

CONGRESS-BUNDESTAG-PROGRAM ESSAYS

by [Brian Tomasik](#)

written around end of 2004 / beginning of 2005

I applied for this scholarship to live for a year in Germany. I faced competition from a few other people in my local area, and I was ultimately rejected. I think I did poorly in the in-house interview, where we were supposed to interact with our fellow applicants and answer questions in front of a judge panel. In any case, I did get something useful out of the experience: I applied for my first passport.

Following are some of the questions that the application included.

--Brian, 4 Aug. 2014

1. Choose one of the activities you listed on Part C and describe your participation in depth. What difference has it made in your life and in the lives of others?

The most important project that I have ever undertaken has probably been my effort to encourage the Guilderland school district to buy recycled copy paper instead of virgin. I began the project in tenth grade with the Student Environmental Action Coalition. After asking the district business official about the virgin paper currently in use, I wrote to regional paper distributors to see how their brands of recycled paper would compare. I also prepared a report on the environmental benefits of recycled paper and wrote a draft letter describing my proposal for the district administration. When I met with the district superintendent, he was very impressed by my argument and agreed to have the business official request prices for both virgin and recycled paper in all future bids. The first bid showed a cost difference of \$5,000, which was too high for the administration to accept. Nevertheless, I intend to continue raising support for my proposal; the next step may be to present a paper-purchasing policy to the Board of Education.

Regardless of how the effort ends up, its impact on me has been substantial. I have learned a lot, not only about recycled paper but also about how to request information and ask for guidance on what to do next. And in the process of trying to change the school policy, I found myself becoming more paper-conscious as well. I began to print less and less from the Internet, and what I did print was on scrap paper; I also used fewer paper towels and more cloth rags. The effect has worn off on others, too: both of my parents have become similarly aware of paper use, and one of my friends at school—who said that I have made him more environmentally conscious—told me how upset he was that the Albany County Legislature's thick agenda is printed on only one side of the paper. In addition, my mother has researched the possibility of conversion to recycled paper by the Altamont Library, while the secretary of the Altamont Reformed Church has already switched the church to recycled paper because of my example. Even if I cannot ultimately convince the school district to buy recycled paper, these impacts on the attitudes of myself and others will have made the endeavor worthwhile.

[Note from 4. Aug. 2014: I no longer know whether I support recycled paper, because paper production may reduce wild-animal habitats. The [topic is complex](#) and should be explored further.]

4. Describe a non-academic situation in which you have had to face defeat or failure, or have made a mistake, and explain how you dealt with it.

I am unable to think of any instances of a defeat or mistake powerful enough that I had to cope significantly with it. I can, however, relate a few examples of failure to do something or fear of doing something and how I attempted to improve.

One example is exercise. For most of my life, I never had a regular exercise routine. During the summer, I was somewhat active playing tennis, but there was nothing that I did consistently; moreover, my activity largely stopped once winter came. At the end of my 11th-grade year, I set out to change that. By simply deciding that the present satisfaction and future health benefits of regular exercise were far too important to forgo, I motivated myself to exercise almost every day during that summer and I have continued to do that almost as regularly now that I am back in school.

A second example of determination to change is in the area of public speaking. Giving a presentation, whether before the class or in a meeting, had always been one of my most dreaded activities, not because I did badly but because I was afraid to talk before a large audience. But instead of escaping from the task whenever possible, I resolved to make myself less nervous by practicing it more often. In 11th grade, I took a class on public speaking; it taught me not just elocutionary skills but confidence and calmness. I gained further practice whenever one of my clubs hosted a speaker at the high school, because I always gave a brief introduction of the club before the presentation began. To be sure, I am still nervous before any talk in front of a large group, but I have done it enough that it has become more routine and less terrifying.

5. It is natural for exchange students to feel homesick during a year away from friends, family and school activities. Reflect for a moment on what it will be like to live as a member of a family in Germany. What problems or challenges other than language might you expect to encounter and how might you deal with them? What is it about the exchange experience that appeals to you?

I do not anticipate encountering many problems during my stay in Germany. I will no doubt feel some homesickness, but I am already somewhat used to not seeing close family members every day, especially now that my sister is away at college. My current household does not really have any rules that I have to follow, but I think that I am flexible and tolerant enough that I would not really mind if my German host family did. I consider myself to have a positive outlook, and I tend to get along well with practically everyone I meet. The few problems that might arise would probably be in the areas of food (I am a picky eater), entertainment activities (I do not enjoy watching a lot of television or listening to a lot of music), and schedule (such as when the family wakes

up); however, all of these would be fairly minor difficulties that could be easily resolved by discussion. I am not pretending that living in another country, attending school in a foreign language, and making friends all over again will be easy, but I think that the challenge involved with adjusting to a new lifestyle will make the experience all the more worthwhile.

The prospect of living in Germany is particularly exciting to me because I have never before traveled outside of the United States. Being immersed in the country for a whole year will give me a firsthand view of the people, history, culture, and politics of Germany (and other parts of Europe) in a way that is not possible for tourists or temporary visitors. Although I am already fairly proficient in German from school, I am anxious to acquire the degree of fluency that is only possible when one is surrounded by the language for a long time. In addition, I hope that taking a year off from my regular academic work will allow me more time to open my eyes to the larger world and all of the possibilities that it holds. And, after my year in Germany is over, I will be able to bring to college a richer understanding of what other parts of the world are really like.