

WHAT I LEARNED OUTSIDE OF COLLEGE

500-1000 Words

A college degree is often considered a basic prerequisite for career advancement, educational opportunity, and even elected office, but many college graduates don't have more advanced forms of expertise that employers, university researchers, or community members desire. Journalists tell grim stories about unemployed and underemployed college graduates unable to recoup their investments in higher education. Such students are described as too narrow or too shallow in their undergraduate training to succeed. They are caricatured as excessively dependent on authority figures and only expert at being college students.

It is also important to stand out in a large pool of potential applicants, where being "well-rounded" just isn't enough. Being able to tell defining and memorable stories about your experiences outside of college are often very important to audiences far removed from campus settings.

Here are four questions that should help you get started writing this short reflective essay. You do not need to answer all of them, but you might want to choose at least one question to answer as a way to organize your essay.

1) Describe a case when your work was evaluated as excellent by an audience outside UCSD. Are you an expert computer programmer, blues guitarist, martial artist, translator, pastry chef, or EMT? (Hint: we have all of those specializations represented in our class.) What criteria for excellence or personal qualities were important when you were judged by this outside body? What was your attitude about contributing your labor to such work or projects? What made the final product so distinctive to others?

2) We are all members of communities outside UCSD. Those communities may be defined by culture, language, family, neighborhood, religion, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, political activism, military service, scientific or artistic expertise, and many other possible features or traditions. How does your relationship to your community shape who you are today? What makes you an insider with a unique perspective? To what extent do you also feel like an outsider or critical observer?

3) One common complaint about recent college graduates is that they may lack independent problem solving abilities because they have been told what to do and how to think for so many years. Given the sheltered routines of undergraduate life, such naysayers argue, typical students never get a chance to improvise and are never forced to adapt to new situations away from the cocoon of a protected college campus environment. Explain how your own experience defies this stereotype. What makes you able to solve real-world problems creatively without step-by-step directions?

4) Another common complaint about recent college graduates is that they don't understand the conventions, regulations, and practices of institutions and organizations. Describe a time when you discovered the merits of playing by established rules to preserve an important value (like fairness or stability) or when you had to be sensitive to the needs, feelings, or goals of others. What do you know about the rules of complex systems, structures, or social dynamics that a less mature student might overlook?

(Of course, people also love to complain that recent college graduates should be better writers. But hopefully we will take care of that possible complaint in this course.)