie. Then we're back to the action sequence, and then the action sequence, there has to be a decision made left or right, blue pill, red pill. You take the one you choose and then it goes into a resolution and then a conclusion. Much like that.

Think about your life like a movie. How does it develop? What is the opening scene to the admissions committee? How do you capture them? How do you provide them with context? How does that give a sense of who you are, and then how does that

reach an apex, a climax, and then how does it come to a resolution? And where are you going to be in terms of that school as a leader for that school? So think about that as well. Then stress test it. Go to people that you really trust and be like, here's my central idea. Here's where I think I'm going with it. What do you think? And then also say, here are other ideas I have and they'd be like, I love it or I don't. So stress test it. Check it out with a couple of people that you're really close to. Mentors, maybe parents, best friends, a professor that you really like. Maybe even somebody who's at a University that has gone through the process, that can also just kind of give you, but don't get too many cooks in the kitchen because you ended up in a situation where you'll have a hodgepodge of an essay.

Put it all down onto paper, start dividing it up, so outline your essay. Intro paragraph, second paragraph, third paragraph, fourth paragraph, fifth paragraph, and then if your intro is like we discussed an action sequence with context, your second paragraph is about your personal background, the third paragraph about what you studied, the fourth paragraph of what you want to do in the fifth paragraph, why you want to go to that school. That's a classic personal statement anatomy. Then you just start filling in the information with the ideas in each one of those areas. Then take a step back, then attack it again. Start cutting it down because you always want to make sure that you're responsive to the prompt; and also you're responsive and adhere to the word count. Then once you kind of flush it all out, you've got a solid essay to lead with.

Moira McCullough: So it's multistage obviously, and I've had two kids go through college and then now I'm laughing because I have my junior, who I will definitely have him read your notes and your advice in terms of the steps that one may take, because it's not something that you can just do in one sitting. And now more than ever, I think this year will be a very challenging year for everyone, with more and more schools going test optional. The essay is a key component of the application where students can really stand out, and share their story in a way that is going to be maybe more of a factor in the applications process, but it's very hard to identify how to do that. What is that hook that's going to grab that admissions representative who has read countless of essays? So it's kind of a daunting task and that's something that is so hard for students to realize. But then also it's something that with the steps that you've provided, that could possibly be so much easier with the right mind-set and the planning that's involved in it.

Hamada Zahawi: And also be weary that a lot of people are going to write about Covid, a ton. Everybody in their mother's going to write about Covid. So while last year there was a plethora of different topics you could write about, yeah. But now Covid is in fact every one of our lives, it's similar probably in the ex post nine 11 period. It's a curse and a blessing. It's a blessing because you've got something to talk about. It's a curse because everybody's going to talk about it because if they feel they don't talk about it, then there's an elephant in the room. How do we address it?

So you have to take a unique angle to Covid. It has to be cathartic, it has to be introspective. It has to be more than just I was bored at home; like what did you do? How did you maximize your time? How did you help others in the community? When history judges us ex-post, where were you? What side were you on?

Moira McCullough: So is that something that you're working with now? I think a lot of the students will struggle with that because that's something that they'll say, well of course the lost opportunity. I translate that when I discuss it with my son, that it's actually not a lost opportunity. You've gained an opportunity to kind of delve deep and explore and do some soul searching, because the lost opportunity are the sporting events, extra-curricular activities, all those planned activities. But now you give, you've been given an opportunity to reflect and find out what is it that you really love, what excites you and that is frightening. But it's also incredibly powerful if you can convey that in a meaningful way. I go back to being authentic and I think you've talked about this a lot in your story, throughout your experience and your work with students, getting that true voice and true self to come out is hard. But once it does, it's so easier than to complete that essay in a way that people will want to read more.

Hamada Zahawi: Exactly. And the small test case, this is really hard to imagine, but what I wrote about when I applied to law school in 2003, I ended up living it 10 years later when I was working with the U.S. Government doing international law and international development law. Obviously we can't foretell in the future what it is, but I so believed what I was writing. It was so authentic in my mind, that I actually ended up living it because that's the direction I was going; without knowing that's what's going to happen. And that's how much you have to believe what you're writing about. Because if it's inauthentic, it will stand out in a heartbeat to anybody who's reading it.

Moira McCullough: So we talked about the common mistakes. If you had top three tips on how to write and rewrite and fine-tune your essay, what would you say to them?

Hamada Zahawi: So I guess we'll go back to that same process again, the top three tips would definitely be, don't be shy to write stuff down on paper, because if you keep stalling as they say, the enemy of progress is perfection or perfect. And so if you just keep rethinking and thinking and rethinking and not putting anything down on paper, nothing's going to really give rise. I was reading an article recently that said it's probably better to put 20 things down on paper than 10, because even 10 could be limiting. Just write, as I call it, dig it down, the free storming concept, free flowing, just free flow ideas in a brainstorming capacity, so

just throwing stuff down and brainstorming at the same time to really come up with a lot of content. And again, if you have all that story developed from before in your journal and so forth that we discussed, then you will have a lot of ammunition to go through. Then put it down and outline it step by step into the different categories that you need to write the essay from. Again, an intro paragraph, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, with the conclusion at the end. And when you're dumping all those ideas, as I said and you talked about that kind of hook, that takeaway message, stress test that, ask some people, what do you think about this as what I would lead in, everything that kind of encapsulates me. Then as I said, you put it down on paper and you outline that. Then you cut it down from all the content you have into somewhat of the required word count and then take a step back, and make sure to look at everything with a fresh pair of eyes a day or two later and go into it, which obviously begs the idea that do not leave this at any shape or form to the last minute; because if you leave it to the last minute, you don't even have time to reflect adequately. And you'll have a whole year pass you by, or you'll get into the wrong school simply because you did not effectively do what you needed to do to get into the right one.

Moira McCullough: Great advice and something that I think is something that every student should think about in any aspect of whatever application they're going for undergraduate, graduate. And this takes even into when you're going into a job interview, it's the preparation, the thought that goes into it, and making sure that you have everything outlined. Given what we've experienced this year, going to test optional, is there anything that you see differently or any other advice that you would give to students? You did mention before, let's not all write about Covid19 and everything that happened, try to extract something else from this story that you could write about in a meaningful way.

Hamada Zahawi: Yes, and that really comes down to your own personal experience with it. Now obviously there's going to be people who are going to be like, really? I didn't experience much. I was at home; I was with my parents. I couldn't go out; I didn't do much. The idea is that, well, use the time to be introspective. Maybe you can start learning how to meditate during this time, maybe you can learn to do more volunteer work. I mean, for example, there's opportunities even here in Santa Monica where I'm located, where you can help the elderly by fielding phone calls and basically coordinating with volunteers, who run out there and grab their groceries or medications. You could do this all from the comfort of your home. There's all kinds of things that you should be doing to stay proactive and those who are proactive, those are introspective, are going to win the game, in this admissions process, those are just not the same, bland, boring, didn't really do much, Netflix and chill and just did my homework. There's

really not much you can give to write about. And if you're gonna write about Covid, it's already going to look awkward. So you want to write about it, but write about it from a perspective that really impacted you. What did you learn? What did it tell you about human dynamics? About politics, about inequities, about medicine, about the future, and there's a series that I'm creating with a right track called future proofing your career in education. It's a lot about that. It's about thinking about what's the next steps and what's, what are we in for? That's what they want to see, that kind of introspection, those kinds of thoughts.

Moira McCullough: Okay. And then when you talk about that aspect of the essay, do you have that same approach when you're going to the supplemental essays? Is it the same type of tactic?

Hamada Zahawi: It's not, I'm going to tell you why. And It's a great question. Because a lot of people will do everything for the personal statement, then forget about the supplemental, and those simple rules are really important because in some cases, the personal statement and for those who eventually applied to medical schools, same thing with a primary statement. You can't put everything in there, but then again, you can't leave everything out, because this is what you're going to lead with, it's what the first thing they're going to see. But the idea is if the school is asking for a personal statement, let's say the common application essay. It's going to go to all the schools, but the schools are even more intrigued not by that one statement that went to everybody, but why you want to go to their school? So those supplements are sometimes even more important. So what you want to do is, you want to make sure that you're leaving some things out of the personal statement that you can put into the supplemental essays. So you want to avoid being duplicative, spread out the ideas. Treat each supplemental essay as if it's a personal statement in and of itself. That's how important it is. Okay. And always, always be responsive to the prompt and the word count and, and avoid the copy paste. The essay for Tufts is very similar to the essay from University of Illinois Urbana, I'm just going to copy paste. If you just simply copy paste without really seeing what the question is about, you can get yourself in a lot of trouble because they'll automatically realize all you did was copy paste. It just shows that you're not as caring and the person who really cared, who really created the essay to suit that school, they're the ones who are going to get ahead of you. And like you said, Mora in the beginning, essays are going to be mission critical. Why? Because some SATs have been cancelled, school has been disrupted. So our classic baseline academic record standardized test is no longer going to basically be the thing that's going to carry you forward. So it really has to come out, and what you're able to write, how

you're able to stand out for each one of the schools, which each supplemental essay they request.

Moira McCullough: Well, and I love what you said about that, because I think I turn it into a positive to a challenge and an opportunity for students saying you have so much more, that you cannot not possibly put on an application in a text [Inaudible 00:06:14] nor, in the personal statement. So this is really your opportunity to share more about all the great accomplishments that you've had, and the interest that you have and how you are the best fit to differentiate yourself from that next candidate. So if you look at it from that approach, it is one that would energize and inspire and get students to be more specific because as you said, the supplemental, you have a smaller word count and a smaller opportunity, but an opportunity nonetheless. Couple last questions (1), what do you wish you knew before you attended college or law school? I know that's it, always like to throw that out because as we get older, we kind of reflect back and know that I wish I'd paid attention and I wish I had listened a little bit more.

Hamada Zahawi: Well let me preface that by telling you what I did learn that was very important during college, and I always say this, five main things that you want to get out of college. And then I'll tell you quickly what I kind of missed in between. The things you want to get out of college. Why? Because in the end of the day colleges prepare you for a career or for graduate school, which is going to lead you into a career. And if we know one thing about careers, is that having a high emotional intelligence and being able to pivot and be able to kind of, how do I say, work among different people and adapt, especially given what we possibly will see in the future. It's important to have strong leadership skills. And I mean, take on an activity, maybe take on two and just really go towards leadership, go towards teamwork and leadership. Don't take on 10 activities and just do them on the subsurface, it's the concept of one-inch-deep, a mile wide versus a mile deep and an inch wide. And you really, really want to get into that organization, whatever it is, and really push hard at it. Academics are paramount, why? Not just because it shows employers or graduate schools that you have the wherewithal to withstand the constant barrage of academics, but you can do well and rise to the occasion. But it also allows you to get scholarships. I mean, my last year at UCLA I was able to fund my whole year and have extra, because I was performing well in school. So it gives you a little bit of bandwidth to pay off your tuition. Maximize your social life. That's something you should never ever forget, because it's really important networking in terms of building strong connections. So, I mean have fun, you know socialize with folks, that's extremely, extremely important. And I hope that we see that coming back to schools hopefully in the following.....

Moira McCullough: Students will love that, then realize how important and how valuable that is. [Cross-talking 08:55- 00:08:59]

Hamada Zahawi: It's mission critical because all those guys and I'm sorry I have to say it, I was clowning on all those people in South campus, who are like the dorks, who were the science geeks and stuff like that. And I can tell you that they might have gotten great grades. They may get plugged into a job that was working at IBM, what have you. But they're probably out of a job now, because those jobs have become redundant and because they didn't have the social ability to network and work with others that could then vouch for them to get other jobs. They're out. And that's a very important concept of future proofing. The other two quick things that I would say about it is your health, mental and physical. It's super important to stay on top of that. I can't tell you how many people have broken down, because they don't effectively look out for their mental health, which is something that's extremely important. And physical health, I did not suffer from freshman 15 because I thought that was a cop out, to me you have got to work hard and I know that you have kids who I think one of them you said plays lacrosse. I mean, you play sports, you stay engaged, you stay in the game. You don't just kind of say, Oh, whatever, I'm in college, I don't care anymore.

Moira McCullough: That's what I always tell him.

Hamada Zahawi: And you know, like me now, 20 years post-college fitness is extremely important to me. It's a mind over matter and it's a part of your life. And finally, a small tip for me, I love this. I think it's so important. Studying abroad, getting that cultural interaction outside of Europe, the comforts of whatever, the campus or America is so important. Hopefully that will come back after Covid, we will be able to study abroad and travel abroad too, but those are really, really important. And the quick things that I thought, man, I wish I had known honestly. And again, I learned all these things during college and I really maximize my college experience. I transferred from UCF to UCLA and I really did as much as I could there and it's paid me in dividends. But the things I wish I knew, I wish I knew more about scholarships early on, I wish I knew more about fellowships. Like I still regret not having applied for a road scholar or a Marshall or a Fulbright. I didn't know about it even though I had great grades. And I think a great story to tell. I didn't really prioritize internships during the summers, because I didn't even know where to start and I was a history major, so I didn't even know where to go.

So I think if I was better planning my internships in the summer, that's important. And then finally just future proofing that concept of being able to just not hyper focus on one field, but understand that we are approaching problems like this vaccine that we're seeing, we're not approaching really medically, we're approaching it from a legal perspective, from a design perspective, from an engineering perspective, from a business perspective, this process, this crisis is multifaceted and that's how you need to approach your college education and your graduate school education.

Moira McCullough: I couldn't agree more. I think you hit everything in there and it is enough information for a whole nother podcast, that's for sure. Lastly I'd like to add what is your favourite dessert or dessert spot in a college town? Because I'm a foodie who loves to travel and that's actually one of the main things we do whenever we go to a different town. We love exploring and we love finding the neighbourhood gems. So any in particular that stands out that you would go back for in a nanosecond?

Hamada Zahawi: For sure. I have to do a shout out. I have to say my sister's brownies, I don't know what she puts in there and they're out of the box, but they're so good. Maybe it's the [Inaudible 00:12:12] land that she uses or the amount of water, the less eggs, but her brownies are off the chain. I have to say my favourite dessert spots on campuses. I'll quickly rattle that out for you. UCLA, Diddy Rise. I'm sure you went there when you visited.

Moira McCullough: I did, that's calling me back.

Hamada Zahawi: And then at Berkeley it would be anything they serve at Strata Cafe, it was right next to my house when I was in law school, and they have great desserts, great pastries. And finally at Harvard it was cold, I would have to say the JP Lakes right down the street, right across the Harvard yard, was a great ice cream shop that wasn't too crowded and it was absolutely delicious. So those would be my top picks for the Universities here.

Moira McCullough: I don't think you're allowed to graduate without going there. Is that the case?

Hamada Zahawi: It sounds like it. I think I was right.

Moira McCullough: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today. And I just want to let our listeners know that to learn more about right track admissions and their live webinars series that you host on Wednesdays, you can find all that information in our links, in our show notes and the webinars series are hosted on Hamada's LinkedIn and on Facebook. And you also, I think have a list of the past webinar recordings on your website.

Hamada Zahawi: We do - The webinars are geared somewhat towards professionals, but I'm not going to lie. It's so important that you should be thinking about not just the next step of school, but the next step after that in terms of your career. And that's why we've been doing these webinars to really kind of share the knowledge with people that have been there, done that so that when you are facing the challenges and we're going to keep facing these challenges for the next year or so, you're way ahead of the game and really know how to be resilient. And as we keep saying, future-proof.