What Matters Most To You, And Why? The Stanford MBA Wants To Know, And So Should You

This question is simple enough; though coming up with your answer can be a lot more challenging. This notorious essay is at the heart of the MBA application to the Stanford GSB, and typically ties applicants in knots as they try to come up with an answer that they hope is clever, striking, or even profound.

Whether you’re actually applying to the MBA program at Stanford, or wondering about the career path that is right for you, taking the time to answer this question can provide invaluable insight about your life purpose, values, and true authentic self. When you understand what matters most to you, it’ll help solidify your self-awareness and give you a strong foundation. This will lead to success at business school but also success with relationships and career. It’s a question that is worth considering in spite of the pain and agony!

Stanford MBA Program essays provide you an opportunity to reflect on your own “truest interests” and “highest aspirations.” Derrick Bolton, Assistant Dean of MBA Admissions Stanford GSB

So why does Stanford ask this question, and why they have stuck with it for so long? For Heriberto Diarte, a Stanford GSB alumnus and alumni ambassador, the question really gets to the heart of what Stanford is about, and links strongly to the school’s tagline, ‘Change lives. Change organizations. Change
the world’. “Stanford is looking not just for extremely bright and successful professionals, but also young people who have strong values, and who want to have a positive impact in the world.”

“The school genuinely wants to get to know you and to understand your values,” Diarte explains. “Stanford MBAs are driven by a desire not just to excel in their careers but also to help others and have a positive impact.”

Compared to other top business schools, Stanford is a relatively small program of around 400 students, and is seeking to build a very close knit, supportive community. Diarte points to the incredible warmth and spirit of collaboration and friendship that permeates the whole experience. “Stanford students have the ability to open up, be vulnerable, and grow in a supportive yet challenging environment. As such, the Admissions office works very hard to bring together a group of students who are open, humble and have strong integrity and this provides the foundation of the incredible level of camaraderie and trust that you find at the school. This is really core to Stanford’s brand and the identity of its community.”

So what matters most to you, and why? Start off with your intuitive or blink response. Write it down. We’ll come back to it later.

Now Stanford is suggesting 750 words for this essay. Maybe you feel that you can answer the first part of the question in one word, with things like family, love, or chocolate. But the heart of the question, the part that reveals your true calling in life requires deeper introspection. Why does that one thing matter more than any other?

If you’re staring at a blank page, perhaps we can start with some of the advice that Stanford GSB itself provides. They suggest that you think in terms of who you are, lessons and insights that have shaped your perspectives, and events that have influenced you. And they encourage you to write from the heart.

Stanford’s Assistant Dean of MBA Admissions, Derrick Bolton has been quoted to say, “please think of the Stanford essays as conversations on paper – when we read files, we feel that we meet people, also known as our “flat friends” – and tell us your story in a natural, genuine way.” If you look up ‘story’ in the dictionary, you will find a definition along the lines of ‘an account of imaginary or real people and events told in an entertaining way.” The best essays are told in a compelling ‘story-like’ way that may involve emotion, humor, inspiration, wit, insight, honesty, and simply – being yourself. A Stanford GSB admissions officer may be reading 20 applications today, 30 tomorrow, and hundreds more in the following weeks. So how can you make an impact, sound intelligent, be original, and engage your reader? This is no easy task but it’s time to put on your thinking hat and reach inwards to tell the story that you are the best qualified to write.

Our team at Fortuna Admissions offer advice on how to best tackle the structure of this essay, while telling your ‘story’:

1. Start with identifying a person, event, or experience that greatly impacted you.

2. What morals, values, and lessons did you gain from this experience?

3. How do you use these morals, value, and lessons today, and how do they impact your drive, your motivation, and your vision of the world? (Remember, Stanford’s mission statement is ‘change lives, change
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organizations, change the world.

4. How has the development of your career linked to the above?

5. Conclude by restating the link between your values and your career vision, and why these goals are important to you.

If you’re still drawing a blank as to what really matters to you, start by noting down all of your experiences to date, and exploring things like:

- What was it like growing up? How did your parents/guardians and your surroundings shape you? Were you a happy child? What were you regularly involved in (by force or by choice)?
- What was school like? Were you focused? How did your friends influence you? What kind of people did you hang around with? How did you feel, emotionally as a teenager? What did you get involved with?
- What has your career been like? Are you happy with your choices? Any regrets? What do you like/dislike about your job and why?
- What extra-curricular activities and hobbies do you engage in and what’s the reason behind them?
- What do you love or hate about life? What makes you happy or sad, frustrated or upset?
- What gets you up (or not get up) in the morning? In this life, what do you really care about?

Now look at all of your answers – including what you initially wrote down as your gut response. Can you identify an underlying theme (or themes) throughout your life? I bet you can. It might amaze you that you have a method to the madness in your life! You could even talk to friends and family as they may have some anecdotes about you that have slipped your mind. Now, through telling an interesting story, highlight the key themes and connect them to the general ideas expressed in your essays.

Even though you might have to spend hours on this essay through brainstorming, research, talking with others, writing a draft, then another (and then another), just remember that it’s all inside you... it’s your story, and you just have to find it and pull it out.

Shouldn’t we all really think about what matters most to us, whether we are applying to business school or not? This essay is, in fact, a very beneficial exercise to help with self-awareness, to understand why we do the things we do, and why we make certain choices in life. Take this on as a personal feat, not as an MBA essay question. Stanford wants to know what matters most to you, and so should you.

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