Read the following application essay. See if you can figure out this essay's strengths and weaknesses. Then keep reading to see our critique.

The Essay

From the time I was able to realize what a university was, all I heard from my mother's side of the family was about the University of Michigan and the great heritage it has. Many a Saturday afternoon my grandfather would devote to me, by sitting me down in front of the television and reminiscing about the University of Michigan while halftime occurred during a Michigan Wolverines football game. Later, as I grew older and universities took on greater meaning, my mother and uncle, both alumni of the University of Michigan, took me to see their old stamping grounds. From first sight, the university looked frightening because of its size, but with such a large school comes diversity of people and of academic and non-academic events.

In Springfield High School, non-academic clubs such as the Future Physicians and the Pylon, both of which I have belonged to for two years, give me an opportunity to see both the business world and the medical world. These two clubs have given me a greater sense of what these careers may be like. In Future Physicians, I participated in field trips to children's hospitals and also participated in two blood banks.

Currently I hold a job at Maas Brothers. This lets me interact with people outside my own immediate environment. I meet different kinds of people, in diffrent moods, with different attitudes, and with different values. This job teaches me to be patient with people, to have responsibility, and to appreciate people for what they are.

In the community I am active in my church Youth Group. As a high school sophomore, I was our church's representative to the Diocesan Youth Fellowship. I helped organize youth group events, the largest being "The Bishop's Ball," a state-wide event for 300 young people. I also played high school junior varsity soccer for two years. As a senior I will be playing varsity soccer, but in the off-season. As a junior I coached a girls' soccer team for the town. This gave me a great deal of responsibility because the care of twenty-four girls was put into my custody. It felt very satisfying to pass on the knowledge of soccer to another generation. The girls played teams from other parts of Florida. Though their record was 3-8, the girls enjoyed their season. This is what I taught them was the greatest joy of soccer.

The past three years of my life have given me greater visions of my future. I see the University of Michigan as holding a large book with many unread chapters and myself as an eager child who has just learned to read. I intend to read and probe into all the chapters. The University of Michigan offers me more than the great reputation of this fine school, but a large student body with diverse likes and dislikes, and many activities, both academic and non-academic, to participate in. With the help of the University of Michigan, I will be successful after college and be able to make a name and place for myself in our society.

The Critique

Admission officials consider how you write your essay, not just what you write about. Try to critique your own essays in the same way this sample essay is critiqued below.

**The Introduction**

The introduction seems to have a lack of focus: Where's the writer going with this paragraph? Where's the writer going with this essay? Also, the writer needs to tighten the phrasing (e.g., "while halftime occurred" to "at halftime" or "From first sight" to "Immediately").

**The Body**

There is a very abrupt transition from the first paragraph to the second: How did we get from Michigan's diversity to the writer's clubs? The second paragraph also includes general statements with little evidence: How did these activities reveal career paths?

Can the writer be more specific? What does "participated in two blood banks" mean? Did he drive volunteers from across town, sign people in all day on three Saturdays every month except August or spend 15 minutes one Thursday afternoon in the nurse's office giving blood?

In the third paragraph, we have to ask: What does the writer do at Maas Brothers? "Interact" needs definition. What here shows that the writer has thought about the time spent at Maas Brothers? Also in this paragraph, there is a misspelling of different ("diffrent"): The writer did not proofread thoroughly.

The information in the fourth paragraph (as well as the previous two paragraphs) appears elsewhere in the application. Essays that simply run down your accomplishments don't add to your application. And does the reader need to know that "the girls played teams from other parts of Florida"?

The writer would be better off focusing on one of the things discussed in this essay, such as working with the girls' soccer team. What he did to make Jennifer and Gretchen and Courtney enjoy soccer even though they won only three of their games would be more vivid and focused than a lot of talk about passing things on to future generations.

**The Conclusion**

The conclusion returns to the earlier idea of diversity at Michigan, but this idea was not developed in the body of the essay. It's not necessary to mention "the great reputation of this fine school." Instead, the writer should give specific, programmatic reasons Michigan offers the kind of education he needs.

**Overall**

This essay seems full of information and demonstrates basic essay organization, but it lacks focus and proof. The reader gets a laundry list of activities rather than a clear sense of who the writer is and what he cares and thinks about.

The writer also repeats some phrases. He mentions the “University of Michigan” six times and repeats “academic and non-academic” twice.

Kevin Zevallos '16   
High School of Telecommunication Arts, Brooklyn, NY

I live alone — I always have since elementary school. I wasn't privileged with having my parents there for me. I didn't grow up with my father; he left when I was four. My mom worked from morning to night, so I spent no time with her. While I grew to appreciate her sacrifices, it strained our relationship. My sister Paola, however, was there for me.

Paola picked me up every day from elementary school. Walking home was the best time of my day; the time I got to connect with a person and actually tell them what I drew in school or the new song I learned to play on my recorder. She was the one who fed me, read me bedtime stories and tucked me into bed. I grew to love her like a mother. In time, Paola left me too.

Having to tend to her newborn child, LaMya, my sister could no longer devote her attention to me. Since I was only in second grade when Paola had LaMya, I did not comprehend my sister’s actions. I felt abandoned, and I longed to hear someone say I’m proud of you. I used that as a driving force to excel in elementary school.

Before my niece was born I wasn’t the brightest kid; I would get C’s and B’s. Diligent studying, however, paid off. In the fifth grade, Kings County sent me a letter about the “Citation of Honor.” I was one out of two kids in my school to receive this award. My mother and sister told me *si tu quieres, puedes*; if you want it, you can achieve it. Like the engraving on a statue, those words stuck with me forever. I felt empowered knowing my mother and sister had faith in me. In high school, when my mother told me *yo quiero que tengas un mejor vida que la mia*; I want you to have a better life than mine, I finally accepted that they had other responsibilities. I don’t remember the last time anyone asked me how my day was, but I admire my family's sacrifices for their children to have a better life.

Now I pick up my niece from school and listen to her day as my sister did for me. Everything I learned from my family, I pass on to LaMya. My family’s values of sacrifice and self-determination, values embodied in my persona, I echo on to her. One day, if she ever feels lonely, she’ll know who to come to.

Work drains so much vitality from the people I care about. I know they must work so that one day I will go to a great college, have a good career, and be successful. I will not let my family’s economic situation deter me from my future. I used to be selfish and stubborn; I longed for their attention to hear that they are proud me when in reality they always were. I now understand and don’t feel so alone anymore.

Madeline H. Conley '14   
Brattleboro Union High School, Dummerston, Vermont

I don’t watch television.

I don’t watch television because family legend has it that when I was a baby, there was one of those infamous Vermont snowstorms that knocked the antenna off our roof. My parents, already ambivalent about television, decided not to replace it. That was seventeen years ago. We had our little VCR, and now DVD player, and throughout the time I was growing up, that was enough.

I stopped watching TV altogether when I was 13. The impetus was my best friend deciding to give up chocolate for Lent and me deciding I would try to go without television. I stopped watching videos and DVD’s. Just stopped. For two months I didn’t watch a minute of TV. At the time it didn’t mean much, but it’s a decision that’s come to matter a lot to me. Someone asked me, “How long are you going to not watch?” “Until I don’t want it anymore.”

I’ve grown up in the shadow of Mt. Wantastiquet and Black Mountain, in the corner of Southern Vermont. I live in a small town, in the same house that I’ve lived in since the day I was born. People gather in church basements and granges, on the ski trails, and in the co-op. I live in a place of community, farms, art and poetry. I love that when I go out, I see people I know and feel known. There is plenty to do besides watch television.   
  
I don’t watch television because Garrison Keillor’s smooth voice rose and fell from the introduction of a book of poems bound in bright yellow paper, and spoke to me. He murmured, low and cool, “television is a product, not a medium,” and I heard him. I can’t think when I watch TV. I get swallowed in lethargy, and I forget what it means to really concentrate, to really see, and hear. And when I don’t watch television, my mind feels clean, my body right.

It used to be that the numbing movement of colors on the screen was my refuge when I was scared or anxious or tired, a short-lived solution, and a temporary slowing of the gears in my mind. But I realized it wasn’t a refuge - it was just a way to immobilize my mind and to avoid what was making me anxious. I sensed how dangerous it was to equate relaxation and safety with turning off my mind. I pictured some horrifying Orwellian scene where I was trained to feel nothing and think nothing. That’s an extreme, but there is a passivity in television that I’ve always thought was dangerous for me.

In my time away from television, I have learned how to love poetry, how to love listening to the radio, and be happy with just the crooning and swelling of voices. I have learned to play the guitar and sing at the end of a tough day. I have learned how to really listen. I have heard, and really heard “This American Life,” a radio program of stories, a little like those old-fashioned radio programs that my generation missed out on. (You know, the kind where they clapped coconuts together for beat of horses' hooves, and shook sheet metal for the sound of thunderstorms).

It’s easy to sit in the dark, the colors bouncing off your wind-burned cheeks in the theatre, or in the den by the wood stove. It’s easy and often comforting to feel as though you’re in the company of more beautiful, glamorous people, with seemingly more beautiful and glamorous lives. It’s easy to turn your mind off for a little while, to turn your body off.

But it’s not for me. I don’t want to be dependent on a machine. I want to be reliant on real people, on my own body, and my own mind. I want what’s real, even if it’s not easy or glamorous or action-packed. There’s a different sort of comfort in that. I don’t watch television because of the way it disconnects me from what is pure and simple and authentic.

I don’t want to be passive, ever. I want to be where I am, when I’m there. I want to be engaged, I want to listen, and I don’t want to run away from my own mind. And I’d like to live my life like that: with engagement, gratitude, authenticity, and happiness. My mom jokingly calls me a “little pilgrim,” or an ascetic, a puritan. But it’s not about self-righteousness. Because after a while, what I first promised myself became true. “Until I don’t want it anymore,” I had said. And I just don’t want it anymore. I haven’t for a while. It’s not about self-abnegation; it’s about doing what I love.

**Spy—Elana**

Ten years ago, I was a spy.

Secret identities, awesome spy gadgets and undercover operations consumed my imagination. This was serious business and l took training seriously.

My brother was Public Enemy No.1. He’d come home and I’d use Mission Impossible stealth moves to follow him everywhere. I’d pick his bedroom door with a nail file and steal his allowance. I’d climb the tree outside his window and take reconnaissance photos.

The proudest moment of my young espionage career was Operation Secret Crate. One Saturday afternoon, Mom drove up with my brother and his friends, who were coming over to play Grand Theft Auto, make stupid jokes and eat junk food. My mission: eavesdrop.

My high-tech tool was a plastic moving crate, two and a half feet square, forgotten behind the living room couch. It had eye-holes big enough for an intrepid spy.

I was small and flexible, but fitting inside that crate was a stretch. Still, the mission was on. Quick jumping jacks and toe touches to loosen the limbs. Squat, knees to chest, crate over head...

Slam! The boys banged through the front door and swarmed onto the couch. Peering out I saw tennis shoes and hairy ankles. My heart thumped so loud I worried it would overpower their excited voices and the hum of the X-Box. The smell of Pizza Hut cheese sticks was in the air.

The moment of truth. Would they notice the girl crouched in the crate inches away?

One minute. Five minutes. Ten minutes. They didn’t notice! Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Still safe. Thirty minutes. I realized the flaw in my plan. l might learn their secrets, but my body was so contorted and aching that soon I might never walk again.

Something had to be done. Something bold, drastic, unthinkable.

ARGGHHAHGHGHGHGHGHAHDHGHGHHGHGHG!!!!!!!

I shouted at the top of my lungs, flung the crate off me and jumped onto the couch. They all screamed. The cheese sticks went flying. The coke spilled. My brother, for once, had nothing to say.

Elana, girl of mystery, strikes, I said. Be warned.

I strutted out of the living room.

Since those first spy trainings, I’ve never stopped preparing for a future clandestine career. I’ve cracked codes in computer science and cracked jokes with a CIA operative. I’ve slogged through 10k of mud at the Camp Pendleton mud run and four years of Chinese in high school. I’ve flown planes with the Civil Air Patrol in Santa Monica and beat drums with Sudanese refugees in Tel-Aviv. I have launched a rocket, administered CPR, operated ham radios, set a broken arm and helped a rescue team look for a downed plane.

I could end up as a spy, a diplomat, a soldier, an astronaut, or a fighter for a lost cause. I could end up famous or completely unknown. I know two things for sure: I won’t be at a desk job, and I’ll be good to have around when there’s trouble.

“I like this essay because you really get to see the adventurous side of Elana, an intangible quality that cannot be seen in her transcript, test scores, or list of activities. By telling a story from her youth and connecting it to current activities and personal qualities, her sense of humor shines through and lets the reader know she is not afraid to take risks. After reading this essay, I saw her as someone who would make a difference on our campus, someone who wouldn’t hesitate to get involved and try something new. She seemed like a great fit for Hopkins.”