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**32 SUCCESSFUL
HARVARD
ADMISSIONS ESSAYS
FOR ASIAN STUDENTS**

The most important book to get you started
on your college application essay

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ASIAN STUDENTS**

BY ALEX CHANG

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To high school students who are struggling with college essays

How to Use This Book

When you first start writing your college essays, you may have no idea how college essays are even supposed to look like. Read through some or all of the 32 successful Harvard essays in this book, and you will soon have a better idea.

Being able to identify good and bad essays is the first step. Afterwards, it is time for you to brainstorm your essay! You may know exactly what topic and what content to write about, but it is typical that your mind will be completely blank. When this happens, read through some of these essays, and they may give you inspiration for your essay. You may not need to read every single essay in this book; you can first choose the essays that seem interest to you first, and read the rest if you feel you need more ideas.

As you start writing, keep these Harvard essays in mind, incorporate the good characteristics in these essays into your own essay, and remember the points we mentioned in “11 Common Essay Mistakes to Avoid at All Cost.” Hopefully, you’ll have an Ivy League-quality essay in no time!

Even if you are someone who doesn’t need to write college essays (yet), or if you are already done with the college essay writing process, these essays are still fun stories for you to read during your free time!

A few things to note:

1. The Harvard college essays in this book are categorized into 6 topics: failure, identity, community/where you are from, experience, passion, and a bonus section, “why are you applying.” The first five

categories are topics that appear in Common Application every year, and you'll realize that many of the essays in this book work for other topics too (for example, essay 1 for failure, "A Cat in the Kingdom of Tigers," can also be applied to topics on identity, memorable experience, personal growth, community, and so on). Therefore, these essays are not limited to just their category in this book.

2. The bonus section, "why are you applying," contains 2 essays that students wrote for Harvard's supplemental questions on reasons for applying to Harvard. Essays like this are not the regular Common Application essays, but may be required for individual colleges as a "supplemental essay."
3. When you read these essays, you may find yourself loving some of these essays and disliking some of them, and that is supposed to happen. Remember that whether an essay is good is subjective to the reader; maybe an admission officer with a strong interest in history enjoys reading an essay on the student's visit to the Statue of Liberty, but you find the essay boring. Luck plays an important role in the college admissions process; if the person reading your essay happens to love it for any reason, you are in luck!
4. In this book, we intentionally share Harvard essays written by only Asian students. Although ethnicity and race do not play any role in how college essays should be written or how admission officers evaluate essays, we prepared these specific essays in case you are interested in essays that "relate to your Asian ethnicity background," or you mistakenly believe that Asian students actually *should* write essays differently from, say, white students. In the sequel to this book, we will also share essays written by non-Asian students, and you will see for yourself that a successful essay is a successful essay regarding the author's ethnicity.

Important Disclaimer

It goes without saying that **you cannot use any of the essays as your own**. We share these essays with you so you can identify components of a good essay and perhaps get an inspiration for your own essay. However, you may not plagiarize a part or an entire essay, nor you may write your essay in an almost identical style. Odds are that admission officers from the schools you are applying to have a copy of this book and have read through all the essays. Taking any part of someone else's essay as your own is cheating and will get you an automatic rejection. In addition, plagiarism is a crime that is punishable by fines or jail time. Please use this book wisely.

11 Common Essay Mistakes to Avoid at All Cost

In our experience helping thousands of students on their college essays, we see that students have a hard time coming up with a good essay draft in the beginning because they have limited experience writing similar creative essays in the past and they do not know what to write about. When students come to us with an almost finished draft and ask us to look over their essays, almost all students make at least one of the following 11 essay mistakes, and the mistakes on more than half of these essays are so significant that we strongly recommend they rewrite the entire essay.

Below is the list of 11 common—and deadly—essay mistakes. If you can keep these in mind as you write, your essay will be off to an excellent start!

1. Writing an essay that has the same plot as everyone else.

When students write an essay about their biggest failure or challenge, the most common plot is as follows: "When I first started, I did not know what to expect, and I encountered a lot of challenges. I wanted to give up, but I decided to try harder. Because of my perseverance, I became successful in the end." When you have a draft for your essay, check if the plot of your story applies to everyone else: if you change your story on learning the violin to your friend's summer camp story, does it seem like your friend's story? If so, the plot is probably too common. Make sure to rewrite it!

2. Lacking interesting high school life stories to write about.

This is a common mistake to students who do everything on what they believe is on the "high school check list": get good grades, get a good SAT or ACT score, join after school clubs, participate in volunteering

activities, learn an instrument, attend summer camps, and so on. When it comes time to write about their high school lives on the college essay, they realize that their high school life experiences are identical to all of their friends, and they do not have anything to write about.

3. Reiterating your accomplishments that are already on your application's resume.

Admission officers already have your college application, which contains your activities list and awards list. If you use the essay to repeat everything that is already on your application, the admission officers will not only be bored of your essay but also know that you are trying too hard to impress them. As a result, your essay will leave a bad impression on the admission officers.

4. Talking about too many things in one essay.

Think about any good movie that you saw recently, and it probably had only one main issue that the main character needed to overcome or a main villain that the superhero had to beat. Similarly, in your college essay, if you focus on talking about too many things--for example, talking about overcoming challenges in school, drawing, and piano--your essay will appear very disorganized.

5. Not being detailed or deep enough.

Writing college essays is like writing movie scripts. In a movie, each scene contains a lot of details and lasts a few minutes. If your essay only quickly talks about an event without much specific details, it is like watching a movie where each scene lasts just a few seconds. If you do not go a lot deeper in your essay's development and paint a vivid picture to the reader, the reader will have a hard time relating to your experience.

6. Being too general and not being specific enough.

When your essay is about why you want to attend a specific school, students often write about things that are general that apply to many other schools. For example, if you simply say that you want to attend a certain college because it has "excellent professors and high-quality education," "a diverse student body," and "a great academic and social

environment," the essay will not be persuasive because thousands of colleges will claim they have all of these qualities. You'll need to write about some things that are particular to this school, and hopefully no other.

7. Telling, and not showing.

Ever heard of the term "show, don't tell?" When you're writing your college essay, make sure that you are showing the reader what you see, feel, hear, or smell. If the reader cannot sense what you want to express, your essay will not appear interesting to the reader. It's like watching a black and white movie without sound where the characters interact in front of a plain white screen. When helping my students, I always recommend the "movie narrator test": does your essay sound like sentences that the narrator of a movie will say, or actions that the actors will act out? If it's the former, your essay is telling and not showing.

8. Choosing a topic that is too extreme or controversial.

Your essay should aim to please the admission officers, and their views on controversial topics such as politics or religion may very likely be different from yours. For example, if you write an essay about how bad you think the President of the United States is and your admission officer actually likes him or her, your essay will leave a very bad impression in that person. Even if your essay is "perfect" in every other way, the admission officer may very likely find your essay offensive and reject you.

9. Not getting feedback from others.

When I was writing drafts my college essay, I remember I was on the brink of crying when I was typing down the emotions we felt during the orchestra tour that summer. However, when I showed my essay to my English teacher, she not only could not relate to my emotions but also was very confused with my story. This is very common in essay writing: when describing an experience, we wrongly assume others can see what we see or feel what we feel. However, those who do not have your first-hand experience may not be able to be emotionally connected to your essay. If you feel embarrassed sharing your essay with your

friends, teachers, or relative to get feedback, it's okay; just make sure you put yourself in other people's shoes and make sure your essay is as powerful when others are reading it.

9. Getting too much feedback from others.

Essays are graded subjectively; while most people will have the similar ideas on whether an essay is good, everyone will have his or her own opinion on how to fix an essay to make it better. If you ask too many teachers, counselors, and friends to read your essay, you'll very likely get lost even more.

10. Trying too hard to use "difficult words" in your essay.

Some students want to use their college essays to show that they know difficult words. While this is not entirely a bad thing, if you do not have a good English fundamentals yet, do not try to stuff in "difficult words" that you find in a thesaurus. For example, if you're in regular English class in school, getting 650 or below on your SAT English, or getting 28 or below on your ACT Reading, and you use words such as *melodious*, *amalgamation*, or *inextricable*, these words will stand out from your essay in a very bad way because these words probably do not exist in your vocabulary. As a result, your essay will appear forced and fake.

11. Forgetting to proofread and making simple writing mistakes.

This sounds simple, but admission officers often read essays with silly grammar, punctuation, or spelling mistakes. Another common silly mistake is where a student copies his or her "Why do you want to attend our college?" essay for another school and forgot to change the school's name mentioned in the essay. Making such mistake does not guarantee immediate rejection, but it will leave a bad impression in the admission officer's eyes because it shows you are careless or don't take the college application seriously enough.

As you turn the page to start reading the essays in this book, please pay attention to how they avoid these mistakes.



Chapter 1

FAILURE

Essay 1: A Cat in the Kingdom of Tigers

Author: Brabeeba Wang (Harvard)

“I don’t belong here.” With bruises and frustration, I walked out of the gym.

I remembered my misfit in the wrestling team since my first practice, when I walked on the team mid-season. Feeling anxious about joining my first sport team ever despite not really knowing what “wrestling” looked like, I headed to the gym wearing a polo shirt and dress pants. An awkward moment soon followed: I looked at the wrestling players in disbelief, finally realizing that wrestling entailed brutally pummeling each other to the ground, while others also looked at me in disbelief, seeing a scrawny Asian from the math team farthest from wrestling world in the most inappropriate outfits come to practice.

As I continued my way back, I sighed. “I didn’t fit in the team since the very beginning. I am a bony math geek, not a wrestling bull.”

An hour ago, I just had my first ever wrestling match, facing Emma, a petite freshman girl. At the shriek of whistle, I lunged at her. To my surprise, Emma agilely evaded my attack, locked her arms around my head, and snapped my head directly towards the ground. Next thing I knew, I was turned upside down and pinned to the ground by Emma, who won the match in mere 10 seconds, sadly setting a new team record in the shortest match ever.

“I can’t even beat a girl, and now I am the team’s laughing stock. I don’t belong there after all,” I murmured. Back in room, I submitted to the temptations of escaping from eternal tribulation and drafted an email to my wrestling coach to express my intention to withdraw from the team, temporarily disregarding my principle to never quit. Before I pressed “SEND,” a Gchat IM window popped up. It was from Emma.

“Hey, Brabeeba. Do you want to do extra work out with me this week? We can’t always be at the bottom of the team, can we?”

Surprised by the warmth of support from Emma, I gave the situation another thought. Realizing that I was the only one on the team who wrongly felt I did not belong, I decided to stay with the team. "Of course. We are a team after all :)" I responded.

Since then, I changed my attitude. I wanted to become a small but essential gear of the wrestling team, and I did. Cheering for our victories and laughing off our defeats, we developed an extensive camaraderie as a team. Although my matches thus far all resulted in defeat, my teammates and coaches still rooted for me in every match, shouting "up! up! up!" to give me strength to get up after getting pinned down by my opponent. During Christmas break, for the first time ever, I went into gym voluntarily to do wrestling drills. I wanted to reply to their expectations and prove that I could be a reliable teammate.

My first match after Christmas break came. Hammering on my chest and giving me high fives, my teammates gave me support as they always did. My opponent's fierce look and strong physique no longer intimidated me; putting aside memories of my past defeat, I stepped onto the mat with composure, knowing that my teammates would not laugh at me even if I failed miserably because they accepted me, a total outsider from the math world, as a comrade of their wrestling world. At the sound of the whistle, countless days of pain, drills and laughter with my dearest teammates led my body move voluntarily. Cross face-cradle, Peterson, half, and turn, every move I had practiced connected in a chain. When the whistle shrieked again, my hand was raised high by the judge, I was screaming and everyone was going berserk, hugging me, screaming and celebrating my first victory.

Who says a cat can't live in the kingdom of tigers!

Essay 2: Swimming

Author: Jacqueline Ly (Harvard)

Chlorine overwhelmed my senses as I stepped onto the pool deck. At fourteen years old, I was the oldest new swimmer on the team. My friends had been on the swim team for five or six years, and every year, they tried to convince me to join. Never one for sports, I'd refuse, but this year was different. I was starting my high school career in the fall, and the time had come to get out of my comfort zone.

Mary, the head coach, assigned me to lane one, closest to her. The warm-up was clearly written on the board, but I was still clueless. Watching the other girls in my lane, I began to learn. Jump off the block, head first into the water. Come up to the surface, whip the arms in a windmill motion, and kick the legs like scissors. Easy enough, I thought.

Snapping my cap on and pushing my goggles on, I stepped onto the block and bent forward to grip the edge of the block, just like the other girls. *Ready, go!* But instead of diving gracefully, I belly-flopped. I felt the burn from my chest to my shins, but I continued to attempt my best windmill and scissors. Unaware of how to breathe properly while swimming, I became winded and lifted my head straight-up, instead of to the side like an experienced swimmer, slowing me down. Once at the shallow end of the pool, I couldn't help but walk the rest of the length, too winded to windmill or scissor.

Back at the end of the pool, Mary stood, ready to give me some tips. She manipulated my arms, legs, and head, showing me how to jump off the block and swim the freestyle. This time around, the flop felt less severe, and the windmill and scissors came with a bit more ease, but the breathing was still flawed. I got out of the pool feeling worse and ready to give up.

I walked back to the blocks, yet again, to complete the next part of the warm-up. The other swimmers were well ahead of me. Diving in for the third time, I swam not even halfway down the pool before I hopped out,

tears falling from my eyes. I was done. I apologized and told Mary that swimming was not for me. She sat me down on a bench, asking if this was my first time swimming. It was my first time doing any sort of sport. She chuckled and said, "You had to choose the hardest sport." She explained to me that new endeavors can and often will be difficult. The worst thing I could do is shy away from an opportunity because it's too difficult.

Keeping those words in mind, I began my high school career. I stuck with the swim team and improved a lot that year. I tried out for the volleyball team and made the freshman squad. I enrolled in challenging courses. Slowly, my shyness began to chip away. The "swim" talk, as I like to refer to it, encouraged me to never quit on something that I wanted. The fear of failure can be paralyzing, but only if I let it. I would much rather step on the block, ready to face the belly flop, than not risk the dive at all.

Essay 3: Basketball

Author: Kylie Hung (Harvard)

Duuuuu... It sounded like the high-pitched flat-line of an EKG machine signaling heart failure. But it was not. It was tinnitus. I had learned about the symptoms of tinnitus in my sports medicine class before my personal encounter with the condition. As my head smacked against the uneven pavement, I experienced a brain trauma that affected the brain function linked to hearing. My ears rang for what felt like eternity. The whole world seemed to freeze in that moment because all I could hear was that ear-piercing ring. In fact, as my head hit the pavement, everyone around me froze when they heard *crrrrrack*.

I had been playing basketball. No one expects a five-foot nothing, Asian girl to be dribbling the ball back and forth down the court and making shots. Yet, there I was, front and center playing with the best of my male friends up until my skull met pavement. As I jumped up for a rebound against my friends who were twice my height and weight, an opponent knocked me down from six feet above the bumpy ground. I didn't know it then, but this was a defining moment in my developing relationship with basketball.

As I was on the ground, I winced from the blazing sun rays. I attempted to sit up with the help of my assistant principal who came running to my aid. All I could utter was a confused "Ouch", partly because my ears were still ringing and partly because of my enormous pounding headache due to the collision. As I sat up, I felt warm liquid running down my back. Everyone around me turned pale when they saw a pool of red where I hit my head on the floor. The stream of blood gushing out from my wound started to drench my white shirt. I was immediately rushed to the emergency room.

Most people would shy away after a dreadful injury, but through the pain and stitches, all I could think about was getting back on the court. My life felt incomplete without basketball. Gripping a basketball for the first time since the injury induced involuntary flashbacks of the blood and pain that I had felt. I had doubts. I was afraid of being knocked down. I was afraid

of getting hurt again. I was afraid that my fervor for basketball would be murdered. Yet, I was anxious to get back on my feet because I had to prove a point – that I was a fighter who was not going to be pushed down by fear, obstacles, and challenges. From a young age, I realized that in this sport, the odds were stacked against me, whether it was in age, height, or gender. Even my coaches throughout the years did not believe that I could succeed. I was just a mole hill amongst towering mountains. However, despite these setbacks, I never gave up on basketball because it was always something that I enjoyed. The thought of quitting never even crossed my mind.

At the time, I didn't know that I would join my high school basketball team and become the leading point guard. I wasn't aware that our team would eventually make it to playoffs, being the only multiracial team to do so in our division. It didn't occur to me that 'captain' would eventually be in my repertoire, that 'championship' and 'MVP' were possibilities, not dreams. All I knew was that I did not want to give up on something that I really enjoyed and I had to overcome my injury in order to move forward.

If it had not been for that incident, I would never have realized the passion I have for basketball. It was in those moments – lying on the pavement, riding in the ambulance, and getting my stitches – that I gained a better understanding of just how much basketball meant to me.

Essay 4: Tennis

Author: Anna Li (Harvard)

I've been playing tennis since I was ten and have been lucky enough to be fairly successful. With many more peaks than valleys in my young career, I was oblivious to the injuries, hardships, and failures that the sport could bring. Adding to my good fortune, I made my high school varsity tennis team as a mere freshman. With a bit of luck and talent, we achieved an extraordinary undefeated season and managed to qualify for states. Then with additional hard work, we made it to the state championship finals. It was on the court, two sets in, when I was forced to realize I still had much to learn.

This final match was played in a best-of-five format; we needed three wins to become the second team in school history to win a state title. Everything was going perfectly for us. We heard a cheer erupt; we had secured one victory. Another roar, a second triumph. At this point, I was still playing, and all I could think about was clinching the win. One moment I was diving for a ball just out of my reach, the next I was down on the ground. I had twisted my ankle at the worst possible time. I got up and tested it with a few tentative steps. Realizing that I would have no chance of winning with the injury and would only worsen it if I kept playing, I miserably limped to the net and shook hands with my opponent, forfeiting the match. I had failed my teammates by losing at a time when it mattered most, giving our opponents a better look at the championship title. I hopped on one leg to the bathroom and cried, wallowing in self-pity, wondering what the others would think of me.

Suddenly, I heard one last explosion coming from the courts, one considerably louder than the two preceding it. Curious to see what the noise was about, I jumped up onto one foot, used the racket I had with me as a crutch, and hobbled towards the court. Seeing my teammates with tears of joy in their eyes and with their hands raised in fists above their heads, I realized our team had managed to capture the state championship. Immediately, something within me changed; within a split second, my despair turned into delight. My initial happiness magnified as I stumbled closer and closer toward my team. At that moment, nothing

could replace the joy I felt winning alongside my teammates. We had risen together despite the fact that I had fallen alone. I had learned to rely more on my teammates than on myself, something so unique for what is usually such an individual sport. And though I wasn't able to play for a few months after that day, I wouldn't have changed anything about it.

Our victory marked the end of my freshman varsity tennis season. As I matured into a less naive sophomore, I came to better understand that individual failure is often inevitable when aiming for a larger purpose. Keeping this vital lesson in mind helped our team to defend our state title my sophomore and junior years. This year as a returning captain, I have to keep reminding not only myself of the importance of team interdependence but also the incoming freshmen— hopefully none of whom will suffer an ankle injury during a championship match.

Essay 5: Singing

Author: Anonymous (Harvard)

I stood paralyzed in the center of the room, heart racing, tongue-tied, and certain that The End was upon me. Under the penetrating gaze of three sets of expectant eyes and a video camera that documented my every move, I found myself in an environment of panic, a room known to destroy hope and faith, an event encompassed in anticipation and dread - a singing audition. And I had missed my entrance.

Racking my brain desperately for any recollection I once had of the lyrics to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," I stumbled through the first verse, inventing lines and rhyming "window pane" with a second "window pane," as my face grew redder than a ruby slipper.

Time slowed. In a fraction of a second, my emotions careened from excitement, to terror, to despair as I realized that I was unequivocally out of my league. Being Asian, I rested miles away from anyone's idea of a traditional "Dorothy" from "The Wizard of Oz." The casting director would surely prefer one of the girls in the waiting room who had boasted of months of rehearsals with voice coaches; a seasoned actress for whom it was not her first time auditioning for a professional theater company, let alone any musical outside of school; someone who had not been informed of the audition with only a two days' notice by her enthusiastic theater teacher.

As I neared the chorus, I made a decision. Accepting that I had forfeited any slim chance I had ever grasped at landing the role, I threw myself into the song, passionately blundering through with conviction, doing my best to channel Judy Garland, who was surely tossing and turning up a hurricane in her grave. As I abandoned myself, my cheeks flushed and my heart pounded, off-beat, in my chest. I enjoyed myself, belting any lyrics I could salvage from the depths of my flawed memory with exuberant enthusiasm.

I've always loved performance, since the age of four years old, when I began to learn to play my first instrument (which happened to be a violin-

shaped cardboard box with some glued on string). Whether I'm reciting a monologue, playing a concerto, or presenting an original song, I invariably enjoy being onstage, especially among friends.

The Dorothy audition set my nerves afire, and a resulting mind-lapse cost me a chance at the part mere seconds into my audition. When I reached the chorus, however, I remembered why I had entered the room in the first place - my love for theater - and I embraced the situation. Though my hopes and prospects for winning the part had vanished, I decided to take control of the situation and simply have fun, stepping out of my comfort zone and gaining a new experience. Looking back on this moment, I realize that my passion for theater stems not only from the roles I play, but also, and more meaningfully, from the people I meet, the skills I acquire, and, most of all, the thrill of performing for others.

Despite not getting the role, I regard that day as a success. Regardless of the outcome of the audition, I gave it my all, deciding in that moment that, if I was going to fail to win the part, I would at the very least enjoy the experience. In this way, doing what I love most, I could not truly fail.

Essay 6: Rejection

Author: Tiffany Lam (Harvard)

Outlined on the first page of my pink diary when I was 8 was the ultimate plan: I would start a clinic with one of my cousins, Kimberly, from which we would send patients to my cousin, Catherine, who would be a pharmacist. She would get her medicine from my third cousin, Jeffrey, who would be the owner of a drug manufacturing company. Together, we would form a perfect triangle of teamwork. EASY... Or so I had thought.

In the summer after my junior year, I applied to prestigious summer programs at City of Hope and Stanford Institutes of Medicine. I had worked hard all year to maintain my grades and make a good impression on my teachers. I was fully convinced that I had to get into these programs to fulfill my end of the bargain. Although I knew my chances were slim, it did nothing to lessen the disappointment I felt when I received the rejection letters in the mail. My failure to get accepted into research programs made me doubt myself and wonder if I really had what it took to chase after this goal.

It was during this time of sulking that I came across the book *Gifted Hands* by Ben Carson. He was African American, raised by a single mother in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. He knew he wanted to be a doctor at a young age, yet all odds were against him—his ethnicity, his financial situation, and the quality of his education. Despite all this, Ben never let it stop him from achieving his dreams, eventually becoming a world-renowned surgeon and head of the department of neurology at Johns Hopkins. Upon reading this book, I was inspired. Sure, I didn't get into the summer programs I wanted, but there were so many more chances out there. I shouldn't be dwelling on what didn't happen, but thinking beyond to what could happen.

Taking the cue from Dr. Carson, I decided to find my own opportunity. I contacted a few professors from different universities, sending an introduction letter and my resume. I knew that I might not hear back from any one of them, but I also knew I had to at least try. A week later, I

received a response from Dr. Frederick Sigworth. He was interested in having me participate in his lab in the cellular and molecular physiology department of Yale University. After making living arrangements with a friend in Connecticut, I eagerly accepted.

I was allowed to participate in hands-on activities right away. In six weeks, I combined, removed, and altered the arrangement of genes on a DNA vector. I learned how to perform DNA transformation, Mini prep DNA, run tests through gel electrophoresis, and transfect DNA into cells for protein expression. About three weeks in, I even earned my own project to design a primer containing a specific restriction enzyme site to be inserted into the gene. Overall, I learned more than most people my age would have. What made this experience so much more meaningful to me was that it hadn't been simply handed to me—I had discovered it myself.

My rejection wasn't a great obstacle to be upset over, but a stepping-stone to learn from. There is no set path to follow. For this very reason, I embrace the future knowing that things will not always happen as I've planned, but I can always change the course and achieve meaningful results. It was a timely lesson to learn, since Jeffrey bailed on the rest of us and changed his major. His position is now open for consideration.



Chapter 2

IDENTITY

Essay 1: Her Name

Author: Eileen Feng (Harvard)

I will never forget the first day of 7th grade.

On that day, my science teacher confidently declared that if she didn't remember anyone's name by the end of the period, she would give that person her box of doughnuts. That afternoon, I walked home with a sugar rush, stuffing the doughnuts in my mouth as I smiled pompously to myself.

Gradually, that pompous feeling disseminated. I was always the last kid the teachers remembered; I was always that kid the substitute stopped at when she checked attendance; I was always that kid who people knew the face of, but not the name. At every social gathering or club meeting, I was just "that girl." I wished that I had another, more normal name, like Ashley or Nicole.

Running for historian of our Key Club freshman year, I was busy in the corner rehearsing my speech when I was suddenly interrupted by our advisor, as he announced that the next candidate running was "Yay-lin." I cringed as laughter burst out and echoed through the room.

As if I weren't nervous enough. My legs were shaking as I grabbed the microphone, which seemed 100 times heavier than it usually was. And somehow, I managed to trip up the stairs to the stage. Looking up, images of laughing faces seized my vision. Even my best friends were covering their mouths and holding back giggles. At that moment, I promised to myself that this would never happen again.

Four years later, I was no longer the timid, shy girl in the corner. Sitting in the same seat at Key Club, I was nervous yet expectant as our advisor read off the newly elected officers. As he slowly stopped at vice president, I closed my eyes, crossed my fingers, and hoped for the best. "And your next Key Club vice president is ...Yilin!" My eyes shot open as cheers from my friends and classmates erupted. I walked up that stage once again, this time without tripping. My advisor had finally

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remembered how to say my name. After working with him for several months, I corrected him that my name is pronounced “Yee-lin.” He was an especially stubborn case.

It turns out that when you run things, people remember your name.

Besides being the vice president of Key Club, I also lead my own music club of over 50 people, managing everything from obtaining music to contacting gigs. As captain of the tennis team, it is my responsibility to take care of others. Throughout the years, I have learned to open up and approach others.

Slowly year by year, I learn more and more about myself. My name is matchless. Having a unique name is a privilege—a chance for idiosyncrasy to burst out of its shell. I no longer want to be Ashley or Nicole—and I certainly don’t want any more doughnuts. I want to be a leader, to be someone who can influence others. I want to be YILIN.

Essay 2: Songwriting

Author: Stephanie Wu (Harvard)

What rhymes with today? Say? Play? OK? Puzzling over this predicament for a few minutes, I finally decide on “yay!,” and the chorus is complete. As I lie in bed, I can hardly contain my excitement over having my Global Learning Initiative Club raise over \$2,500 in our Annual Algonquin 5K fundraiser. After months of designing t-shirts, searching for sponsors, and advertising to the community, today is the day when all of my work has come together. Today is a day to celebrate.

Ever since I taught myself how to play the guitar, I’ve been writing songs. Tonight, I compose a song that captures everything I’m feeling in this moment: “Have a Happy Day!” My process of writing music starts with a random outburst of creativity: a bright, lively tune that pops into my head when I ace a chemistry test, or a somber, heavy line that forms when I lose a tennis match. Once I have something to work with, I test a few chords on my guitar, and the rest just flows.

The act of writing a song helps me deal with all of the emotions that are running through my head, happy or sad. When I was cut from the varsity tennis team in tenth grade, “Broken” was born. Letting myself wallow in gloom for a couple of hours and pouring all of my disappointment and dejection into writing “Broken” was cathartic, empowering me to move past my failure with newfound optimism and determination to make the team next year.

Not only does writing songs help me cope with obstacles in my life, but singing and playing the songs that I’ve written also enables me to remember meaningful moments and exactly how I felt during those times. “Don’t You Miss Me?,” the first song that I ever wrote, is about growing distant from my friend. When I sing that song, it takes me back to the wonderful times we had together (*Don’t you miss playing DDR? Or carpooling in your car?*), reminding me of the importance of friendship and how relationships can slip away if I don’t make them a priority. Documenting my emotions through music allows me to learn from and internalize situations that I’ve experienced, ensuring that I won’t make

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the same mistake again. (Consequently, I wrote another song titled “Friends Forever” about cherishing the friendships that I have now.)

Taken together, all of the songs that I’ve written illustrate the story that is my life, what I feel and the way that I think. I don’t craft melodies and lyrics because I want to be a professional songwriter. When writing lines, I don’t think about sophistication or worry if people can relate to my words. Composing songs is purely a personal endeavor, a way to express myself whenever. (I didn’t mean to be clever, however.)

Recently, when faced with the daunting task of writing a college essay, I was stumped for a while, writing disingenuous essays that sounded like they came out of another person’s mouth. *Who am I, really?* I kept wondering. Feeling frustrated and confused, the lyrics to my next song suddenly popped into my head:

Who am I? Who do I want to be?

I still don’t know what this world holds.

Reach for the sky. When will I be free?

Only time will tell ‘cause I’m still trying to find myself.

Maybe I don’t have everything planned out. Maybe I don’t know exactly who I am yet. But with every note and every word that I compose, I know that I’ll be one step closer to figuring it out.

Essay 3: Violin

Author: Alexis Ross (Harvard)

I opened my violin case hesitantly, questioning the purpose of playing for my grandmother at all. It was difficult to see her lying in the stiff, white hospital bed, her eyes distant and expressionless. She had had a stroke and lost a lot of her cognitive ability. It was not clear that she was aware of what was happening: she said nothing and was in and out of sleep. Still, I unpacked my violin and prepared to play, hoping that in her few, and perhaps last, moments of consciousness she would enjoy listening.

I played the slow, second movement of Dvorak's Violin Concerto, which I have always found moving. I closed my eyes and dedicated my energy to releasing the feelings of suffocation I had had since my arrival in the hospital room. When I reopened my eyes, I saw that her eyes were no longer vacant, but filled with tears; she clasped her hands together, a sign of recognition and appreciation. I felt tears begin to well in my own eyes, and as I continued to fill the room with sounds, I realized that I had found a way past my initial helplessness. Although we could not communicate with words, the music spoke, and I knew she was there with me.

During my 13 years as a musician, such powerful moments have not been rare; I experienced the magic of music for the first time at four years old, when I first opened my violin case and began playing. At that time, it was the mystery of the new instrument that excited me. I longed to understand how it worked and how I could improve. As I learned, I sought to spread my knowledge whenever I could; usually my sister was the one who endured my detailed descriptions of everything violin-related.

As I advanced as a musician, my excitement only grew. I vividly remember the anticipation I felt backstage in the moments before I walked out on stage for the first time. Peering out at the crowd, I felt gratitude not only for the opportunity to make my family proud, but also for the chance to connect with the hundreds of faces I might only know in the moment. Months of preparation had finally paid off.

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During my first summer at music camp, the magic came from being surrounded by musicians who were just as passionate as I was; I fed off their energy. I delighted in my introduction to a world of diverse ideas and pieces I had never heard before. Inspired by my peers, I subconsciously absorbed ideas every day and thus discovered a new way of learning.

When I played Carmen Fantasy by Sarasate at the age of 15, I experienced the wonder of assuming a new, albeit temporary identity. To learn how to play the role of a seductive gypsy, I had to use my imagination and step out of my comfort zone. I started paying keen attention to the smallest sounds and gestures, striving to add my own individual nuances to the piece.

Today, I take pride in carrying around my violin case, which marks me as a musician; I want the world to know me as a vehicle for music's power. When I opened my violin case to play for my grandmother, an opportunity arose for empathy and human connection that would otherwise have been impossible. The violin in the unopened case slung across my back always has this potential: it is the chance to touch a suffering heart, to share my own story, or to have a conversation with a stranger about our shared love of music. It's my duty and pleasure to bring that potential to life, and I will never tire of taking out my instrument to do so.

Essay 4: An Everest of My Own

Author: Jenna Bao (Harvard)

At some point, I learned to spot the exact moment when recognition, *when anticipation*, spread across a teacher's face as they studied the class roster on the first day of school.

"Bao? As in, Erik Bao's sister?" A smile, a nod. A mental mountain made out of a molehill, perhaps, and yet it's always felt more like I was the mole, embarking on a perilous year-long quest to dismantle Everest and build a mole-tastic bounce-castle in its place.

Now, some background is in order: my brother, seven years my elder, lovely human being and pun extraordinaire, is one of my greatest role models. He also just happens to be a valedictorian, an internationally-competitive science whiz kid, and a student at a top medical school. No pressure, right?

Throughout my childhood these two perceived personas performed balancing acts in my mind; when we ran a club from the cubby underneath his bed, he was a prototypical dork, and yet at every possible avenue of comparison he became an impossible, infallible metric. There's a voice in my head dedicated just to his legacy, and it sounds like if Motivation and Expectation had a single-minded daughter. *Erik was placed into the gifted program in third grade--if you aren't, what does that say about you? Erik made it to Nationals, so you have to get at least that far.*

He isn't the only culprit: certainly my parents, peers, and teachers reveal varying expectations, and I crave amelioration like I do Shanghai soup dumplings. Yet, his precedent only ever managed to amplify all of the above. This was never intentional, but it's shaped my life nonetheless.

Thus, a part of me wonders if my pursuit of the humanities is some kind of subconscious maneuver to escape direct comparison. In eighth grade, I was presented with a choice that prompted what is now affectionately (-ish) referred to as my sixth-life crisis. (This is an estimation derived from

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my general fitness, or lack thereof) At age eight, I'd developed an elaborate life plan spanning college to death, starring a career as a neurosurgeon. This roadmap was formally challenged when, after months of preparation for both a regional short story competition and my first science fair, I realized both events happened on the same day. Since I'd been crafting manuscripts since the second grade, no STEM course had ever enchanted me half as much as the *Percy Jackson* books did, and my brother had about a dozen science fair titles framed above the piano, I chose Power of the Pen and won first place. The rest is history. And by history, of course I mean years of introspective car rides, fence straddling, and constant, deliberate choices to storm down my own yellow-brick curriculum.

Ultimately, I refuse to spend a lifetime digging out of anyone's shadow. In the past few years, I've plotted a route of my own, far from anyone's anticipations. It is similarly characterized by academic excellence but features unique back roads and landmarks of mock trial, journalism, and leadership. I've shifted my focus from his past accomplishments to my current and future goals.

I will never be certain if my interests are influenced by what he *didn't* do, but my passion for humanity and the understanding of it is strong and vibrant. I still grapple with the weight of his success, still struggle in gathering the perspective to realize how much of this comes from impossible expectation I've placed upon myself. I don't know if I'll ever fully lay any of this to rest. But now more than ever, I also have the confidence and determination to climb out from under his Everest and focus on building my own--one that is lumpy and neon and extraordinary and mine.

Essay 5: Learning Independence

Author: Norman Xiong (Harvard)

My bedroom does not have a light switch on the wall by the door. After the sun sets and no more sunlight filters into the room, I must navigate the thick darkness of the room to the bedside table and fumble with the lamp switch for illumination. My room is familiar to me, though. Even with my eyes closed, I can find my way through book piles and chairs to the bedside lamp without stubbing my toes or tripping over books.

Before my father left to work in China, life was like my bedroom. It was comfortable. Like my darkened bedroom at night, everything was familiar. After he left, I thought life would progress in much the same way, and for the most part, I was right. No major changes to routine occurred. I still went to school and earned good grades, participated in clubs and organizations that I cared about, and endured our pug's overwhelming shedding. Despite living alone with my chronically depressed mother for the first time in my life, I was able to handle the change: I was already used to helping out around the house by cooking meals and keeping the place tidy. Yet, some things were different. Without my father at home, I had to teach myself how to knot a tie and parallel park for the first time, things my mother could not teach me.

When the kitchen faucet broke, my mother said it was my job to fix it. After all, I was the man of the house now. Yet, in the two years that had passed since my father's departure, this was one of the first serious issues that I had had to handle. I was apprehensive; learning how to evaluate integrals and analyze monopolistic markets had not prepared me for this. Try as I might to put off the task, the day finally came when my mother came home with a replacement faucet kit and ordered me to work. I could only acquiesce. I spent that afternoon crouching in the kitchen, sweat adorning my skin and splinters decorating my fingers.

It was a lengthy, discouraging process. Instruction manuals are notoriously unhelpful, and this was no exception. Countless times that afternoon I would secure part of the new faucet into place, only to discover I had forgotten a crucial piece that the manual writer failed to

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emphasize. Prudence demanded that I follow the instructions, but intuition argued otherwise. I discarded the manual and proceeded on my own. Twice that afternoon my mother offered her help; twice I declined. This was something I wanted to do independently.

As I labored, I thought of my father, who had always taken care of these things. I had never admitted it to myself, always trying to play the part of the stoic son holding the family together in his absence, but I missed him. I missed his exaggerated Coca-Cola-commercial-esque gasp of satisfaction after taking a gulp of cold water and his proud declaration of “Skunken!” every time we drove down a road that had been generously sprayed by a skunk. My father had a million sometimes annoying yet always entertaining habits.

Five hours after I began fixing the faucet, I stood up and stretched. I had come to a realization: if my father could learn to live alone in China, making a home for himself in a country now foreign to him, I could learn independence too. This faucet, assembled without a manual or my mother’s help, was a testament to that fact. Through my father’s absence, I had already learned the power of resolve, persistence, and self-sufficiency. I was no adult, but I had embarked upon the road to maturity. Hesitantly, I reached out and turned the handle – water gurgled out and splashed with a hollow sound into the metal sink before vanishing down the drain. The faucet worked. The lamp turns on.

Essay 6: Favorite Quotation

Author: Norman Xiong (Harvard)

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough? Blue enough for what? Blue enough for...I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough...for you!"

— Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

When I was a freshman, I wanted to be like Solon.

Solon was a virtuoso. An able pianist, composer, and vocalist, Solon personified my musical aspirations. As a freshman, I was already an accomplished cellist, but Solon's musical achievements — from composing scores to leading roles in our school's musicals — easily dwarfed mine. At the time, though, I wasn't worried. I believed that with time would come experience, and that by senior year, I'd be a musician comparable to Solon. As a freshman, I was content.

When I was a sophomore, I wanted to be like Mindy.

Mindy was a paragon in debate. She never shied from speaking out, even if her opinions were strongly challenged. As a sophomore just delving into literature discussions, I was fairly shy. When my peers eagerly debated with one another, I lacked the confidence to join them. Despite my strong desire to debate like Mindy, I remained a tacit observer, always listening but rarely participating. Still, I believed there was time. I thought that by senior year, I'd be as confident a debater as Mindy.

When I was a junior, I wanted to be like Alex.

Alex was our school's tennis deity. In his senior year, he managed to notch the singles state title, a feat I regarded as the ultimate high school athletic achievement. As a member of the of the varsity team myself, I was by no means a novice athlete. However, I would never come close to Alex's level, a thought which perturbed me. Alex had been training in

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tennis since he was old enough to stand. What had I been doing all that time?

By the end of my junior year, I'd become nothing like the people I wanted to become. I was not a virtuoso or a tennis champion, and although I was a competent debater, I was still less confident than I'd hoped to be. I'd always thought that with time, I'd naturally follow in Solon, Mindy, and Alex's footsteps, but that was clearly incorrect. I was nowhere near as impressive as them. I felt as if I'd squandered the years waiting for greatness.

One day in the post-AP bliss, my economics teacher allowed us a free period. I decided to make the obvious, sensible use of my time: reading Calvin and Hobbes comics. As I browsed the poignant cartoons, one Calvin saying struck me: "The truth is, most of us discover where we are heading when we arrive."

I didn't immediately know it, but Calvin's observation would resonate within me. Over time, I understood how aptly it reflected me. Throughout my underclassman years, I thought I knew who I hoped to be as a senior, but now that senior year is upon me, I realize I'd been mistaken. My worth is not measured in my debate experience, musical prowess, or tennis expertise. My identity is in the details. I am good at entertaining people with my Chandler-Bing-style dry humor. I am good at taking care of and helping people, a skill I learned from caring for my depressed mother while my father worked in China. I can be content because of the little things which are mine.

I take comfort in knowing I cannot be exactly like my idols. I have forged my own path. Whereas before I felt fear that I could not compare to the Solons, Mindys, and Alexs of the world, now I only derive confidence from knowing that I don't want to compare to them. If there was ever a time to make internal peace, this was it. After all, I am myself. That's better than anybody I could have hoped to become.



Chapter 3

COMMUNITY/ WHERE YOU ARE FROM

Essay 1: Vietnam

Author: Lisa Vo (Harvard)

Vietnam is a medley of all the right colors. Some nights, standing under the white light of my laundry room, I am strangely overcome by a yearning. It is the specific color of that light, the darkness outside, the chilly breeze that slips through holes on the window screen and raises goosebumps on my arms—and suddenly I am standing on the rooftop of my grandmother's house in my father's village. I can attest that evening winds feel more or less the same whether in America or East Asia, but it is difficult to appreciate the coolness of the wind without first experiencing the stickiness of humid air. Vietnam is not the scent of freshly cut grass; it is more often the odor of cow manure. Yet there is serenity in the downtrodden and organic details of my father's village. I remember one night, as I was about to sit on a pillar at the very edge of the rooftop, my cousin stopped me and lightly kicked the concrete pillar, at which instant chunks of it immediately crumbled off and fell to the ground below. No, I suppose Vietnam is not the paradigm of safety-regulated infrastructure. I do not miss the flying cockroaches or moths that take shelter in the bathtubs, either, but there is something thrilling about never knowing when the next blackout will be and whether it will occur while you're stark naked in an eerily secluded and drafty bathroom.

If there is anything my homeland has taught me, it is gratitude. It is not the same gratitude that immigrants like myself often speak of when comparing the boundless opportunities of America to the lack thereof in our own native countries. Though I am reminded of my blessings every day, I could not possibly condense that thankfulness into a mere recounting worth a few hundred words. The gratitude I speak of comes from humbler origins and simpler places.

Every morning in Vietnam, I would follow my father to a shabby little cafe by the fish market. He would order the same cup of iced coffee, greet the owner with a few curt words, and then sit on one of the white plastic chairs in the front, observing the market-goers walking back and forth with red plastic bags of seafood in their hands and straw hats on their

heads. He finally explain to me, one day, that about twenty-five years ago, when he had been so poor as to not even be able to afford a document carrier for a critical emigration interview, it was the same owner of this very cafe—then just a stranger—who had given him the forty thousand Vietnamese dong. Nowadays, that translates to less than two dollars. My father never repaid him. He says he never will and he never could, for to return a few dollars today would be to immensely cheapen the meaning of the owner's gesture twenty-five years ago. So in spite of the prosperity time has brought my father, he has chosen to retain that meager debt, a small reminder for him to always be humble, always be grateful.

Because of my father, I believe in being indebted. I believe that some burdens are better kept than shed, and that sometimes, we must be reminded that we certainly cannot do it all alone. Vietnam is not a rich country; our people are not the best educated, and basic amenities I have come to know in America are but luxuries for my cousins back home. Meals are eaten on the floor, toilets are flushed with buckets of water, and diapers are layers of fabric strung together. Yet what is lacking in material objects is made up for by the trust between neighbors and codependency between people. No matter where my ambitions lead me, I hope to always be grounded by my debts to others—debts that cannot be repaid and debts that make me remember, in my moments of triumph, those who were by my side in my times of need.

I hope I never forget, even in the midst of this individualistic society, that it is rarely about helping ourselves find the most expedient way to the top. I will need to depend on others, and others may need to depend on me. There is no shame in asking for help, and there is no loss in helping without expecting a favor in return. I hope my debts weigh me down with the burden of gratitude, so that I may never get too prideful in my abilities or complacent in my successes. If I can seek to be often humble and always thankful, then I will have truly learned from a great man of a good country.

Essay 2: The Gift of Friendship

Author: Derek Peng (Harvard)

“...though we may be involved with the most important affair, let us never forget how good we all once felt here, all together, united by such good and kind feelings...”

–Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

Growing up in a dirt-ridden neighborhood infested with delinquents, I never understood what true friendship meant. The term was as foreign to me as was wealth.

Everyday, I'd hike up to the community pool, the 'humble' abode of the previous said delinquents, where they'd litter burnt cigarette butts and take a swig of whatever was in that vile glass of liquor they always held. Yup, it felt like home. Turning a blind eye to their obscenity, I'd dive into the pool, swimming towards the tattered water polo cage. The loneliest days were those when I'd clumsily chuck the amber-hued ball at the cage while the delinquents sneered from a distance.

The impact of my hermit-like existence reached a climax when the hoodlums, out of their own disgusting sense of drunken satisfaction, began mocking me, trying their best to break me. I was afraid to come out of the water, because doing so meant confronting their towel whipping, which left bright red marks on my skin.

It came to no surprise that my new home felt like a haven, a refuge from the continuation of the “cold war” that plagued me since youth.

However, my insecurities always hovered above me, like my own stormy cloud. Perhaps by some ironic scheme pulled by some divine being, my school inaugurated the water polo team during my senior year. I 'enlisted', not expecting much.

The first day of water polo in the summer was the most nerve-racking. I was on my toes, warily scrutinizing my teammates' faces looking out for signs of those delinquents of my past in them.

However, I soon realized that they were simply a reflection of my past. They were nervous and shy just like how I was in my younger days.

Unsure of what my actions would bear for me, I lent a helping hand to those struggling with conditioning, offering words of motivation. Soon enough, the “ice” was broken, and we became a team—each of us familiar with the other.

Time flew by accordingly, as time does in enjoyable moments, but I relive the memories everyday, as if every event were caught by camera: when the team goalie slipped in the locker room and we gave him a helping hand, chuckling; when we gave each other celebratory hugs; when we huddled together to glorify the moment of victory; when we swam in the midst of a rainstorm, laughing; when we fed pizza to each other; when we made the unforgettable play that won our game in overtime. As the colors of the seasons changed from yellow to orange, from white to green, we kept our bonds to one another no matter what struggles we strived to overcome. This exemplified true friendship.

I’ll always keep to my heart what my teammate said to me, “You may be Captain, but you’re also my brother.”

Whenever I walk by the empty swimming pool after class ends, I don’t just see a vacant pool. No, I don’t even see the liquor-wasted thugs who scarred my friendless childhood. Instead, I envision the buzzer ringing, the crowd roaring, the ball tight in my hand, and my teammates grinning.

I know that next year we will disperse, each to our own separate colleges, and in a few years the only testament to our time spent on the team will be a team photo lost in the pages of Diamond Bar High School’s records. However, I beseech each and every one of my friends never to *“forget how good we all once felt here, all together, united by such good and kind feelings.”*

Essay 3: One Stitch at a Time

Author: Lily Gao

Click click. Swish. Each stitch whispered as I nudged it off the needle to join the masses of interlocking loops below. Knit one row, purl the next. As I wound down after a long day to the rhythmic cadence of my knitting needles, my mind began to wander.

The contradictory nature of the stockinette pattern I was using for my beanie fascinated me. By knitting the first row and then essentially doing the opposite by purling the next row, I was forcing together two seemingly incompatible elements, causing two distinct sides to emerge. I noticed how this was analogous to my double cultural life as a second-generation Chinese-American. My constant flip-flopping between cultures had caused me endless frustration because even though I superficially adopted elements of both, I never felt entirely American or Chinese; I'm absolutely clueless when it comes to old-fashioned music from China or America, and some idioms in both languages still leave me baffled. In light of this cultural predicament, I childishly attempted to eliminate Chinese culture from my life and assimilate completely into American culture, justifying my mindset with my plans to stay in the US.

Each knit stitch became an act of defiance to the traditional Chinese culture I had grown up with and a step towards adopting American culture. Knit one, adopt pets. Knit another, learn clarinet instead of violin. Knit another, choose sports over another instrument. Fall in love with country music. Learn to make small talk. Become less reserved with emotions. Learn to cook Southern comfort food. Serve mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving.

When I reached the end of the row and started to purl, I reflected on my connections with Chinese culture. Purl one, reject breakfast cereal for rice porridge. Purl another, share the same dinner dishes with my family every night. Purl another, reuse plastic bags and containers. Collect tiny shampoo bottles. Study Chinese at Sunday school. Muse on the nuances of the Chinese language, ones that could never be fully translated into English.

As I stopped to examine the progress on my beanie, I noticed the elaborate stockinette pattern emerging from the chaos of knots and tangles, with each individual knit and purl stitch interlocked with surrounding loops; as I contemplated how the fabric of my culture was similarly structured, with American and Chinese practices intimately intertwined, it dawned on me that both Chinese and American culture had been embedded in my identity due to my bicultural upbringing—and that I couldn't fully Americanize myself without unraveling my past.

Since those revelations I've decided to seek a balance of cultures rather than assimilate entirely and have stopped viewing my culture's two contrasting sides as incompatible; instead, I now view those differences as complementary, each enhancing the nuances of the other. Without the juxtaposition of Chinese and American customs, I wouldn't be able to fully appreciate the hallmarks of either culture, such as the Chinese values of family and respect for elders or the American emphasis on individualism and informality.

I have long since finished my beanie, but my culture is still a work in progress, evolving with new places visited, people met, and ideas experienced. Within the cosmopolitan mosaic of my culture, my identity exists – that I am sure of – but I could never hope to untangle its ever-changing essence. In its intricate dimensions lie my Chinese studiousness, ardent love for National Parks, covert addiction to country music, burgeoning interest in Chinese calligraphy, and the endless aspects that simply make me who I am. My newfound appreciation for culture continues today with an expanding scope, but instead of trying to neatly categorize each new strand of culture I come across as American or Chinese, Korean or Hispanic, I now focus on recognizing each culture's intrinsic value and seamlessly incorporating its applicable elements into my life.

Essay 4: Is the American Dream Dead?

Author: Jason Ma (Harvard)

“So, Jason, what’s your question today?”

“My question is: Is the American Dream dead?”

“And how would you like your time signals to be given?”

“I will have the standard five down.”

As my coach started the stopwatch, I proceeded to deliver my prepared speech. My short answer: “Yes.” My support: “No matter how hard the less fortunate people work, they will never catch up to their rich counterparts in society.”

This perspective was indicative of my struggle with the English language. Prior to joining the speech team, I always believed that no matter how hard I worked, I would never be as strong as my native speaking counterparts because I did not truly begin studying the language until the 8th grade.

Nevertheless, I was motivated to become a fluent speaker. In 10th grade, I finally gathered enough courage to try out for the speech team. Unsurprisingly, my career started out with a lack of promise, and I realized that my accent and pronunciation were the main culprits bringing me down. When learning English, I was never taught pronunciation rules, so I spoke words as they sounded in the Chinese pinyin system. As a result, I didn’t know the difference between the “th” and “s” sounds, between “reach” and “rich”, and so many other nuances of the English language. Additionally, I unconsciously added vowel sounds to the end of words that concluded in consonants, so “united” would sound like “united-a”. All of these things that come naturally to native speakers were so difficult for me, and they sacrificed my chances of performing at the level I hoped for. Understanding that I would never fully get rid of my accent, I contemplated quitting.

Since the moment I joined the team, however, I was able to find a tight-knit community of supportive friends. Throughout the years, my teammates have always been there for me—whether that meant having dinners together at GMIF, playing cards while waiting for a flight at Newark, engaging in late night philosophical discussions on bus rides home from Bronx, or laughing about tournament absurdities together at Columbia. Although my language was still a barrier, these friends accepted me unconditionally and showed a level of support that meant more to me than winning a trophy for a well-spoken English speech. For this reason, I never again wavered in my commitment to the team and was determined to do whatever I could to overcome my barrier.

With newfound determination, I looked online to learn some tricks I could apply during practice: I started biting a pencil whenever I was rehearsing my speech to loosen up my facial muscles; I memorized and practiced many tongue twisters, although that meant biting my tongue from time to time; and I recorded my speeches to analyze my accent. As my coaches and captains were familiar with how I spoke, I also challenged myself to give speeches to my parents, who had more trouble at English than I did. If they could comprehend my speech, then I knew I was on the right track.

Eventually, after a year of hard work and grit, I began to see improvement. I started to see great competitive success, and by the end of junior year, I managed to win a state championship. Standing on the stage that night, I truly tasted the sweetness of hard work, in the end learning that nothing is impossible with faith, determination, and a strong support system. The applause was loud and the championship trophy was glorious, but what was truly meaningful was my validation that no matter where I started, perseverance and a support system could in fact lead me to my goals, even if I started in a disadvantaged state. So, ask me again: is the American Dream dead? My successes on the speech team give me hope that, in fact, it persists.

Community/Where You Are From

Essay 5: Family

Author: Joey Kubicki (Harvard)

My family has endured varying degrees of tension and periods of hardship throughout my childhood. My dad's severe osteoarthritis burdened both his physical and emotional health, which led him to seek relief in drugs and alcohol. His battle with addiction put immense financial and emotional stress on my family, which at times, felt like it was falling apart. Despite my strenuous surroundings, I learned to appreciate the little things in life. In a sometimes frustrating and complex world, the simple beauties remind me that things can always get better. Playing with my dog, watching a vibrant sunset, laughing until I cry, and lighting up the neighborhood with my Christmas lights are a few of the many miniscule, yet phenomenal experiences that have brought tremendous joy to my life.

Despite the chaos at home, I found comfort and tenacity in school, a home away from home. The classroom was a stable environment that gave me a sense of control in my life. I felt a sense of relief and discipline in the stable environment where I could immerse myself in learning and let my curiosity run rampant. The possibilities seemed endless and I excitedly seized opportunities to better understand our world, both inside and outside the classroom. For example, I enjoyed researching the stock market and taking online courses as well as watching videos about the Higgs boson and the theory of time travel. The more I learned the more questions I had, which inspired me to keep pursuing knowledge and searching for commonality among all areas of study. My desire to appreciate the beauty of this world fueled my passion for intellectual growth and discovery, which ultimately helped me excel in school. I realized that the passion and drive I developed in high school could allow me to have a fresh start in college and a brighter future. During the college application process, I felt confident in my promise and potential, but nothing could prepare me for the devastating outcome and the painful reminder that some things are out of my control.

Last year I was determined to attend a university where I could be challenged and expand my horizons. I became increasingly excited as I

waited to hear back from admissions, wondering where I would spend my next four years. I knew most of the schools were highly selective and my chances were slim, but I never could have imagined being denied from every school. Failure was devastating; I felt more helpless and void than the little boy of my troubled past. However, when I reflect on the experience I am deeply humbled and grateful for its enlightenment. It brought me closer to my family and friends and renewed my Christian faith, all of which supported me during the next few weeks of uncertainty. It compelled me to search for balance in my life and rediscover many of my passions. I began to take the time to look up at the stars before I go to bed, read more philosophical nonfiction, and focus on weight-lifting and playing basketball again. Failure was humbling. But, more importantly, failure allowed me to embrace the idea that success is not about being the best, but about testing the limits of my ability. With a strengthened, optimistic perspective, I no longer condemn an unfortunate situation; instead, I embrace the learning experience it may bring.

Suffering and failure are innate human conditions that remind me I am alive. I am truly reminded that people are shaped by, and in, their adversities. For me, it all began with an appreciation for the little things which transitioned into my passion for learning and a renewed optimistic mindfulness. I am grateful for the challenges I have faced and their influence on my life. I made a promise that I would never give up on my family or on the pursuit of my dreams in school, and it is a promise I intend to keep.

Essay 6: Mom

Author: Mary Wan (Harvard)

My childhood was abnormal. While other kids dreamt of frolicking in fields overflowing with fragrant petals, I dreamt of falling rapidly as my world crumpled around me. They bounced weightlessly on marshmallow clouds as I closed my eyes tightly, dreading the inevitable contact with the bleak earth.

Fortunately, my nightmares never came to fruition. Instead of falling to my demise, I fell into my mother's soft arms. She carefully wiped the sweat from my forehead and rocked me back and forth as I buried my head into her shoulder and sobbed with relief. She smiled at me, her eyes warm but tired.

"Are you okay?" she asked as she wiped my tears away.

"I am, Mom."

"Okay," she replied. She hugged me again and the scent of jasmines and safety permeated my senses. "I have to go back to work, honey, but yell if you need anything." Mom had saved me from another nightmare.

There were more. My childhood consisted of innumerable nightmares: failure to speak English after moving to America, victim of bullying, academic setbacks. She would ease my pain and I basked in her love; our apartment swelled with our happiness.

Unfortunately, the worst nightmares come without warning. In October of my junior year, my mother went to a doctor's appointment for a routine checkup. Two weeks later, she came home from a biopsy. The moment I sat down with her, her tears fell. I held her in *my* arms and realized how fragile she really was.

HER2 positive breast cancer: the words alone sounded like a death sentence. I wanted to bawl. I yearned to become a small child again and feel myself within my mother's arms, find solace within her eyes and

bury my face in her shoulders. I tried to wake up but realized that I was already wide-awake; I moved my arms and realized that my mother's face was in *my* shoulder.

"Turn left here," I told my mother as we neared the hospital.

Christmas Eve meant a celebration of the impending holiday, yet my mom was complaining of intense stomach pain and a fever of 103. We pulled up to the emergency room and I helped my mother out of the car and slowly walked her inside, her face contorted with pain. I felt queasy. The effects of chemotherapy on my mother had been debilitating, but never to this extent. "It's okay," I told myself. "Everything will be fine," I numbly repeated the nurse's words as she led my mother into a room.

The doctor entered, studied my mother's pale face, and asked her a question, which I quickly translated.

"I feel very dizzy and nauseous and I've had nonstop diarrhea today," she replied in Chinese, and I relayed the information. The doctor glanced at me. "Does she have a fever?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Two hours ago. I called her oncologist and we immediately came here. I do hope you can ease her pain." He nodded vigorously.

After three hours and four bags of IV fluid, some color came back to mother's face. She gripped my hand tightly as she watched TV.

"Thank you," she whispered, a solitary tear falling.

I thought her tears would break me apart but I remained steady. I told myself not to cry and, instead, smiled at my mother.

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She sobbed freely. "I thought it was all over. When I went into the emergency room, I was sure today would be my last. For a moment, I worried about you. What would you do without me?" I squeezed her hand tighter and wiped her tears away.

"But then I realized that you changed. You would be fine because this time, you saved me. I don't know what I would've done without you. I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "I ruined a holiday."

I smiled reassuringly and caressed her hand.

"It's okay. The nightmare is over. We'll be fine."



Chapter 4

EXPERIENCE

Essay 1: "1! 2! 3! Together!"

Author: Alex Chang (Harvard)

I met you in the second week of my sophomore year. That day, as I strolled down the hallway after school, I came across an eye-catching notice that said "Join the Lacrosse Team! It's the fastest sport on two feet. Come to our meeting today after school. No experience needed!" Although I had absolutely no knowledge of this sport, I was attracted by the poster and decided to head my way to the meeting.

Standing in front of the crowded room was you, a chubby old man in his early seventies. You wore those big glasses, the usual blue-and-orange team coat, and a cap that read "Cardozo Lacrosse." You introduced yourself to us as head coach of the lacrosse team and your name was Coach Glenn. After briefly describing the benefits of playing lacrosse, you told us the word "team" stood for "Together, Everyone Achieves More." At the end of the meeting, we learned the team chant—you would say "1! 2! 3!" and we would all shout "Together!" together. We did the chant, and, ah, didn't it sound nice!

You constantly reminded us to "pass before shoot, and we before I," the integral concept of teamwork. Through your leadership, we finished with the best record and made our way to the Championship Game against Tottenville, the defending league champion. We started off strong, but they began to catch up, and our players became worried; we began shooting the ball blindly instead of executing the intended plays. In a blink of the eye, we were losing by two points. You called timeout and asked us, "Son, there is only one way we can beat them. Do you know how? Tell me, on three, 1! 2! 3!" and we all yelled "Together!" As if the word had some sort of magic, we were all pumped and began to play together like we did all year. Our dream finally came true; we finally beat our toughest archrival, and we were the Champions of '05.

I realized the power of the simple word "together" and used it as an inspiration in my orchestra. In our tour to Asia this past summer with Youth Orchestra, we were tired from the plane ride and dejected from doing horribly in our dress rehearsal. As the Student Vice President, I

stood up and told every one that we had to play together in order to bring out music. We chanted "1! 2! 3! Together!" and the magic words worked again. That concert turned out to be the best we ever had.

Lacrosse really changed my high school life, if not my entire life. My friends realized that I could play sports in addition to do well in school and looked at me differently. I learned the value of teamwork and how to respect others. Through lacrosse, companionship redefined itself; my teammates became my closest friends that I would worship forever. Whenever people asked me what "lacrosse" is, I gave the two-word definition: "Coach Glenn."

Coach, you meant the world for the team; that was why we were all appalled to hear that you had a heart attack and are now in critical condition. The Doctor says you have a very slim chance of surviving this battle against the devil, and even if you do, you cannot coach us again. We all wish you the best. No matter what, you will always be our Coach Glenn, and you will be there with us when we win the championship this year. We will play together, because "Together, Everyone Achieves More." Coach, let's do the chant again one last time— "1! 2! 3! TOGETHER!

Essay 2: Math

Author: Ellen Li (Harvard)

My pencil was poised above the paper. My finger rested on top of the buzzer. My eyes were glued on the screen in front of me for the final question of the Countdown Round at the MathCounts Competition. I tightened the elastic holding my ponytail and quickly resumed my vigilant position. The question flashed on the screen and I buzzed with the correct answer a few seconds later. I heard an incredulous voice say, "Wow! 5th to 1st! But she's a girl!"

My excitement from the victory was quickly nudged aside as doubts and questions flooded my mind. Why was I singled out for being a girl? I soon discovered that my victory was something of a rarity in the math world. Over the next year or so, I learned that girls were expected to be left behind when it came to more advanced math. Initially, I observed no discrepancies between the boys and girls on my math team. However, I noticed that the female-to-male ratio on the team decreased over time as my female friends gradually dropped out to pursue other interests. When I started to participate in higher-level competitions, I was struck by the harsh reality that I was usually one of only a few girls in those competitions. At one competition, I was not put on the "A team" because of the possibility that I would quit the team sooner or later. Confusion and indignation crossed my mind as I began to have doubts about my own future in mathematics.

However, I resolved to combat these setbacks by indulging myself in the beauty of mathematics and participating in more national competitions. To stay ahead of the game, I scoured the Internet for resources and strived to understand more advanced topics with the help of my coaches and teammates. Whenever I felt uncomfortable being the only girl, I reminded myself that I had worked hard to get to where I was. I also attended various summer camps to immerse myself in the subject by attending lectures, researching complex concepts, and collaborating with peers on challenging proofs.

While I am proud of my own achievements, I know that the prejudice is still there. A year ago, a parent approached me at a piano recital and voiced concerns about her daughter pursuing mathematics in high school, particularly the lack of mathematically inclined girls at higher levels. Thinking back on my own struggles and successes over the years, I pulled her daughter aside and told her about my experiences, my hardships, and how I overcame them. I encouraged her to reflect on her love for math and strive to fuel her thirst for knowledge. Now, I am pleased to say that this girl has grown tremendously in mathematics and is now a fierce competitor in our math team.

As I continue to observe the drastic decline of females in mathematics from middle to high school, I take every opportunity I can to encourage young girls to pursue their passions. I promote a more enriching, meaningful, and in-depth pursuit of math in my community through my volunteer work by instilling a love of learning in younger students. Mathematics is an especially tough field for girls to be in, but I hope to inspire girls to pursue their interests regardless of societal biases. Looking back, I have faced many roadblocks throughout my journey. The excuses my friends gave me when they dropped out, the fear of not being picked for the team because of my gender, and the social isolation at tournaments just motivated me to prove that anyone who is passionate about mathematics can perform at his or her highest level. I don't regret believing in myself, choosing to follow my dreams, and pursuing my passions. In fact, I am proud to have overcome the doubt that surrounded me with grit and perseverance. Ponytail or not, I'm going to kill it.

Essay 3: Classic Movies

Author: Brian Chang (Harvard)

“What’s Racky?” I asked.

I wasn’t sure what to be more confused about – the atrocious handwriting of our school newspaper’s editor-in-chief or the reason why he was handing me this piece of paper.

Dash gave me a look of shock and disbelief. “Please tell me you know *Rocky*.”

He wanted to write an article for a page featuring the must-see classic movies of all time. Prompted by my dubious question, “What do you mean by ‘the classics’?” Dash brought The List the next day (in his words) “as an early Christmas present.”

“You’re going to watch all this before you graduate,” mandated Dash, while handing me a piece of paper with his recognizably messy handwriting.

The List contained 60 movies that I was to watch every Saturday morning with him. Some of these movies I had never even heard of: *Lawrence of Arabia*? *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*? *Dr. Strangelove*? The list went on and on.

What was I going to write about in the paper? The only things I remembered learning from movies was that evil always lost in a battle against good and the nice guy always won the girl. After a few weeks of popcorn munching at Dash’s place, however, I gradually understood exactly why these movies were considered “timeless.”

When I was the only one on campus working on a midnight paper deadline, I recalled *The Shawshank Redemption* which taught me that no situation is inescapable with determination.

When I faced the choice between sleeping and studying, *Casablanca* taught me that I should always take actions that I won't regret, "maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life."

In both friendly conversations and serious debates, I constantly controlled my use of the filler words that made me sound unprofessional, thanks to John Travolta's and Samuel Jackson's "Say 'What' one more time" scene in *Pulp Fiction*.

And *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* ... well that was just a great movie.

Every Saturday morning was a time to learn something new. I was sleeping early on Friday nights just so that I wouldn't miss a chance to take another movie off of The List. Dash has left for college now, but he left me with something I treasure as a hobby- film viewing and even film making. Whether I'm writing or filming a short video, I seek to create the same effects that some of these classics had on me – moving hearts and teaching important values to viewers.

For two hours each week, I was not Brian Chang. I was Ben-Hur. Or Spock. Or Rocky. Each time I delved more into the lives of the protagonists, I learned more about friendship, love, and other fundamental human values. The oldest movies taught me the most timely of lessons.

This September, our newspaper held its first meeting to discuss page ideas. As editor-in-chief, I requested that we create a movie classics page that had been brought up and unfinished last year. In the back corner of the class, a sophomore raised his hand.

"What do you mean by a classic? Aren't those really old and boring?"

I chuckled. I was about to change his life.

Experience

Essay 4: Soccer Referee

Author: Crystal Xue (Harvard)

My journey to control my reaction to my environment began in March 2014; I was going to become a soccer referee. Little did I know a side job would change my world perspective and teach me the power of managing my own perception.

The rules of refereeing are simple, but challenging to enforce. The best referees are personable, but stoic, amidst chaos. My first referee assignment was a far cry from this ideal: I was able to stomach the first few protests from coaches and parents, but the never-ending onslaught nearly left me in tears. At the end of the game, when expletives were being thoughtlessly catapulted, all of my prior preparation melted away. Paralyzed with fear of additional criticism, the simplest of decisions left my mind in a frantic, haphazard mess.

After the game, I was stark raving mad at everything; I was even furious at the weather. I fumed about how the coaches and parents were not even qualified to nitpick my refereeing as, I was the one who sat through the referee entrance course, not them. In my moment of irrational anger, I reasoned that if I refereed as if the audience had been muted, sideline comments would never impact my future performances. This seemed to be helpful until my first high-tension game. I was so focused on trivial details, such as the exact placement of the ball, that I accidentally almost ignored calls to tend to an injured player. My ardent belief in isolation from coaches and parents nearly hindered me from fulfilling the top priority of a referee: keep the game safe. Yet again, I had failed.

My refereeing in 2015 and 2016 was decidedly mediocre. Every glimmer of confidence and improvement was somehow crushed by a difficult assignment. Dejected, I was convinced my performance would always be bound to the tension, or lack thereof, in my environment. Searching for solutions, I was led to *The Four Agreements* by Don Miguel Ruiz. After digesting Ruiz's postulates, an epiphany hit: I may not be able to control my environment, but I can control how I perceive it. Inspired by this concept, I worked on viewing illegitimate criticisms as a reflection of

the speaker(s), not of my performance. Likewise, I learned to shift my refereeing style to de-escalate tense environments, which previously seemed immovable. Developing flexibility in perception was integral in my quest to building a constructive environment.

This past season, three years after my first referee assignment, I was selected to referee the highest-level game of my career. I viewed this game as an opportunity, not a challenge, and enjoy each and every minute of my time on the pitch. Based on compliments I received from both teams, I finally felt I had earned, not demanded, everybody's trust. During this assignment, I perceived a fundamental paradigm shift; the fierce competition, which commanded heightened alertness, was an indication of the players' hard work, something to be commended. The easily ignorable, seldom but intense, illegitimate criticisms were not a reflection of me, but of understandable nerves, a natural part of a high-stakes game.

Just like many things in life, the core of a refereeing never changes; referees will always enforce the rules. But each time a referee steps onto the pitch, she must adjust her reaction to outside interpretations of the rules' enforcement. Is the criticism well-founded? If so, accept it constructively. Is the game physically violent? If so, referee on a much tighter leash. Is the parents' wild temper simply the side effect of their child playing in a championship game? If so, smile and disregard the comments. This practical application of selective interaction with one's environment has led me to realize that I may never be fully in control of my environment, but I can certainly control how I interpret and interact with it.

Experience

Essay 5: His Brother and Him

Author: Chris Zhang (Harvard)

Christmas at my brother's house in Austin, Texas was disappointing for me. I was ten-years old and wanted two things: snow and video games. Unfortunately, the streets of Austin were not white that Christmas and instead of video games, I received a telescope and science kit.

The 17-year age gap with my brother has made him into a father figure in my life, especially since our dad passed away when I was two. As my role model, he exemplifies strength in character, but moreover, he encourages my intellectual vitality. From sharing his taste in music and books to introducing me to podcasts like RadioLab and webcomics like xkcd.com, he has guided me in life and cultivated my curiosity.

It took me a while to understand how valuable the telescope and science kit were. I thought I had understood it a year later when I found out it was several hundreds of dollars, but I still missed the bigger picture. My brother had bought the gift for me so that I would learn. If I took the telescope out and gazed into the sky, my curiosity could take me on a journey. I could be entranced while watching the constellations or finding a planet in the sky. Through the surface of Earth and into outer space, beyond the Milky Way galaxy and into the depths of space, somewhere along the way I could find what I loved. Past the surface, I could see the bigger picture and think beyond.

On the other end of the spectrum, I could see into the intricacies of the microscopic world with the science kit. If I looked into the microscope, my curiosity could take me on a completely new adventure. Observing the complex structure of insects or the small organisms living in my neighborhood pond could give me a glimpse into the smaller world and make me thirst for more. Maybe it could inspire me to dig deeper and find a microscope that showed the nucleus of an animal cell or the chloroplasts in a seemingly simple leaf. Perhaps those observations could spawn a question like, what made plants grow? After learning about photosynthesis, perhaps I would wonder how it occurred and

begin to contemplate what dictated the molecular interactions. It could have been a never ending journey.

I didn't understand my brother's gift for several years. I only wanted video games and turned down chances to learn and explore. But despite my indifference, he continued recommending books he enjoyed and pointing me to insightful blogs on science. In his attempts to find anything that would pique my interest in science, he was persistent.

Slowly, I opened up. I wanted to understand the passion he had for science for myself. As I read, I became more interested in the materials he sent me. I wanted to know how GPS worked, why sugar tasted sweet and what is space-time. Curiosity had spread like a virus, the more I learn more I wanted to learn.

My desire to dig deeper led me to research in a college laboratory. While learning about polymers, adsorption and organic solvents, I witnessed the beauty of science: theories that explained the everyday world and models that predicted the smallest reactions. Seven years after receiving those "disappointing" Christmas gifts, I had found my love of science in Chemistry.

Essay 6: Sailing

Author: Emily Wang (Harvard)

People don't realize how physically taxing sailing can be. They imagine a huge, fifty-foot sailboat, glimmering under the sun and sailing peacefully towards the horizon. They don't picture a girl clad in tight neoprene, hanging inches from the water in a trapeze harness. They don't imagine her toes gripping the edge of her race boat as the wind and waves threaten to send her plunging in.

My sailing experience began freshman year, when I realized that I no longer wanted to put myself through the misery of running track. I spontaneously became interested in joining the sailing team and contacted the captains to sign up. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I chuckle when I remember my coach's first question to test my level of seamanship: "Emily, is starboard left or right?" to which I gave the wrong answer. At that point my family barely knew what a yacht club was. As luck would have it, that first year I got to train with Nick, the team's best skipper, and I continued to sail with him for the next two years as his crew.

The summer after sophomore year, Nick invited me to crew for him in Cape Cod. Every morning I woke up at seven o'clock, biked to the yacht club, and taught eight-year olds how to sail until noon. After wolfing down a buffalo chicken wrap, I slathered on waterproof sunscreen and threw on my rashguard for an intense four-hour practice outside the harbor. The "summer regatta experience" is essentially a requirement for calling oneself a true sailor, and I soon found out why. In the first three days, I had to master the spinnaker and trapeze, two crazy pieces of equipment I had never seen in high school sailing. On day four, I was thrown into my first of five elite ocean regattas.

The month of August was a rollercoaster of fear, pain, frustration, and finally relief when it was over. It was also a month of excitement, accomplishment, growth, and success. Many days, I dreaded a brutal afternoon of practice. Both my muscles and emotions were battered each day as Nick and my coach criticized my technique and speed,

while the other sailors trapped with ease around me. Nevertheless, Nick and I quickly developed a strong trust in one another. If he didn't fill the mainsail after a tack, I'd be dunked; if I didn't lower myself down far enough, the boat would capsize. We fought through over thirty races as one, and I had new bruises and battle scars every day to prove the effort I put in.

Four weeks of living on the Cape on my own and sailing with no days off taught me that hard work and discipline really do pay off. Not only did grasping the opportunity to race over the summer result in a second-place win in a 77-boat regatta at the end of the season, but it also promoted my growth from inexperienced, timid sidekick, to seasoned, confident varsity captain.

This past summer, I painfully declined Nick's invite to sail for his yacht club again. Instead, I hired on as a sailing instructor at Courageous Sailing in Charlestown, MA. There, I spent seven hours a day engaging campers with games, showing them how to tie barrel knots and clove hitches, making sure they had life jackets and full water bottles, and teaching them to captain a nineteen-foot sailboat. I spent my summer with one-hundred city children aged six to fifteen who, without Courageous, would never have the opportunity to learn to sail and gain the confidence, leadership, and problem solving skills that sailing requires. For these kids, as for me, sailing is far more than the glimmering fifty-foot boat cruising towards the horizon; it is the ideal vehicle to foster assertive, tough, confident people, and a passion that lasts a lifetime.



Chapter 5

PASSION

Essay 1: Powerful Passion

Author: Anonymous (Harvard)

Mr. Peterson, like many middle-aged men, had quite a round belly, which would jiggle and shake along with his arms as he conducted. His actions were similar to his physique: big. He was a raging, furious, and passionate conductor. The amount of effort he put into conducting was literally visible; little beads of sweat on his head glistened under the bright stage lights.

In the classroom, he would sing passages for us as if he were an opera star, his chest heaving up and down as he belted out the melody. He would then bow and blow kisses to the orchestra as we applauded his award-winning performance. To show us the meaning of forte and piano, his expressions ranged from furrowed eyebrows and clenched fists, to closed eyes and puckered lips.

I started learning violin in kindergarten and practicing seemed like just another “chore” to complete. Previous teachers showered me with praise, which only reinforced my belief that what I was doing was good enough. But Mr. Peterson was different. One day, Mr. Peterson called up another violinist to be concertmaster. I was furious; first chair was *my chair*. I never sat anywhere else. The end of the rehearsal couldn't come soon enough. However, to my chagrin, just as I was about to leave the room, I heard those dreaded words, “Jasper, can I talk to you for a minute?” He told me quite bluntly that he saw in me a talented but dispassionate musician, which to him was no better than someone less talented but passionate. He questioned my dedication to my instrument: Did I play only to silence the “Go practice!” yells from my mom or did I play because *I* wanted to?

Unaccustomed to criticism, I thought Mr. Peterson hated me. I contemplated quitting, but there was a sense of pride that wouldn't allow me to give up. As reluctant as I was to admit, I knew that Mr. Peterson was right; something had to change. If I were to continue playing, my routine of one-hour practices, where I listlessly slouch in front of the stand, simply would not cut it anymore. I realized that I should be

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practicing for my own benefit, because / wanted to play for myself, not for my mom or anyone else's sake. This revelation stuck with me after that day. I began to focus less on getting an hour of practice in and more on the way I was playing. Instead of just glossing over pieces, I started to focus in on specific passages and really dug into the music.

Nowadays, my violin playing closely mimics Mr. Peterson's conducting style. My friends mock my dramatic hair flipping, body swaying and brow-furrowing that I do when I play. They laugh when I hit a *presto* section and the fat on my body jiggles as I furiously saw away with my bow, but I don't mind, because this is how I truly feel about music now-- powerful and passionate.

Essay 2: Political Interests

Author: Brian Lai (Harvard)

In seventh grade I sent a letter to President Obama. He promised on whitehouse.gov to read and reply to ten letters from everyday Americans every day. This was so exciting that I raced to the post office, licked the envelope shut, and prayed that Obama would find my concern for college accessibility insightful and accept my jovial challenge to a basketball game. After all that, I was so ecstatic that “the most powerful man in the free world” answered, in a generic letter saying, “Dear Student: Thank you for writing to me. I am glad to hear from young Americans like you.” I admit. I wasn’t really ecstatic. In fact, the 13-year-old youngster Brian was kind of disappointed and felt that his voice was lost among millions.

Maybe I couldn’t change the nation yet, but I knew that I could still impact my school community. I was elected into Student Government as Class President. My cabinet worked on dozens of proposals representing student concerns. Every one of them was shot down by administration. Every one. The frustration was immense because when I visited neighboring schools with plentiful technology, I envisioned what my outdated high school could be. It took three years of perspiration and grappling with different principals, the board, and regulation writing. Finally, projectors were installed in classrooms. Laptops are now permitted in study periods and soon to be enjoyed in classrooms. I learned that titles and recognition for efforts do not matter; what matters is improving the lives of the people around us. An incoming freshman may never hear the name Brian Lai or know of my struggle. But that freshman, using the laptop that I fought for, would discover a passion for learning history when seeing how impressively the Bismarckian Prussia expanded in 19th century Europe. The possibility of making such a difference for someone is all that the 17-year-old Brian needs to know that his voice is never lost.

Sometimes I muse if I struggle like Hamlet to be or not to be, would the outcome even matter? Am I just a speck on this planet, and Earth a

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speck in this galaxy, and our universe a speck in a Dr. Seuss creation with an elephant named Horton, using big ears to hear us “Whos?”

Yet our world is so beautiful and I feel madly in love with it. There’s such a patriotic feeling singing *America the Beautiful* at the top of my lungs, while marveling at the Carolina mountain majesties in a 6:00 AM sunrise. There’s such awe in thinking how the Logitech mouse editing these words was designed in Silicon Valley, assembled in China with plastic gathered off the coast of Kuwait by BP oil rig workers, enjoying early-morning coffee harvested in Guatemala. Our world may be insignificant to the magnitude of the universe, but it’s the most significant and extraordinary speck to have ever emerged.

While there is tremendous goodness and wonder happening on Earth, there is also much that is concerning. Every day, our nation faces growing social and income inequality that threaten the very principles of democracy. Every day, we emit pollutants into the air that threaten the stability of our complex civilization and even existence. I see people at the forefront of change like Elon Musk and Bill Gates, dedicating their lives towards resolving these issues. They inspire in me an unwavering sense of duty to protect our precious blue marble, to never accept mediocrity because we as humans can do better.

Life never came easily for me and my family, but as I watch the people of Hong Kong fight for their rights for freedom and democracy, I know that I am blessed. And I know that my duty, my purpose on this earth is to make a great impact on the world. I know that my voice will be heard, and heard loud and clear.

Essay 3: Music

Author: Andrew Lee (Harvard)

Some time after the orchestra arrived in Amsterdam, we boarded boats in small groups and embarked on a tour of the canals, floating serenely through the city in a world of our own. I watched the water break across the bow of the boat, rippling outwards in undulating waves that disrupted the otherwise pristine surface with a steady rhythm, and I was suddenly reminded of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, a piece we were playing that so wonderfully evokes the dreamy landscape of French Impressionistic music. Feeling the soft summer breeze sweep across my face, and catching glimpses of sunlight as it danced nimbly across the water, I could almost hear the fluttering sound of the flutes, interspersed with long, arpeggiated runs from the harps. Had Debussy himself experienced so blissful a connection to nature when writing this piece? It filled my heart with wonder to think that we were exploring music in such a genuine manner, by immersing ourselves in surroundings so evocative of the intangible qualities of music. I struggled in vain to put my feelings into words, then gave up and relaxed instead, mesmerized by my surroundings and the music of my mind.

We glided underneath the narrow arch of a bridge, and I ran my fingers along its rough edges, marveling at the feat of engineering, at how each stone piece fitted so precisely into place. I could hear the rumbling of trucks passing by overhead, and it impressed me how such a simple construction could support so much weight. My mind wandered to the presence of structure in music, to the way that the basses and low brass instruments so steadily supported the melodies of the upper strings in our Prokofiev symphony. I could hear the music's underlying mathematical themes, and it amazed me how every complex combination of rhythms, every instant I placed down my finger to adjust the frequency of vibrating strings, came together perfectly to create beautiful, resonant harmony. In this way, we were exploring music by tying together threads of our previous knowledge, and it made me think of all the exciting possibilities presented in the intersection of music not only with math, but with the history and evolution of the arts, and with the science behind the inexplicable emotions we feel.

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That night in the Royal Concertgebouw, one of the world's most renowned halls, I performed with a renewed sense of appreciation—indeed, reverence—for music and its role in my life. Granted, I may have played several notes out of tune, or possibly even missed an entrance. But the notes were mere technicalities compared to the heightened connection I felt with the music, the boundless energy I felt flowing through my body and into my fingertips, bringing the music to soaring life from its ink-bound paper home.

Experiences like this have inspired me to use my passion for music as a vehicle of exploration. I have experienced diverse cultures and new communities, having shared my love of music with both underprivileged elementary school students, often for their first time, and senior citizens, for what could be their last. I am enthralled by opportunities to explore the intersections of music with other disciplines as well, and I see endless potential in combining my talent with my unending pursuit of intellectual fulfillment. How exactly do our brains translate simple arrangements of sound waves to an incredibly complex range of emotions? What scientific properties explain the profound, yet often indescribable, feelings that music can evoke? Music continues to fuel my insatiable curiosity, my intense desire to discover the answers to questions like these. I cannot wait to use this passion of mine to make discoveries about the world we live in, to connect the legacies of the past to what we are learning today, and most importantly, to be unafraid of asking questions along the way.

Essay 4: Numbers

Author: Stephanie Cheng

The red digital clock just flickered to 10:00 and back to 9:59. I wonder why our school clocks always glitch; their inner workings seem to be pretty simple...but I guess not? Noted: understand how digital clocks work.

Ouch, the seemingly innocuous paper cut was stinging my thumb. Why do smaller cuts often feel more painful than larger cuts that can go unnoticed for days? How can human skin heal with such precision and efficacy? Noted: investigate pain mechanisms and the science behind healing wounds.

These are the normal inner workings of my brain and my senses, going back as far as I can remember from childhood. Like a scientist, I constantly try to understand why things happen the way they do, whether it's a physical or social phenomenon. A voice speaks to me in my head with a mind of its own. Unconsciously, all these workings occur at the same time non-stop. Disorder annoys me. Irrationality is my pet peeve. The unknown is my enemy.

Ever since I learned my numbers, I counted everything I could possibly count. While my dad was running errands at the local bank, I silently counted the brick tiles on the wall. On weekly grocery shopping trips with my mom, I would count the number of vegetables found on the displays and mentally create a catalog of them. Counting was and, to this day, is a safe haven that gives me a sense of security.

But I haven't always appreciated this quality. My vigilance, curiosity and constant hunt to eliminate the unknown can be extremely distracting; I can't seem to mute these functions. Even in the boisterous, tumultuous high school cafeteria, I can tell whenever a friend is upset or troubled and I will proceed to do what is in my power to help them – whether that'd be scrupulously analyzing the issue and devising the most logically satisfying solution or simply being a shoulder to cry on. Despite years of reading countless articles on the scientific benefits of

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meditation, I have not yet mastered the art of calming the mind to a state of deep peace. As thoughts are being pushed out, room is only made for new perceptions to move in. Sometimes I wish I could be thought free.

Thus, over the course of a week, I was determined to be “thought free.” I told myself to push out my hyperactive inner voice. *I wonder...nope, push it out. What if...eliminate this thought.* I tried to resist the urge to help every single lost freshman in the hallways. I tried to banish all ponderings about the potential of string theory being true. I tried to deny any desire to consider the motives behind the protest seen on TV. All I concluded out of this “experiment” was, that week was perhaps the most miserable period of my life.

I have come to embrace my super-curiosity as an essence that defines who I am. Getting rid of my inner voice and thoughts was like taking away Monet’s oil paints and replacing them with a series of grayscale paint swatches; my world became a lifeless canvas without color and excitement. A whole dimension to my personality and identity seemed lost in the abyss of nothingness. I am, and forever will be, the girl who approaches the world with a probing mind and heart – who knows that the glitches in digital clocks are due to fine-tuning of the frequency and cycles of the electric grid from power companies, and that the agonizing sensation from paper cuts is due to the shallowness of the non-clotting cuts that leave damaged tissues and neurons exposed. Although I used to see the unknown as my arch nemesis, I now have come to treat it as my best friend and the driving force that guides exploration of this intricate, fascinating world around me.

Essay 5: Piano

Author: Ariana Chiu (Harvard)

As my mind wanders, my hand summons the lightest touch I possess. With each gentle stroke, I frame the window to the soul. Every muscle in my body activates as if a single moment of hesitation could be detrimental. I move in slow motion and, for a split second, I forget to breathe.

Eyes captured my attention at a young age, and the pursuit to craft the perfect eye has since consumed my daily study break routine. For the longest time, I failed to identify a logical explanation behind what has always seemed like a nervous habit. It was not until I recognized the parallels between drawing eyes and my musical endeavors that I discovered a common thread in myself. Playing the piano, though comparatively complex, shares surprising similarities with drawing eyes. Drawing an eye requires laser focus, while performing Schubert's Impromptu Op. 90, No. 3 mandates complete concentration. Allowing my mind to drift for even one second risks disrupting Schubert's long melodious phrase, an interruption which, believe me, feels like the world's greatest sin. Furthermore, both preoccupations cultivate the highest discernment in my sense of touch. Applying more pressure to the tip of my pencil brings definition to the eyelid. Likewise, learning how to press the keys allows for mastery of a particular sound desired by a composer.

Most importantly, drawing eyes and playing piano intimated my desire for perfection. Just as I longed for eyes that appeared more realistic each time I drew, I demanded a Beethoven sonata that sounded more refined each time I performed. My incremental improvements satisfied me somewhat, but my mind begged for fresh inspiration. I quickly morphed into a Youtube 'junkie': Van Cliburn, Martha Argerich, and Yuja Wang became my Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux, and Sidney Crosby. Finally, I could visualize the perfection I was searching for, right? In reality, even the greats play wrong notes, yet they continue to receive critical acclaim. Beyond the technical execution, two interpretations of a Brahms Intermezzo can differ substantially, yet be equally awe-inspiring.

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It dawned upon me that, in my search to discover the light at the end of the 'perfect' tunnel, perfection is not the end-all be-all, but rather a means to a higher end: my pursuit of beauty. For years, I had focused on accuracy, but even when I hit the right keys, I yearned for a personal connection with the music. I had originally believed that listening too closely to professionals' renditions could stifle my inner creativity. However, the more I listened with my heart, the more I heard the phrases and, the more I pieced the music together in the context of musical construction rather than as four measures on a sheet of paper. I began to differentiate a performance lacking in feeling from a performance evoking transcendent emotions. Understanding music's lack of formula has enabled me to expand beyond some of the original tenets in my pursuit of perfection: absolute concentration and sound quality.

Since my evolution in purpose, I have never felt so liberated. I embrace drawing eyes as a pathway to pursue beauty instead of a repetitive task. My piano playing has also transformed, as I no longer fear imperfection. I have developed my own voice, my own interpretations, my own music, to effectively communicate my artistic message.

As I acknowledge the applause and seat myself, I close my eyes and inhale slowly. The whisper of anticipation from the audience intensifies, but an inner melody sings to me and consoles me, leaving me self-assured. I reserve a second to reflect on how well my original "pursuit of perfection" has served me, and how far I have come since then. I settle my fingers on the keys, and from then on, one simple, underlying objective outshines the rest -- one which tells me to direct my eyes toward beauty and never look back.

Essay 6: NPR

Author: Eunice Lee (Harvard)

A late-November wind howled outside my window, piercing the eerie silence of a household fast asleep—that is, all except for me. My school assignments had taken me late into the night, and I found myself shivering at the creepy aloneness that pervaded the room. Longing for some company, I remember turning on my mp3 player/radio and scrolling through different FM channels when I stumbled across the delightful British accent of a BBC World Service reporter. Into the wee hours of the morning, I sat there at my desk completely engrossed in the radio program that transported me across the world to the Middle East. And so began my love affair with National Public Radio (NPR).

It was a largely clandestine affair. At a high school where hip-hop reigns supreme, most of my peers thought public radio was dull and pretentious. But nothing could stop me; I was hooked. I learned the NPR program schedule by heart, downloaded NPR podcasts, and had my personal favorites. I even broke down and donated after one particularly guilt-inducing pledge drive. It wasn't long before Terry Gross's disarming voice and Ira Glass's reedy chuckle became as familiar to me as the idiosyncrasies of my own family members.

Part of my addiction to NPR was a growing sense that it could serve as my ticket out of the confines of my room, my school, and my small Texas town. It flung open the windows to worlds I never knew existed, and it connected me to strange and fascinating people beyond my circle of friends and family. Against the backdrop of civil wars, genocides, revolutions, and the stories of ordinary people living extraordinary lives, all the drama and stress from my little world of AP classes, auditions, tests, and extracurricular activities suddenly seemed rather inconsequential. NPR provided a larger context in which I could consider my own place and perceive my own ambitions with a more balanced, accurate perspective.

I realize now that NPR essentially tapped into a part of me that was already there—my love for History and my fascination with the complex bond between individuals and their worlds. I've always been captivated by the idea that we are all part of a universal tapestry, with History being the ever-

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expanding narrative connecting the past to the present and the future. My time spent working in a wide array of History museums, doing historical research for a college professor, and pursuing advanced History courses has only confirmed my theory that we are all threads of one story, and that our individual lives only make sense and take on significance in the greater context of time and place.

Still, on nights like this when I'm up again all alone, and the late-October wind is whimpering outside my window, I simply appreciate the good company that NPR has been for me through countless nights. It has served well as my gateway to the world, offering a glimpse of the bigger picture that I am inescapably a part of. It has broadened my knowledge of and appreciation for the complexities of life and also instilled in me a deep wonder at the vast spectrum of people, causes and events that are creating tomorrow's history today.



Bonus

**“WHY ARE YOU
APPLYING”**

Essay 1

Author: Amira Song (Harvard)

Why am I applying to Harvard?

“It’s been a lifelong dream.” Well, of course it has. One fateful day approximately fifteen years ago, lying idly on the couch beside my mom, I pointed at the book she was reading - at the girl on the front cover who wore a bright smile and was holding what looked to be a certificate, and asked who she was. My mom replied that her name was Liu YiTing, and that she was going to be attending Harvard, the best university in the world. Hearing this, I told her – all straight-faced and ambitious – that I, Song ZiWei, too, wanted to go to Harvard when I grew up. My mother took the words of my eager three-year-old self (perhaps a little too) seriously, applied for an immigration visa to Canada, packed her bags, and flew across the Pacific all alone to start a new life from scratch in a country where she had no connections, no friends, no family - just so I could have a better shot at getting into the university. But I do not wish to weave a sob story around my childhood dreams; after all, dreams are but works of fiction.

“I love the campus.” Well, of course I do. My adventures in Go, the Chinese board game said to be the hardest in the world, have taken me to represent Canada all across Europe: from Paris to Bucharest, Zürich to Prague, I’ve bathed in the full glory of this continent’s Gothic churches and extravagant palaces. And yet for me, the prime example of architectural ingenuity finds itself on Harvard campus quarters in the form of Memorial Hall; when I was given the opportunity of touring the university last March, everything had just seemed so *right*, and pieced together so nicely that I had to be physically dragged away by my mother. I visited five universities that break and took about 600 photos; 488 of them were at Harvard. But no matter how strong my desire to have a meal in the magnificent Annenberg Hall or watch the sun set from the Charles River, it’s not a reason to apply to a college with the intent of staying for four years.

“The people are wonderful.” Well, of course they are! As cheesy as it sounds, everyone that I had the pleasure of meeting on campus – student and professor alike – gave off a positive vibe that made one look at life from a different angle and aspire to be better. Campus tours weren’t running the day I went, but an extremely friendly girl who spoke with a beautiful Aussie accent volunteered to take time out of her undoubtedly hectic life to show us around. Her name was Shori; she was warm but professional, and detailed in her descriptions while holding our attention the entire time. She told us anecdotes for a personal touch, and handled all of our questions like a pro. Everyone in my tour group was more than grateful for her kind gesture, and she made my day – heck, she made my entire *trip* just by being herself. Yet, as much as I look up to Harvard students for their various qualities, that’s hardly grounds enough to apply.

For a while now I have been plagued by a fear of failure. Whether it be losing a game of Go, not making the podium for various DECA - an international business organization - competitions, or not getting into the university of my dreams, failure has enough power to crush me and scatter the dust in a million different directions. I “dealt” with this fear by simply running away and refraining from taking risks, because it’s a lot harder to mess up when one stays within one’s comfort zone – I was actually in the process of convincing myself not to apply to Harvard because my chances were next to nonexistent, and that if I didn’t apply, I wouldn’t have to worry about the suffocating reality of a rejection letter. Why should Harvard accept me? I haven’t conducted ground-breaking medical research, haven’t won Canada any medals at international science Olympiads, and am not an elite athlete, school captain, or genius.

And yet, I *have* won Canada medals at four separate international Go competitions. I *have* finished a 35,000 word novella, and am in the process of writing another one which I hope to conclude before my eighteenth birthday. I *am* an athlete, having played basketball, badminton, and field hockey throughout high school and pursued horseback riding (albeit on and off) for almost six years, and have won awards in every one. I am also a person who pours her heart and soul

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into the subjects that she's passionate about: be it founding and running Go Club singlehandedly for six years in order to cultivate and nurture an interest in this fascinating game amongst my school community; reading business textbooks cover-to-cover and taking notes doggedly until I essentially had them memorized in preparation for DECA; or spending days upon days making a video for the Youth Philanthropy Initiative in an attempt to win money for CARD, the nonprofit organization that I've been volunteering at since grade eight. But above all, I am someone who places the needs and happiness of those around her before that of her own; someone who wishes to dedicate herself entirely to improving the lives of other people.

I am also someone who needs to overcome her fear of failure.

While contemplating whether or not to add Harvard to my list of colleges on the Common App, I remembered how my tour guide, Shori, told us the story of how she had originally wanted to get in via athletic recruitment but was not chosen - the swim coach didn't think she was good enough. Instead of being dejected and giving up on her dream, she applied to Harvard regular stream and was accepted, and ended up becoming a member of the swim team through trying out. This success - achieving one's goals after an initial disappointment - is perhaps the sweetest of all, and her spirit is something for which I hold nothing but admiration. I realize now that every excuse I make is a missed opportunity; a chance for growth and self-improvement, wasted. I realize that if I don't try, I'll never find out.

The truth is, I am writing this mini-essay as a challenge for myself, a step to overcome my fear of rejection; I am in the process of rediscovering the thrill of taking risks, because failure - should it occur - is *not* the end of the world. I have worked hard my entire life for this and have given it my best shot; there is no apprehension, no regret, only hope for the future.

Essay 2

Author: William Quan (Harvard)

I need the cotton balls! That was all my three-year-old self worried about when I dropped my art supplies on the ground as my mom and I were running to catch the 96 Bus. Luckily, I saved all of them and we rushed onto the bus to school.

It's strange I still remember this seemingly nominal event. I find it interesting that, as a bus-riding three-year-old infatuated by soft cosmetic items, I was completely oblivious to the world around me. I was the singularity in my universe. I did not see the miserable stranger sulking after breaking up, the professional going to a meeting, or the Harvard student excited to work on his research project. I was just a boy getting dropped off at daycare by his mother.

Nowadays, I do not play with cotton balls. I partially owe my growth to the presence of Harvard University. I was so honored to be a lab rat for the Center on the Developing Child. It introduced me to scientific research, and I realized the importance of myself as an individual in a healthy society. I was included in the first virtual campus tour produced by my father, and I feel old because my presence was erased by virtue of a more modern one. I am perpetually awed by the university's innovation, but my personal connections truly made me view Harvard as a dream school. Before, it was a fantasy, in which Harvard's power awed me but lacked a sense of reality. I had no idea I could possibly achieve anything so special. But now I believe Harvard is, instead, a "dreams can come true" school. I can be that person. This belief is not because I am the smartest, most talented, or even the most intense scholar. It is because I have a vision for my education; I know how I want to use Harvard.

I've spent my fair share of time around the university and the one thing that always surprises me is its humanity. Beyond the stigma and intellectual gravitas, I find Harvard students to be normal, kind human beings. I will debate, collaborate, and live with them. Their talents and insights will give me an enjoyable medium from which I may gain a

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comprehensive, global perspective. I learned many cultural norms while studying abroad in China from my host family and I look forward to taking in the wealth of information that Harvard students import from around the world. With the university's incredible resources, wide range of course offerings, and the Harvard community, I will be able to first find my dream, and then mold my passions into reality.

To me, the unique thing about Harvard is its relative location to Somerville. Although Boston, with its multitudes of opportunities, is so close to my hometown, I have noticed a "Somerville Bubble" that encapsulates the students here. The diverse youth of Somerville is disconnected with the surroundings because of my school's welcoming nature; strangely, our differences bring us closer together.

But this lack of exploration also comes from a lack of belief. Until my peers are exposed to what is possible, they will not do the possible. During my time at Harvard and beyond, I want to stay connected with my community. To me, having others in mind is not simply altruistic, but also a matter of personal happiness. As much as I tutor to help with math concepts, I tutor to build relationships with middle schoolers and enjoy their successes vicariously. Growth can often be associated with tutoring. I have learned to better articulate my thoughts with concise, understandable instructions. Even literal growth occurs: a quiet and shy former student who graduated to high school surprised me when he confidently broadcasted the morning announcements. I will be able to help others burst the "Somerville Bubble" by sharing my experiences, and helping them to find their own passions,

My future occupation is uncertain, but I will find myself by learning with others. I will find my passions because I believe they exist. Now, after 14 years, I see myself on that bus, but instead of getting off at Sacramento Street, I am going all the way to Harvard Square.

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Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/> Contains an engaging, original plot <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Answers the given prompt and stays on topic <input type="checkbox"/> Appeals to the reader with vivid presentation
Impression	<input type="checkbox"/> Leaves a lasting impression in admission officer <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriately demonstrates admirable qualities <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates credibility and persuasion
Writing	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates college-ready writing ability <input type="checkbox"/> Uses advanced writing techniques and diction <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Does not contain writing mistakes

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