



THE US PERSONAL ESSAY MASTER GUIDE

Featuring 50 Essays from Top
US University Admits



A CRIMSON EDUCATION PUBLICATION



01.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to "The US Personal Essay Master Guide," crafted by Crimson Education's experts. This ebook is your essential resource for mastering personal essay writing for admission to top US universities.

In the competitive landscape of university admissions, the Personal Statement serves as more than just a requirement—it's your chance to shine, to stand out amidst a competitive pool of applicants, and to convey your unique voice and perspective to admissions officers. Our mission with this guide is simple: to demystify the essay-writing process and provide you with the tools and inspiration needed to craft essays that leave a lasting impression.

What sets this guide apart is the inclusion of 50 real-world examples from successful applicants to top US universities. These essays offer more than just examples of effective writing—they provide a glimpse into the lives, experiences, and passions of fellow students who have successfully navigated the admissions process.

Within these pages, you'll find practical advice, expert tips, and actionable strategies aimed at helping you transform your ideas into powerful narratives that resonate with admissions committees. Whether you're at the initial stage of brainstorming essay topics or refining your final drafts, you'll discover guidance tailored to every step of the writing journey.

Ready to embark on your personal essay writing journey?



02.

THE HOLISTIC US APPLICATION PROCESS

It is important to understand the unique, holistic application process that US universities are renowned for. Top US universities look for students who possess a combination of intellectual vitality, leadership, initiative, and creativity. This is demonstrated through:

40%

- **Academics**

Top universities seek students who have consistently demonstrated academic excellence through outstanding high school grades, top school ranking positions, and participation in advanced courses, such as AP, A-Levels, or IB classes.

- **Standardised Tests (SAT/ACT)**

Standardised tests, like the SAT and ACT, are used to help measure a student's aptitude for university-level studies. While top universities typically have high average SAT and ACT scores among their admitted students, many of these institutions have transitioned to test-optional policies in recent years.

30%

- **Extracurricular and Leadership Activities:**

Top universities seek students who are actively engaged in their communities. This is demonstrated through a diverse range of extracurricular activities. They value students who demonstrate initiative, teamwork, and a commitment to making a positive impact. This could include involvement in sports teams, clubs, community service projects, or other endeavours that align with their aspirations.

30%

- **Essays**

The Personal Statement and Supplemental Essays provide students with an opportunity to showcase their personalities, experiences, and aspirations. Top universities seek students who can write thoughtfully and reflectively about themselves.

- **Letters of Recommendation**

Letters of recommendation from teachers, counsellors, and other mentors can provide valuable insights into a student's character and potential. Top universities look for students who have strong recommendations from people who know them well.

- **Interviews**

Some top universities also conduct personal interviews with applicants. These interviews allow the university to get to know the student better and assess their fit with the institution.



03.

WHAT IS THE PERSONAL ESSAY?

The Personal Essay (also known as Personal Statement) is a 650-word essay that is sent to every school you apply to in the Common Application. This essay serves as a powerful tool to bring your application to life, demonstrating through words who you are as an individual, your personal qualities, goals, and motivations.

The Personal Essay plays a vital role in differentiating applicants. With admissions rates for top US universities being notoriously low, a well-written essay might be the difference between an acceptance or rejection:

+ Illuminate Your Character

Through the Personal Essay, applicants can illuminate their character, values, and unique perspective, showcasing their fit for the university's community and culture.

Examples of personal qualities admissions officers look for:

- Self-awareness and reflection
- Social awareness
- Willingness to grow
- Problem-solving skills
- Critical thinking
- Service-oriented mindset
- Their compassionate nature
- Resourcefulness



+ Enhance Diversity and Depth

By sharing life experiences and backgrounds, applicants enrich the diversity and depth of the student body, demonstrating their potential contribution to campus life.

+ Demonstrate Skills and Capacity

The essay allows applicants to demonstrate communication skills, critical thinking ability, and capacity for self-reflection, essential attributes for success in university and beyond.

+ Provide Context and Address Discrepancies

Applicants can provide context for academic achievements and address any discrepancies in their academic record, offering a more holistic view of their capabilities.

+ Highlight Strengths and Aspirations

The Personal Essay highlights individual strengths, achievements, and aspirations, helping applicants stand out amidst a pool of competitors.

+ Assess Potential Contributions

Through the essay, admissions officers can assess an applicant's potential for making meaningful contributions to the university community and society at large.

This is what
YALE

has to say about the essays:



When you write your essays and short answer responses, write about something that matters to you. Use your own voice. Your perspective – the lens through which you view your topic – is far more important than the specific topic itself.”

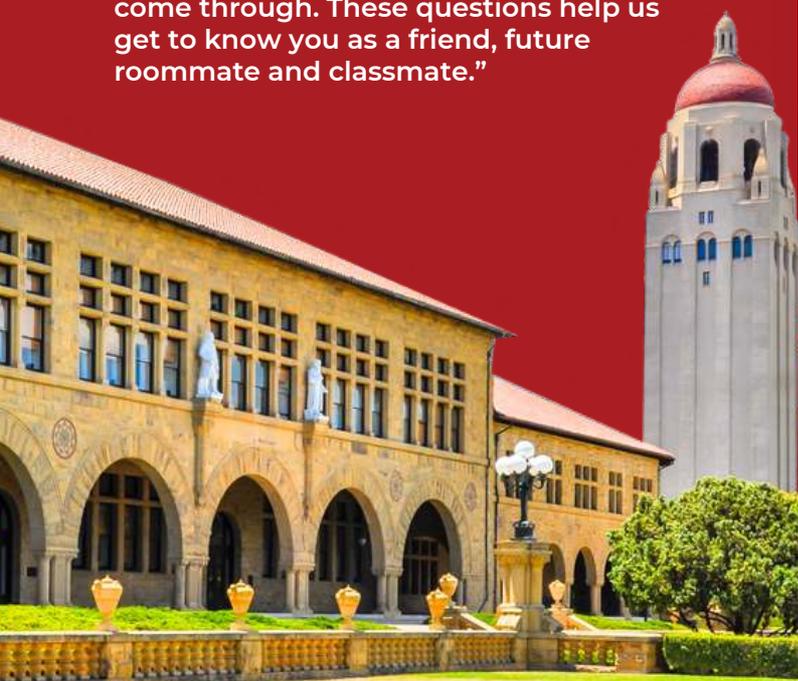


This is what
STANFORD

has to say about the essays:



The essays are your chance to tell us about yourself in your own words; there are no right or wrong answers and you should allow your genuine voice to come through. These questions help us get to know you as a friend, future roommate and classmate.”



Essays Beyond the Common Application

When applying to universities, students often encounter additional essay requirements beyond the Common Application. The Coalition Application typically requires a Personal Statement along with school-specific supplements. Similarly, the Universal College Application (UCA) commonly necessitates a Personal Statement or Essay, often accompanied by additional supplements tailored to specific colleges. Additionally, the University of California (UC) Application stands out with its requirement for applicants to respond to four out of eight personal insight questions, each limited to a maximum of 350 words.



04.

PERSONAL ESSAY PROMPTS

While the Common App Personal Essay does not have a specific structure besides the 650-word limit, here are some sample Common Application prompts you can consider.

- + Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- + The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- + Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- + Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
- + Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

05.

WRITING THE PERSONAL ESSAY: KEY STEPS SIMPLIFIED

While there are many ways to write a good essay, here is a roadmap on how to get started.

Step 1: Brainstorm impactful experiences and passions.

Review your prompts. Then, using paper, an app, or your phone, write down as much as you can, responding directly to those prompts. Once you're done, filter through your results and rank the results according to which experiences and passions have impacted your growth the most. No major transformation is necessary; after all, many of you are still in high school. That being said, there still needs to be some kind of growth demonstrated.

Most good essays begin at a specific point in time and revolve around a specific event. Your passions can also work as a starting point for an essay topic, so long as you're clear on how the passion has impacted you and your view of the world.

Step 2: Figure out what you learned.

Once you've decided on your topic, list out:

- What you learned
- Why it matters to you
- How it connects to who you are now
- How it will help you become who you want to be
- How this has helped your perspectives grow and change over time

Admissions officers care more about the insights you have than they do about the event that you're writing about in your essay. You don't need to tell a sad or traumatic story — and in fact, trying to lean on sympathy doesn't work with admissions officers. They want to see personal growth, even if it comes from seemingly insignificant experiences.

Step 3: Draft a very rough 1st copy.

Assemble your notes and puzzle them together. Don't focus on perfection or the word count yet. Make sure that your writing involves:

- Your experience
- Make sure your 'story' develops with a beginning, middle, and end
- A clear resolution or lesson
- How you will apply this lesson in the future

Having trouble writing or getting started? Try voice recording your thoughts, asking a friend to scribe, or using voice-to-text.

Step 4: Edit.

Now that your first draft is complete, it's time to edit for grammar, word choice, and clarity. Ensure that your essay remains focused on your reflections. Once you've finished editing, seek feedback from trusted friends, family, or consider getting personalised support from Crimson Education's experts for suggested edits. This process will guide you through creating second, third, and fourth drafts of your Personal Essay.



Step 5: Double-check your deadlines.

Are you looking to apply for Early Action/Early Decision? Or just in the Regular Round? Nevertheless, you'll need to make sure you know when your applications are due! Most Early Action deadlines are around November 1st, but some might even be as early as October 15th! Otherwise, regular round applications are usually due around the end of December to early January.

Step 6: Finalise your essay.

Some people need to make 10 drafts. Others 50. Some, 5. Whatever that number is for you, that's okay so long as you're not falling into the trap of "analysis paralysis."

Focus on insights and takeaways from an experience, rather than the experience itself.

Successful essays are often humble and reflect a student's capacity to struggle with and conquer difficulty, rather than implying that the student is already an expert. Students should not be afraid to admit their mistakes, show how mentors inspired them, and celebrate their resilience in times of hardship.



06.

TIPS FROM A FORMER ADMISSIONS OFFICER

Meet Eileen Dougherty. Eileen was a Former Admissions Officer at three US universities and, most recently, at the University of Pennsylvania. As an Admissions Officer for nearly ten years, she visited high schools around the United States to inform prospective students about the school, evaluated applications, and interviewed prospective students. Eileen has been an Admissions Strategy for Crimson Education for the past five years, and her students have been accepted to many of the best schools in the US. Here are some of her top tips on both what to include and what not to include.



What to Write ✓

01. Content that is unique to you
02. Content that allows you to explore your personal traits and characteristics (ingenuity, resourcefulness, resilience, creativity, etc.)
03. Content that shows your personality (sense of humour, intellectual curiosity, etc.)
04. Show, don't tell!

What NOT to Write ✗

01. A list of achievements and accomplishments
02. Content that rehashes what is already listed in other sections of your Common App
03. Unnecessarily ornate and/or convoluted language
04. Content that tries to prove your academic superiority (like the time you won a competition or prestigious award)



07.

THE SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS

The supplemental essays required by US universities play a crucial role in the admissions process. While the Common Application questions provide standard information, the supplemental questions are where individual universities have the opportunity to truly understand applicants and assess their fit for the campus community. These essays offer applicants the chance to distinguish themselves and demonstrate why they are the ideal candidate for a particular institution. Underestimating the importance of supplemental essays can lead to missed opportunities and potential rejection. Therefore, applicants need to approach these essays with diligence and care.

+ What the Admissions Officers expect

Admissions Officers use supplemental essays to fill out their picture of who you are and learn things about you that are not contained in the rest of your application. The supplemental essays shouldn't contradict anything you've written elsewhere, but they shouldn't repeat anything either.

If we were to choose three words that are key to the success of your supplemental essays, they'd be **specificity, authenticity, and commitment**.

When it comes to **specificity**, universities want you to go deep into your research on what they have to offer, and the various unique aspects of their campuses that appeal to you directly. That means taking time to do substantive research—it doesn't mean finding the first class on microeconomics they offer and mentioning it in your essay, because that's neither specific to the university (every university has an intro to microeconomics class!) nor is it specific to you (thousands of students will take a class like that).

When it comes to **authenticity**, universities are looking for personality and individuality. That means talking narrowly and specifically about what interests you. If you love completing Rubik's cubes as a hobby, that should go in the essay. If you love model trains, that should go in the essay — the key

is just finding an outlet for it at the university (a cubing club? or a hobby club?). Don't just talk generally about the "incredible career opportunities" — what specifically is going to be great for you?

When it comes to **commitment**, universities want to see that you're the type of person who's had experience committing to extracurricular activities and your various communities in the past and that you intend to do so at their school in the future. You can express this eagerness to commit in ways small and large—it can be as simple as saying something like "I plan to build on a passion for community service that began in high school by joining the Bay Area Tutoring Association at Stanford." Little additions like that show that you value your commitment to things you did in the past and plan to continue building on that commitment in the future.

Supplemental essays can range in length from a single sentence or series of words to an entire 650-word essay.



+ Supplemental Essays: The Types and Top Tips on How to Answer Them

Broadly speaking, there are eight main types of supplemental essays. In the following sections, we will explore each of these types and provide top tips on how to effectively respond to them.

01. The 'Why us? / Why you?' Question

For a 'why us' prompt, your focus should be on (1) what the school offers and (2) how it aligns with your interests, passions, and values. The university is asking you: "Why are you choosing us?" For a 'why you' essay, your focus should be on (1) your interests, passions, and values, and (2) how they align with what the school offers. The university is asking you: "Why should we choose you?"

Top Tip:

The 'Why us' / 'Why you' questions are two sides of the same coin, but the order in which you present the items -- and the amount of the essay you spend on them -- is reversed for each. Ultimately, your goal with this essay should be to sincerely, authentically, and excitedly tell admissions committees what you will get out of going to their school in particular, and what you will contribute to their school as a student there. Which specific opportunities will you take advantage of? How will you bring your skills and past experiences to bear as a leader and collaborator on their campus?

02. The academic interest essay

These essays ask you to explain your intended choice of major, or if you don't have one, your academic interests in general. They are typically 'short' answer questions - with universities often asking for responses in 150-250 words.

Top Tip:

When answering this prompt you must address three questions: Why do you want to study your elected future major area of study (or if you are undecided, you'll need to write about your primary area(s) of academic interest), what your goals are for the future, and how pursuing this course of study will help you to achieve them. You don't need to know exactly what you plan to do in the future, but it'll make your essay a lot stronger to have a few ideas and try to develop those ideas with a bit of detail!

03. Describe an extracurricular

Tell us about an extracurricular activity you're involved in and how it has shaped you. Once again these questions normally ask for a 150-250 word response. In these essays, you explore one of your extracurriculars in greater depth.

Top Tip:

In this essay, it's more important to talk about something that matters to you than it is to talk about something impressive. With this question, admissions officers want to know (1) which item on your activities list is most important to you, and why; (2) what is something about your participation in that activity that we can't learn elsewhere on your application; (3) what you have learned through your experience doing that activity that you can take into the future; and (4) how this extracurricular positively impact others and/or embody your values?



04. The meaning of community

Universities may word these questions somewhat like this: “Our college campus is all about community and valuing a diverse group of people. In what ways do you value community? How have you contributed to communities in the past? What would you bring to our community?” As you can see in this case you need to narrow down what you would bring to this specific university’s community.

Top Tip:

In asking this question, admissions officers are trying to find out: What in particular does our school have to offer that you’d like to get involved in as a future student? And... What will you contribute or bring to the table as a student on our campus? In answering these questions you must show how your past experience as part of a community informs what you’ll contribute.

05. The second Common App essay

These essays can vary in content just like the Common App essay, and they are similar in length (500-650 words). They might ask you to write about a person who has inspired you, write about an experience that has shaped how you approach the world or use a quote as a starting place to tell them about your perspective.

Top Tip:

This supplemental essay type typically asks you to write a 500-650 word piece using a usually broad prompt to guide your answer. Writing this essay is like writing a second Common App essay - but you must be sure to pick a new topic that explores a new area of your past, interests, personality or attributes.

06. Short takes

Some universities ask you to provide brief descriptions of yourself or things you like in 100 words or less - sometimes without even using complete sentences. They might ask for two adjectives your friends would use to describe you; your favourite word; or what your favourite snack is; or who (living or dead) you’d like to ask a question to, and what you’d ask them; or if you were teaching a class, what it’d be called.

Top Tip:

These short answer questions can be hard to tackle! Top tips include: answer the question, but don’t repeat it, consider the underlying message you are sending, explain your answer and be specific!

07. Write a letter to your future roommate prompt

This prompt is pretty self-explanatory, the aim of it being for admissions officers to gauge what you will bring to campus as an enthusiastic, passionate, intellectual and empathetic member of the college community. They can be creative, humorous, reflective, inspirational — whatever theme and style reflects your personality best.

Top Tip:

These questions provide a great opportunity to show what you will bring to campus on a micro level. Will you be the ball of energy that exudes positivity, or the reflective listener who is always there to lend a helping hand? This question must be honest and reflect a side of yourself that will provide a true insight as to who you are beyond the classroom.

08. Miscellaneous prompts

These are the creative or otherwise unusual prompts (“Design a major,” “Design a class,” “What do you do for fun?,” “Choose an image that represents you,” “What gets you excited about learning?,” etc.) that vary in length and style. While not common, they can be great fun for applicants to create!

Top Tip:

These questions vary, but some basic tips include: be personal (go deep!), be humble (no bragging!), be intellectually curious (show your love of learning) and be genuine (no platitudes or clichés).





08.

OUR ESSAY SUPPORT - CRIMSON STUDENTS' UNIQUE POSITION

When it comes to helping students secure a spot at a top US university, their application essays are not just pieces of writing; they are the key to helping them stand out from the sea of extremely qualified applicants.

Our essay reviewers are the same experts who have helped Crimson students gain admission to the Ivy League and other top schools at a rate that is **4.5x higher than the general applicant.** They know what works and how to help the students craft essays that truly shine.

+ Application Mentor

We provide every student with a specialist essay mentor — someone who has graduated from a top university and knows precisely what admissions officers look for.

+ Personal Narrative

Our methodology helps applicants develop a complete story that weaves their application together, giving them the edge they need to leave a lasting impression on the admissions committee.

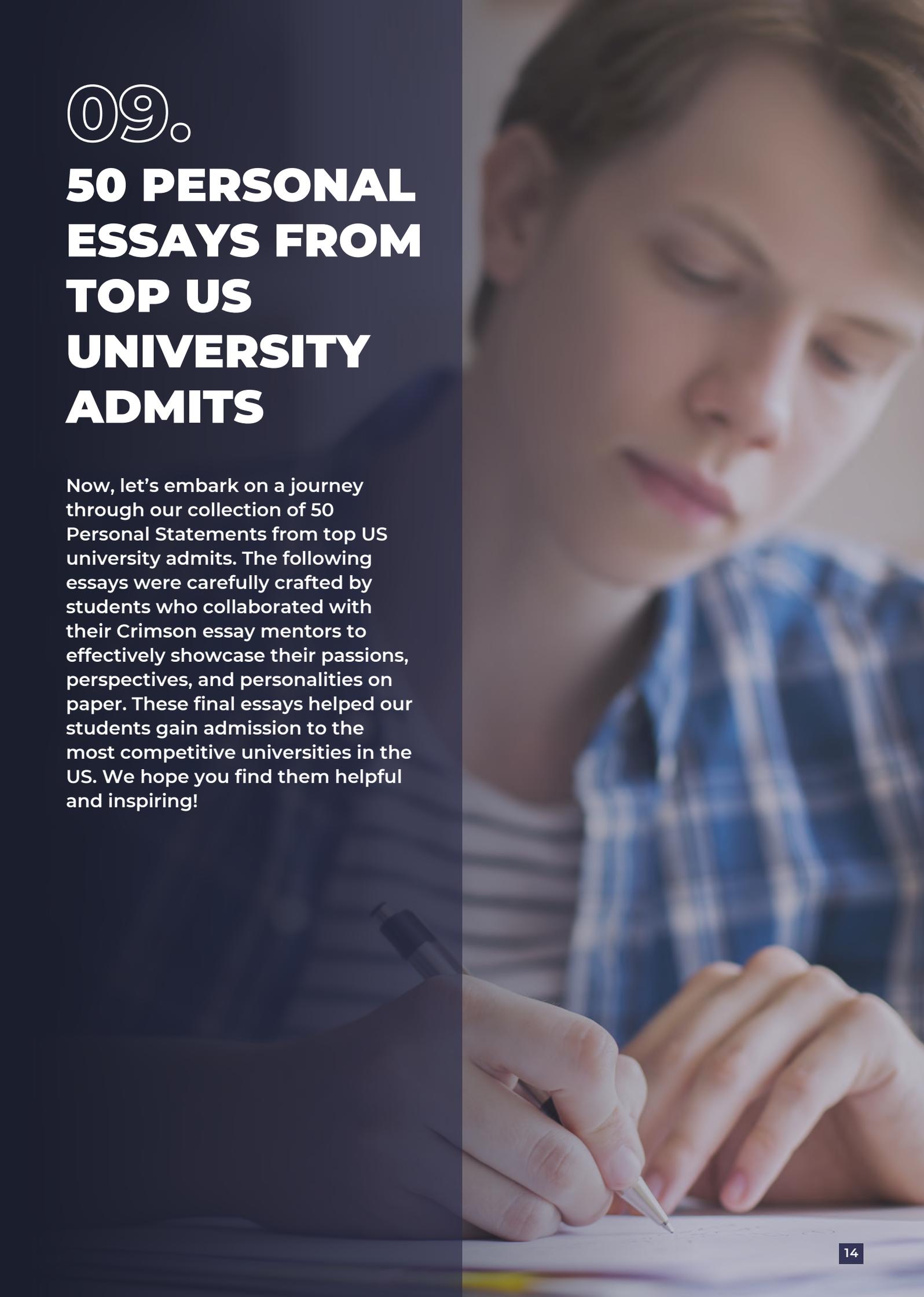
+ Thorough Revisions

We offer comprehensive revisions with no limits on the number of edits. Our goal is to help the student refine their essays until they reflect their true potential and passions.

+ Former Admissions Officer Review

At Crimson, we also provide a Former Admissions Officer (FAO) review service, where the student's university application will be reviewed by FAOs who have worked at the Ivy League and other top schools, including Stanford, Duke, UChicago, Columbia, Cornell, UC Berkeley, and more. These experts will evaluate the student's application as if they were sitting in the admissions office and provide invaluable feedback to the student and their family.





09.

50 PERSONAL ESSAYS FROM TOP US UNIVERSITY ADMITS

Now, let's embark on a journey through our collection of 50 Personal Statements from top US university admits. The following essays were carefully crafted by students who collaborated with their Crimson essay mentors to effectively showcase their passions, perspectives, and personalities on paper. These final essays helped our students gain admission to the most competitive universities in the US. We hope you find them helpful and inspiring!

Essay #1

Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Columbia, the University of Pennsylvania and 20 more!

The Surgeon

The apron drooped to my knees. I was emblazoned with the 'Hi, My Name is Jamie' sticker, coupled with a scarlet employee-in-training hat. The 'Fresh not Frozen, Grilled not Fried' motto resonated in my mind. It was July 2011. I had taken the plunge and secured my very first part time job. I was flipping burgers, and I was excited.

I was accustomed to academia, to the sports field, to the stage, but this was an entirely fresh paradigm. Anuj, the staff trainer and joyously friendly employee tasked with the rather unfortunate challenge of having to teach me hamburgerological cuisine greeted me with a firm handshake. This guy meant business.

The familiar fast-food funk wafted through the tiny store like cologne in an airport duty free store – overpowering, faintly nauseous and all-encompassing. The filing cabinets in my mind usually reserved for physics formulas, economics jargon and debating cases were tipped out and crammed with permutations and combinations of burgers – Otopo, Chicken Wrappa, Bondi. Exceptions to French conjugations were momentarily replaced with extra topping combos. The till became my new graphical calculator.

With surgeon-like precision Anuj modeled how to wrap a burger in four swift motions – place burger in the dead centre, pull wrap from left to right, then right to left, then roll the corners. He gestured towards his demonstration model and motioned for me to take to the stage. It was show time! Unfortunately, my burger ended up looking like the after effects of Hurricane Katrina. Anuj patted me on the back, said 'you'll learn fast' – and smirked.

Suddenly the barricades were overrun and an influx of jandal-wearing, sun-glass toting beach-goers charged into the store. The orders came flying faster than budget cuts at a Tea Party convention. I heard the petrifying three words 'chicken tenderloin combo'. This was it, the Everest of my culinary career. It involved delving into the boss's prized stock of 'succulent tenderloins' as he had described, 'the highest quality meat we sell, expensive to buy and delicate to cook, we can't afford any mistakes'. I was handling meaty gold. As the first tenderloin slapped onto the grill with a satisfying sizzle, I could imagine the boss's scorching eyes scrutinizing my every action from behind the prying lens of the staff security camera. Sun-glass toter number two, the tenderloin culprit, then muttered 'Excuse me! Sorry mate, my fault, I meant the chicken nuggets.'

Silently, I screamed. I grimaced, pirouetted and pleaded with the security camera. Anuj saw my face, contorted in anguish, and took to the rescue with business-like efficiency. He rolled his eyeballs. In one graceful movement he scooped the tenderloins and flicked them into the cooler with one hand, and in perfect synchrony, removed the emergency chicken nuggets with the other. His eyes glistened with intensity. With consummate mastery his arms flicked from grill to cooker to table to bread to wrap. In less than ninety seconds, the order was complete. The boss's eyeballs returned to their sockets. The day was saved. I worship the Anuj's of this world. Certain jobs may look simple but that simplicity masks years of expertise. My skills in the rococo art of burger flipping paled into insignificance beside the master. I learnt more than burger flipping that day. I learnt humility, respect and the value of a good chicken tenderloin.

Harvard University, Princeton University

March 15 is a date imprinted in my memory- the day 51 innocent people were killed, one mile from my home because they were Muslim.

A stream of heartbreak, hurt and horror filled the air as our city locked down. I was in disbelief, driven by my lack of education on the people in my community. Before this day, New Zealand's darkest day, the term massacre was absent from my mind. The mosque I jogged past almost every day was a place so foreign to me. My only exposure to religion was wrapped in the chapel I attended once a week as insisted by my school. Before I could showcase acceptance and diversity to the 700 women at my school as Head Girl, I needed to grow beyond my natural bubble and step foot into someone else's story.

Bordering the first anniversary, I brought together Muslim victims and student leaders from across the city, to Al Noor Mosque. I held onto the hope that Shahd, the one Muslim student at my school, would feel as though she had a whole army of people behind her, curious to learn about her religion because it is special. Inside this mosque where children, women and men were mercilessly gunned down, we took part in Islamic prayer together whether we were Muslim or non-Muslim. I spoke to a man called Farid. Farid's wife was shot and killed as she attempted to salvage her brothers and sisters. Farid sat peacefully in a wheelchair, not as a result of the Islamophobic attack, but after being hit by a drunk driver. The first words he spoke contradicted all the menace he had faced during his lifetime: "Forgiveness". "Forgiveness towards my wife's killer was not something I needed to think about, it came immediately. He was a victim too by having hate in his heart". I attempted to hide my watery eyes behind the hijab that hugged my crown.

After March 15, I learned the real value of people, especially those outside of my instinctive circle. I answered the question that always sits at the forefront of my mind- "What

is the most important thing in my life?" He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. It is people, it is people, it is people. I realised that we are all people with stories to tell. We live in a world that is the home of every king and queen, every hero and coward, and every Muslim and Christian. We must abandon the questions of reputation and riches, and start seeking knowledge about what's actually important- people's stories. I am a person with a story. We all are.

It is quite obvious I wouldn't be here today without my parents, nevertheless, they are at the roots of my story, interests and dreams. At the age of 10, I would recite my father's emails aloud as he struggled to read beyond the words 'you', 'at' and 'I'. Dad left school at fifteen with the ambition to fuel the world and become one of the most promising farming stories in New Zealand. At his success, I grew up surrounded by potatoes, carrots, and herds of cows. The motto 'paddock to plate' was far too close for comfort as I harvested potatoes from dawn to dusk, then visited McDonald's the next day eating the spuds from my home. My exposure to the agricultural, business world is my story.

March 15, holds the worst act of terror seen on New Zealand soil, yet it made me grow. It forced me to be proud of my story and sparked my passion for sharing other people's stories through documentaries called 'Humans of Rangi'. Shown to the entire school fortnightly, students share their different cultures, upbringings and passions. Through these gems, our community has grown a sense of understanding among others. As the applause roars across the chapel after each new story is told, I feel fulfilled.

In a matter of seconds, I went from lying in my bed watching TikToks to sobbing from frustration, confusion, and hurt. When my mom received the phone call from her sister that lives in Colombia, she came running downstairs screaming, “mi Abuela!” We knew from the call that my Abuela was unwell, but with the distance separating my mom and me from my family, we could only hope for the best.

My mom had me at sixteen, and since she was my only parent, all her Colombian family felt like my immediate family. We left this family when I was seven, looking for better education and a chance for prosperity. Because of the distance between my family in Colombia and my mom and I, we always had a practical backup plan in case something happened to my mom. Still, I didn’t have a plan for how to face the death of a loved one from afar emotionally. Because of my mom’s youth, my great-grandmother always felt like a grandma, and I thought I would have more time with her.

When Abuela passed away, I hadn’t seen my extended family in a year. Though my mom had kept asking me to go on a short getaway to Colombia, I said no because I was scared of missing school. I was frustrated with myself, my selfish excuses, and the distance. We couldn’t just get in a car and go to her house. I had to sit on the 6-hour plane ride wishing for it to be a prank, waiting for my mom to pinch me and wake me up from the nightmare. The news of her death wasn’t sinking in.

Challenging times like these are when I start questioning our life choices: should we even live in the US? When we left, it was worth it to escape the toxic elements of my dad’s family, but now that I’m mature enough to create boundaries, is it worth staying here? In Colombia, my mom wouldn’t have to worry

much about me because we would always be surrounded and supported by family. But, while my mom and I may get emotional security in Colombia, we wouldn’t have the financial security we have in the USA.

While I still haven’t accepted Abuelita’s passing, it has made death more of a reality, and I know she will always be alongside me and will keep our family together. Being in Colombia after her passing was the first time we were all together as a family, putting our differences aside to grieve together, remember Abuelita, and make a delicious paella. My great-grandmother always saw me as a little girl; I was her Ana Matilde, her first and only great-grandchild, who will put her dreams and her family before anything else, just like Abuelita taught her. I regret that she won’t see me graduate from high school, but she will always be with me. Whenever I eat chicken, rice, and corn, I’m back at the kitchen table playing cards with her as we share our favorite dish. I will share it with my friends and family as they get to know the Ana that Abuelita didn’t get to know. As I continue growing, whatever version of myself I am will always contain a little bit of Abuelita.

Since Abuelita died in June of this year, I have thought of death with less fear and more adaptation. Abuela’s passing was deeply challenging, but it brought my faraway family together. I have also learned to appreciate the time I spend with my mom while it’s just us two before I leave for college next year, knowing everything is going to be okay and alleviating the guilt of leaving home. Accepting death goes hand in hand with taking responsibility for life; now that I consciously value my time with my loved ones, death has begun to feel like another part of life.

Yale University, Duke University, Northwestern University

In a discreet wooden box lay my memories as Polaroids captured by my dad. Unlike most, our eyes don't serve as the ultimate testament to our experiences because my dad and I suffer from congenital nystagmus, a condition of involuntary and uncontrollable eye movement that distorts vision. We therefore rely on his Polaroid Sun 600 to capture and stabilize our memories. In other words, Polaroid pictures symbolize long-term memories stored for later access. Today, these tangible recollections preserve my authenticity and reveal snapshots of my personal development.

The back of Photograph 1 reads: "Andrea gets her first pair of glasses (08/13/2007)." I sit in the ophthalmologist's office, subtly announcing my resignation by gazing at the floor. A month before, I had begun using an odd pair of rectangular magenta glasses that drew attention to my eyes, making my involuntary and repetitive eye movements more noticeable. Afraid of being questioned about my condition, I avoided eye contact and failed to ask for accommodations at school. Unwittingly, I became an introvert, yet to discover the value of adaptability.

Photograph 2 is labeled: "Dad runs the New York marathon (11/03/2013)." I stand beside my dad, who seems elated while he holds his medal with both hands. I can recall how he strenuously thrust forward as he was approaching the finish line. This was the first time that I saw movement as a positive force. As an 11-year-old, I started to embrace my condition by comparing my dad's graceful movements while running to the movement of my eyes. As a result, I began sitting in the front of every class, requesting adapted materials, and candidly telling my classmates about my condition. By the time I was 13, I had consecutively been chosen as a class representative and had a variety of friend groups. Nystagmus no longer defined me because I began to develop an adaptive mindset that empowered me to openly face uncertainty.

The caption of Photograph 3 reads: "Mexico Earthquake (9/21/2017)." I am loading emergency food and water supplies into a cargo van for disaster-affected families. Two days earlier, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico, opening my eyes to our broken health system and deficient policy response. However, the earthquake also allowed me to witness Mexico's adaptive reaction to severe adversity and encouraged me to found Yodoc, a nonprofit organization. Through Yodoc, I seek to empower Mexican youth and prepare them to drive social change by exposing them to STEM and healthcare. Having embraced my nystagmus and seen the potential of an adaptive mindset, I believe that Mexican youth need to be resourceful and emotionally intuitive in order to face our country's uncertain future.

Nystagmus has fueled my process of self-discovery by forcing me to adapt to my environment. My growing self-assurance is evident: I used to avoid eye contact, but I now treasure the opportunity to interact with others and thrive in a myriad of social settings. Uncertainty is now a sign of confidence because I have embraced all aspects of my identity. I owe the existence of this archive of personal development to my dad and his Polaroid Sun 600. However, in college, I will begin to capture my memories through my own lens. I am eager to see where I will take the first Polaroid and where that memory will take me.

Disciplined was the first word I used to describe myself. I can picture myself in the mirror:

hairspray in one hand, hairbrush in the other, slicking back my hair so not a single hair would budge as I danced—the lengths I would go to to look like an egg. Just like ballet required that level of tight control, I was like that as a person, too.

I was raised in an environment where emotions were looked down upon. My mother always told me not to cry, even when it was warranted. As a dancer, I was trained to constantly ignore pain to make physical challenges look effortless, my face hiding everything. I did the same for my thoughts and feelings, so that the inside of my head wouldn't budge either.

In high school, I began seeing contradictions to what I already knew, such as when my American textbook called Atatürk, someone more than a hero to me, a dictator. I was confused by the way things were “incorrectly” portrayed, but after investigating my thoughts, I realized that there isn't a singular point of view that's absolutely right, emboldening me to share more of my own personal beliefs.

When my ideas started changing, so did my feelings. I grew confident, challenging ideas and defending my own. Being more curious and open changed me as an artist. In my recent dance project, I portrayed Fear and Desire wearing a motion-capture suit, my dancing completely digitized and my face invisible. Emotions were the centerpiece of the project. Through this new dance performance, I had to let go of personal control and fear holding me back: my muscles relaxed and my face softened. After 14 years of dancing, I was finally free. Similarly with piano, I started feeling my pieces that I played rather than just listening to them. By exposing my vulnerability, I positively changed the energy of the room; I know the audience could feel my expression, too. Deepening and personalizing myself as an artist led to the most surprising development:

it brought into focus my relationship with people, not only music and movement. After first expressing myself to an audience, I began showing my truth to my friends, gaining the courage to open up one-on-one. Performing was like a rehearsal for more genuine connections in real life.

In my relationships, I've become candid and expressive, which has led to solving conflicts without hurting the other person due to bottled up emotions spilling out. Being open is not necessarily encouraged in Turkish society—I had experienced negative responses to my vulnerability, which made me fear it. I used to expect people to understand what I felt from the way I sulked or didn't talk after a small conflict because I was afraid to speak out. However, once I opened up to my friends, I was met with comfort and acceptance. I also noticed that not everyone responded the same way. When I told my mother how her words sometimes hurt me, she grew defensive and didn't listen to me. I would have done the same. But upon being more open, instead of blaming her, I tried to explain to her my own experience and point of view, and she responded by doing the same. We were both viewing the situation from completely different viewpoints, not accounting for what the other was feeling. Though it is not completely smooth, we both are working on it, and it all comes from our vulnerability.

I used to believe that being emotional made me appear weak. Now I know emotions aren't weak—they're human. I see my emotional vulnerability as a strength. And disciplined turned from emotional control into passion. After all, flexibility, not rigidity, is what makes a good dancer, pianist, thinker, friend...and daughter.

Kairos

Seated at the top of a hill, overlooking a valley of plantations, sat an old white house, with paint that was ever so slightly starting to chip. We walked up the steep staircase to enter the front door and were greeted with the smell of old wood and books; a smell that I would eventually come to miss. For four nights, my peers and I would live in this house for our Kairos retreat. Kairos is a retreat for juniors and seniors at my school, Loyola Blakefield. During the retreat, my classmates and I were put into small groups of 5-6 and led through a series of exercises to grow our relationships with God.

My meeting room was the last one on the left. The walls were painted green. There was an old chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The room was quiet which allowed thoughts to flow. The room smelled like the outdoor's brisk air. In this old room, the group leaders would ask us to draw and describe a graph of our lives with all the highs and lows of our 17 years. While I was able to write down my life graph, I had a hard time expressing my answers to the questions out loud. My parents got a divorce when I was 9. Life became more about my mother and father's relationship, or lack thereof, rather than caring for my siblings and me. I felt like it wasn't fair to dump this story on my groupmates. I felt like it was my baggage to carry, and not theirs.

I felt horrible that I couldn't express my answers in the small group. I met with the adult leader, who happened to be my guidance counselor, Mr. Lankford. Since I was a freshman, I had met with him every month. During my sophomore year, I went through a difficult time with lacrosse; I wasn't the starter on varsity, and I was having difficulty adjusting to my role as a backup in the sport I loved. When I spoke to him about lacrosse, my jealousy and anger started to fade away.

I didn't worry about how my coaches viewed me or how I wasn't getting the playing time I expected. Instead, I focused on myself and what I could do to improve my game. When I told Mr. Lankford I wasn't comfortable telling the group my story because I didn't think any of my group mates could relate to it, he responded by telling me the whole point of the small groups was to open up and be vulnerable. I decided to finally tell Mr. Lankford the story of my parents' divorce, in the hope that my thought process would change the same way it changed how I viewed being a backup my sophomore year. After speaking to Mr. Lankford, I built up enough courage to share the story with my small group the next day.

My story seemed to be unavoidable, and as time started to tick away, I became more and more nervous. I didn't know what to expect after telling my story. I couldn't tell if my parents' divorce was too much for my group mates to handle, and part of me still doubted if telling my story would make me feel differently. After sharing, I was surprised by the love and support of my group mates. I discovered that the divorce didn't define me as a person unless I wanted it to. Kairos was my reset button. It showed me that a problem is only a problem if I perceive it to be. I discovered that I was no longer chained to my past.

"True freedom is understanding that we have a choice in who and what we allow to have power over us."

— Meryl Streep

Cheese Dumplings

Whenever I eat ravioli, pierogi, or any other dumplings, I'm amazed by the variety of tastes wrapped inside that thin layer of dough. In my culture, dumplings—or jiaozi—aren't merely about flavor. They are the core of Chinese tradition, and the absolute star of the Spring Festival feast.

In my junior year, my 82-year-old grandma flew to America to celebrate the Spring Festival with us. I begged my mom for the last few medallions of dough and made my own filling: pork, cabbage, mushrooms, and one more secret ingredient.

Against my mother's protest, I added American cheese in the dumpling filling.

What went in the dumplings was more than just cheese. It was three years of replacing chopsticks with forks, replacing qipaos with skinny jeans and sandals, replacing timid smiles with hugs and screams when greeting mere acquaintances. After coming to the U.S., I abandoned my old preferences and tried to negate my past fourteen years in China. My alteration, however, alienated me from my family: while my parents listened to Chinese classics in the car, I put on headphones and listened to Taylor Swift; while they flipped through Chinese TV dramas in one room, I watched *Game of Thrones* in another. Once, when someone complimented me on my language ability, my parents thanked them with heavy accents and sighed: "See? Only young people can assimilate into a new culture. We're too old for that." I, too, thought a stark line separated us. Our paths diverged; I was on the road toward Americanization, while my parents stubbornly persisted in their native culture.

However, I didn't want my beloved jiaozi to follow my parents' path. These dumplings deserved the same transformation that I went through, and the cheese filling was a perfect example.

On the night of the feast, dumpling soup was served. My cheese dumplings did not go unnoticed: my father's face twisted, my mom

put down her spoon.

Then it was Grandma's turn.

"Aiyoo, why is this dumpling stinky? My dear, was this filling unrefrigerated for too long?"

Afterwards, everybody burst into laughter while I sat there with a weak smile. My mom sprung to the kitchen to boil more "normal" dumplings. But my grandma stopped her: "No, no! It's Joy's* new invention. Maybe I'll learn to like it if I eat more!" She bit into another one. "Mmm, not bad!"

I was speechless. How could an 82-year-old woman molded by conservative Chinese society be so receptive to my "Americanized" jiaozi? Did she accept them out of love? No—my parents loved me no less. Perhaps it was her age and life experiences that rendered her tolerant of any novelty.

I wondered: perhaps the Great Wall separating me from my elders was not impassible. After my grandma proved that age didn't prevent assimilation and a generation gap wasn't inevitable, I tried harder to bridge this gap within my family, and I noticed that, as a result, my parents reciprocated. They encouraged me to volunteer at the town hall for the presidential election although they were apolitical. My father watched the Super Bowl and happily bought a Boston Red Sox T-shirt. My mother learned to roast turkey for Thanksgiving and asked me to walk her through their tax returns.

To first-generation immigrants like myself, cultural exchange is like cooking: you don't have to abandon one ingredient for another; instead, every chef can blend any ingredients in different ratios to create distinct flavors. My flavor had more cheese than my parents', but both are delicious in their own way. I no longer hide the Chinese part of me, or perceive my Americanization as a trade-off for sacrificing family relationships. Instead, I am proud of being at the intersection of two distinct cultures. Now, with my family reminding me of my roots, I am more confident to explore other cultures, and to add new ingredients to my jiaozi.

Stanford University, Yale University, New York University and more

“Èkó ò ní bàjé ooooo,” my Grandma said to us in Yoruba at our annual Christmas dinner in Lagos, a bustling city in Nigeria.

I sat there confused about what this phrase meant but continued to speak in my English accent and show off the new vocabulary I had learnt from boarding school in England. As the granddaughter of the event, I thought it would only be polite to introduce myself around.

“Good evening, my name is Faramola Bakare and I am going to be the President of Nigeria,” I proclaimed loudly in my age-eleven voice. An elderly woman said to me, “that's not how to pronounce your name, young lady, you're speaking like Western people.” Everyone laughed, but I did not get the joke.

At school in England, I was known as the 'cool' Nigerian: the Nigerian who travels the world, attends the hottest concerts and hosts exuberant “owambes” (grandiose parties). I liked this version of me: it was the popular me. When I showed my friends pictures of Lagos, I only showed them the fancy shops and the sandy dunes of its beaches. I deleted the pictures of bad days in Lagos and maintained a perfect image of Lagos in order to counter the narrative of Africa, 'the heart of darkness' riddled with poverty. The illusion I had painted of Lagos to my schoolmates was too beautiful to be tainted by the bleaker reality: rubbish lining the streets, children begging on the side of the road, blaring melanges of police officers with AK-47s and nowhere to go. In truth, I was ashamed of Lagos.

Age 16, I was driving back from our family-organised food drive in Elegbata, an impoverished neighbourhood on the outskirts of Lagos, when my mum and I realised that we had a few more relief packages left. We decided to stop and distribute the rest of the packages in the community. In the blink of an eye, an army of men rushed to the car like they were chasing their kidnapped children. Soon after, violence broke out. I could feel the

hunger and desperation of the people, a moshpit of anger. The turmoil reflected the disease caused by socio-economic disparity within the community. At that moment, I feared that there was no cure.

I recognized that I was hiding the reality of Lagos from my friends because it was the easier option. I couldn't say my name because I didn't know who I was. I realised that I could not help a country I did not identify with, that was the joke.

“Èkó ò ní bàjé” means “Lagos will not spoil”. I am learning to take pride in my country and acknowledge that to help Lagos not spoil, I have to play my part. I now understand that having the privilege of soaking up the sun on the sandy dunes cannot insulate me from Nigeria's systematic issues.

More than ever, I am determined to understand Lagos' complex nature and champion my Grandma's mantra that Lagos will not spoil. To begin to address Lagos's systematic issues, I lead an outreach supporting single mothers to launch businesses in the Dopemu community. Last year, I created STEM in Africa (SIA), an organisation that raises awareness around careers in STEM for young African students. I believe advocating for STEM in Nigeria will catalyse a new way of thinking for the next generation of Africans. SIA has already impacted two hundred and thirty students' lives through STEM education and we are just getting started. I hope to better understand how to sustainably make an impact in communities.

At the inaugural ceremony of SIA, attended by the students and supporting partners, I stood to say, “Good evening, I am Faramola Bakare. Thank you for believing in the youth of Nigeria, you are leaving the nation in good hands. We have a long way to go, but Èkó ò ní bàjé ooooo.”

Columbia University, University of Southern California, Boston University

The only sound my 13-year-old self could hear was that of powerful water droplets in the sink and the silver dishcloths rubbing the plates in that loathsome prison that was our kitchen.

The insufferable air in the atmosphere established that neither me nor Carolina, Melissa, and Isabella, my three little sisters, stood the mere presence of one another.

In truthfulness, though, I was only pretending to be an unapproachable and efficient dishwasher obligated to wash the same dishes repeatedly (instead of being able to experience his new video game or Lego set).

I was hiding the fact that my heart ached at the possibility of having ruined what I considered crucial relationships. But one thought wouldn't leave my mind as I drifted away from the endless dishes: the universe had extended its hand towards me with an opportunity for me to reconcile with them.

I needed them to know that I missed the times we played video games, build Legos, and watched Hell's Kitchen. Yes, that was it.

"You know, you're lucky I'm not Gordon Ramsey," I said, halting the monologue of the sink, "or else you'd all be gone by now."

They looked confused.

Yet I knew it was more than that. We had always loved the show.

"Are you going to help or just stand there?" Isabella retaliated.

I chose the first option.

I couldn't hide my eagerness as I explained how I had an idea to implement some changes in the kitchen based on my video games. By modifying some of our responsibilities there, we could escape from that place quicker.

My sisters' silence transformed my excitement into crestfallenness. I thought it was a matter of time before they would start yelling at me about how I repeatedly found a creative way to mess everything up.

Gradually, however, something else occurred.

Even though many of the visits my sisters paid me in my room had the purpose of me helping them with homework, I was now often relieved. It was as if they appeared to feel safer now when approaching me.

Maybe that is what our relationship lacked: an assurance that I cared. These visits also propelled an unexpected feeling of excitement within me. I realized how rather simple things in my daily life, like a video game or a TV show, could play a role in something bigger than myself, such as a relationship.

I was motivated to replicate the idea of using my hobbies for a significant cause after seeing how it had a small but considerable impact on me and my sisters. Yet, I suppose I rooted my desire to be unapproachable (or shyness) so deep inside me that I had goosebumps at the thought of leaving my comfort zone for these experiences.

Still, I convinced myself to give it a chance, just like I did when I opted to count on my sisters for help in the kitchen.

This attempt, which started with me helping them with their homework, transformed itself into things like working on a scientific project which would help those who don't have access to clean water or collecting costumes for pediatric oncology patients undergoing harsh treatment.

Every time I made a minor difference by merely doing what I liked to do, I realized how I had been hiding so long behind a wall of unapproachability from countless opportunities before my stay in prison.

Now, when my sisters and I embark on our daily journeys to that place or on our occasional adventures to watch Hell's Kitchen, I often think of how something I dreaded allowed us to come together.

It showed me that if I could be more open-minded to even the smallest, meaningless experiences like dishwashing, I could be there for people the same way my sisters wished I were there for them.

And that also didn't mean I couldn't be an efficient and focused dishwasher when required.

University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, Columbia University, Brown University and more

I whizzed down the uneven road, wobbling on my yellow bicycle before careening over a ficus root. My grandfather was teaching me to ride a Brazilian Caloi, my first bike. On Fridays, he would pick me up at school and we would enjoy a lunch of fried eggs, red rice, and fresh jabuticaba—Brazilian cherries. After a siesta, we'd spend the rest of the day learning how to ride my Caloi at Ibirapuera Park.

My grandpa didn't believe in training wheels. I learned to ride by practicing among the holes and ancient tree roots in the asphalt. He would give me a strong shove, helping me find the bike's equilibrium point. Despite falling often and repeatedly applying burning iodine to my bruised knees, seeing my own progress—and my grandpa's pride—was what mattered most. Those shoves helped me grow comfortable with taking risks from a young age.

When I could finally stay up, my grandpa and I began to take longer rides in Ibirapuera. I raced him on the bike paths, as he shared stories of his childhood heroes, describing professional cyclists who passed through his village in Italy during the Giro d'Italia. As we passed Oscar Niemeyer's modernist buildings in the park, I asked my grandpa—himself a brilliant civil engineer—to teach me the physics that kept the edifices upright. He described how engineering, like learning how to ride a bike, requires continuously iterating: "If you stop trying and taking action, you'll lose balance and fall." These experiences piqued my curiosity about engineering and turned biking into a lifestyle.

During my cycling geek peak, I interned at a bike shop in my hometown. While selling bikes and accessories, I noticed how customers sought cycling as a means for sustainable living. Yet, ironically, the shop only sold metal bikes, which use non-renewable resources and end up in landfills. Provoked by the apparent contradiction that cycling's foundation wasn't truly sustainable, I asked the shop's owner why he only sold those bikes. "Of what else could they be built?", he replied. Perhaps this question was rhetorical, but I kept trying to come up with an answer.

Back in Ibirapuera Park, riding through a hundred-meter-long bamboo tunnel, I was fascinated by how the bamboo stalks waved with both strength and flexibility. I realized I could craft an equilibrium between the environment and material development. Those stalks represented the innovative path to manufacturing a vehicle that corresponded to cycling's call for sustainable living. I became determined to build a bike out of bamboo. After sketching bamboo frames in my notebook, I began prototyping and quickly learned that building a bamboo bike was easier said than done. In a few weeks, my attempted iterations had all spectacularly failed. The broken prototypes, however, reminded me of my grandpa's analogy between engineering and learning how to bike—if I persisted in creating new iterations, I would eventually succeed.

After studying how to treat bamboo with natural resin and fibers for durability, my plans started to mature. I built my first frame, handlebar, fork, and spokes. But how could I convince people to adopt such an unusual bicycle? The answer lied in commercialization through entrepreneurship. I could only convince people to use a bamboo bike if I guaranteed that it solved a specific need. Commuters wanted to charge their electronics when going to work, so I crafted a phone-charging attachment after discussing the technology with engineers. What at first seemed like a unique, one-time prototype became a real-world product with a clear value proposition.

Reflecting back, those Friday afternoons with my grandpa taught me how to take initiative, persist, and use creativity to solve problems. I hope to apply my experiences by devising and commercializing innovative solutions to my country's urban mobility and energy issues. My grandfather's lessons have inspired me to help build a future in which humanity strikes a balance between technological advances and a sustainable relationship with the planet.

UCLA, UC Berkeley, UC San Diego, UC Davis, University of Southern California

1. Please describe how you have prepared for your intended major, including your readiness to succeed in your upper-division courses once you enroll at the university.

My "click" moment came when I realized that beyond the impersonal and rigid nature of coded materials are the very subjective and well-intended goals of the programmer: every code was inputted for a specific, cognitive purpose.

To prepare for my major and career in connecting how programming can help improve neural functions, I have taken a streamlined approach to planning out a 2-year academic plan and maintaining a 4.0 GPA in all of my community college courses. I have also challenged myself to take math and cognitive science courses at UC Berkeley, where I realized the expectations of UC-level instruction and learned how to both discipline myself academically as well as to actively interact with my GSI's and professors through Office Hours in and out of the classroom. Specifically, I was encouraged to pursue my own research projects to apply what I learned to the real world; as a student researcher for RISE Research Group, my literary review of existing research in the field combined with my direct experimentation using Avogadro, a modeling program, I came to realize the importance of taking upper-division courses in cognitive science and programming and forming a fundamental understanding of a wider range of studies.

I want to use my UC education as a stepping stone to pursue a career in creating virtual realities by developing brain-computer interfaces in order to ultimately tackle the challenges of codifying the current-mysteries of the brain using concrete solutions, especially given the challenges of treating diseases invisible to the naked eye. As such, I plan to prepare myself by balancing my upper-division coursework with continuing to participate in research projects and other extracurricular activities. My goal is to balance what humans want through cognitive science courses, matched with the reality of how human brains act through psychology courses, with how humans interact with other humans or their surroundings based on these brain activities through anthropology and linguistic courses as well as field work, to ultimately use coding to create ideal models for these processes.

2. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.

Having experience as an international student myself, I have always been driven to wanting to help other international students in need. As such, I became a tutor and student counselor for UC Davis GUAP, a program designed to help international students balance their college courses with campus life.

Because GUAP was a fairly new program when I joined, my input went directly into the ears of the director. Specifically, when grades drop for domestic students this may have been due to not studying enough or not understanding the materials; however, GUAP students from China or Korea who have been disciplined to study the course materials thoroughly, so I realized that the issue was more about how they did not understand the prompt or were not used to the formats and citation methods of the American college system. In other words, by assessing individual students' grades and academic performances, I was able to find patterns in grade drops to recognize the cultural differences that may prevent international students from excelling academically.

To solve this issue, I suggested providing tutoring sessions not just by subject, but also general info sessions to teach students how to organize their essay or lab report structures, and the materials and templates I made for my own students were eventually revised to become incorporated into the official GUAP curriculum as well. I also realized that GUAP had so many resources available to them that many students never even knew about, so I helped translate some of the most important PPT slides from the GUAP counselors and UC Davis websites into Korean and Chinese.

While my actions were driven by my desire to help out the individual students I was assigned to, by recognizing patterns in students' learning behaviors as well as knowing my team members well enough to accurately assess their needs is what allowed me to be able to find simple, direct solutions to help them. Thus, as a leader, I learned to focus on the small groups first then use these models to generalize to help other groups as well.

3. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

"Innovation" is just a fancy word for putting together and improving on the same old ideas that we are used to in completely new ways.

As a student researcher for RISE Research Group, I learned how to model fullerene & carbon nanotube neurotransmitters' molecular structures and derivatives in the nervous system using Avogadro Programming to identify the most reactive molecular states for each type of neurotransmitter. Simply put, I performed literary analysis of existing research on how neurotransmitters impact mental disorders to compare to our ongoing research. Here, I realized the importance of having a solid foundation in various studies; what I learned in Psychology courses about brain structures and event schema helped me understand why the psychiatric patients I read about during my research acted in certain ways that could be seen as going against the norms of society, and what I learned in biology and anatomy courses helped to comprehend how certain stimuli would cause specific neurotransmitters to react and turn red or blue on our charts. Furthermore, as I recorded all of this information, I used my foundations in programming and chemistry to learn how to work Avogadro. Ultimately, we were even able to publish our research through the American Chemical Society (ACS).

In working on another research project studying ways to make MRI imaging clearer, I found myself lacking in specific medical knowledge and had to self-study to catch up on how MRI's work to work with existing software to improve signals and reduce noise on MRI scans to more accurately create images of human internal structures. While the computers I worked with were the ones programming out the ultimate solutions, every solution required months of tedious research and meticulous calculations on our parts and extensively comprehensive understandings of how human brains work; thus, despite how convenient research has become due to AI and computer technology, the engine behind how each code runs is the result of a human being's ability to seek out innovative solutions based on the information and resources already available.

4. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

As an international student myself, after realizing the difficulties of finding accurate information online about studying abroad programs online, I became more actively involved in online communities for international students. One such Facebook Group called UHoneyTip, geared towards international high school and college students and run by UC Berkeley students and alum, was especially helpful to me as I began preparing to enroll at a community college; as I answered questions within the group, I was given the opportunity to serve as a staff member and am currently the president of the organization.

Under my leadership, UHoneytip became one of the largest online international communities for Korean students with high interaction rates; while other communities focused on providing the most numbers of helpful posts or comments by including paid promotions and posting posts via quantity-over-quality, we worked hard to create small groups through Kakaotalk groups based on general interests such as major, hobbies, age groups, and geographic locations to really focus on what our members needed. In fact, with my active participation, I was able to recognize patterns in what kinds of questions were asked during which months and as a team, we tackled these issues strategically. For example, students tended to ask more about visa-related issues during the months before Spring and Fall semesters began, so we would create news-style infographics about OPT policies and health insurance-related information in January and August. We would also post vacation-related posts before final exam periods, when students would be most actively looking forward to their summer breaks, and post resources for mental health awareness and create social groups during COVID-19 for international students who lived far away from home.

Although I started off with the pure intention of not wanting others to struggle as I had, I now feel less like I am personally helping one person at a time and more empowered by being able to read the needs of others in order to work together to instigate changes based on the solutions to common problems.

Dartmouth College, University of Pennsylvania, Yale University

For a long time, I struggled with the fact that I didn't feel I was genuinely a Brazilian. Having grown up in Manaus, the biggest city in the Amazon rainforest, the beaches, the samba, and the tropical weather that the media showed were Brazil weren't really what I saw when I looked around. The Amazonian weather was always too sunny or too rainy and, not only did I not look like the beach-tanned Carioca, I also didn't share the physical characteristics of the Amazonian Caboco.

One time during the pandemic, my dad did something that wasn't routine: he tuned into the Brazilian popular music (MPB) radio station. At the time, the song "Onde anda você" by Brazilian poet Vinícius de Moraes was playing. Suddenly, the long-forgotten synesthetic in me somehow resurfaced. The soft and melodic sounds of the trumpet blew me away in shades of a subtle orange harmony while the deep and quiet tones of the string quartet guided me towards a calm rose-like sunset. When the pandemic got a little better, I bought a record player and wandered across the Belle-Époque buildings of downtown Manaus in search of the Brazilian essence distilled in the '70s vinyl discs. The love letters written on the covers, the crackling sound of the imperfect grooves, and the motion of the disc made listening to Brazilian music all the better. It had grown into a ritual, a safe place amidst the lockdown periods.

One day, one artist stood out. With his songs talking about the cultures of the five Brazilian regions, and, most importantly, about the Amazon and the Sertão — the desert-like region where my family had come from — Belchior made me want to see, with my own eyes, the reality behind those lines.

I followed that calling and traveled to visit the Sertão to hear the stories my grandpa had been telling me since I was a little kid. There, the lyrics served as the soundtrack of the story unraveling right in front of my eyes. I saw my family name written in century-old documents. I visited the exact place where my

grandparents had met, the weir where my great-grandparents used to bathe their children, and the land where my ancestors proudly worked for their entire lives. I listened to centenarians talking about how my great-grandmother rescued and raised them after they had been abandoned. I got recognized in the street just by looking like my late great-grandfather.

I lived, even if for short, the exact life my grandpa told me he lived when little. Seeing the simplicity and how time runs not quickly, not slowly, but just right in the Sertão made me value every moment a little more. A chat with my grandpa. A coffee with some friends. A beautiful sunset. Every instant could stretch out into eternity if I just laid back, and enjoyed. Life suddenly detached from the everyday madness and became so much more pleasurable.

On that trip, I inadvertently found a piece of me that had been missing for a long time. Seeing the true portrait of the diversity running through my veins, I understood that the difference between the cuisines, the contrast of the appearances, and the variation of accents had grown to be an essential part of me. I had finally found myself.

I can now proudly say every time the needle lowers into an Alceu Valença, a Chico Buarque, or a Milton Nascimento LP, I'm proud to be Brazilian (yeah, with an "s", just like the Portuguese writing). I feel that warmth deep in my heart declaring, in Belchior's lyrics, who I truly am: "I have 18 years of dreams, blood, and South America, by force of this destiny, bossa nova fits me way better than blues". I'm proud to be "only a Latin-American boy", and to truly belong to Brasil, "a tropical country blessed by God, and beautiful by nature".

"I always exhaust myself pondering the trajectory of my existence had my parents not lost their lives during Partition", my Nanu (grandfather in our native Punjabi) stated while sipping chai. I interrupted his thoughtful gaze with a seemingly-obvious question, "well, do you feel things would've turned out better had they lived?" He responded with a confident "no." My eyes widened with perplexion, as Nanu's deliberate expression was reborn as a smile. He recounted selling bread on the streets to make ends meet, with just enough to spare for the wilted dictionary with which he taught himself English. His eyes gleaming with pride, he described how hours of lucubration tucked under decrepit Chandigarh lampposts propelled him to Punjab's highest division of criminal law. He concluded his tale with an assured claim, "the magnitude of my adversities fueled my drive towards success".

Although inspired by his resilience, I was suddenly unnerved, as a familiar void of self-disappointment deepened within me. Against all odds, Nanu outplayed the brutal hand life had dealt him. He chose to smile despite having every reason to frown. So why, in such a life of comfort and privilege, was I ceaselessly gasping for air? I only desired to exist in the future, as the present meant facing the adversity of unceasing anxiety.

My journey with anxiety began from an early age, however, it began its crescendo in 8th grade. An ever-so-slight decline in academic performance coupled with typical middle-school social turmoil was enough to derail my system. Through its malevolent tricks, anxiety convinced me that I was nothing but worthless. I would come home from school and immerse myself in study, cursing myself maliciously as textbooks became puddles of tears. I can't even imagine how helpless my mother felt, as she watched her beloved son succumb to his greatest foe - himself.

I couldn't fathom how success could possibly emerge from such sheer brokenness: I was certain even Nanu couldn't explain it.

However, something told me that I needed to keep going. A subconscious force I didn't quite understand, until one particular summer evening. Guitar in hand, I sat on my basement stairs, embellishing the hum of a melancholy tune with strumming when a sudden urge confronted me. I need a release. I need to write. I need the listening ears of paper and pen to comfort me while I let it all out. So I wrote. I wrote down my truth without hesitation, and as the words glinted across the paper I could suddenly feel them floating off my tongue. Consoled in the arms of that same melancholy tune, they told me that pain was my catalyst to happiness. All the suffering, self-isolation, and sleepless nights served as a message: a learning opportunity. Anxiety is simply the language of my body and mind, and it deserved my listening ear rather than relentless suppression. Inevitably, the emotions and fears persisted, yet they began to appear harmless the more I listened to what they tried to tell me.

Songwriting taught me to understand the process; those who truly desire to make positive change must realize its significance within the journey, instead of the end goal. I find joy in the brightening of smiles at every performance, continuously showing myself that my greatest successes come from spreading light to the lives of others in any way I can.

I vividly remember the twisting in my gut as I climbed up onto the stage. Open Mic Fridays at Cosmo Music was a weekly tradition, but I shuddered at the thought of singing something I wrote. What if nobody understood or cared? The intrusive thoughts began to spiral, but as I pictured Nanu's smile, the words uplifted my spirits as I sang "when I'm alone, pain makes me feel at home...". At that very moment, I felt his presence in my heart, and thanked him silently for his continued guidance and blessing.

UC Berkeley, Northwestern University, and more

“What’s your pain like today?”

Asked our librarian, Ms. Courtney. She looked strong in front of the books lining the wall behind her, her stature enhanced by stories of tragedy, resilience, and love. She handed me a chocolate protein shake laced with sodium and vitamins, knowing that the chocolate was the only way I could choke down the required medication to ease my symptoms of Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome. I braced myself against the back of the wheelchair, and shrugged in response to her question, not wanting to give the full answer. Nevertheless, Ms. Courtney’s smile radiated her compassion and eased some of my pain.

Her compassion also helped me see that (even in the midst of hardship) there is beauty. For instance, I remember sitting with my friend on a curb at a festival listening to the joyous laughter of children and watching their faces light up as they climbed a bouncy castle. A woman then came and sat in front of us, using sign language to communicate with her son as he raced towards the castle. The fluidity in which her fingers articulated each sign amazed me. I knew some basic signs so I approached her, and she explained (through sign language) that she was deaf and could only interact with the world around her with signs and lip-reading. As we sat together, I realized that she could not hear the music or her son’s laughter. Nevertheless, her eyes were beautifully framed by smile lines. From her, I learned that language in all forms has the capacity to bring beauty to an otherwise broken world.

And I have seen beauty in the cruelest of places.

I witnessed my uncle survive a 99% chance of death from necrotizing fasciitis in his neck, even after the surgeons had given up on him. Although he was in constant pain from his medication, he found humor in an otherwise humorless situation. Some days, I can still hear him call me “Sunny” with a slurred smile and a guttural laugh created by the one vocal cord he had left. I cannot help but smile each time I get into a car as the memory of us driving fast, singing at the top of our lungs lingers with me

still. After he recovered, he refused rehab and drowned himself in alcohol until his organs shut down,

while the dog we had adopted together lay at his feet. Now, every sunny day, I choose to remember his strength and his resilience but also I remain aware everyone has their own demons and pain.

The next chapter of my life hangs dauntingly and daringly before me. Our world is unstable — politically, economically, and environmentally. Clear communication is the greatest weapon that we possess against the darkest evils prevalent in today’s world. And for this reason, I want to continue to learn and educate myself. For me, International Affairs seems to be the best path for me to help drive out some of these evils. In any situation, I’ve learned that change starts with listening. To be a better listener, our first step is learning the language of those we wish to help, be it a foreign language or local vernacular. Therefore I see myself expanding my knowledge of various languages in order to better support others.

In the end, I want to be in a place where I can enact real change in the United Nations and create a more beautiful world for those plagued by evil.

“How is your pain today?”

I am still in pain. But it’s not the gut-wrenching physical pain that the librarian was referring to. Instead, I am pained like the hundreds of heroes behind Ms. Courtney, each fighting in their own story. There are thousands of stories in this small library—and even more across the globe—so many of them tell a tale of beauty and compassion and their triumph over pain.

Essay #15

Boston University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Yale University, University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, Vassar College, The College of William & Mary

My 5 foot 3 Grandmother, no more than 55kg, one of the least intimidating people on this planet, is one of the strongest people I know.

As we stood in the kitchen 6 years ago, the layered scent of smoky za'atar hanging in the air, I had thought it was just another afternoon making Lebanese food with my Grandmother. I love cooking with her: she has so much to teach me.

While folding in the corners of the pastry, she recounted the story of her escape from Iraq. Her father, my great-grandfather, had just been imprisoned and died in Abu Ghraib due to him having a British penpal. Iraq was granted independence from Britain in 1932, and the Ba'ath party, 50 years later, were keen to label British people as colonial spies. She spoke of her 14-hour ordeal crossing the desert alone, driving her two young sons to flee the Saddam Hussein regime.

Tossing the tabouleh salad, my Grandmother quivered, describing the hours of fear in the embassy where she wasn't sure if they would be deported back to Iraq, a country that was no longer safe. As loose as it was, her connection to England put the family in considerable danger. I was the same age that my dad was when they fled, 12 years old. I realised that I hadn't faced challenges of that scale in my own life and wondered how I would cope if I did. I felt my father's fear.

That night, my mind roamed. I have had a clear journey in London, finding the perfect school for me, a true friendship group, international influences, and a healthy family construct. In contrast to my education, due to her being a Catholic woman in a male, Muslim society, she was thrown out of university.

I am incredibly fortunate that I have grown up in a world where my life has not been blemished by ridiculous stigmas such as those my Grandmother faced. Today, I go to school without fearing I will have to leave tomorrow, and when I run for my life, it is down the wing of a football pitch, not to flee from my own

government. Her story contextualised my life. From this, I have an inherent sense of duty to serve and augment the communities that I belong and contribute to.

Through my Grandmother, I realise we must afford all people the right to be seen for the strength they possess beneath the surface. I worried that I have not always seen the inner strength of others. Had I not gotten the most out of my interactions because I didn't look past the exterior? This stuck with me, and I decided to make changes in my life. I now strive to engage deeply in the profoundness and authenticity with which I speak, interact and listen, truly listen to others. As School Captain, I connect on a more empathetic level with the people I meet, those interactions are far more insightful and rewarding. As a Chemistry teacher the more I acknowledge my students' inevitable wisdom the more I learn from them. As a Drama director the more I facilitate the actors' contribution, the more unique and exciting the final product becomes. This deep empathy is a hallmark of who I aspire to be.

When we cook together now, I see her differently: Not only as my everloving Grandmother but as a fierce human whose determination is the reason I am here today, free to explore my interests. Living in London, an incredibly multicultural city, where I am exposed to these diverse cuisines and cultures, is a gift I will never be able to repay my Grandmother for. As I look forward to college, a place where everyone is so much more than who they appear to be, I will remind myself of my Grandmother, to find bravery and strength in everyone.

My parents, like many others, sheltered me from the world as if something bad was going to happen otherwise. I believed that Singaporeans were all treated fairly and that others were taken care of. That was until June 2018, when one of my lecturers invited me to volunteer with her to deliver food to homebound elderly in the community. I would usually peer into the homes of the elderly, calling out to them. Most times, my heart sank. The elderly were usually skinny and only had just enough meat to cover their bones. This is not how we should be treating the people who built our country. I thought it would get easier each time I volunteered. It did not.

Everytime they thanked me, I heard my heart crack. We should be taking better care of the elderly in our community. All these issues were present while I was growing up, but I did not notice it at all. After a month, I realised things in Singapore were not as rosy as I thought and I was angry. How could my parents hide these issues from me? I had a rude awakening and was propelled into a whole new Singapore, exposed to the harsh realities of the world.

In March of 2020, the Ministry of Health enlisted the help of the Singapore Armed Forces for contact tracing purposes, and I was called to duty. Most of our calls were to migrant workers staying in dormitories. I, along with the Nation, quickly learned that due to their deplorable living conditions, these people were more susceptible to the virus. They had been living this way just to earn a meagre amount of money to support their families in a distant country. This was a human rights issue that I could not turn a blind eye to too.

I started small, by donating a sum of money to causes that mattered to me: food insecurity and migrant worker rights. Was I doing enough? I also started posting links to donate on my social media and asking my friends to donate some money to the beneficiaries. The

people around me started to become more aware of these issues and were posting articles to raise awareness of some of the issues I was trying to get people to talk about. That was when I began to see the impact I had as an individual.

At first, it was hard, having to constantly think about other people. I was used to being selfish, only thinking about myself. But because of the experiences I got from volunteering, it got easier and it became a normal thing to do so. What was not normal was allowing these people to suffer, while someone like me, who has the privilege of living comfortably, not do anything about it. This year was a tough year for everyone. Dealing with news about deaths and crises is never easy. However, through this experience, I learned that people need to use their privilege and their voice to effect change. Just because something does not impact me does not mean that I can't be a vessel for change.

I still have this bugging feeling inside me that I am not doing enough. Therefore, I want to explore how I can use my craft to affect change and bring about positive experiences for those less fortunate than me. I believe that films are one of the ways we can spread messages. I want to make use of my experiences and stories to create films that inspire others to act as well. I recognize that the world has endless issues and inequalities and I won't be able to end it. But I can at least have an impact in my own community. I want to bring about change in the next community I will be inhabiting, be it in University or the City I live in next.

UC Berkeley, Johns Hopkins University, University of Pennsylvania, Yale University

Racing to the couch after swim practice, I hear a diverse array of voices and languages. "Marhaba!" says mom, "Ça se passe bien papa?" asks dad, my friend Raymond texts me in English "What were your thematic-stakes in your analysis?" As an international student, my quadrilingual upbringing – English, French, Arabic, and Darija – has opened many doors. Having been all over Africa, I've had the chance to learn about many things, from the trading system of the Malian Soninke to Sudanese desert rituals to Yoruba traditional beats. However, studying abroad has also come at a cost. Speaking different languages in different settings has led me to have, or at least to perceive I have, different identities. Over the years, I've struggled to unify my personalities, to remain my whole self in any environment.

When I'm at school abroad in Zambia speaking English, I'm seen as nerdy and studious, whereas in Morocco, I'm seen as social though lacking intellect, at least I thought so. The different settings I lived in had different "vibes". Intellectual conversations were fostered amongst my school friends in Zambia, whereas in Morocco, my mates' minds were usually on leisure and entertainment. In Zambia, the rigor of my courses, my daily swim-practices, and my extracurricular-endeavors occupy most of my time. My peers only see me in the classroom and – because I don't have time to attend social events, such as bonfires and parties – I'm labeled a nerd. Once, when I asked my friend if I could join the boys on a safari, he replied, "Sure, just don't bring any textbooks with you." Meanwhile, summers in Morocco, I spend time at the beach or playing soccer with friends; speaking mostly Arabic and French. In Morocco, I'm not a nerd. Rather, I'm outgoing and vibrant. But my intellectual side has no room to thrive. My friends would rather play a second game of soccer than hear about the latest economics book I'm reading.

Whether in Zambia or Morocco, I worried whether the language I spoke impacted the way people saw me; and that maybe, switching between them, I was taking on a different guise. I look back at some of these moments and realize the sense of callowness I possessed. Even if the people I'm with aren't into the same

headly subjects, I shouldn't have been afraid to express myself fully.

Things all changed 2 summers ago, when I realized it was me who created these obstacles. My friends and I ran into some photographers shooting a documentary for the Women's soccer African Cup. They asked if one of us would volunteer to talk about the exciting atmosphere of this competition, in English however. I remained uncommitted. Yet, my friends, who actually knew my intellectual English-side, pushed me to volunteer. I got a thumbs up from the reporter, and my friends joyfully commended me afterwards.

When I returned to school in Zambia, many classmates who called me a nerd introduced me to some new French and Egyptian kids as someone who could speak their languages. My English-speaking friends asked me to teach them some French slang. As my vibrant Moroccan personality began to awaken at school, I felt like I was breaking character. But nonetheless, I taught them slang words like "ça-roule", which resonated with them that, till present, they're slipping them into conversations. I realized then, that my English-speaking friends never saw me as just a nerd.

All along, my friends had been seeing both sides of me – the intellectual and the social. I've realized that academic and social lives don't need to be dichotomous. I can incorporate my comedic side during school much like I can always showcase my knowledge when I'm talking to my Moroccan friends. Learning how to express my whole personality, everywhere I live and in all the languages I speak, was perhaps one of the hardest parts of growing up.

Johns Hopkins University

I never let a moment become a memory. And there were plenty of moments. Beautiful sites from the Grand Canyon to Mauna Loa and the bustling cities of Singapore, Dubai, and my own birthplace, Bangalore. Countless flights, road trips, memorable moments, and common among them all: no records to look back too. I always hated taking pictures.

Of course, travel came to a halt. During the quarantine, out of the collective boredom we all faced, I drudged up my family's old belongings. In this dusty mess was an old, plastic bound book with my baby pictures from when I lived in India. These innocent pictures opened a whole new world for me, one I couldn't let go. I showed the album to my parents and was surprised to see them light up as they told stories regarding those moments. Several pictures stood above the rest, ones from a day at the park. They depicted blurry images of a beautiful day in the crowded life of Bangalore. Inside them were a newly wed couple and their newborn baby, me.

My parent's recollection of this memory involved so much curiosity as new adults exploring the world while learning how to raise a child. And I loved their stories. They ranged from terrifying moments of almost losing me, hilarious in retrospect, or detailed aspects about their daily routine, which had changed so much as we moved and grew as a family. In their anecdotes, I saw change and growth that I never appreciated. More than anything, I just enjoyed listening and learning of all these details I had never known. And as I heard more about our history, I became eager to rediscover my past in my own pictures.

But I never took them. My stubbornness to avoid pictures left me with no stories to tell.

When life went back to a new normal, I vowed to take more photos, record moments to transform into memories. It was a simple promise that let me look back at the wonderful experiences I've had. And wherever I was, there were amazing stories intertwined with reality.

My debate cases dove further into why an issue existed to begin with, which dragged me through rabbit holes in history where I found even more stories. Science began to form narratives in my mind. When I completed my science fair research, I saw more than numbers and statistics, I saw connections between our collective conscience as students and how the quarantine affected us. And the people we surveyed became more than collections of data, they each carried their own exceptional journey through isolation. I made sure to tell these stories in my research.

I've learned to connect my life with stories, with my memories flowing between each other like chapters in a book. And now that I can combine these chapters and tell a tale through my pictures, I have more moments to look back to. My thoughts and emotions are immortalized. From victory at the science fair, the happiness plastered on my face when I became the Public Forum champion, the pride I held for my team when we reached our fundraising goal for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, to once in a lifetime events like my junior prom and all the laughter of joyous evenings with friends and family, all captured through a lens.

I live my memories through pictures, contextualizing eras of my own life and the world around me, and I will take those connections with me into the future. I see stories everywhere, many mirroring my own or others I have already studied and witnessed. Yet some are still unique, proving there is so much to learn, plenty of room to grow, and an unlimited number of stories to appreciate. Because every picture is a memory, every old dusty album, a narrative.

And I will always ask, "What's the story here?"

Johns Hopkins University

How does artistic expression shape our perspectives? This question floated into my mind as I stared at the famous painting “The Scream” by Edvard Munch, a bold amalgam of fiery reds and oranges and short, wispy brushstrokes.

As far as I can remember, my favorite pastime was doodling characters on the empty spaces of my homework, standing in contrast with my illegible handwriting. The sounds of classmates talking, sharpening pencils, and the screech of sliding desks would trail off to lush forests, bustling with the chirping of insects and the rustling of leaves. My imagination was an escape from my mundane school routine, so I continued to envision my fantasies.

In middle school, I discovered Webtoon, a comic app for digital artists and the Holy Grail for visual storytelling. I was fascinated by the expressiveness and depth of each character and the use of colors and storyboarding to create complex plots. These stories from creators across the world inspired me to learn digital art to create my own stories.

Teaching myself how to draw digitally, however, was much harder than I had thought. There were hundreds of online tutorials by artists with different styles. I struggled through crooked lines and messy coloring until I could draw portraits and cartoons. However, the biggest challenge was developing my own distinctive art style. Until I discovered digital art, I had only ever drawn still images.

Influenced by years of math and science competitions, I had strived to create the “perfect picture”. Unlike these academic activities, with a strict set of facts and formulas to follow, art was a different challenge. It relied on my own perspectives and ideas, which had been stunted by my earlier impression that there was always a definitive answer. I realized that I was the one who had to define what ‘perfect’ meant for my art, instead of chasing after the styles of other artists and trying to imitate them.

To share my ideas, I opened an art account on Instagram, and slowly grew a following of inspirational friends in the art community. Through their encouragement, I began creating art that represented my passions by combining my knowledge in both art and science to educate others about topics I cared about, through characters who reflected my own aspirations and different cultures as well. The first character, Griselda, of Indian descent like me, was based on a female sultan in Delhi who had rose up from slave status but whose trust in others became her own undoing. My first reel featured her and when it went viral, I discovered that my art could positively influence millions. It felt liberating to see people empathize with my characters, and try to learn more about their stories.

Through my experience sharing my art on a global platform, I’ve come to realize the power of art as a vehicle to challenge one’s perspective and share stories with others. I’m still learning to design my characters in a way that resonates with others. On a fundamental level, shifting from realism, a more rigid art style, to digital art, which was more flexible, opened my own mind up to new ideas, cultures, and histories. I also discovered the possibility of intersecting my own experiences in different disciplines to create art that mirrored my authentic self, but could also teach others about the world. The scope of creativity available through my artistic expression influenced my worldview and helped me see the merits of science and math for teaching and learning, and art as a tool for communicating, and I hope to impact millions through this passion of mine in the future.

University of Chicago, New York University, Duke University

As the sun incessantly falls beyond the horizon, so too does my inner world fall into turmoil. The transformation of the blue sky into glossy pinks and oranges signals an impending battle under the darkness of the night. Since I was young, I have been terrified of the dark—of the loneliness, the irrationality, and the uncontrollable fears that would jump out in the silence. If I was the last one awake, no one would hear me if I called.

It was 2018, in Washington, DC, and I was 8000 miles away from home. As the only religious Jew at the Global Young Leaders Conference, my parents had organised for me to stay with a Chabad family in Brooklyn over Shabbat. Needless to say, I was terrified; on the plane, I stared into the deep blue day sky, wishing for its permanence.

After the flight and short taxi ride, I stood nervously on the doorstep of a narrow house. The warm, wide-smiling face of a mother opened the door, and I was greeted with the scent of challah, a white-clothed Shabbat table, and the familiar tune of Hebrew song.

This was a Jewish home just like mine, yet that evening in the shower, I cried so hard. I would never make it through the night. The anxiety bustled into my head, the thoughts waiting at a platform, boarding the train as soon as I closed my eyes. I told myself that I was being irrational, yet still I felt alone in the world, with these feelings and fears that I couldn't control. I desperately wanted to be with my family, my two dogs, and my laughing brother—with safety, certainty, and familiarity. The tears and water droplets were indistinguishable as they ran down my face.

When my hosts called me to dinner, my heart beat in my chest as I faced a sea of strange faces. But soon, the Shabbat songs, the light of the candles, and the smells of chicken soup instilled in me a comfort I had not expected to

find so far from home. These simple traditions brought with them a time of quiet reflection, a recentering of self and a refocus on what's important.

As a young girl I was taught about the power of Jewish peoplehood, the power of Jewish continuity. But it was then that I truly felt I was a part of something greater than myself, a larger story that extended across borders. Here I was, singing the same Hebrew songs that I had sung just a week prior at the tip of South Africa in my own home. Traditions pave the way as footprints of a longer history. I stood here, centuries after the destruction of the First and Second Temples, Spanish Inquisition and just decades after the Holocaust. We had made it through all of that; I could make it through another night. It was like looking up at the stars and realizing that you exist for just a moment in the infiniteness of time. Strangely, it was in this insignificance that I found strength. I was a single letter in a single word in a book of a billion pages.

That night was the same as many others, my mind running, my heart aching. But it was also the night I realised that I was setting a precedent for my narrative.

As I listened to the divorce struggles of a Russian mother, argued with an Israeli millennial about the future of the Jewish diaspora, and stayed up eating Rice Krispie treats with a 34-year-old New York health expert, I realised this was a gifted moment to prove to myself: I could face and overcome my fear of the dark, of uncertainty, of solitude, just as my predecessors had done before.

There were people awake on the other side of the world. Eventually, I fell asleep.

Duke University, Northwestern University

Welcome to y(our) home

The first time I heard “Welcome, make yourself at home” was when I went to live in the SOS Children’s Village, a Brazilian orphanage.

Auntie Goreth, a social mother, was waiting in front of the house with other residents. There, I grew up amongst different stories, setbacks, and dreams. The Village’s sense of community made me feel embraced and safe, especially when we sat around the large wooden table for lunch, to do our homework or to share experiences. Auntie Goreth received me willing to know me, and I harbored the illusion that I would always be welcomed.

All of that changed when Auntie Goreth died and I went to live with my first foster family. The first foster home was a “traditional Brazilian family”: husband, wife, two daughters, and a dog. They said: “Welcome to our home!”, but this “welcome” wasn’t as warm and sincere as the one in the Village. Later, I understood that I wasn’t really part of that family—I would have to either adapt or leave.

I strove to adapt, faking a smile and trying to fit my opinions into their expectations—from choosing a TV show to deciding the dog’s name—even so, at the end of the day, my opinion didn’t matter at all. As someone who can’t keep my mouth shut for more than ten minutes, I felt like a part of me was dying by being constantly silenced. I was losing my essence, my identity—I had to leave.

In my second foster family I heard: “Welcome to our home!”; this family was a little more receptive and gave me time to adapt. However, my sexuality became a problem. One day, my aunt used my younger cousin to offend me, saying he would be a “man,” implying that I wouldn’t. I was shamed for being gay. Eventually, they threw me out.

I began to live by myself in an apartment shared with workmates. For the first time, I didn’t have anyone to say “Welcome” to me: I

was welcomed by life. This time I didn’t have to adapt to someone else’s rules—I could create my own. But I still felt watched, surrounded and forced to follow old rules.

Real freedom only came once I moved again. For the first time, I was leaving my country and doing something because I wanted to—moving was finally a choice. I was welcomed by the unknown. I felt unsteady and shaky in the midst of that new world.

At Watson Institute, I felt as welcomed as in the Village. There, people had that same willingness as Auntie Goreth—they wanted to know me for who I was. Different from the foster system—in which people wanted me to fit into their expectations—at Watson, I was constantly invited to share my perspectives. In the first week, all scholars had to go to the middle of a circle and tell their story. I was nervous to talk in front of people I barely knew in a language that is not my mother tongue. When my time came, I questioned if they would listen to me. But, at the end, I realized I was in a safe place—being gay and speaking my mind was not deemed as a problem anymore. I was finally allowed to voice my feelings.

The meaning of “welcome” morphed every time I moved to each of the different places I lived in, and so did certain parts of myself—I learned not to create nor try to meet expectations. By doing so, I finally felt welcomed. Not because of anyone, but because I know I can shape my future and make it a welcoming place to fit my perspectives, my desires, and embrace the changes to come. I don’t need to hide who I am in fear anymore. Just as Auntie Goreth wholeheartedly welcomed me once, I welcome myself.

5:43 AM: I scurry down a gloomy alley, my heart pounding louder than the clatter of my shabby suitcase on the cobblestones. I pray that the zipper lasts this time. Glancing at my phone, I instantly pick up the pace.

I can't be late.

Panting, I charge into the familiar vastness of Katowice Main Station. The thrill of the bustling place runs down my spine. I've never been much of an athlete, but the sprint to catch the Saturday morning train is my specialty. Having traversed this exact route countless times, my feet find the path to the right platform long before my mind does.

11 stops, 216 kilometers, and 2 hours 43 minutes of travel every month separate my two realities.

On one end, Katowice: the heart of Poland's largest industrial area, whose residents — single-income families living off coal mining — reasonably contest my fiery belief in renewable energy NOW; on the other, my tiny hometown of Przygodzice. The departure point couldn't be more distinct from the destination. Yet, through my frantic attempts to keep the only child's solemn oath that after moving out I'd balance academic and family time, I strive to merge the two worlds. Courtesy of my beloved Polish State Railways, they intersect at the reality in between.

The hastiness of my steps entering the stuffy train compartment perfectly resembles the hectic life schedule I self-dictated in this Silesian metropolis. The lengthy entries in my journal hint at a possible cause: a burning need to explore the city's endless opportunities.

In Katowice, the local American Corner library equips me with the classics of British literature I vigorously interpret in my Extended Essay (and the same three series of young adult dystopian novels I reread out of pure nostalgia). I religiously absorb both in the cozy premises of Black Woolf Cafe, the greatest supplier of mint tea and the safest escape point for when my microscopic apartment's dangerous desk-to-bed proximity lures me with a nap.

Clearly, moving into the city at 18 provided me with a life that the 15-year-old version of myself, hopelessly stuck in rural Przygodzice, could only dream of.

6:14 AM: When the conductor's whistle announces our departure, I settle myself in the reserved seat and let my mind wander. The rhythmic clatter of the train on the tracks brings me closer to the place that I had once been so eager to leave behind. And yet now, as we approach, I don't feel the same frustration. By being intentional in my ambitions, I'm learning to combine the warm embrace of my hometown with the exhilaration of the city, the *"life is today"* with the *"what about the future?"*. Every choice has an opportunity cost — I know that now — but I'm determined to make it work.

I can't wait to report back to my grandma on the riveting explorations of humanitarian law for my History Internal Assessment and all the speakers we will host at our TEDx conference (even though I know she'll probably just smile and nod). Tomorrow's my grandpa's "name day," a Polish tradition that calls for a big family celebration. I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I'm a little scared of the day that Julia — my 12-year-old cousin — becomes a teenager and stops looking up to me unconditionally. For now, I sigh with relief as she texts me through her mom's phone, confirming our Harry Potter movie marathon after the party.

8:57 AM: Stepping off the train, I take a deep breath of the relatively coal-free air and let the Saturday morning sunshine sink into my skin. My dad's already waiting for me at the station — we cover the last eight kilometers together. We don't say much, but the way he instantly reaches for my shabby suitcase tells me everything. My heart beams with calm gratitude. We go home.

Goodsway Mooring was an oasis in hell. In London's urban wasteland, it was rare to find a community not destroyed by decades of urbanisation—but ours had survived. In an area rife with poverty, addiction and seedy dealings advertised in back-page ads, we were the people who had picnics on our narrow-boat roofs and who named our pontoon 'Bluebelle's First Steps'. My family exhibited a similar dichotomy, finding comedy in the lack of space that meant my mum's cello was stored in the bathtub, and reveling in the storybook quality of having a cupboard for my bed. Such simple pleasures as feeding swans in the morning or waving goodbye to the moon at night were an easy distraction from the harsh reality surrounding us.

But the fairy-tale couldn't last forever. While we followed the legacy of poet and architectural preservation activist John Betjemen by resisting all council attempts to remove our leasehold, the value we found in this afterthought of the industrial revolution was not shared by governmental powers. When gentrification came to King's Cross, our attempt at a campaign was dwarfed by the bureaucratic machine of government inexorably marching towards a 'grand future' which had no place for us. New housing complexes promised to be far more lucrative than our cluster of boats, so the redevelopers wanted us gone—our stories forgotten and our lives erased. Far too quickly, it was all over. We moved onto land, and soon after, a flash flood sank 'The City of Truro', my first home.

I had been born on the water, lived and breathed the fantasy of a life where it was more commonplace to know a pirate than a banker, then lost it all. To a child raised on stories, it seemed obvious that my sunken home was the ultimate symbol that the contented and innocent life I had been blessed with was lost forever. I could no longer be

ignorant, and so I opened my eyes to the injustices of the world and used my loss to spur my action against them. I wanted to speak out, and thanks to my debating coach, I learned how to do so in a way that would make others listen. Soon enough, I took action by founding my refugee pen-pal charity, 'Words Not Wars', and by joining the Camden Youth Council.

This new life of activism was far removed from the blissful indifference to the future that had defined my idyllic life as a 'boat baby', but I could never forget the loss that had made me the person who wouldn't sit by and ignore the problems of the world. This was made clear for me while filming a video for the 'London Needs You Alive' knife crime campaign in the high-rise, high-tech building of the Camden Council, 11 floors above the meandering canal that was once my home. Looking down at the murky water I had once built my life around, I realised I was standing in a building that would not exist had the King's Cross 'regeneration' not occurred, doing a job I never would have considered had I not been forced off the water.

This was when I realised the eviction battle was one I had not, in fact, lost. Yes, I'd lost my home, but I'd found my voice—and learned the importance of using it. The video being filmed revolved around our dreams for the future, so when filming began I spoke of my plans to start a radio network, one that would not only let me tell the stories I care about, but that would also sponsor grass-roots programmes so that the most subjugated members of our society can seize control of their own narratives. No one deserves to be forgotten, no one should have the power to erase other's lives. I'm telling my story, but there are many more to find and share.

"So, how is your brother's girlfriend going...?" My dad dropped this bomb nonchalantly. The tarred road zoomed alongside us. Locked Doors. No cars for miles. This was code red. Searching for any and all signs of egress, I was in full panic mode over the impending inquisition.

Two hours into our drive to a rowing camp in Taree—a hamlet north of Sydney—we had already exhausted all the polite conversation. Each passing second became another potential opportunity for an awkward 'parent' question to open a treasure trove of personal embarrassment. I attempted a musical diversion. However, the cycle of the radio tuning wheel groaned as the paucity of stations gradually depleted from thirty options to now only two - static or Country. I chose static. Palms sweaty, I struggled to circumnavigate the wheel, but my swelling anxiety betrayed my incipience as a driver. Dad was not one to easily give up on a hunt for information. I needed to take the reins and steer us away from danger if I did not want to be next.

"Dad, have you ever considered what would happen if we could travel as fast as the speed of light?"

"Never crossed my mind."

"Theoretically speaking, time would slow down, distance between objects would shorten, and if this speed were maintained, our mass would increase exponentially. The most interesting part of it all is that we will never know if all these things even happened. It is logistically impossible to recreate."

"Great. What was your fastest rowing time last week?" Dad only cared about the possible. "Not quite the speed of light."

As Dad talked about rowing techniques, I zoned out. With my foot gently on the accelerator, I imagined the car gaining speed as we drove north. I thought about the earth moving, about the car zooming into space. If we reached the speed of light would everything stand still?

I hit the brakes! Inertia jolted us forward as the seat belts pulled us back to Earth. "What's that about?"

"Sorry, Dad, I got distracted"

Settling in again, he asked: "So what will it take for your team to win this year?"

"Well, if all 8 of us each put our blades into the water at perfect 90o angles at exactly the same time, pull with the same force and exit the water in perfect unison, we would win. He chuckled. "Even I know the chances of that happening are zero."

Yes, it is impossible, but the excitement is in trying to. Whether it is what happens to time at the speed of light or imagining how to calculate the perfect rowing technique, I am excited by the potential secrets and hidden possibilities lurking in deep thinking on big ideas and debates over detail.

I love to dwell in the hypothetical: to investigate, question, and debate the unknowable, even if, my pursuit is futile—that I will ultimately fail. My salsa with the unanswerable delights me because the mystery of dancing with a phantom energises my mind and ignites my imagination. As a prospective university student in Australia I'd been pigeonholed into Commerce, Engineering, Science or Art without being able to explore the intersections between disciplines. However, in a future where career paths are unknown, broader perspectives are crucial to facilitating greater innovation and more flexible thinking. Entwining a study of philosophy with language, computer studies and math will allow me a multifaceted pursuit of unanswerable questions that energize and excite me, such as the Collatz Conjecture and whether it has potential for Artificial Intelligence.

As a prospective university student, I want to experience intellectual rigor as engagements with potential information rather than just facts to be memorized. I want to wonder with teachers and students who can pull with me, who want to drop blades in the water at perfect angles in perfect unison, all the while knowing that to do so is impossible.

Georgia Institute of Technology

I was still in shock.

My golf coach now taught me from a wheelchair. My sister's bangs were gone. The old Mickey Mouse dishes had been replaced by white porcelain ones. My room was no longer light blue and yellow, instead painted a dark navy. I was no longer part of my friends' most recent anecdotes. The main cook at my taco stand was gone.

That night I lay in a bed that didn't feel like mine, holding my breath, eyes wide open. All I could think of was the feeling of my chest being pumped with air and an urge to run away. I felt cold in the place where I had always felt warm, like I was trying to fit into a puzzle I was no longer a piece of. Was I at the right address? Or had I taken a trip to Mars like I have always wanted to and came back to see everything changed? This was still my house, but I didn't feel at home in it. How was that possible?

I left for boarding school when I was fifteen. Now, I was back for my third summer since then and three years of accumulated changes hit me like a basketball to the face. Moving away when you're that young is definitely a challenge with added responsibilities and having to live alone, but coming back and feeling like a foreigner in my own home was a far stranger experience. I felt paralyzed by how estranged I felt.

After some days of feeling completely alienated, I was practicing with my now wheelchair-bound golf coach and couldn't focus. My frustration grew as I wasn't able to hit the ball straight. After a couple of minutes, he quickly corrected my swing and I started improving. Then, he declared, "You see, I'm still the same old man."

I drove back home, thinking about what he had said. He could still coach me better than anyone. I pondered over this. This man had been my mentor for years and suddenly his entire puzzle had shattered, or so I thought. Yet, his spirit had remained unchanged.

His unwavering defiance in the face of trauma made me realize that perhaps not all of the changes that had welcomed me were negative. I couldn't let these differences bring me down; I didn't have many days at home and couldn't let them go to waste. I had to adapt.

For the remaining days before I went back to boarding school, I tried to appreciate all the new things that had welcomed me back. I realized how my friends and I still had the same connection and now had more stories to share. My bed regained my shape. I still loved my sister no matter what her hair looked like and that taco stand remained my favorite, no matter who the chef was. I was still part of the puzzle, my piece had just changed shape, and the puzzle had too. If I was going to fit in again, I had to remember the similarities between me and them, then and now. I had to recognize the changes in the puzzle and find my spot in it once again.

I learned to find comfort in the uncomfortable. I made new friends at boarding school each year even when my old friends were gone. I have adapted to different teachers and housemates every year. Constant change has pushed me to overcome the struggles of feeling out of place. Now I know that I am able to adapt to new scenarios by changing with them and finding my place within them. Things will inevitably undergo change and more challenges will arise, but I'll always remember that discomfort is good and that it should be seen as a guiding light towards paths of growth.

The shock was finally gone - I could breathe again.

Vanderbilt University

A lot has changed about my back-to-school shopping since sixth grade, but the same item has always topped my to-buy list: my favorite planner, the Whitney English Day Designer.

I love the Day Designer because it includes a full page for every day, complete with an hourly schedule, to-do list, daily quote, and even a small box for gratitude. I write everything in my planner: homework assignments, after-school clubs, birthdays (even my own), and everything else that dares to be forgotten. If it's flying around in my head, it goes down on paper in smooth black ink. Every summer around mid-July, you can find me meticulously scheduling in important dates for the new school year. Planning for the future transforms feelings of anxiety and overwhelm into a sense of calm and preparedness.

However, all the time and careful attention I had taken to plan out my entire high school journey before freshman year became irrelevant when my mom shocked me with the news that we would be moving from our suburban home in St. Louis, Missouri to Blonay, Switzerland for her new job. How would I fit the enormous weight of moving across the world in a monthly calendar? How could my daily to-do list possibly have enough space to grapple with the knowledge that I would be packing up and leaving the only home I had ever known? The planning system I had relied on and trusted for years failed me, and I had no idea what to do. I never could have planned for this.

Between cardboard boxes, donation bags, and my ever-growing anxiety about moving to a new country, I got to thinking. There was an infinite list of experiences on the horizon I would never be able to plan for: starting a new school, making new friends, and assimilating into a new culture with a different language. This fear and discomfort led to the realization that my current planning system would not be able to keep up with the realities of my new

life. I couldn't abandon the trusty Day Designer I relied so heavily upon, but I needed to adapt. How could I strike a balance between charting out life's most minute details and learning to be okay with changed plans?

I began searching for a solution, and eventually found it in the Target stationery aisle: colorful Post-It notes. Not only do they brighten my days by adding visual variety to each page, they make scheduling and planning more flexible. As I settled into my new home and school, it became evident that this system was exactly what I needed. Changes I would have previously viewed as inconvenient and frustrating morphed into exciting opportunities. Tutoring pushed back one hour on Saturday morning became a relocated Post-It note and time to go for a walk in the Swiss Alps. A doctor's appointment after school was no longer a wasted afternoon, but a chance to improve my French in the form of a neon orange colored Post-It note. Joining an international school and making new friends has not been a daunting task, but an extraordinary adventure.

I feel at ease knowing when (not if) plans change, all it takes is a quick adjustment in my planner and my mindset to stay focused on my goals while avoiding chaos. This addition to my planning routine has taught me it is not only necessary to be flexible and adapt to changes, but it's also the most efficient way to live.

As the handwritten Theodore Roosevelt quote on the front page of my planner reminds me, "There can be no life without change, and to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life." Now, instead of the fear, confusion, and worry I felt when faced with an international move, I feel gratitude, hope, and excitement about the changes and challenges my future holds.

Sam Gosling said in Snoop that your room is a reflection of the inside of your mind. Every chaotic piece of paper cluttering your living space represents an idea created inside that lump of grey matter. However, sometimes each of those neurons pile up and need to be organised. And so, as I walked past my Yamaha upright with sporadic piles of music and the dusty mounds of 1900s CDs, I realised: "I really need a shelf."

Just like any other creative with a penchant for mispronouncing Swedish, I went to IKEA and found a beautiful, white, open-backed cabinet that resonated with my desire for sophisticated simplicity.

The trouble started when the box arrived home. Late at night, I started hacking it open with a knife and scratched the unblemished white surface of my cabinet. A well-worn truism reverberated between my ears: Precision was key. "Lesson learned," I thought. "But no one cares about a single scratch." I tried to rationalise my mistake; my decision grated against my perfectionism, but at least the scratch reminded me to approach even menial tasks with care.

Then I embarked on the task, spurred by the tantalising satisfaction of building it without instructions (I have a tendency to add unnecessary challenges to see just how far I can push myself). Ten minutes later, I was in the hall balancing the cabinet between the wall and my knee. The shelves were in, and now all I needed was the top, a humble piece of flat timber. And the struts that hold it together. And the plethora of screws littered around me; surely they were spares.

Just as I slotted the crowning piece onto my slightly lopsided shelf, the "Leaning Tower of Pisa" finally collapsed. The screws I had put in bent. I guess I would be needing those spares. The little wooden bits meant to keep the shelf stable snapped, and the middle panel had a

hole ripped through its centre, as if Australia's very own Wolverine had ripped his claws up the side of my shelf.

At first, I felt anger at my ineptitude, then despair and denial. Every stage of grief towards the magnificent project I thought I had completed flashed through my brain. My frustration had peaked. The collapsed shelves had defeated me, but the niggling voice at the back of my mind, which guides all my movements, said: "Hey, you could have done this better. You have to try again." The next day, after a meditative break, I was back, more determined and clear minded than ever.

I embarked once again on the construction, without the instructions, but with the shelf lying horizontally on the floor. My determination to challenge myself had not yet swayed. By the end of the hour, I had a working shelf that didn't look like the diagram but was able to support books. I needed to try again. I started again with the instructions and built a working, sturdy shelf that looked as though it could be printed in the IKEA catalogue- so long as they photoshop out the extra scratches.

"Well, what's the moral? She used the instructions." Yes, I did use the instructions. Yes, I did have to remake the shelf three times. But every single mistake in those three attempts was a lesson I can use in the future. In every moment, I gained a greater understanding of the way parts fit together. Every time I looked at the instructions I realised I didn't need to carve my own path single-handedly; instead there was a lot of merit from building the work of those before me and taking their ideas to grow even more. And, at the very worst, at the end of it all, at least the chaotic pieces of paper were no longer on the floor.

Fordham, UC Davis & University of Notre Dame

I felt every step of my horse, every movement gotten right was followed by a breath of relief.

By looking forward between his ears, I could picture my next successful movement, approaching another step of my first dressage competition. However, my horse's ears suddenly turned to my right side, he began to rear up and my feet stiffened in the stirrups. I knew something wasn't right—my horse had been frightened, but I didn't know by what. My controlled and planned performance became chaotic in a matter of seconds, making my self confidence evaporate. I could feel the audience's tense looks and my coach's nervous feet shaking in the arena sand while the strong wind blurred my vision. It seemed that everyone heard my heartbeat speeding up.

These twenty seconds of uncontrollable experience felt like long minutes in my head, and suddenly my performance ended before it even started. As soon as I was able to control my horse, I was called to the judges' cabin. "Dressage is about the connection and control over your horse, what you clearly didn't demonstrate..." From the 15 minutes that she spent talking, this was all I heard. My eyes filled up with tears, and I did everything I could to keep myself from crying. The limited confidence I had gathered during those first minutes of my presentation completely faded, and I became speechless.

Her words had a significant impact on me. It felt worse than being disqualified. At that moment, her comments made me believe that I wasn't capable of being successful in a sport that was such an important part of my life.

Until then, I saw every doubting look or unmotivating comment as if it was telling me to give up and stay in my comfort zone, especially when I was exposed in front of an audience. Since I was young, the idea of presenting in front of a crowd was my biggest fear, especially in dressage, where all my competitors were much older and had much more experience than me.

Once I was able to process the judge's criticism, I realized that I could choose how that moment would affect me. My love and passion for the sport taught me to digest this negative comment in a lighter way, transforming it into determination and perseverance. The judge's strong words made me want to work harder and prove to myself more than to anyone else that I was capable of doing whatever I put my mind to. With time, this motivation made me expand my horizons and discover the strength and curiosity that had been hidden by shyness.

Two years after encountering myself in that uncontrollable situation with my horse, there I was entering the arena one more time, in the most important competition of my sporting career – the national championship, which every young rider dreams about. I looked forward, and my eyes crossed with that same judge that changed my life without even knowing it. My hands were shaking, once again the only noise I could hear was my horse's breath that seemed to be speeding up along with my heartbeat, taking me back to that exact same day. Even though that huge wave of feelings caught me by surprise, I tried to focus on the hard work that led me to be there, competing among the best in the country. Without hesitation, my horse started lengthening his steps and starting the first movement of the performance, showing me that he was ready – and so was I.

The insecurities left me instantly because, for the first time, I believed in myself more than anyone else. I know that my challenges are just starting, but this growth mindset and my newfound confidence makes me certain I am ready to face any obstacle that comes my way, whether inside the arena, at the university campus or in whichever career I pursue.

University of Pennsylvania

Sweet Child o' the 80's.

To this day, when I hear a song from the 1980s, I am instantly transported to childhood happy car journeys, trying to sing in tune with my mother. Our soundtrack reflected my mother's conviction that an interest in music creates possibilities and positive connections. She and I have grown increasingly close by belting out tunes from 80's music, and these songs have become a symbol of her empowerment and the empowerment she passes on to me.

At first, I just enjoyed the music but didn't appreciate its significance. But, as I began to question my mother about the songs, we started to explore the late 20th-century histories of Britain and the US. Pop-culture icons I had known for years took on new meaning. Watching the conclusion of 'The Breakfast Club', which features the Simple Minds track, 'Don't You (Forget About Me)', I was struck by the depiction of young people trying to achieve authenticity through somewhat ludicrous means. This song is now inseparable from my realisation that I need to follow my own path, even though it may be viewed by others as ridiculous or defiant.

Yet, as my mother led me through British musical history, she also opened up to me about her own. She helped me see the need to find balance between the demands of tradition and the norms of modern society through her own example. My mother was a second generation immigrant growing up in London surrounded by the music of the 70's. But it was the 80's music of her teenage years that defined her. The music of artists like Boy George and David Bowie challenged her conventional upbringing and the ideals she had been raised with. My mother's parents encouraged her to pursue a career, which was progressive for their generation, but their traditional Indian values still restricted her freedom of choice. She was a keen young journalist but was pushed to pursue a career in pharmacy. Boyfriends were not allowed and she was expected to have an arranged marriage.

When she moved to university, musical icons like Madonna and Cyndi Lauper who embodied female empowerment helped her to grasp her newfound independence. Madonna's 'Papa don't Preach' had a massive impact on my mother because it celebrated the pregnancy of an unmarried woman. It was the antithesis of the rules she had been raised by. Yet, the music also reminded her of home, and listening to the radio with her own mother. Music was a rebellion, packaged in a familiar form. 80's artists helped her to recognise that she could seek a balance between cultural expectation and emerging possibilities for women, and begin to navigate away from her heritage on her own terms with 'Take On Me' by A-ha as her soundtrack. Even in a time of profound change, music was her constant.

My search for authenticity has been different, yet the need for change and balance is one that we share. While I do not want to be constrained by convention, I do not want to lose track of my background. Many around me have said that my choice to move to the US is a rejection of the easier options they have worked to lay before me. Some have even gone so far as to call it a rebellion. But taking inspiration from my mother and, of course, from my beloved 80s artists, I have come to the conclusion that becoming my own woman will require sound judgement, and respect for others, but also creativity, ambition and bravery. The music of the 80's gives me the courage to be bold, even if it makes others angry, and my mother's story has shown me how to retain the ideals that are important to me. Just as it did for my mother, music will push me forward while anchoring me to my past.

Duke, Tufts & Case Western University

Reaching The Summit

The gate creaked closed behind me as I stepped out onto the pavement. The sun was beginning to peek over the horizon, casting a gentle yellow light through the trees above me. I took a deep breath and stretched, the brisk morning air calming my growing excitement. The world felt silent and empty, and the only thing that mattered was me and the road ahead. I set off at an easy pace, savouring my surroundings with each stride. I didn't plan where I was going, but that's what made it exciting. The best way to explore was to get lost.

In fact, that attitude did not just apply to my running - it mirrored my approach to learning too. I have always loved to create things, and I began to see coding as the perfect outlet. Soaking up every resource I could find online and in the library, each of my projects became more ambitious than the last. I taught myself the skills I needed as I went, losing myself completely in the exciting world of technology.

The sun continued to rise and I was no longer under the cover of trees. I felt the harsh heat drain my energy. Looking ahead, I felt apprehensive – a long track winding up a steep hill that was notorious amongst runners. Aside from turning around, there was no other way home. I locked my gaze onto the road ahead and pushed forward.

At the same time, I was working on my latest project – a timetabling application for my school. I had experienced first-hand the painstaking process teachers had to endure to create lesson schedules manually, and identified the opportunity to solve a real-world problem. I dived into it head-first, losing myself in a world of graph theory, genetic algorithms and advanced databases, but soon my

overzealous approach began to backfire. The program became bloated and disorganized; my lack of planning made further progress seem impossible.

Leaning over and gasping for air, I stopped under a solitary tree. I was barely halfway, but I felt exhausted. I didn't want to turn back now, but I was so tired I could hardly stand. At that moment, the idea of reaching the top felt impossible. Fitter runners had tried and failed to beat this hill, and despite my exhaustion, I could see that throwing myself at the problem wasn't going to work. I needed a plan to stack the odds in my favor.

I stood up, noting the incline of each part of the track; where to conserve energy and where to put in all my effort. I divided the route into smaller parts; each bend became a milestone and each step took me closer to the top. Before I knew it, I was looking down to where I started, feeling tired but flushed with success.

Once home, I deleted my first attempt and started from scratch. The way I managed to reach the top of that hill was to plan thoroughly, and this was what I needed to do for my project to succeed. Just like that run, it was challenging and I spent countless hours working on it. I solved the problem in sections, and the feeling of success that followed was completely worth it. I would never have thought that the inspiration I needed to solve my coding dilemma lay in running, but that lesson has stuck. Now, when I can't see the way forward, I step back, break down the problem, and tackle it piece by piece until I reach my goal. There's always a way to reach the summit, it's just a matter of finding it.

My process of discovering who I am has been strongly influenced by two significant marches. First, I marched to the holiest Jewish prayer, the Shema, then to the beat of Asimbonanga Mandela. First, I marched along the brick paths of Auschwitz, then along the dirt roads of Soweto township. First, I marched with thousands of Jews, then with thousands of South Africans. First, I marched to remember, then I marched to belong - though I wasn't sure I ever would.

'Arbeit Macht Frei. Work makes you free.' As a young Jewish girl from South Africa, I never thought I would walk beneath these infamous words while singing the Israeli national anthem - not only because I lived far away but because I did not think I was brave enough to face the true horrors of the Holocaust. At the age of 17, I travelled to Poland alongside 40 young Jews from South Africa. This trip was aimed to educate us about the horrors of our past, expose us to the uniqueness of the global Jewish community, and encourage us to examine the roots of prejudice, intolerance and hatred.

This march was not merely a journey in our ancestors' footsteps, but a process of self discovery. My great uncle and great grandmother were survivors of Auschwitz. I never got to meet them; however, I felt as if I walked alongside them during the march. While being surrounded by young Jews from around the world, I realized how grateful I was to be Jewish and a part of this people. I learnt the power of hatred - that not only actions but also words can lead to a horror such as the Holocaust.

Returning to South Africa was challenging. I was met with the realization that South Africa could not offer me the connection and comfort of being close to my heritage. In Poland, I could feel connections to my past through seeing piles of shoes at Mejdanek or reading through The Book of Names in Auschwitz. But after this, I began to feel out of place in South Africa.

A year later, my school invited me to attend a Youth Day March commemorating the youths who were brutally murdered for taking action against the apartheid regime. I knew I would be out of my comfort zone, marching alongside people I had less of a connection with, whose past struggles had not been my own.

As we arrived at the starting point, I felt overwhelmed by the number of unfamiliar faces. When a student I didn't know asked me to march with her, I began to feel included. With every step I took, my discomfort began to ease, and I started to enjoy the march. We were singing songs of freedom. We saw people standing outside their homes, waving and smiling at us as we marched.

I realized that the Jewish nation's horrifying past was not so different from that of Black South Africans' under apartheid. I could identify with their feelings of fear, of not belonging and of hope for a better future. Our people had both been wrongly discriminated against. I held a sign that read, 'Calling for youth empowerment,' and for the first time I felt empowered as a South African. I had allowed my pessimistic attitude to blind me from the beauty of my home; we were of different races, religions, and histories, yet this no longer felt like a barrier. I finally felt part of the "rainbow nation."

Today I still march along my own path. I live with the comfort of knowing who I am and where I belong. I still have more to discover about myself, my Judaism and my South African identity; however, I now feel ready to continue my journey. I've found my comfort zone in South Africa, which means that it is time for me to step out, and find myself anew.

University of Southern California

During October 2011, my confidence changed for the better. I went from someone who felt that they had no value in the world, due to my irrational fear of being humiliated, to someone who believed in their worth to the world.

After class one day, my English teacher called me to stay behind and said “Qaks, I would like you to consider joining my public speaking society.” I was left shocked and confused. I was terrorized by thoughts like, “How could a shy, timid boy like myself join such a society?” However, I joined based on my teacher’s recommendation.

Despite my trepidation of failure, I spent the whole of 2012 honing my public speaking abilities. I admired my progress from the novice speaker shaking every time he spoke, to a speaker delivering with confidence. Impressed by my progress, my teacher invited me to partake in a competition against my fellow peers. She then thrust me on the spot when she told me that my first speech on stage would be an impromptu speech.

This terrified me. However, the audience laughed at my humor and I could see their interest in my speech. I placed second. This left me astonished. In that very moment, I realized that I have the ability to speak my mind without the fear of being ridiculed. I realized that I had the ability to converse on contentious topics like racism, sexism, politics, and religion. I had just grasped the notion that my words could impact lives, engage people in my ideas, and hopefully leave a mark on the world. It was in that moment that I realized the power of my voice.

It is only now that I view my teacher’s invitation to be one of the best opportunities that I have taken in my life, for which I am forever grateful. I realized that people are enticed by the content of my mind; the only thing that I had to do was simply speak. This newfound

confidence in myself and my voice convinced me to pursue my other interests, such as learning the saxophone and playing sports like basketball and rugby. It led to my appointment as a leader within the school’s council and was ultimately the foundation of my leadership. It was through that experience that I was able to discover who I was, the boy who limited his potential, and who I could be, the man who could conceivably influence the world.

After numerous interactions with people who originate from impoverished areas, I identified that many have yet to discover their voices. It is a tragic reality that many people in rural areas in South Africa are not confident in their abilities due to their circumstances. I yearn to change this unfortunate belief. My English teacher inspired me to see the potential in others, just as she had with me. It is thus my wish to assist people to discover their voices. This led me to numerous hours of helping to elevate those in communities around me out of poverty, especially with regards to their education and English proficiency. My ambition of becoming a social entrepreneur stems from my appetite for community outreach. Through my interactions, I believe that many people dream of becoming entrepreneurs, but lack the confidence to turn that dream into a reality. It is for this reason that I have the desire to go to college in order to put myself in the best position to acquire the necessary knowledge on start-up ventures so that I may assist others.

My English teacher gave me a sense of confidence that I had never felt before in myself, something I aspire to replicate in others. Just like how my English teacher plucked a reserved, anxious boy and gave him a new sense of life, I wish to do the same for others, so that they too can find their voices.

UC Berkeley, Tufts & Case Western University

The big engineering beast,” I mumbled as I saw the intricate design of the colossal structure before my eyes. The scale and complexity of these tracks filled with vertical drops and loops fascinated me. Yet I couldn't shake the anxiety that accompanied the thought of facing this engineering masterpiece. Rollercoasters have always frightened me, and I knew that, sooner or later, I would have to face them.

In 11th grade, my school organized a student trip to Spain. I anxiously anticipated the adventures that lay ahead. The idea of traveling to another country without my family sparked a mix of excitement and unease within me. The notion of exploring a foreign land, inserting myself into a new culture, and venturing into unfamiliar spaces was both thrilling and intimidating. Despite all I was anticipating, I wasn't expecting that the biggest thing I would face was my fear of rollercoasters. As the sun rose, the whole group woke up excited to visit the amusement park, while I was terrified to the very core. After entering the park and taking a couple of turns, we arrived at the biggest rollercoaster I had ever seen.

The sheer size and design left me marveling in complete shock, as I knew I would have to embark on a rollercoaster for the first time in my life, but still, I didn't feel that I was ready. Though deep down I logically knew that rollercoasters were designed with safety as the main priority, dread overwhelmed this thought. It made me even more hesitant, giving me flashbacks of my biggest fear: Heights. While hearing the screams of fear of those who were already on the ride, I felt even less eager to climb up those steps and buckle myself into the safety harness. At that moment, as I was paralyzed and thinking about what to do, I felt a hand on my shoulder and heard: “Come on, let's go.” Motivated by the goodwill of my friends, paired with my desire to conquer my fear, I climbed the stairs with hesitant yet excited steps. I boarded the rollercoaster.

As the ride launched into motion, a surge of adrenaline coursed through my veins. The initial fear gradually gave way to exhilaration, and with each drop, loop, and upside moment, my confidence grew. The rollercoaster could be seen as a metaphor for life, an embodiment of the challenges that lie before us, inviting us to take a leap of faith and discover the thrill of pushing our boundaries. And much like a rollercoaster, life also has its valleys and peaks. When ascending, we might think that it will never stop, but suddenly, life can completely flip.

Just as engineers design a rollercoaster, giving it a balance of highs and lows so they have a meaning, in the hard moments in life we must find resilience, ensuring that we get to the next phase more prepared than before. This experience showed me that a delicate balance is required to navigate both the realms of rationality and emotions. Using it as an approach to life, I will make decisions that consider not only what I want, but also the consequences. Moreover, I recognized that the situation I was in CA Vieira, Otávio CEEB: 910086 Fall 2024 9 FY EA CAID: 38306901 reflects the collaborative nature of engineering, in which you need help to reach your goals.

My friends' presence exemplified the importance of having a reliable group of individuals who inspire and push me beyond my limits to be a better person and reach my true potential. As I leverage the teachings from previous valleys and look ahead, I am committed to embracing challenges in my academic and personal life, pursuing higher education, and moving to a new country. Therefore, I recognize that personal growth and fulfillment often lie beyond the confines of comfort. With determination and excitement, I feel ready to ride the various “Big engineering beasts” throughout my life.

UCLA and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

"It's time for a serious chat," my dad said. "Your sister has been diagnosed with epilepsy." I didn't know much about epilepsy at the time. Judging by the somber expression on my dad's face, though, I knew it was very, very serious. My brain, fried from a long day at school, automatically kicked into overdrive. I wondered what effect this had on my family.

The first time my sister had a seizure in front of me, I had no idea what was going on. It frightened me to see her have this out of body experience where she had no control over her actions; all I wanted to do was help. This helplessness made me realize the role I had to play and that I had to make it a priority for me to learn how to care for her when it would happen again. It has been difficult for me to see my parents struggle through this time, one could never wish upon an event such as this in anyone's life. They saw my sister's character entirely change as a result of this condition. She went from being a confident young girl that had an answer ready for any question before you could even ask it; to one that lacked assertiveness and social skills, what were once her defining characteristics. My heart broke for her and my parents.

What was best for Andie was a supportive, stable home life. It forced me to sometimes give up on visiting friends on the weekend, to be there for her when she needed it the most. As time progressed, I soon became a pillar of strength for my sister, whether it be during one of her seizures or in daily aspects of her life. From that day on, my relationship with my parents was never the same. I had transitioned into an adult with the responsibility and capability of taking care of and standing up for others. Our dinner conversations became more mature, and I loved our new dynamic. Having the responsibility of looking after my sister also gave me a greater sense of understanding and compassion for the unknown.

This experience as a whole enabled me to engage more with those around me. I felt as if I had a better understanding of people and their emotions. As a result, I forged deep and meaningful relationships with not only the people around me at school but also with people many years older than myself, many of whom I remain close with to this day. Engaging in meaningful conversations with these varied groups of people, including my parents, allowed me to mature at a young age.

I stopped relying on my parents to take care of everything in my life, soon thinking more for myself. I felt a strong, independent vision for who I wanted to be. I envisioned using my skills and talents to benefit those around me. Many people around me were still on the journey of self-discovery; finding and developing their own identity. I have discovered inner strength and confidence through my role as caregiver. This experience has shown me the importance of my contribution towards the welfare of others.

This is why the word - "family" - means a lot to me. My upbringing ended up so different than I expected. My parents simultaneously exposed me to both life's hardships and rewards by encouraging my sense of responsibility, overall maturity, and how much I value my relationships with others. Not forgetting the hurdles such as my sister's epilepsy which in turn allowed me to forge a stronger bond with my family. I will always remember that chat at the dining room table, for it shaped me and developed me into the responsible and robust character I am today.

It is Friday evening and the stage is set with the "Glorified Podium of Discussion" in the middle of the living room.

First on the docket is "Weekly Fast Fact." At the sound of the gavel my grandfather declares, "If you are ever in need of a quick repair, there is only one item for every job: duct tape. Duct tape fixes everything!" Or so I was told.

Three pieces of particle board, half a roll of duct tape, and some TLC came together to create the "Glorified Podium of Discussion." Every Friday, for the past four years, my family has gathered to hold our personal family Congress TED Talk in the comfort of our home. It all began when we sat down to watch the primary election debates leading up to the 2016 presidential election and tensions began rising in the room.

Living in a multigenerational and multicultural household, I have been fortunate to be exposed to a full spectrum of views, opinions, and ideas that have bound my family together. Whether it be an evaluative look at United States foreign policy, a critique of a new movie-musical dance number, or a history lesson in space exploration, we have talked about it.

Of all the topics my family has discussed, there is one that has stuck with me: duct tape. The creative versatility of duct tape has transformed into the binding metaphor for family unity in my life. Every week I look forward to taping together the gap between clashing views, and this is only possible with communication. While there is a lack of meaningful dialogue in society, my living room represents the reverse microcosm of encouraging, informative conversation.

Over the last seventeen years, I have had to become an expert in duct tape ingenuity - due to seven moves. I have had to give up roots in one city in exchange for a clean slate of unveiled opportunities and new relationships in the next.

Often, people are astonished when I name all the cities in which I have lived, but, in all honesty, the outcome of each move outweighs the frustrating process of packing up boxes, taping them shut, and hoping they arrive at the next destination. Moving from one city to another requires me to create new long-distance friendships, adapt to new school environments, and learn the "ins and outs" of an entire new community, while also giving me ample practice to reflect on my personal experiences. I carry with me an unyielding desire to adapt and understand the communities I call home by directly facing adversity.

After each move, the makeshift podium requires more duct tape to keep its integrity; in contrast, the past seven years have aided the growth of my emotional and psychological integrity on which I continued to build. My identity has also grown through my connection with my family in relation to the places we have lived. From taking part in a Mother's Against Drunk Driving forum, hosting an annual Dragon Boat Racing Festival, or attending NASA's lecture in the final days of the Pluto New Horizon Mission, I am able to tape together my experiences and lessons into a cohesive whole, bettering the person I wish to be.

My grandpa was wrong; duct tape cannot fix the entirety of the world's problems, yet I assert the discussions with my family have aided in a clearer understanding of who I am, one family TED Talk at a time.

Although my living room has changed many times, the importance of family unity has been developed by meaningful discussions. When it comes to facing adversity, I believe the "Glorified Podium of Discussion" has equipped me with skills for real world application. Obstacles will be the fuel of my ambition as I continue to strive for success with the skills developed in my living room.

On a Sunday morning when I was 11, I woke up to my parents shouting as they hurriedly prepared me and my brother for church at Santa Rita de Cássia in São Paulo. When we arrived, I was pleased we were late. Mass was halfway through, and, in a few minutes, communion began. The queue strolled towards the priest, and I followed. Back at our wooden bench, my hands on my forehead and mouth tasting like cheap wine, I felt nothing.

Brazil is a country where a cross hangs in every court and a Bible adorns every house. Religious conservatives promote their pro-life agenda on social media and protest against gender transition in public hospitals. Uniquely, I have grown up in a family open to religious discussion, which has led me to consistently challenge obstinate judgments.

When I started my Catholic confirmation classes, I contested multiple biblical claims in family conversations, especially about Jesus' resurrection and ascension to heaven. My mother intently listened, often arching her eyebrows to express concern for my supposed disbelief in God. Sunday lunches after my classes started to acquire a bitter theological taste.

Months later, heading home with my mom from a confirmation lecture, I wondered aloud why evil existed when God had the omnipotence to end it. Shouldn't God use his divine powers to eradicate sin and eliminate the need to forgive evildoers? My mother narrowed her eyeballs and pressed her lips. I invoked my school assignment on Freud's religious "phantasy" and mentioned the Epicurean paradox of God, rebutting her silence with the loudest atheist academia. At age 12, my pre-teen ego desired to inflict a small crack in her holy crust, so I kept arguing. Undermining my mom's faith thrilled me as if I could refute the Catholic creed itself.

As she parked the car, I was ready for her to reproach me for not understanding my confirmation lessons. Instead, she simply acknowledged, "It is good that you're thinking. That is what religion is about."

Over the next six years, I daydreamed through my priest's sermons, finding an old woman's Parkinson-afflicted hands more engaging. Each ceremony felt like routine homework, which, at some point, I gave up trying to comprehend.

In recent August, my study abroad at Cambridge University unsettled my apathy when I met Ahmed, an Iraqi Muslim. Keen to discuss religion, we talked late into the nights about the Prophet, Jesus, and religious fundamentalists. These chats only reinforced my conclusions on the illogical premises of Catholicism. To my surprise, he invited me to his Friday prayer in Cambridge's Central Mosque, which I accepted.

That day, I overloaded Ahmed with various questions about the Salah, the Rak'ats, and the Quran readings. After washing my body and removing my shoes, I stepped inside the mosque. As soon as the prayer began, the Imam recited the Quran in archaic Arabic.

Neither I nor the majority of the crowd comprehended his words, but I replicated the Rak'ats movements of the other men on the prayer mat. Detached from my Catholic ritual, my hands stretched on the floor and my forehead prostrated on the ground, I felt a rare calm.

Back home, as I told my parents about this experience, my mom endorsed my continued search for spirituality. She was right. Only in persistently doubting would I reach a point of accepting faith's mystery. Beyond our bodies, books, and rituals, the unknown reveals itself in the most subtle shapes, like an act of friendship or a sentiment of peace. Jumping to absolute conclusions without due appreciation of the transcendent seemed rather naive in hindsight. The Islamic prayer sparked a singular humility that my 12-year-old mind would not have dreamt about. In the end, my journey from skepticism to spiritual openness has revealed my commitment to questioning enigmatic dilemmas, such as religion, always in pursuit of personal comprehension rather than premature judgments.

USC, NYU, UC Berkeley & more

From Disciple to Guru

“Lift that foot higher off the ground or you will keep falling out of your chakar!”

Namita’s stern reminder rings sharply in my ear. It’s around 5pm and I’m well into my sixth hour at my dance studio. It’s been another long day where I leave feeling exhausted and sore but, every Sunday, it is my home.

During practices, everyone in the class is pushed beyond what seems possible. Talking, except to ask questions, is unacceptable. We forgo water and we run drills time after time until each step is mastered by every person in unison. Namita hurls strict corrections across the room as we move our way through eight count after eight count.

Yet, the minute rehearsal ends, the scene changes. Namita facilitates the conversation asking us about our school, our friends, our love lives, and our families. She nurses our wounds from both the physically demanding rehearsal, and the emotionally wounding drama in our personal lives. It is during these conversations that I have become incredibly close to the woman that is the heart and soul of our company, my teacher Namita. Namita’s roles as a strict disciplinarian and a loving caretaker are often split based on whether or not we are in the studio, and in my own teaching endeavours I have aimed to converge the two. Rather than separating results and empathy like Namita, I have become a coach and mentor that is “hard on performance and soft on people”.

Modeling off my teacher’s truly unique style, I’ve been able to find a happy medium between being empathetic and results-driven. As a coach for the Rocky Heights Middle School debate team, I expect engaged discussions, quick turnaround times for speeches, and enthusiastic acceptance of criticism after mock debates from my students because I want them to succeed at tournaments. Yet, I know to be understanding when my expectations aren’t fully met because of excessive

schoolwork, poor mental health, or other outside factors. Being only a couple years past my own middle school years, I know the rigour and often excessive stress that plagues students, not to mention the petty drama and pressure to fit in. I quickly found that being both a reliable source of information and an approachable one resulted in the most productive team. This meant knowing my audience.

Meetings are a mix of days where we all pull out our laptops and research for hours, but also of days where kids come to me exhausted from the school day, and we eat candy, laugh, and make slower progress. I practice the same style in mentoring biotech research students so that they are better prepared to conduct and present their research. Even in drilling students on how to use the autoclave, being able to be simultaneously understanding of their perspectives has allowed me to more effectively pinpoint where students are struggling.

From days where I was demotivated by excessively strict dance rehearsals, I’ve learned the necessity of being able to read the room. I’ve begun to find methods to motivate my students in ways that are unique to me. In the advanced kids dance class I teach, I’ve attempted to draw attention and excitement by playing games like “freeze dance kathak”, letting kids contribute to choreography, and even ending every class with our ceremonious team Tik Tok. My ladies class and I run drills on new steps until they have been mastered, and immediately follow it up with conversations regarding how to bring joy into our dancing and let ourselves be truly vulnerable in a safe space.

Through watching Namita interact in different situations, I have learned much more thanatkar and technique. Both discipline and empathy are incredibly important to me. By balancing both of Namita’s personalities, I have become someone who is not only respected but has a relationship with the people I coach and mentor.

As I was putting on my mask about to dive in, my instructor reminded me that I would be given a task to complete at 130 feet deep to test the effects of nitrogen narcosis — the potentially deadly alteration in a scuba diver's consciousness which affects their ability to make decisions, creates a false sense of security and brings unpredictable euphoria when diving deeper than 100 feet.

Just before I jumped into the water, I hesitated. What if something went wrong and I could not manage it? But then I remembered why I was doing this: it was not only to become a better diver, but more importantly to challenge myself. With that I jumped in.

Together with my instructor, I slowly began to descend along the guide line. As we neared the bottom of the line, I started to make out the coral reef which sat at around 80 feet. I started to recognise different fish from past dives, everything from vibrant blue fish to bright red lionfish.

As I swam towards the cliff that marked the beginning of uncharted territory, my mind was racing with thoughts of how narcosis could affect me. I was afraid that I would lose my focus and start acting dangerously, but through facing challenges in my life, I have devised a strategy that always levels my thinking: I took a deep breath and re-focused my mind and thought only of the task at hand.

As we passed the cliff, I could see the sandy floor waiting for us at 130 feet, yet it still seemed so far away. I was having a mental war with myself, wondering if I had been affected yet, if I should turn back to the familiar. Eventually, we were only a couple feet from reaching our goal depth and I started to feel excited, but the journey was far from over. As we neared the sea floor, I established my buoyancy and looked at my instructor who was preparing the narcosis test. Much to my surprise, it was an actual test. I took the slate

from her, my eyes poured over the long division problem and I began to chuckle through my regulator.

Ordinarily, math is not a humorous subject for me, but the absurdity of the situation was enhanced by the euphoria I was apparently experiencing. With a tap on my shoulder from my instructor, I quickly shook off the effects, focused on the problem and used the waterproof pencil to reach the quotient.

After handing the slate back to my instructor, I looked up and I could barely see the surface - even though the visibility was very clear. It hit me how deep we were: as deep as a twelve story building. I was undeniably affected by narcosis, however I still had a clear head. I nervously watched my instructor as she checked my math. She finished and nodded with a smile. I felt a rush of relief, and finally began to truly notice my surroundings.

First, I recognized that I was slightly shivering and it was darker than usual. Then I noticed the stillness: there were fewer fish and the sea floor seemed untouched, everything seemed more calm. I wanted to stay in this other world for a little longer, but eventually the time came to return to reality.

As we ascended alongside the cliff wall of coral, I was in awe of the incredible beauty of the underwater world which amazed me every single dive. But, before I knew it, we were gazing over the reef again. When we finished our dive and broke the surface, I couldn't help but smile knowing what I had overcome. This feeling of accomplishment is what keeps me challenging myself every opportunity I can. While we swam to the boat, I immediately felt the urge to plan the next experience that would further challenge me.

“Why does your mom have eight arms, Ayaka?” my classmate, Ryan, asked curiously, glancing at my artwork.

Before I could answer that it was because she always multi-tasked as if she really had eight arms, he called Mrs. Hatcher over, who immediately complimented Ryan’s red fish-blue-fish painting before pausing in confusion at my portrait.

“Maybe you should try again, Ayaka.”

Since kindergarten, ridicule has been the typical response to my art. My one-legged elephant, my musical about a lonely moon, my story about a monkey raised by werewolves. Nobody got it. I was the only one who loved these bizarre ideas, and I felt isolated. Without anyone to appreciate them, I started keeping my creativity to myself. In time, this translated into striving to fit everybody’s expectations. I started to draw my mom with two arms.

But I still held on to one indulgence of my true spirit: poetry. I loved all poetry, from Dr. Seuss’s quirky words and ideas that bounced off pages like songs, to haikus that layered inner emotions with nature’s beauty in just seventeen syllables. Composing poetry allowed me to capture my raw emotions, those sometimes squiggly hard-to-define feelings, and express them in ways no other art form allowed. But fear of judgment kept my creations hidden from the world.

In my junior year, I first read William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow.” Some classmates found significance in the color red, and others found meaning in the white. But I was fascinated by its structure: four short simple stanzas. The unconventional structure welcomed me into a world where structure didn’t demand conformity. The poem assured me that being unconventional had value.

Inspired, I decided to create an original poem. Word after word flooded onto my paper—reflections on how stifled I was being forced to follow social norms, how I lost confidence in expressing who I was, how I hid feelings and thoughts from myself and others. But as words unfolded, I had peeled off the outer layers of the Ayaka-cabbage, revealing my core. When I finally completed my poem, I slumped back in my chair, and read it. Again, and again, and again. Then I waited. One day, two days. Two weeks, Three

weeks. The words—my voice—slowly simmered within me. This poem couldn’t just sleep in my notebook. That would mean I would once again hide who I am. My poem woke up, walked off the page, and took me to the website of the Japan Poets Club Poetry Contest. But the idea of being dismissed, just like in kindergarten, left my cursor hovering over the submit button. After a minute, I knew it was time to seek value in my work regardless of what others think; I was ready to embrace the fact I had eight arms.

Click.

Congratulations, your poetry has been successfully submitted.

Until then, I was never able to Dr. Seuss my own fanciful animals. I couldn’t red wheelbarrow my white chickens. The eyes and words of others caged my inner self. But finally, I realized the importance of embracing the whole width of A Y A K A.

Today, I treat my life as if it is its own poetry. Creating palindromes, having a collection of cacti, vlogging about my everyday life, and that’s just the beginning of my list.

My mom does have two arms. But from time to time I draw her with eight arms. Other days five. Why? Because...

“You shouldn’t draw outside the lines”
“Your painting is confusing”
The lines are so restricting

“You’re petite”
“You’re too tall”
The lines are so restricting

“You should smile more”
“You should sit like a woman”
The lines are so restricting

“You are such a nerd”
“You are so weird”
The lines are so restricting

Then one day, I drew outside the lines
Because the lines were so restricting.

Harvard University, Georgetown University, Northwestern University and more

“Samuel is a good listener and a motivated learner, but he is often distracted and rolls around on the floor with his friends during group activities.” Such was 5-year-old Sam Clark as described by preschool teacher Ms. Kim—much more interested in somersaults across the carpet than focused academics. I teemed with energy and could find no way of containing it, necessitating incessant fidgeting, a near perpetual stream of talking and singing, and frequent breaks from reading time for classroom gymnastics. To both the amusement and frustration of preschool teachers, I needed and would always find outlets, acceptable or not, to release this erupting energy.

As I have grown older and arguably more mature, my energy has not dissipated, but has rather found forums in which to flourish. My physical energy, once only manifested in squirming and poorly executed classroom cartwheels, has been honed in martial arts. Entering the Tae Kwon Do studio seven years ago, I had no knack for any sport; I was “built for math,” as my instructor Ms. Theresa said—more comfortable with algebra than a well-placed punch. I never expected that I would win tournaments, teach classes, and sport a 3rd degree black belt. But it was that same raw energy, that same joy in illicit preschool somersaulting, that fueled my training, teaching, and success in the martial arts world and continues to do so.

My vigorous verbal energy has inspired, and perhaps necessitated, a fascination with debate. This insatiable drive to speak produced the fierce fervor with which I approach debates—on topics from alternative energy to welfare reform. My discoveries and frustrations over the course of extensive research or a debate round have sparked a deep and continuing interest in domestic and foreign policy; I feel driven now to pursue such interests, and debate has ignited an intense desire to stay informed and engaged as I dissect policy intricacies and an opponent’s case. Debate has rerouted younger Sam’s torrent of random post-somersaulting comments into zealous yet calculated speeches on important issues.

While debate and martial arts allow a release of energy through a rapid rebuttal or a 540° roundhouse kick, theatre provides the ultimate forum. Improvisation and sketch comedy have become arenas in which this energy can explode, virtually unhindered, while individual roles in a variety of productions have focused this energy to create specific mannerisms and fuel powerful motives. As I have transformed myself into a tormented and inebriated fish-man (Caliban) a

preaching, dancing showman (the Wiz), or simply, dare I say it, an ass (Bottom and Dogberry), my rolling on the floor with friends has tumbled down different paths. My 5-year-old desire to roll without restraint has evolved into a passion to experience every aspect of theatre—from acting to directing to writing to lighting design—as it is now the theatre, rather than cartwheels, that I truly enjoy.

Through martial arts, debate, and theatre I have been able to mold a rampant energy from a spastic nuisance into true joys that I hope to continue and pursue. But I believe that the most important and rewarding outgrowth of this energy has been my ability to recognize the same trait in kids whom I teach. In teaching martial arts, I believe that the insane energy of kids is something to be embraced rather than stamped out. Many of the kids I teach, in both after-school programs at private schools and classes at transitional housing programs and homeless shelters, suffer frequent reprimands, as I did, for their fervor and glee in their rigorous schools or struggling home lives. A martial arts class should be a release, a place where energy is cultivated and encouraged, and used to build fitness, skill, and confidence—rather than one more setting where enthusiasm is condemned. To me, little is more rewarding and exhilarating than teaching and pushing students to do what they never imagined they could, and I believe that it is the enthusiasm in the students and myself that drives such success.

I take a similar approach elsewhere: whether choreographing and leading a performance with my martial arts school’s Demonstration Team, assistant-directing a production at the Jewish Community Center, coaching novice debaters, or hosting an improv show. In all these outlets, I am driven by this raw energy and I believe that it is imperative; the black belts kick harder and jump higher, the improvisers think faster, the actors perform better, and the debaters hammer home their points.

I no longer roll around on the floor during class. But the brimming energy that drove my preschool acrobatics has not subsided in the least; rather, it has become the driving force behind all that I do. From the debate podium to the classroom to the stage, I try to, and often must, approach everything with this vigor. These endeavors have become my “rolling around on the floor with friends,” my release, and my passion, and I cannot wait to see what more will fill that role as I move forward. I suppose if all else fails, I can go back to somersaults.

Harvard University, Yale University, Columbia University

I distinctly remember the many pairs of twitching eyebrows, tapping fingers, and the exaggerated sighs of my classmates while we had a discussion about the use of nuclear energy in Japan. Although not intended to be a debate, whenever someone spoke, they were immediately interrupted by someone who disagreed with them. We failed to separate our feelings from facts, and by the end of class, I was frustrated by our inability to communicate.

When I was 8 years old, the Great East Japan Earthquake caused one of the most devastating nuclear power plant accidents in history in the region of Fukushima. Since then, rather than cooperating to solve the energy problem, people have been engaged in an endless debate about the benefits and dangers of nuclear power.

In my classroom, the reason for the miscommunication was people being set on their beliefs. As a high school student, I have no control over policy making or research, but I am a part of the conversation, so I searched for a way to converse with as many people as possible. I spent days thinking, and then remembered my love for watching movies. I had always wanted to make my own, but I had never found a compelling story to tell. I looked at my camera that was sitting on my shelf and decided that it was time to make a documentary.

Initially, I believed that I could objectively portray the problem from both sides. I eagerly sent out emails and phone calls to scientists, companies, and government officials, and each interview felt almost like a science experiment. I asked everyone the same set of questions, and I was excited to be collecting so much data with sound reasoning.

However, this strategy started to crumble when I first visited the city of Namie in Fukushima. I tried to simply record the

radiation levels and get an understanding of the policies that had been implemented there, but once I heard the stories of locals living in the city, it did not feel right to ignore their perspectives just for the sake of an objective portrayal.

I was guided by a man who had lived there all his life until the accident. He told me his memories of banquets under the cherry-blossom trees, dancing under the red lantern lights in summer festivals, and eating the first bowl of rice that he harvested. Through his eyes, behind the silent and empty city, I was able to see a city similar to mine; I was able to connect with Namie.

For a long time, I focused on positioning myself as another expert on this issue. Not being able to find a clear answer on the subject made me uncomfortable. I felt that I had to be an expert to have the authority to make a documentary, but I was an ordinary citizen. My experience in Namie showed me that although objectivity is what helps you get unbiased information, subjectivity is what brings out the humanity in what you see. I realized the best way to connect with the audience was to show my personal struggle in picking a side.

During my first screening at a film festival, I was nervous because the documentary did not present any answers. To my surprise, many people came up and thanked me after the screening for my honest portrayal of nuclear energy, telling me that watching the film made them reconsider their beliefs. My documentary ends with the words “We have not lost hope even though we have come far from finding a choice. Our investigation has just begun.” By showing my own perspective, I was able to sit beside the audience, and together, we could think about the future of our country.

Brown University, Case Western University

Passover is always a crowded holiday at our house. The day before our week-long celebration of freedom begins, our kitchen is filled with three generations of women, blasting 80's hits, and the smell of onions. My mom always reminds me to wait before putting trays hot from the oven onto the counter because "remember when I accidentally made the glass tray filled with farfel explode?". I laugh and form sticky dough into kneidlach for the chicken soup.

For as long as I can remember, I've helped prepare this exact meal: the charoset, the farfel, and the kneidlach. Until I was tall enough, I stood on a step stool, carefully following the recipes that my great-great-grandparents, in their East European shtetls, passed down to me, in my family's São Paulo apartment. I read the family cookbook's instructions over and over, making sure that I was doing everything exactly right. I measured out ingredients, chopped vegetables, set timers for the oven slowly and attentively. I felt it was my duty to carry out these tasks, precisely, identically. But with time, this routine became repetitive, mechanical, mundane. Those old songs rang in my ears; I sighed as I cut up yet another carrot; I dragged my feet to set up the table. I started to tire of doing the same things over and over, year after year.

Naturally, however, as the years passed, I realized: Repetition is not an exercise in vain. Repetition yields small but meaningful growth, personal touches become traditions in and of themselves.

Every year, I'd added my own touches to the holiday's proceedings. I'd incorporated customary ingredients—leeks, potatoes, and bitter herbs—into new dishes. I'd changed the positions of the wine glasses to prevent spilling. These were simple changes, but, slowly, they became important parts of our seder. I followed the same rules and traditions, but the dishes grew more complex, and the tablecloth, thankfully, cleaner.

Later on, it's time for seder. We gather around the plastic tables set up in our jam packed living room and begin telling the story of our people. Most of the seder is scripted, but we recount it with fervor, as if the story were new to tell and hear every year. In some ways, it is. Though we sit through hours and hours of storytelling and praying, we always find new ways to build on our traditions. We turn old Hebrew melodies into Brazilian funk songs. We scatter the table with masks, stickers, and drawings that represent different parts of the narrative of Passover. We allow our experiences from each year to expand the way we look at the story already heard so many times.

This is what really makes Passover and tradition so special. Each year, we create new meanings, memories, and ideas. We retell the same stories—stories that are repeated across generations and across the world—only to find there is more to uncover.

It is from repetition that novelty emerges. Acknowledging the past's connection to the present opens us up to possibility, innovation, and insight. Through preparing the same meals, I came up with new recipes. Through telling the same stories, we found new angles of interpretation. And I can see this, now, in everything else that might have otherwise become tiresome. I repeat the same knit and purl stitches to make a new sweater. I replicate the same procedures in the lab daily to get valid results regarding plant growth. I play the same scales with students in my music program until they have dominance over the guitar. Yes, repetition can, at times, seem pointless and annoying, but when I think of sitting with the same people, around the same table, and to the sound of the same songs on Passover, it fills me with excitement for the new things that come out of our seder every year.



As I threw open the pool's thick metal doors, the pungent aroma of chlorine swaddled me like a wet blanket around a shivering newborn. The scent was pervasive during my year-long stint on the swimming and diving team, when the fame I'd imagined for myself as a freshman remained just out of reach. As I stepped along the slimy pool deck, I brought my focus back to the reason I had revived my failed athletic career.

Gustavo Torres and I met through my school's Best Buddies Club, which connects students with and without developmental disabilities. The students' excitement as they jumped up to greet me every morning drew me into a community that made their own happiness in a world that often met them with judgment. But while Gustavo's limited mobility and reliance on a communication device made conversation challenging, these were small setbacks compared to the fact that he seemed to want nothing to do with me. We made bracelets, holiday cards, paper mache flowers, and decorated cookies, but these encounters lasted mere minutes before he'd gesture for his aide to retrieve him.

I had nearly given up on our friendship when a teacher suggested we participate in a scuba dive organized for our school's students with disabilities. At first, all I could imagine were the new ways in which Gustavo would be able to ignore me in another location - the pool.

Growing up less than a mile from Lake Michigan, I've always been attracted to the water. The first time I swam, pushing the soft water back and forth between my hands and feeling self-assurance I never experienced on land, I felt I'd touched freedom. I was liberated from being the only gay kid in a small elementary school, from constantly being made to fit into a mold when it came to my

sexuality and beliefs. Everywhere I ventured, my peers insisted they knew aspects of me I hadn't explored myself. Their constant questioning of my identity - commenting on my favorite floral sweatshirt as I walked down the hallway and describing my love for classical music as "feminine" - occupied an enormous space in my brain at a time when I should have been finding answers for myself. Those brief moments of underwater clarity helped me retreat from all the boxes the world set out for me, washing away everyone's expectations like a tide smoothing out the sand when it crashes onto the beach. Every time I left the water, I felt a piece of my identity had solidified.

So perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised by what Gustavo experienced in his first swim. As his aide and I unstrapped him from the wheelchair where he spent the majority of his days, bits of food and old pieces of paper from past art projects fell to the ground. Terror filled Gustavo's eyes as the security of his chair was stripped away, but the warm embrace of the water flowing around his limbs immediately calmed him as we gently lowered him into the pool. For a brief moment, his eyes locked onto mine and we shared our excitement.

Though it was fleeting, our glance taught me an invaluable lesson. Until that point, I hadn't tried to connect with Gustavo on anything but a superficial level. Our art projects were motivated by sincerity, but they offered no channel for Gustavo and I to share something we mutually loved. Letting his fingers glide along the water's surface, I helped him float for the next thirty minutes in an uninterrupted state of bliss that can only be experienced by someone who has been confined for so long - a feeling I was able to understand. By sharing something that helped me come to terms with my identity, I was able to connect with him on a deeper level, one where we both felt free.

It was the penultimate day of my school's annual trip to Gambia – a trip in which we visit our partner school, Kotu Senior Secondary School, for a week to aid the improvement of the school's resources for pupils. A football match between Colfe's School and the very best footballers from Kotu was about to take place. I expected a well-kept grass field, but as I reached it I immediately realised how mistaken I was. It was indeed a field, although there was sand instead of grass and a ditch, roughly half a foot deep, ran diagonally across. I envisioned it would be easy to get to know the Kotu pupils through verbal conversation, yet this turned out to be more challenging than expected. By the end of my stay, I realised that verbal conversation is not always a necessity; there are alternatives that I can utilise to bond with others.

Throughout the week, I felt I was unable to connect to the Kotu students. The language barrier did contribute to this issue: the students had little knowledge about English, and I knew even less about French or other local tongue. However, I think my narrow-minded approach to conversing by over-relying on words was at greater fault. I was too focused on making simple conversation, which was proving to be unsuccessful when trying to learn more about the Kotu pupils to find a common ground on which we could relate. Because of this, I spent too little attention on finding alternatives to communicate, like pictures.

For the first time, Colfe's won the annual Kotu vs Colfe's football match. On top of the monumental victory, I took something else from the match. Playing with the Kotu boys offered a physical alternative to conversation. In contrast to prior conversation, where there was disparity in language, everyone was an equal on the playing field. Language had no bearing on the result of the football match. For the first time all week, it felt as if they were friends of mine because of the parallel it portrayed of friendly competition with my friends in London. Additionally, the miss-kicks

on goal, I blamed the 'uneven surface' for mine, created laughter on both sides, further reinforcing the sense of growing friendship. Having this equality in communication is important because of the opportunity it presents to create strong bonds with others that cannot be made in an environment of asymmetric communication.

This insight into communication proved useful. When I moved schools last year, I only knew a few people at my new school. The idea of making conversation was scary, as I had become so familiar with the schoolchildren at my prior school that was 30 minutes closer to home. I organised a small meet-up to play football with the few people I knew, and they brought some of their friends that I had not met yet. With the common enjoyment of football, conversation flowed freely. We talked about football managers and what professional players we thought would do the best in the upcoming season. Eventually this broke off into more general conversation about school classes and teachers. Without the prior experience with physical communication in Gambia I would have had to revert back to an over-reliance on words to develop a relationship with my new classmates – something I know I would have been less confident with in comparison to playing football.

Following the match with Kotu I sat under a tree, the shade providing refuge from the scorching Gambian sun. My T-shirt was sticking to my back with sweat, but I knew I would look back on this experience with keen fondness. As a cricket bowler, I remind myself that there are sometimes alternatives to verbal conversation when this seems ineffective. Overall, this has given me more confidence to meet new people, and I am looking forward to getting to know my fellow undergraduates.

Essay #45

Yale University

Essay In my kitchen, there is a simple pathway to the stove, with my fridge on the way. Still disoriented and craving fried eggs in the morning, I try to reach the stove but, when I come to my senses, I realize I haven't reached it yet. Instead, I look down and feel like I'm running on a treadmill, sliding my feet in all directions on the water leaking from my fridge, struggling not to fall like a cartoon character.

My fridge was too old and that leaking tormented me for many years. "Mom, when are we gonna buy another fridge?! There's no end to this." She left me waiting for an answer until my leaking fridge won and I finally slipped. As I sat on the ground, defeated and soaked, I wondered what it would be like if another fridge miraculously appeared in my house, until I realized it would all stay the same.

The problems around me would continue as I believed it did not depend on me to change them, instead, something would naturally come up and do the job for me. When I was little, I used to hear stories about how brilliant scientists would change the world by dropping apples from trees and other quaint stories.

These tales made me believe in a romanticized science, supposedly developed by epiphanic or random historical moments. However, after almost breaking my coccyx because of a leaking fridge, I had the urge to create my own definition

of science. Science isn't something glamorous or a concept to be romanticized. Science is the discontent with reality, converted from the passive dissatisfaction that would've been useless but instead is applied to transform our surroundings.

Understanding that science only requires my will to change the status quo made me revive my responsibility as a person and student, as I understood its real extent regarding the things that are important to me and my community. My fridge finally opened my eyes to contemplate my environment critically. Now, I realize how the leaking leads to food loss, not to mention how many people don't even have domestic energy to consider getting a fridge.

With new lenses, I see the world as solely my duty instead of the universe's, and at Yale, I want to pursue research to continue actively observing my surroundings and prevent other leaking fridges from continuing to plague the world with stagnation."

University of Notre Dame & Fordham University

I stood in the front row of my middle school choir, ready to join 50 voices to serenade the audience of teachers, parents and students. The acoustics in the auditorium were so bad that only the muffled sound of parents asking their children to look at the camera could be heard. A microphone was passed from hand to hand among the choir rows so each of us could sing. Known for solos in school musicals, I was bombarded by my friends, teachers and parents to grab the mic.

But I didn't. I quickly passed it to the next student, and the show dissolved into inaudible lyrics shouted by younger students, ruining any element of the song's theme of peace. I had passed the mic, quite literally, overwhelmed with the emotions of being judged a show-off by my peers. Music has always been a part of my life, from weekly singing lessons to leading roles in musical theater, band presentations, and church choir. My childhood room is known as the music room: a guitar hangs on the wall, asking for melodies to come out of its strings, and a piano sits across from my bed longing to be opened. A wallpaper border of musical notes encompasses the room. By highschool, music seemed to be gradually fading from my life.

Time to play my guitar was replaced with analyzing William Blake's poems for English class, and piano was pushed aside to learn integration calculus. My parents fought for music to remain a part of my life; my mom begged me to play "Shallow," and my dad asked me to sing "Every Breath You Take," pieces I used to perform a lot for them. These moments broke my heart - I knew the happiness my music brought them, and how much support they had given me to pursue this talent.

But with schoolwork, vestibulares, and college looming, the musical note wallpaper felt like a symbol of my childhood. In the summer of 2022, I was offered an internship with Spectaculo, an arts institute. My role was to teach English to 18-25 year olds who could not afford university. As I entered the institute's tall building for the first time, the murmuring of people singing choruses caught my attention, along with a beautiful, brown grand piano in front of my classroom. I realized my job would be to teach English, and I had music as a tool. Sitting at the grand piano with one of my students, Saullo, during break time, I started playing, and he began singing. When I looked around, all the other students were singing the song. Before he could clearly pronounce, "I am an artist studying in Spectaculo," Saullo could say "Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide. No escape from reality..." This gave me the idea to teach English through song lyrics.

One day, Saullo told me how life-changing the lessons I gave him were, as they allowed him to rap one of his songs in English, pursuing a new course with his music. Not only was I brought closer to music, I was helping someone else achieve their goals through it as well. Saullo had handed me back the mic I had passed so many years ago. Music is inherently who I am, and it came back to me through a medium that I would never have imagined: teaching. I learned that I can continue to prioritize music in my life and as a tool to support other people in their lives.

Even though I can't go back and sing my childhood solo, I have a new mic and audience, bringing peace to my 6th grade self. Yesterday, I came home from school, and sat down not at my desk, but at my piano. For just a few minutes, before diving into Portuguese literature, my room filled with sound.

My dad and I made the ascent together. We climbed the Precipice Trail, the Acadia National Park path of lore whose steep cliffs and trail-side signs warning of death convinced more prudent hikers to turn around before the halfway mark. Resting, I gazed out beyond the dizzying drop below to the green Maine foothills and blue Atlantic Ocean. I appreciated the slight strain in my step, ready to move onward. My dad also stood, his hat crooked and backward, his shirt soaked through, still panting for breath.

"I think we need a water break," I said, looking him over. "I think so, too," he replied.

My relationship with my dad is a complicated one. In the halcyon days of my childhood, I remember our Saturday morning "dump runs" followed by a stop at McDonald's, where, as soon as he let me, I would order the exact same "Big n' Tasty" meal he would. Then, he took me hiking, camping, and skiing. His patient guidance and care on the trail stood in stark contrast to my frustrated, stumbling childhood clumsiness. I would whine and cry and yell on hikes too long or hills too steep; he would stop, listen and encourage me onward. With him, I was comfortable and secure. He could do no wrong.

In time, as we both grew older, this changed. He lost his job and fell into a depression and an absent-mindedness I found hard to understand. Despite his dealing with a mental illness, I became more critical, more attentive to his flaws and shortcomings. He lost his glasses, got linguine when we asked for rigatoni at the grocery store and forgot my friends' names.

At family dinner he sat largely silent until he interrupted with a non sequitur or unrelated question. I promised myself, with all of my naïve bravado, that I would never make myself vulnerable like he did, that I would never wallow in past regrets or failures. I would be assertive, I told myself. I would be a man.

So when I scaled that trail with so much comparative ease, I initially relished the fact that I walked ahead, I carried the pack, I checked in on him. I thought I was being a man. Sitting down, my dad's breathing slowed, and he asked me, like he had so many times, if I had read David Brooks's column that week. I hadn't.

So he filled me in. Listening to him discuss the necessity of imperfection in the democratic process, I felt a twinge of guilt. Guilt that I had fancied myself superior. Guilt that I had ever bought into facile standards of "manhood"; that I had imagined being a proper man meant unflinching vigor on a hiking trail, never dealing with switchbacks or setbacks, never losing your footing or your way.

I looked at my dad and knew all of those notions about employment, competent hiking or getting the right type of pasta at the grocery store, were false. I looked at my dad and I saw that being a man isn't about any sort of superficial, external measure. As it was during my childhood misadventures, it's about us, the imperfect son with the imperfect father, supporting each other up the proverbial mountain.

For me, the transition to manhood was not an external one: fortunately, there was no rite of passage or singular circumstance that forced me to become a man. Rather, sitting there against a cliff with my father, I wondered if maybe adulthood simply meant looking beyond oneself, to the other, without any pretense or pomp. Maybe my father, with his unpretentious generosity and willingness to get back up and continue the trek, is the best example of a man I have.

He finished up his thoughts about the Brooks article, his breathing still audible.

"How about we get that water," I said, reaching back into the pack.

The front door closed as my mom yelled for me. I got closer and saw her hands cupped, holding something. "Ew! Is that a pigeon?!" my sister yelled, but all I could focus on was the tiny creature my mother was holding; a bird certainly, but a bit less expected than my sister's assumption. It had fallen from the nest and crossed straight into the middle of a busy road when my mother found it. That day, we adopted a bird that would become much more to our household, Pichito, to whom I attribute a small part of who I am today. After months of staying up late to make sure his ever-lasting battery ran out and being greeted with a bird flying to my shoulder, we got the news.

We were moving to Brazil, and Pichito wasn't allowed to leave the country, as he was an exotic bird native to Venezuela. How could we leave him after all that we had been through together? I felt like I was betraying him, leaving him behind. I remember vividly the last time that I saw him, crying while saying goodbye to him, who just stared in bird-like confusion while my mother tried to calm me down, holding in tears as well. Despite the suffering, I was determined to make up for the physical distance by carrying him with me, emotionally, forever. Six years later, I have fulfilled this promise. Merely writing about him feels like honoring that little vivacious life. The overwhelming love that I felt for Pichito and the hardship of having to let him go have shaped me into someone who doesn't let contact define connection.

Now, I don't feel the need to be in constant touch with loved ones to know that our relationship persists with the same intensity. It's like hitting the unpaused button and carrying on from where we left off as soon as we meet again. However, on that day, I learned that we don't always get to do that; some have now become unreachable. In this situation, that previously marvelous button is now able to be unpaused exclusively in our brains through the memories we keep.

That is how I keep Pichito alive, through our previous moments, and despite the undying desire to relive those instances, I find strength in the fact that I got the chance to create them at all. I now understand that life is made of phases, and those who are part of one phase won't necessarily stick around for others. Recognizing the impact someone had on me while our relationship lasted and being grateful for that opportunity is how I like to view the changing cycles of life.

As unexpected changes are presented to me, I can't help but think back to Pichito and how the heartbreaking experience led to a positive growth in myself. I realized that overcoming the situation made every challenge seem slightly easier to conquer. The little bird that came to my life on a random Thursday has left an ever-lasting imprint on me, my family, and our connection.

When I think about him now, I like to imagine him in the farm where we left him, flying through the sky with the same vigor with which he used to fly through our apartment and run to the other birds just as he used to run through the garden with us. I can only wish for him to have lived his last moments surrounded by the things he loved most and that he kept in his heart the love that he once was overloaded with, just as I have kept his. I will be forever grateful for the fraction of his soul that he left in my heart.

Northeastern & University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

With a deafening and powerful roar the crowd confirmed a home team goal on the field: we were two minutes away from being national champions. Tens of thousands of fans singing, screaming and crying all together made me feel part of a large community for the first time. Suddenly, I felt a strong hug coming from a stranger and watching the whole stadium come together as one, I unhesitatingly hugged him back.

I like to imagine soccer stadiums as a place where social structures, privileges and injustices are reduced, especially in Brazil, a country known for living its soccer culture to the fullest. Brazil is also known for having severe issues regarding social and educational disparity, racism, and poverty, but the unique atmosphere inhabiting soccer stadiums can spark in many a fighting spirit to overcome these injustices. The sense of community gained inside them, more than shaping me as a sports lover, allows me to reflect on my actions and roles as a community member. Nevertheless, my most intense reflection through sports occurred far away from a soccer stadium. Last year, my school took students to visit an *ocupação*, a building of squatting irregular homeless occupants in one of the less favored regions of São Paulo. At first, I was extremely against the idea, as I worried it would reduce the inhabitants to a human safari, mere objects of observation, disregarding their lives, thoughts, dreams and sufferings while invading their hard fought for homes as if they were touristic locations.

Even though I still stand by this opinion, that visit changed me. When we arrived, three small children playing soccer barefoot, over a concrete floor immediately captured my attention. The ball was in terrible condition, their torn clothes did not fit, and the goal was made from flip flops. None of those apparent issues were even close to bothering the kids. When I asked to join, they welcomed me into their game of pure joy, laughter and smiles. It was magical. In their movements, juggles and laughs I recognized my younger self and felt like a child again. My background of privileges and their struggling condition were momentarily obfuscated.

The connection experienced through soccer filled me with excitement, I finally understood why I experienced a sense of community at sporting events. It became clear to me how, even though socially imposed barriers will always exist, sports can, at least temporarily, deconstruct them, so I can build connections with people from vastly different backgrounds. Most importantly, this experience fueled my belief in sports as a gateway to breaking social norms. Based on this belief, I led personal quests in high school by looking to promote sports to people traditionally excluded from them. Knowing that sports can allow people to improve their life conditions, I worked to introduce tennis to kids from underprivileged backgrounds in impoverished schools and neighborhoods. This project aims to help these children become their family's first generation to attend college through scholarship programs.

One of my training partners, Ítalo, son of a cleaning assistant and a cook who lived in the Paraisópolis favela, can now provide better conditions for his family through superior education. I have also created my own sports goods donation project to supply more than 150 children with jerseys, cleats and more. The feeling I get every time I attend a soccer match reminds me why I do this work and is intensified every time I manage to connect through sport to someone from a different reality from my own. I wish, at least once in their lifetime, everyone can experience this ninety minutes of a glimpse into interpersonal equality. Although the journey is far from over, I have already taken my first step in this gradual work. Each day I am closer to my goal of accepting all differences, engaging with my community and using my privileges in order to fight for others.

Reed College & The New School

Ages ago, there was a girl named Psyche, whose fame for her beauty reached the end of the earth. That was the beginning of the story of Eros and Psyche, a myth I fell in love with at fifteen. Most people know the myth as a great love story, or a heroic quest, but that isn't what made me adore it. Instead, I was drawn in by the profound unsettlement it instigated within me. In Greek's classic Stockholm Syndrome-y fashion, Psyche falls in love with Cupid after being kidnapped by him, but is oblivious to his identity. Eventually, she breaks that rule by lifting a lamp to his face but inadvertently hurts him and he flees, leading her to endure a series of trials to redeem her reviled disobedience.

The story underscores the idea that some things are better left in the dark, and that never quite sat right with me. As a kid, I felt shining a light on new discoveries was my favorite way of playing. I can vividly picture myself watching a video about the Theory of Relativity at the tender age of nine, being blown away by how little I knew about the world. After that, I felt like the new Socrates, confidently embracing "all I know is that I know nothing" as I ventured through my new-found realm of discovery and curiosity. Learning about the world became a mechanism to know more about myself, as my knowledge became a scaffold to my identity. As a kid, life seemed full of endless possibilities, but, as I entered freshman year, that feeling of not knowing became daunting. The myth became closer to me than ever.

Psyche's story begins with her banishment from her hometown for her beauty. She's led to the edge of a precipice from which a horrible monster would take her; as pantomimic as it sounds, that captures with utmost sincerity a feeling I grew familiar with in freshman year. Much like Psyche, I felt unsure of my future, a drastic contrast to my carefree childhood. As I started overthinking everything I once enjoyed, pleasures like joining sports or attending parties became terrifying. In my isolation, my self-image was cast in a negative light. The monster in the precipice revealed itself to be my own intrusive thoughts and doubts. Facing that overbearing solitude, I decided to shed some introspective light and figure out who I was going to be. I longed to rekindle my childhood craving for knowledge, uninhibited by self-doubt.

With the ambition of Psyche, I entered sophomore year holding a lamp, ready to uncover new truths about myself and discover novel passions. I ventured into the arts, something I'd run away from during my period of self-doubt, and challenged myself to compose my own music, delving into new emotions and experiences. Through studies in economics, I started to understand the inequalities that shape our world, and recognized the effects of policies in the neglected communities around me. Through volunteering, I learned about life in South Africa up close, and heard first-hand about Guaraní land's rights issues as I led activities for indigenous children.

The flame of my lamp was burning brighter than ever. It was that period of metamorphosis, of taking Psyche's lamp and shining it on myself and everything around me, that now shapes the person I am. I've realized I don't have to structure my life with certainties, and that changing and growing is an ever-present process. Be it writing a song, analyzing a math problem, or studying supply and demand curves, I strive for the unfamiliar and thrive in the complicated. Once, what compelled me about Eros and Psyche was how unjust it felt, but now I realize what resonates with me is how Psyche reminds me to be an ever-curious soul, and to never let the flame of my lamp die.

10.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Throughout our ebook, we have emphasised the importance of crafting compelling personal statements and supplemental essays as integral components of the admissions process. From understanding the unique role of each essay type to offering practical tips and strategies for effective writing, we have sought to empower applicants with the tools and knowledge needed to present themselves in the best possible light to admissions committees.

Additionally, by presenting a curated selection of 50 personal essays from successful applicants to top US universities, we have provided readers with real-world examples of exemplary writing and storytelling. These essays serve as inspiration and guidance for aspiring applicants, demonstrating the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and passions that can be effectively communicated through the admissions essay.

As you embark on your journey towards US university admissions, remember that crafting compelling personal statements and supplemental essays is just the beginning. With the guidance and support of Crimson Education's mentoring services, you can navigate the intricacies of the admissions process with confidence and clarity.

Our team of experienced strategists and essay mentors are dedicated to helping you unlock your full potential and present yourself in the best possible light to admissions committees. From personalised essay feedback to expert guidance on every aspect of the application process, Crimson Education is here to support you every step of the way.

As you continue your exploration of the admissions landscape, we invite you to learn more about our mentoring services and discover how Crimson Education can help you achieve your academic and personal goals. With our support, you can confidently navigate the admissions process and embark on the next chapter of your academic journey with confidence and clarity.



About Crimson Education

Crimson Education is the world's leading admissions consultancy. From admissions strategies to research opportunities to a global high school, we offer the most comprehensive scope of admissions services available in the world. We employ over 900 full-time staff in over 20 countries and work with all students, no matter where they live.

Every one of Crimson's students are uniquely matched to experts who will best-fit their needs. This includes Exam Tutors, Extracurricular Mentors, Essay Prep Specialists, and Application Strategists. Our approach cultivates a highly personalised service that leaves no stone unturned in the application process.

All our experts come from the same top universities our students apply to, including Yale, Columbia, Stanford, MIT, Oxford, Cambridge, and many more. This highly individualised approach has resulted in our students gaining admission to the Ivy League, Oxbridge and other top universities at up to 5x the general applicant rate.

Our commitment to our students goes beyond the college admission process. We facilitate internships, ambassadorships, and career opportunities that stretch every student's lifetime. We are dedicated to providing students with the opportunities they need to perform masterfully on the international stage, utilising the education system of the 22nd century to build the leaders of tomorrow.

This is the Crimson Effect:



**The power to transform lives
through world-class education**



OUR RESULTS

Every year, we are amazed by what our students accomplish. In fact, many of our students receive not just one, but two or three offers to the world's best universities. They are faced with the wonderful dilemma of needing to choose between several highly competitive universities!

In general, Crimson students are 4.5x more likely to gain admission to a top university than those who apply alone. Those who worked with us for four or more years are 9x more likely to gain admission to their target university compared to those who joined us later in the application cycle. Check out our statistics below

797

Offers to Ivy League Universities

6,000+

Offers to the US Top 50 universities

1,280+

Offers to the US Top 10 universities

287

Offers to Oxford and Cambridge

1,850+

Offers to the UK Top 10 universities

Crimson Student Admissions Rates Compared to General Applicant Rates (2023)

School	General Admit Rate	Crimson US Student Admit Rate
Princeton	3.90%	15%
MIT	4.7%	27%
Harvard	3.4%	15%
Stanford	4%	14%
Yale	4.30%	21%
UChicago	~4.5%	15%
Johns Hopkins	6.0%	28%
UPenn	~5.70%	27%
Caltech	3.90%	16%
Duke	6.0%	20%
Northwestern	7%	22%
Dartmouth	6.0%	21%
Brown	5.50%	21%
Vanderbilt	6.70%	35%
Rice	8.60%	25%
Washington U. in St. Louis	13%	50%
Cornell	~7.5%	28%
Columbia	3.70%	26%
UCLA	9.7%	41%
UC Berkeley	11%	45%

How do Crimson students compare to international averages?

4.5x

More likely to gain acceptance to the most competitive universities in the world than the average general applicant

2-3x

More likely to get accepted into Oxford or Cambridge compared to the average general applicant

IVY LEAGUE

24.75%

The average acceptance rate of Crimson students who applied to the Ivy League

VS.

~5.2%

compared to the average acceptance rate of general applicants who applied to the Ivy League

US TOP 10

24.55%

The average acceptance rate of Crimson students who applied to the US Top 10

VS.

~4.85%

compared to the average acceptance rate of general applicants who applied to the US Top 10



WHAT SETS US APART

We understand that choosing the right education is one of the most important decisions a student and their family will ever make. That's why Crimson is committed to providing you with the best support and guidance you need to succeed.

There are three distinct qualities that set us apart from every other admissions consultancy in the world. These include:

Personalised Approach: We take the time to understand each student's individual needs and goals, then develop a personalised and comprehensive plan to help them achieve them.

Global Network of Experts: Our team of experienced experts includes former admissions officers, strategists, and mentors from the world's top universities.

Advanced Education Technologies: We create and invest in education technologies that help students reach their full potential and increase their chances of admission to top universities.



01. Personalised Approach

Crimson offers strategic support for students looking to apply to top universities in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Europe, and more. From initial assessment to post-acceptance guidance, all support is tailored to maximise students' chances of success. In our dedication to helping every student reach their full potential, we provide individualised services for all students, regardless of the stage they are at.

University Admissions Consulting

When a student begins their journey with Crimson, they will receive unlimited, individual support from a Strategy Consultant, an Application Mentor, and a Student Success Manager— all of whom are part of the student's core team. Together, these team members provide the following services:

✓ Full Application Strategy

Our counselors have over 350 years of combined experience, many having served on admissions committees at Ivy League schools, Oxbridge, Stanford, Duke, and others. Beyond university selection, they work with students to develop a strong overarching theme for their applications that aligns with their personal passions, achievements, and ambitions.

✓ Customised Roadmap

Extensive planning of the student's admissions journey using our tailored in-app roadmap in order to develop a differentiated and clear pathway in preparation of the applications. The roadmap will be updated regularly to accurately reflect student journey.

✓ Candidacy Positioning

Evaluation of the student's candidacy and application strategy based on relative strengths and unique characteristics, specifically compared to other candidates in their country, community, and school.

✓ University Selection (Pre and Post Application)

Guidance through the university selection process by making recommendations based on university characteristics, resources, acceptance rate statistics, and personal preferences.

✓ Essay Development

- Access to our extensive essay database for analysis on best practice, guidance on topic selection and interpretation for all application prompts, as well as brainstorming creative approaches tailored to the student's personality, experiences, and to the institutions applied to.
- Ongoing revisions of essay drafts to deliver core ideas in a concise and targeted manner, leaving a lasting impression on admission officers.

✓ Holistic Application Oversight

Assistance navigating the intricacies of the student's application, constructing résumés, writing activity lists, and ensuring all information is correctly submitted to the target institutions.

✓ **Extracurricular Activity Advice**

Prioritisation of current extracurricular involvements and creation of new projects premised on a thematic narrative complementary of the student's interests and passions in conjunction to present a clear, focused, and differentiated profile.

✓ **Admissions Test Strategy and Support**

Choosing the standardised tests most suitable for the student (SAT/ACT/AP) and optimising target test score range with respect to their school selection and availability.

✓ **Post Application Mentorship**

Submission of post-application supplementary materials, guidance for post-application correspondence with colleges, drafting of deferral letters (if necessary), and further school choice consulting if the student is admitted to multiple programs/colleges/universities.

✓ **Strategic Advice on Letters of Recommendation**

How to approach and inform potential recommenders to write letters that highlight the student strategically and are in alignment with other components of the application.

✓ **Academic Advising**

- School grade analysis and advising on curricula/subject selection to maximise results in conjunction.
- Advising on academic opportunities beyond what's offered at the student's school.

✓ **Regular contact with students and their parents**

All students and their parents receive regular reports to ensure satisfaction with Crimson services, and to track progress.



Supplementary Services

Outside of core services, students and families may choose to add on the following additional services:

✓ Academic and Test Tutoring

Crimson provides a wide range of tutoring services for a wide range of subjects. These include, but are not limited to:

- Standardised Test Tutoring (SAT, ACT, AP)
- Curriculum Tutoring (IB, AP, A-Levels)
- Aptitude Test Tutoring (Medicine, Dentistry, and Veterinary Medicine)
- MedView UK UCAT
- Medview UK BMAT
- Graduate School Test Tutoring (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, IELTS, TOEFL)
- IELTS, TOEFL, and general ESOL Tutoring
- Subject specific tutoring
- Debate and Model UN Tutoring
- Olympiad Tutoring

✓ Financial Aid

Crimson's Financial Aid service pairs students with an expert who helps students research scholarship opportunities, develop aid strategies, and guides students through their forms and applications prior to submission.

✓ Former Admissions Officer (FAO) Services (US and UK)

Students will receive personalised feedback from Former Admissions Officers (FAOs) through the following services:

- **FAO Hours** - One-on-one virtual meetings with FAOs to discuss candidacy advice, academic insights, extracurricular guidance, and application support.
- **FAO Review** - A comprehensive assessment of a student's application to a single university, including an admissions officer's perspective, academic evaluation, extracurricular analysis, Common App personal statement, and supplemental essay reviews, all aimed at enhancing the application's competitiveness.
- **Crimson FAO Review Board** - For VIP students, the Crimson FAO Review Board involves a thorough assessment by three FAOs, complemented by a summary from the strategist.

✓ Capstone Advising

An in-depth, outcomes-focused 1:1 mentoring is provided by a dedicated expert tutor with the goal of developing a comprehensive and impressive extracurricular activity list (consisting of 8-10 activities) and completing a Capstone Leadership Project throughout the duration of our collaboration.

✓ Informational Interviews (US, UK, EU)

Prepare for college interviews with research techniques, personal responses, bespoke answers to key questions, mock interviews with successful admits, and tailored resources for nuanced interview formats.



Eileen D.

**Former Ivy League
Admissions Officer**

✓ US Boarding & Day School Admissions

Crimson BDSA Strategy includes support for students looking to apply to private US boarding and day schools. We also support applications to private Canadian schools, whose process is very similar. This service includes:

- Candidacy development (academic and extracurricular)
- School selection and visits
- Letters of recommendation strategy
- Application oversight
- Essay support
- Interview preparation

✓ Academic Enrichment (UK and EU)

Students will work through 1:1 sessions with a subject-specialist Academic Enrichment Mentor. Each session will be a deep-dive into subject knowledge and content that is of utmost importance for UK and EU University Admissions. Each module involves:

- Guiding the student on appropriate Media (books, journals, podcasts etc) to compliment the curriculum.
- Leading the student through a series of authentic learning tasks that will help them to integrate knowledge, skills and attitudes.
- Preparing them for the academic rigours of university lectures, tutorials and beyond.

✓ Summer Program Support

Includes support for G9-12 students identifying and selecting summer programs, along with application essay support and final application review. This service includes:

- Strategist guidance identifying and selecting summer programs
- Application Mentor support when writing application essays
- Strategist final review of the application

✓ Graduate School Admissions (US, UK, EU)

Crimson's Graduate School Admissions program features expert admissions strategy and hands-on support for students applying to Masters and Doctoral programs in every field including: STEM, Social Science, Humanities, MBA (& related Business programs), Law, and Medicine.



Our Subsidiaries

At Crimson, we pride ourselves on being a one-stop shop for all students. Whenever a student or their family has a need, we are able to meet those needs expeditiously and at a very high standard. Our subsidiaries work to meet our students' needs, no matter where they are in their admissions journey.

✓ Indigo Research

A competitive high school research program that provides high school students with 1:1 mentorship from top professors and PhDs to transform your academic passion into publishable research.



✓ Delta Institute

Delta Institute offers work experience programs with top global companies at the pinnacle of their respective industries. We offer students first-hand experiences in career pathways they are interested in, which helps them develop an experience-driven understanding of what their potential future career would look like.



✓ Crimson Global Academy (CGA)

Crimson Global Academy (CGA) is an internationally accredited, world-class online private school delivering live, real-time learning to students all over the world. Designed to challenge, students graduate with the International GCSE and International A-Level qualifications which are globally recognised for their academic rigour, flexibility, and breadth of learning.

It is a transformative schooling experience that aims to serve as many students as possible through its global networks, diverse extracurriculars, and access to cutting-edge educational technologies.



✓ **Crimson Rise**

A strategy service for students ages 11-14. Rise includes tracks for hard-hitting uni admissions preparation, earlier-stage skills development, and interest exploration.



✓ **Medview: Medical School Consultation Bundles (UK, AUS, NZ)**

This includes consulting, test prep, interview/core paper/revision prep, and experiences prep for students applying to medical programs in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.



✓ **Revision Village**

Dedicated to providing the highest quality IB Maths resources in the world, Revision Village is an award-winning education website that has helped over 1.3 million IB students prepare for their IB Maths Exams. Over 50% of the resources created by Revision Village are made free for all users worldwide.



✓ **Admit Yogi**

Created by students at Stanford, AdmitYogi is a lower-cost service that lets students access successful application profiles from students who got into top universities. This service aims to provide students with insights on what highly selective universities are looking for including essays, awards, activities, demographic data, GPA, and more!



✓ **Crimson Athletics**

The Crimson Athletics department provides 3 services that target admissions strategy for student athletes:

- Athletic Strategy Consulting
- Athletic Campaigning
- Athletic Recruitment Video



✓ **SummerApply**

Students often struggle to figure out where the world's best, most reputable summer programs are. SummerApply compiles all of these programs into one catalogue- from Pre-Med Academies by Harvard to internships with Uber, students can easily research and apply to summer programs that are unique and will help them stand out from the crowd.



02. Global Network of Experts

As a policy, all Crimson Strategists, Mentors, and Tutors must have graduated from a Top 30 university in the world. From world-leading university alumni to PhDs, Former Admissions Officers to multi-degree academics, every student's team will guide their students through the entire application journey.



Alisha M.

 **University of Illinois, UCLA**

Alisha has a BS in Community Health with a concentration in Health Planning and Administration from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a Master's in Health Policy and Management from UCLA. Most notably, her students have received admissions to Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, NYU, USC, and UCLA.



Abbigail C.

 **Oxford, LSE**

Abbigail graduated from Oxford University with a BA in English Language and Literature. She then completed her Master's in International Social and Public Policy at London School of Economics (LSE). Most notably, she has helped students secure offers to Oxford, Cambridge, LSE, UCL, Imperial, King's, and many other top Russell Group Universities.



Heitor S.

 **Swarthmore College, Stanford**

Heitor graduated from Swarthmore College with a BA in Political Science and Educational Studies with a Minor in French. He is currently completing a PhD in International Comparative Education at Stanford (2025). Most notably, he's helped students gain acceptances to Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Columbia, and UCLA.



Beatrix S.

 **University of Texas at Austin, Columbia**

Beatrix graduated with honours from the University of Texas at Austin with a Bachelor's in Business and Corporate Communications. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Social Work at Columbia. Most notably, her students have received acceptances to Duke, UChicago, UT Austin, and UCLA.



Christine L.

 **Brown University, Oxford**

Christine graduated from Brown with a BA in East Asian Studies and International Relations. She then graduated from Oxford with an MPhil in Modern Chinese Studies. Christine is based out of Seoul, South Korea, and mentors students looking to attend universities in the US and UK.



George B.

 **Harvard, UCL**

George graduated from Harvard with an AB in Sociology and African American Studies. He then completed an MSc in Public Policy with a concentration in LGBTQ+ Health at University College London. Most notably, he has helped students gain acceptances to Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, UPenn, Yale, Cornell, and UChicago.



Natalie S.

 **UC Berkeley, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology**

Natalie received a Bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley and a Master's in Social Science from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Most notably, she has helped students gain admission to schools including UPenn, Cornell, and UChicago.



Pandora L.

 **Cambridge University, University of the Arts London, Royal College of Art, UCL**

Pandora graduated from Cambridge with an MA in History, an MA in Painting from UAL, an Master of Research from RCA, and PGCE from UCL, and is currently completing a PhD at Cambridge in Architecture. Most notably, her students have received acceptances to Cambridge, Oxford, Durham, Imperial, and UCL.



Carolina L.

 **Duke University**

Carol graduated from Duke University with a double major in Psychology and French and a Minor in Education. Most notably, she has helped her students gain acceptances to all Ivy League schools, Stanford, and Duke.



Brenda H.

 **University of Michigan, Cornell**

Brenda graduated from University of Michigan with a double major in Psychology and Economics. She then went on to receive her Master's in Management in Marketing at Cornell University. Brenda's students have received acceptances to Columbia, Dartmouth, Johns Hopkins, UCs, Penn, NYU, and USC.

The Crimson Team

The Crimson team will coordinate and communicate internally to ensure the student is receiving the best, most personalized support possible. Each contributor will help the student with different aspects of the preparation and applications.

For our University Admissions Consulting service, every Crimson student's team features the following:

Strategist

As the leading expert in every student's team, the Crimson Strategist is responsible for developing a personalised strategy that highlights the student's unique strengths, achievements, and goals. Equipped with a deep understanding of university admissions requirements and a proven track record of success, the Crimson Strategist will help the student stand out from the competition and increase their chances of being accepted into the world's top universities.

During formal strategy consulting sessions, the Strategist will:

- Support the student by developing a comprehensive preparation plan for their university admissions, including individual targets and milestones for their academic and personal goals, and a strategic timeline for completing the application process.
- Develop a compelling personal narrative to maximise chances of acceptance.
- Help the student select universities based on their goals, preferences, likelihood of acceptance, and personal narrative.
- Monitor the student's grades and test scores, and ensure extracurricular activities are aligned with the student's passions and aspirations.

Student Success Managers

Students receive ongoing support from the Student Success Team via multiple contact methods to ensure the quality of their program and experience. This includes:

- Ensuring that they are on track to meet all of their admissions milestones and deadlines
- Keeping their parents informed of all key steps and accomplishments
- Monitoring their performance
- Making relevant changes as needed
- Allocating or replacing members of their team
- Responding to requests and inquiries from Crimson parents and students

Application Mentor

The Application Mentor will review the student's profile and help the student prepare for all their Admissions Essays and Interviews during the application year. This includes:

- Brainstorming, planning, and revising the student's university admissions essays to ensure they play a crucial role in the student's application
- Preparing the student for university interviews, providing invaluable advice on how to approach each questions and guide the student through practice interviews.

If the student and their family decides to purchase additional Crimson services, the student can receive guidance from more specific experts, such as an In-Depth Extracurricular & Leadership (ECL) Mentor; Financial Aid and Scholarship Mentor, Academic and Test Tutor, Former Admissions Officer Reviewer, among others.

03.

Advanced Technologies

To meet the standards of our outstanding students, Crimson has developed and improved high-level education technologies that facilitate access to a diverse range of experts and resources from around the world, adapt to individual learning needs, and promote a more inclusive and personalized educational experience.

✓ The Crimson App

The Crimson App is an exclusive learning management system that helps students achieve their admission goals through customized learning plans, progress tracking, and vast resources. Data on student performance is collected and reviewed to ensure informed decision-making.

- **Student-Mentor Matching**

Students are paired with best-fit mentors based on psychometric, expertise, interest, and performance data.

- **Roadmap**

Easily keep track of upcoming tasks and activities, to best optimise your time.

- **Applications**

Manage the school list and track the application process easily.

- **Exclusive Resources**

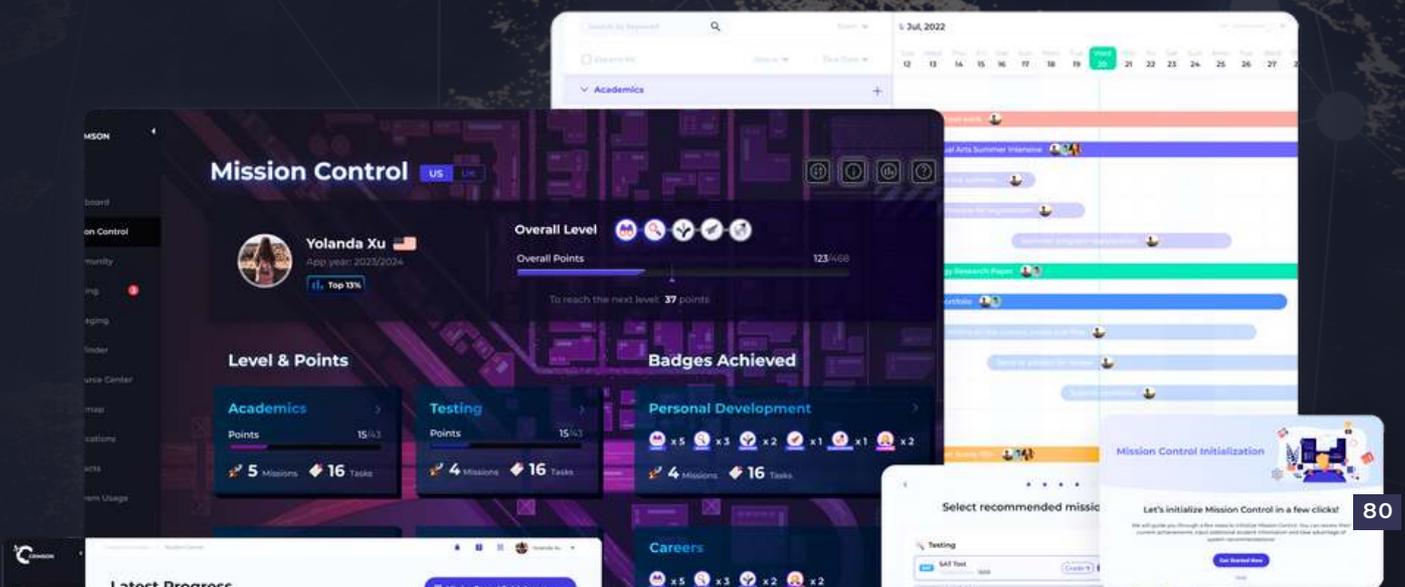
We provide access to exclusive video content and interviews with world-renowned business leaders and entrepreneurs.

✓ Pathfinder

Contained within the Crimson app, Pathfinder is a master list of everything a student can do during high school to increase their chances of admission to top US universities. Pathfinder includes over 280 goals, each with an assigned point value based on how much admissions officers will value that achievement. As students complete goals and accrue points, they move up through 'levels' in Pathfinder, which correlate with increasingly competitive universities.

✓ Launchpad

We offer a unique and engaging community for students from around the world to learn, grow, and connect. Access premium content, including webinars and expert presentations, join groups with students who share your passions, and participate in community events like Crimson Shark Tank and online MUN competitions. Plus, connect directly with Crimson alumni at top schools to find mentors, project partners, and more.



STARTING YOUR JOURNEY WITH CRIMSON

01

Discovering the educational goals

In our free initial consultation with the Academic Advisor, we will get to know the student's interests, goals, and strengths.

While the Academic Advisor is there to understand the student's academic goals and aspirations, the family can ask as many questions as they like in return!

02

Identifying the strengths and weaknesses

Now that we've discussed the student's goals and aspirations, it's time to evaluate the student's odds of admission to their initial preferred university choices.

Based on the student's profile, a personalised program tailored to their individual strengths and weaknesses is built.

Examples:

- ✓ Extracurricular Mentoring
- ✓ Application Strategy
- ✓ Test Prep
- ✓ Essay Prep
- ✓ Best-fit University Selection

YOU ALONE



YOU WITH CRIMSON



04

Success!

It's time to take action! With the Crimson team by the student's side, they can start their journey to acceptance at the best universities in the world!

03

Generating the unique game plan

At Crimson, we don't believe in the adage that 'one size fits all.'

Instead, we design a personalised programme tailored to each student's individual strengths and weaknesses. Every student's journey at Crimson looks unique.

Following the consultation, we will develop a customised Crimson programme for the student, taking into account their academic goals and budget.

Once the student is satisfied with their individually crafted programme, their educational journey begins!



Ready to Get Started?

[Talk to Us](#)