

Narrative/Challenges Example Essays

Essay Types “A” and “C”

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Attended: Brown

The mud was inescapable. We were trapped. The ambulance had barreled down the road, coming so close that I imagined its bulbous lights glancing off our car before we veered off the shoulder. A moment earlier, I had been thinking about what to eat and what schoolwork was due. Suddenly, the concerned face of a stranger popped up in our window offering to help. Before we could reply, he threw his body against the car with single-minded perseverance, and then stood in the center of the road, stopping a moving truck to help us. It was ridiculous and it was beautiful.

Then, there were more of them, these decent strangers: a well-dressed runner; a fatherly golfer; three movers who attached our car to their well-worn bumper; an older man with a perfectly rounded potbelly; and, the young man with white shoes now streaked in mud, the one whose heart was so big, it overwhelmed us all. These people helped even when the task ahead seemed absurdly hard.

I have yet to witness anything more inspiring than the collective will of seven pairs of mud-soaked sneakers and the straining muscles of fourteen hairy arms. That. That’s what reminded me why we’re all here. To do good. To be decent. To push further than we think we can. I realized I too could effect positive change.

Institutions and people can become stuck, much like our car, unable to move forward, mired in the status quo. The mud-soaked sneakers motivated me to pursue cooperative, creative solutions even if against seemingly insurmountable odds. That experience gave me purpose.

I am a storyteller.

When I founded my school’s podcast club, I confronted an institution that was reluctant to see itself, unwilling to acknowledge that members of its community felt marginalized and overextended. The perception of our school had been compressed down into several bite-sized adjectives: white, preppy, stressful, exclusive, and high-achieving. However, they were only one part of a much larger picture.

I created the podcast to unearth the nuances of our collective story, even if that meant examining controversial topics. Although people remarked that the administration would never let me talk about the exclusivity of affinity groups or the divisive nature of the awards system, I

persisted, making a podcast that investigates school stereotypes. This led me to one student who, as someone biracial, felt that affinity groups forced her uncomfortably to self-categorize. It helped me understand the conflicted viewpoint of our head-of-school, who knows that awards have the potential to demoralize students, but also sees the need to recognize outstanding individuals. And it opened a conversation with one lacrosse player, who explained that his team never intended to offend LGBTQ students by humorously cross-dressing as fairies, although others felt their unawareness that the term “fairy” was historically derogatory did not excuse their behavior. Each person added a layer of complexity to overly simplified narratives.

Dislodging established stories proved to be as difficult as prying that car from the mud. Nevertheless, I was motivated to keep pushing. To listen compassionately. To create lasting partnerships by negotiating with school administrators. To integrate a diverse set of perspectives into every episode. To stop the bustle of traffic and seek new truths. When the podcast came out, it got the school talking, teachers dedicating class to discussing it and administrators referencing it at the end-of-year assembly.

I am proud that I helped start those conversations. They are the first tire to be pried loose, but there is a whole car to be liberated. My goal is to be the woman who makes that happen, using storytelling as the moving truck and my ideas as the manpower. My heart is now open in a new way. My world is no longer self-contained. My arms pull with the arms of those men in the mud on the side of the road. I heave on the same count of three. (650 words)

Will attend: Harvard

February 2011– My brothers and I were showing off our soccer dribbling skills in my grandfather’s yard when we heard gunshots and screaming in the distance. We paused and listened, confused by sounds we had only ever heard on the news or in movies. My mother rushed out of the house and ordered us inside. The Arab Spring had come to Bahrain.

I learned to be alert to the rancid smell of tear gas. Its stench would waft through the air before it invaded my eyes, urging me inside before they started to sting. Newspaper front pages constantly showed images of bloodied clashes, made worse by Molotov cocktails. Martial Law was implemented; roaming tanks became a common sight. On my way to school, I nervously passed burning tires and angry protesters shouting “Yaskut Hamad!” [“Down with King Hamad!”]. Bahrain, known for its palm trees and pearls, was waking up from a slumber. The only home I had known was now a place where I learned to fear.

September 2013– Two and a half years after the uprisings, the events were still not a distant memory. I decided the answer to fear was understanding. I began to analyze the events and actions that led to the upheaval of the Arab Springs. In my country, religious

and political tensions were brought to light as Shias, who felt underrepresented and neglected within the government, challenged the Sunnis, who were thought to be favored for positions of power. I wanted equality and social justice; I did not want the violence to escalate any further and for my country to descend into the nightmare that is Libya and Syria.

September 2014– Pursuing understanding helped allay my fears, but I also wanted to contribute to Bahrain in a positive way. I participated in student government as a student representative and later as President, became a member of Model United Nations (MUN), and was elected President of the Heritage Club, a charity-focused club supporting refugees and the poor.

As an MUN delegate, I saw global problems from perspectives other than my own and used my insight to push for compromise. I debated human rights violations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from an Israeli perspective, argued whether Syrian refugees should be allowed entry into neighboring European countries, and then created resolutions for each problem. In the Heritage Club, I raised funds and ran food drives so that my team could provide support for less fortunate Bahrainis. We regularly distributed boxed lunches to migrant workers, bags of rice to refugees and air conditioners to the poor.

April 2016 – The Crown Prince International Scholarship Program (CPISP) is an intensive leadership training program where participants are chosen on merit, not political ideologies. Both Shia and Sunni candidates are selected, helping to diversify the future leadership of my country. I was shortlisted to attend the training during that summer.

July 2016 – The CPISP reaffirmed for me the importance of cooperation. At first, building chairs out of balloons and skyscrapers out of sticks didn't seem meaningful. But as I learned to apply different types of leadership styles to real-life situations and honed my communication skills to lead my team, I began to see what my country was missing: harmony based on trust. Bringing people together from different backgrounds and successfully completing goals—any goal—builds trust. And trust is the first step to lasting peace.

October 2016 – I have only begun to understand my people and my history, but I no longer live in fear. Instead, I have found purpose. I plan to study political science and economics to find answers for the issues that remain unresolved in my country. Bahrain can be known for something more than pearl diving, palm trees, and the Arab Spring; it can be known for the understanding of its people, including me.

Will attend: UPenn (Wharton)

On March 14th, 2016, my mother died.

Allow me to take you back to that day.

My grandmother's words hit me like a train, "Eli, your mother is dead." I feel my legs turn to spaghetti as I collapse into the nearest chair. My mind races but my lips are paralyzed. When? How? Why? For the kid who's always asking questions I'm unusually silent, unable to believe what I just heard.

In just three hours my Mock-Trial team will be competing to make school history by advancing to the Pennsylvania State Finals. Before the question is even asked I've made my decision. This team has become a family to me, and I know what I will do. I will compete.

I know that sharing my loss and making myself vulnerable will only strengthen our drive. As we pull up to the courthouse I gather the team and share what has happened. "We've worked for weeks to get to the point we're at, and I'm not letting anything get in the way of our success." Not only did I have to do it for my team, I had to do it for my mom.

My vulnerability served as a catalyst for our team's best performance. Our team won the Regional Final that day, and would soon place 5th in the state of Pennsylvania. From this experience my biggest takeaway wasn't a trophy or accolade. It taught me that challenges are inevitable, but to quote Rocky Balboa, "... it ain't about how hard you can hit, it's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward." It taught me perspective.

Although losing my mother was one of the biggest challenges I have faced, it was hardly the first.

When I would return from school in third grade to find my mother passed out drunk and my father high on cocaine, I had no choice but to rely on my perseverance. As an eight-year-old kid, I was the most stable member of my family, and I couldn't give up on my dreams. When the social worker told me that "child neglect" plagued my early life, when my father was incarcerated, and when my parents would disappear for days on end, I was never surprised. I knew nothing different. When I think back to my first memories, all I remember are the aforementioned circumstances that formed my reality at the time. My childhood experiences led me to believe these circumstances were normal. As tragic as that was, my aunt always told me to remain positive and to persevere. Her motivation and my sense of perseverance propelled me to do well in school and to form a strong community of friends and collaborators.

Six months before my mother died, this aunt passed away. Five months after my mother died, my grandmother passed away. On the days when I face my hardest of challenges, I am reminded that I must not only persevere for myself, but also for my family.

I wouldn't change anything about my life. Although I've faced a lifetime of adversity, those experiences have made me who I am. Nights without food taught me compassion, providing for myself and my brother taught me independence, and losing three members of my family taught me to trust others. I have gained the perspective to appreciate every opportunity, the ability to persevere through any challenge, and the openness to share my toughest moments with the people around me.

In college, I look forward to sharing my perspective with my fellow students as I simultaneously learn from their backgrounds and experiences. As a first generation college student, I will undoubtedly face challenges, but my stability and determination will allow me to thrive. I have the perspective and compassion to help others, and my goal is to use it to add value and create positive change at my university, surrounding communities, and the world at large.

Will attend: Vanderbilt

"Salasha!" My parents called from upstairs. My grandfather named me: 'Sa' for Saraswathi, 'La' for Lakshmi, and 'Sha' for Shakthi, the Hindu goddesses of knowledge, prosperity, and power respectively. This meaning behind my name created the central mantra of my life: knowledge provides the power to become prosperous. Little did I know that answering my parents' call to come upstairs would lead me to discover that the father I admired and loved was not my biological father. This knowledge rendered an indomitable feeling of powerlessness in me.

It didn't make any sense. But it did, all the same. All those vague memories of being present at my parents' wedding, those times where I was denied access to the old photo albums--the pieces seemed to now come together. My first barrier of defense was to falsely claim that I somehow knew it all along. I was determined to be strong in front of my parents, to nonchalantly brush this off as a part of the past.

I may have tried to fool my parents, but I wasn't fooling myself. My brother was now my half-brother, my grandmother was suddenly my step-grandmother, and so on for my "father's" entire family. I was devastated and no longer recognized myself. Who was I? Where did I come from? Why do I deserve this? These questions plagued me for the next few years.

So, I immersed myself in fictional tales. I found synergy in the estranged child genius *Artemis Fowl* and the passionate fight for minor emancipation in *My Sister's Keeper*. I discovered a quiet, strong power in books that empowered me with all the knowledge I thought I needed to take care of myself. Nevertheless, a part of me knew that closing myself off from real human connection was only a coping mechanism to 'protect' myself from insecurity and distrust.

While I was creating my own fictional solitary version of a family, I was also beginning life in a brand new school. Looking up from books one day I found myself in an assembly run by an overly energetic yet welcoming group of people known as Leadership. With cheers reverberating in my ears that night, I accepted what I had been brushing under the carpet for so long--I genuinely missed being a part of something larger than myself. Leadership showed me a model of family that I wanted to participate in: honesty and assertive communication.

Leadership has taught me confidence, but also how to find power in vulnerability. I slowly regained my ability to trust other people, which in turn led to bursting out of my self-imposed bubble, including my current position as Senior Class Vice President.

Though I still engage in solitary acts, I now discern a clear line between being alone and being lonely. I go to concerts alone, but I see it as a connective experience. In a room full of strangers, we are all bonded by sharing the same joy. Learning to share my solitude with others felt like inhaling petrichor: the smell of the earth after rain, when everything is completely cleansed. I learned also, to connect with my family again. Intentionally distancing myself didn't do anyone any good, including me. Ironically, a whole journey that started with a betrayal of trust has made me more trusting.

And so I carry my name sometimes as a blessing and sometimes as a burden. I take strength from those goddesses, and have been able to gain an inkling of their wisdom. I may not have the power to rewrite my past, but I do have the power to control how I navigate the future and the ability to feel connections with people that I have yet to meet. This to me is the very essence of prosperity.

Will attend: Stanford

At six years old, I stood locked away in the restroom. I held tightly to a tube of toothpaste because I'd been sent to brush my teeth to distract me from the commotion. Regardless, I knew what was happening: my dad was being put under arrest for domestic abuse. He'd hurt my mom physically and mentally, and my brother Jose and I had shared the mental strain. It's what had to be done.

Living without a father meant money was tight, mom worked two jobs, and my brother and I took care of each other when she worked. For a brief period of time the quality of our lives slowly started to improve as our soon-to-be step-dad became an integral part of our family. He paid attention to the needs of my mom, my brother, and me. But our prosperity was short-lived as my step dad's chronic alcoholism became more and more recurrent. When I was eight, my younger brother Fernando's birth complicated things even further. As my step-dad slipped away, my mom continued working, and Fernando's care was left to Jose and me. I cooked, Jose cleaned, I dressed Fernando, Jose put him to bed. We did what we had to do.

As undocumented immigrants and with little to no family around us, we had to rely on each other. Fearing that any disclosure of our status would risk deportation, we kept to ourselves when dealing with any financial and medical issues. I avoided going on certain school trips, and at times I was discouraged to even meet new people. I felt isolated and at times disillusioned; my grades started to slip.

Over time, however, I grew determined to improve the quality of life for my family and myself.

Without a father figure to teach me the things a father could, I became my own teacher. I learned how to fix a bike, how to swim, and even how to talk to girls. I became resourceful, fixing shoes with strips of duct tape, and I even found a job to help pay bills. I became as independent as I could to lessen the time and money mom had to spend raising me.

I also worked to apply myself constructively in other ways. I worked hard and took my grades from Bs and Cs to consecutive straight A's. I shattered my school's 100M breaststroke record, and learned how to play the clarinet, saxophone, and the oboe. Plus, I not only became

the first student in my school to pass the AP Physics 1 exam, I'm currently pioneering my school's first AP Physics 2 course ever.

These changes inspired me to help others. I became president of the California Scholarship Federation, providing students with information to prepare them for college, while creating opportunities for my peers to play a bigger part in our community. I began tutoring kids, teens, and adults on a variety of subjects ranging from basic English to home improvement and even Calculus. As the captain of the water polo and swim team I've led practices crafted to individually push my comrades to their limits, and I've counseled friends through circumstances similar to mine. I've done tons, and I can finally say I'm proud of that.

But I'm excited to say that there's so much I have yet to do. I haven't danced the tango, solved a Rubix Cube, explored how perpetual motion might fuel space exploration, or seen the World Trade Center. And I have yet to see the person that Fernando will become.

I'll do as much as I can from now on. Not because I have to. Because I choose to.

Will attend: UC Berkeley

"¡Mijo! ¡Ya levántate! ¡Se hace tarde!" (Son! Wake up! It's late already.) My father's voice pierced into my room as I worked my eyes open. We were supposed to open the restaurant earlier that day.

Ever since 5th grade, I have been my parents' right hand at Hon Lin Restaurant in our hometown of Hermosillo, Mexico. Sometimes, they needed me to be the cashier; other times, I was the youngest waiter on staff. Eventually, when I got strong enough, I was called into the kitchen to work as a dishwasher and a chef's assistant.

The restaurant took a huge toll on my parents and me. Working more than 12 hours every single day (even holidays), I lacked paternal guidance, thus I had to build autonomy at an early age. On weekdays, I learned to cook my own meals, wash my own clothes, watch over my two younger sisters, and juggle school work.

One Christmas Eve we had to prepare 135 turkeys as a result of my father's desire to offer a Christmas celebration to his patrons. We began working at 11pm all the way to 5am. At one point, I noticed the large dark bags under my father's eyes. This was the scene that ignited the question in my head: "Is this how I want to spend the rest of my life?"

The answer was no.

So I started a list of goals. My first objective was to make it onto my school's British English Olympics team that competed in an annual English competition in the U.K. After two unsuccessful attempts, I got in. The rigorous eight months of training paid off as we defeated over 150 international schools and lifted the 2nd Place cup; pride permeated throughout my hometown.

Despite the euphoria brought by victory, my sense of stability would be tested again, and therefore my goals had to adjust to the changing pattern.

During the summer of 2014, my parents sent me to live in the United States on my own to seek better educational opportunities. I lived with my grandparents, who spoke Taishan (a Chinese dialect I wasn't fluent in). New responsibilities came along as I spent that summer clearing my documentation, enrolling in school, and getting electricity and water set up in our new home. At 15 years old, I became the family's financial manager, running my father's bank accounts, paying bills and insurance, while also translating for my grandmother, and cleaning the house.

In the midst of moving to a new country and the overwhelming responsibilities that came with it, I found an activity that helped me not only escape the pressures around me but also discover myself. MESA introduced me to STEM and gave me nourishment and a new perspective on mathematics. As a result, I found my potential in math way beyond balancing my dad's checkbooks.

My 15 years in Mexico forged part of my culture that I just cannot live without. Trying to fill the void for a familiar community, I got involved with the Association of Latin American students, where I am now an Executive Officer. I proudly embrace the identity I left behind. I started from small debates within the club to discussing bills alongside 124 Chicanos/Latinos at the State Capitol of California.

The more I scratch off from my goals list, the more it brings me back to those days handling spatulas. Anew, I ask myself, "Is this how I want to spend the rest of my life?" I want a life driven by my passions, rather than the impositions of labor. I want to explore new paths and grow within my community to eradicate the prejudicial barriers on Latinos. So yes, this IS how I want to spend the rest of my life.

Will attend: Boston University

When I was a little girl, I imagined I had superpowers. Deadly lasers would shoot from my eyes pulverizing the monsters hiding under my bed. Mom would wonder where I had magically disappeared to after I turned invisible as she forced me to eat that plate of broccoli. It was the wish I made on every birthday candle and upon every bright star.

Who knew my dream would come true.

I discovered my first power when I turned 14. My mom had been diagnosed with Ovarian cancer my freshman year of high school. Seated alone in my room, I became lost in a cycle of worry and panic. In the midst of my downward spiral, I reached out for a small bristled paintbrush, guiding it across the canvas--the motion gave me peace. My emotions spilled out onto the canvas, staining my clothes with a palette of blues and blacks. A sense of calm replaced the anxiety and fear which had gripped me tightly for so many months. Painting gave me the power to heal myself and find peace in a scary situation.

Little did I know, sharing my superpower would lead me to unfamiliar parts of my city. I was alerted to trouble at an elementary school in Dallas where students' access to the arts was under threat from budget cuts. I joined forces with the principal and the school's community service representative to create an afterschool arts program. From paper masks in October to pots of sunshine crafts in March, it did more than teach students to freely draw and color; it created a community where kids connected with the power of art to express joy, hope, and identity. The program, now in its third year, has succeeded in reaching kids deprived of art. Sharing art with these students has given me the power to step outside of my familiar surroundings and connect with kids I never would have met otherwise. I am grateful for the power of art to not only heal but to also connect with others.

I knew my powers worked on a local level but I wanted to reach out globally. For four years, I have been searching for a way to defeat the scourge of child marriage, a leading cause of poverty in rural India. I discovered a formula in which girls' education successfully defeats child marriage as part of my capstone project through the Academy of Global Studies (AGS) program at my school.

I took my powers overseas, flying 8,535 miles to arrive at a dilapidated school in the bleak slums of Jaipur, India. While conducting interviews with pre-adolescent girls stuffed into dusty classrooms, I learned of their grey routines: rising early to obtain well-water, cooking,

cleaning and caring for younger siblings prior to rushing to school. Despite the efforts of keeping these girls in school to prevent child marriage, their school relied on rote memorization without any creative arts programming. As I organized my art project for these girls, I was unsure if my powers would reach them. Their initial skepticism and uncertainty slowly transformed into wonder and joy as they brought their bright paper fish cut-outs to life. The experience opened my eyes to the power of art to form universal connections, and it inspires me to share and strengthen its force within the lives of all children.

Much of the little girl yearning for superpowers remains a part of me. But now I have moved beyond wishing for powers to acquiring a deeper understanding of how superpowers work. While I never fulfilled my wish to run at lightning speeds or shoot spiderwebs from my fingers, my experiences with art have taught me that the greatest superpowers lie within each of us -- the powers to create, express, and connect in meaningful ways. Every girl deserves the chance to dream, I am just lucky mine came true.

Will attend: Northeastern (7-yr scholarship)

Does every life matter? Because it seems like certain lives matter more than others, especially when it comes to money.

I was in eighth grade when a medical volunteer group that my dad had led to Northern Thailand faced a dilemma of choosing between treating a patient with MDR-TB or saving \$5000 (the estimated treatment cost for this patient) for future patients. I remember overhearing intense conversations outside the headquarters tent. My dad and his friend were arguing that we should treat the woman regardless of the treatment cost, whereas the others were arguing that it simply cost too much to treat her. Looking back, it was a conflict between ideals--one side argued that everyone should receive treatment whereas the other argued that interventions should be based on cost-effectiveness. I was angry for two reasons. First, because my father lost the argument. Second, because I couldn't logically defend what I intuitively believed: that every human being has a right to good health. In short, that every life matters.

Over the next four years I read piles of books on social justice and global health equity in order to prove my intuitive belief in a logical manner. I even took online courses at the undergraduate and graduate level. But I failed to find a clear, logical argument for why every life mattered. I did, however, find sound arguments for the other side, supporting the idea that society should pursue the well-being of the greatest number, that interventions should mitigate the most death and disability per dollar spent. Essentially, my research screamed, "Kid, it's all about the numbers."

But I continued searching, even saving up pocket money to attend a summer course on global health at Brown University. It was there that I met Cate Oswald, a program director for Partners in Health (PIH), an organization that believed "the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong with the world." It was like finding a ray of light in the darkness.

Refueled with hope, I went back to find the answer, but this time I didn't dive into piles of books or lectures. I searched my memories. Why was I convinced that every life mattered?

When the woman with MDR-TB came to our team, she brought along with her a boy that looked about my age. Six years have passed since I met him, but I still remember the gaze he gave me as he left with his mother. It wasn't angry, nor was it sad. It was, in a way, serene. It was almost as if he knew this was coming. That burdened me. Something inside me knew this wasn't right. It just didn't feel right. Perhaps it was because I, for a second, placed myself in his shoes, picturing what I'd feel if my mother was the woman with MDR-TB.

Upon reflection, I found that my answer didn't exist in books or research, but somewhere very close from the beginning--my intuition. In other words, I didn't need an elaborate and intricate reason to prove to myself that health is an inalienable right for every human being--I needed self-reflection.

So I ask again, "Does every life matter?" Yes. "Do I have solid, written proof?" No.

Paul Farmer once said, "The thing about rights is that in the end you can't *prove* what is a right." To me, global health is not merely a study. It's an attitude--a lens I use to look at the world--and it's a statement about my commitment to health as a fundamental quality of liberty and equity.

Will attend: Yale

When I was in elementary school, I came home from school every day in the fall and took a five-minute walk to a pond near my house. I remember watching the white egrets strut along the water's edge, peering in to look for sunfish, and counting the noses of snapping turtles resting at the water's surface. I'd take a short hike around the pond through the crisp autumn air before finally heading back home.

These walks inspired me to enter Cub Scouts, and ultimately to cross over into Boy Scouting. Despite several of my friends quitting Scouting to focus on athletics or other activities, I stayed. I loved everything from creating makeshift slings from neckerchiefs to constructing shelters in the middle of the woods. I aspired to follow the trail to Eagle to its peak and become an Eagle Scout. However, what always excited me most was exploring the outdoors through hiking.

As a history nerd, to the point where I would be *that guy* reading history textbooks for fun, hiking allowed me to immerse myself in historical settings. Through Boy Scouting, I was able to arrange and lead Historical Trail hikes, giving myself and my troop firsthand perspectives on a Valley Forge winter, or the actual walk up Breed's Hill along Boston's Freedom Trail. I became the troop storyteller along these hikes, adding my own tidbits of information such as pointing out Eisenhower's five-star general flag waving from his personal putting green in Gettysburg, or how Spuyten Duyvil was perhaps named following one of the first reported shark attacks in America in 1642. While I may not remember every detail of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, I can certainly remember the chill of standing outside Rebecca Nurse's house on a cold October day in Salem. And although I have read about Gouverneur Morris's shrewd political maneuverings during the Philadelphia Convention in William H. Riker's *The Art of Political Manipulation*, it is something else entirely to stand in Independence Hall's assembly room and picture dozens of diplomats scrambling to craft the framework of a nation fresh out of war.

Hiking also gave me the opportunity to teach younger Scouts about various Scouting skills, from orienteering (using a map and compass) to conservation principles like Leave-No-Trace. My troop engages in trail maintenance projects, and we actively monitor a trail we adopted from the NY/NJ Trail Conference. I especially relished the opportunity to apply what I had learned in AP Biology towards actually helping preserve the environment from the harmful effects of invasive species by identifying and removing harmful plants such as thorny multiflora rose. It is one thing to learn about pollution, global warming, and invasive species in a classroom; it is another thing entirely to see the biodiversity of an ecosystem quickly succumb to man-made pressures.

Just as my walks around the local pond were an escape from suburbia, hiking with the Boy Scouts has given me the chance to help others experience the beauty of the outdoors. On a recent hike, I was walking with a new Scout, Louis, who had just crossed over from Cub Scouts. Louis confided in me how disconnected he felt away from his video games. To get his mind off of his electronics withdrawal, I stayed with Louis for the remainder of the hike and pointed out everything from milkweed stalks to coyote scat. After the hike, Louis was exhausted but had a glimmer of excitement towards the environment around him, and could even tell the difference between poison ivy and Virginia creeper. Louis is currently one of my troop's most active younger Scouts.

When I'm hiking, I'm not merely a hiker; I'm a historian, a conservationist, and a teacher all in one.

Will attend: Yale (by same student as "hiking" author above):

500 Word *The Daily Show* Essay:

For over two years, my final class of the day has been nontraditional. No notes, no tests, no official assignments. Just a twenty-three minute lecture every Monday through Thursday, which I watched from my couch. Professor Jon Stewart would lecture his class about the news of the day, picking apart the absurdities of current events.

The Daily Show inspired me to explore the methods behind the madness of the world Stewart satirized. Although I'd always had a passion for the news, I evolved from scrolling through Yahoo's homepage to reading articles from *The New York Times* and *The Economist*. I also began to tie in knowledge I learned in school. I even caught *The Daily Show* inexcusably putting a picture of John Quincy Adams at a table with the founding fathers instead of John Adams! Thanks, APUSH.

Clearly, *The Daily Show* has a political slant. However, Stewart convinced me that partisan media, regardless of its political affiliation, can significantly impact its viewers' political beliefs. I wrote a psychology paper analyzing the polarizing effects of the media and how confirmation bias leads already opinionated viewers to ossify their beliefs. As a debater, I've learned to argue both sides of an issue, and the hardest part of this is recognizing one's own biases. I myself had perhaps become too biased from my viewing of *The Daily Show*, and ultimately this motivated me to watch CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News, allowing me to assimilate information from opposing viewpoints.

I embraced my new role as an intellectual moderator in academic discourse... at my friend's 17th birthday party. It was there that two friends started arguing over the Baltimore riots. One argued that the anti-police rhetoric of the protest was appalling; the other countered by decrying the clear presence of race discrimination still in the country. Both had their biases: the friend who argued on behalf of the police was the son of a police officer, while my friend who defended the protests personally knew people protesting in Baltimore. I questioned both on their positions, and ultimately, both reconsidered the other's perspective.

However, I began to wonder: was I excusing myself from the responsibility of taking a position on key issues? Perhaps there are times that I shouldn't merely understand both sides, but actually choose one. In biology, for example, we studied the debates over evolution and climate change. Is it my role, as an informed student, to advocate both sides of the debate, despite one

side being overwhelmingly supported by scientific evidence? Maybe I must sometimes shed my identity as Devil's advocate and instead be an advocate for my own convictions.

Although I don't have a news (or fake news) network where I can voice my opinions, I look towards further assessing my own viewpoints while maintaining my role as an impartial academic debater. I am eager to delve into an intellectual environment that challenges me to decide when to be objective and when to embrace my bias and argue for my own beliefs.

Will attend: Yale

"In the first six years of my life, my family moved exactly thirteen times. By the fifth move, the security of 'home' was gone. By the ninth, my eyes had adjusted to the aggressive two-dimensionality of the Affordable Housing Authority's drab brick walls. This was my life: only drifting, transience. No roots, no permanence."

My voice trembled beneath the dim dining hall lights as I sat before forty-four students and a dozen faculty members. I shared my world as a first-generation Asian-American, how my mother's first job in America had been a seamstress in an overstuffed Chinese garment factory, and how my grandmother, in her seventies, spent her last years in the Land of Opportunity scavenging cans on the streets of Brooklyn.

Here I was, three hundred miles from home in the Vermont backcountry, opening my heart to strangers. Why?

For the past few years, I'd found myself the bearer of rather peculiar labels from my peers, creative terms like "banana" and "golden Oreo." Perhaps it was because my Chinese language ability (or lack thereof) was my family's shame, or because I absolutely could not use chopsticks for the life of me. Maybe it was because even though I tried and tried, I could not play Pachelbel's Canon in D. Whatever it was, I was accused of letting my "Chinese-ness" slip. I was stuck in limbo, truly belonging to neither the Chinese nor the American community. I felt closed-off and lost.

I yearned for a place to belong. But where? In my junior year, I found it — in Vermont, of all places.

At the High Mountain Institute, a semester school on a farm in rural Vermont, I bucked the New York City culture of over-scheduling and over-stimulation. Living together with my teachers and their children, witnessing one too many animal slaughters with my forty-four classmates, and harvesting all 1,485 pounds of sweet potatoes until our nails caked with dried dirt, I felt comfortable enough, for the very first time, to share my deepest stories.

I also discovered a refreshing approach to activism, one that valued student voices, respected individualism, and championed student-led change — values not as esteemed at my home school. When the issue of racial microaggressions emerged at the High Mountain Institute, for example, I created an affinity group to increase awareness about diversity issues, holding conversations that unified students and staff to effect change in our school.

But most importantly, I found a place where I belonged, and with it, a sense of community and acceptance.

In the spring, I returned to Staten Island Tech refreshed and empowered. I created two organizations to improve sustainability on campus, fundraising thousands to install water stations to reduce plastic bottle consumption. Realizing the value of fighting for change, I protested outside the White House at the Keystone XL Dissent rally and marched alongside a legion of 400,000 at the People's Climate March, demanding action to save our planet.

Before the High Mountain Institute, I let others define me, based on the titles they chose to bestow upon me: "banana," "golden Oreo," even tree-hugger. But in Vermont, despite the rootlessness and transience of my upbringing, I was able to solidify a strengthened sense of self: environmentalist, activist, Chinese-American. By showing my authentic self to a group of compassionate individuals, I realized that I'm so much more than those confining titles: I'm the son of hardworking immigrant parents, the lover of anything by Junot Diaz, the one for whom mixing cereal and milk is a personal sin.

Chopsticks still fluster me, and I can't magically play Pachelbel, but so be it. My identity is just that: mine to own, and mine to shape. In time, I've learned that while my identity already has, and will continue to change, I can embrace it for what it is: a medley of unorthodox traits, passions, and dreams, blending into a singular vibrant whole.

Will attend: Northwestern

I am Charbel Khan. I was named after my father and grandfather. I was born, raised and currently reside in the Phoenician city of Sidon, a port city in the south of Lebanon along the Mediterranean. I was raised speaking Arabic and, at age 6, I began attending American Community School where the language of instruction is French. Thus, English is my third language.

While I have been fortunate in many ways, I have had my share of challenges growing up in Lebanon. In 2006, I witnessed my first war, which broke in the south of Lebanon and resulted in the displacement of thousands of people into my hometown. Hearing the bombs and seeing the images of destruction around me certainly impacted me. However, the greater impact, was working with my father to distribute basic aid to the refugees. I visited one site where three families were cramped up in one small room but still managed to make the best of the situation by playing cards and comforting each other. Working with the refugees was very rewarding and their resilience was inspiring. The refugees returned home and the areas destroyed were largely rebuilt. This experience showed me the power of community and the importance of giving back.

I am blessed with a family who has supported my ambitious academic and social pursuits. My parents have always worked hard to provide me with interesting developmental opportunities,

be it a ballet performance at the Met, a Scientific Fair at Beirut Hippodrome, or a tour of London's Houses of Parliament. Because of the value they placed on education, my parents placed me in a competitive Catholic school despite my family's Muslim background. Today, my close friends consist of my classmates from various religious and social backgrounds.

In 2012 and 2013, I had the opportunity to attend summer programs at UCLA and Yale University. The programs were incredibly rewarding because they gave me a taste of the excellent quality and diversity of education available in the United States. At Yale University, my roommate shared with me stories about the customs in his hometown of Shanghai. Other experiences, such as the mock board meeting of a technology company to which students from different backgrounds brought in divergent business strategies, affirmed my belief in the importance of working toward a more inclusive global community. I believe the United States, more so than any other country, can offer a challenging, engaging and rewarding college education with opportunities for exposure to a diverse range of students from across the globe.

I intend to return to Lebanon upon graduation from college in order to carry on the legacy of my grandfather and father through developing our family business and investing in our community. My grandfather, who never graduated from high school started a small grocery store with limited resources. Through hard work, he grew his business into the largest grocery store in my hometown, Khan Supermarket. My father, who attended only one year of college, transformed it into a major shopping center.

Like my father, I grew up involved in the business and have a passion for it. I've worked in various roles at the store, and, in 2012, I worked on a project to implement an automated parking system, contacting vendors from around the globe and handling most of the project on my own from planning to organization and coordination. I enjoyed every bit of it, taking pride in challenging myself and helping my father.

My hard work has driven me to become the top-ranked student in my school, and I am confident that my ambition and desire to contribute to the community will ensure my success in your program. I look forward to learning from the diverse experiences of my peers and sharing my story with them, thus enriching both our learning experiences. And I look forward to becoming the first man in my family to finish college.

2014

Attending: Pomona

Right next to the "Strictly Platonic" section on Craigslist, you will see the "For Sale" classified: that's my niche, my hub, and where I started my *business*.

And it wasn't exactly legal.

Let me explain:

Because of my parents' financial instability, my summers weren't vacations. Working 30+ hours weekly to help with bills, I was tantalized that my 5th grade friends went to summer camps while I was folding t-shirts at my parent's store. And, as a 12-year old, I had a passion for learning, and a 3-month break was a perfect opportunity for cooking lessons or introductory chemistry labs. But unfortunately, I had to devote my summers to being a minimum-wage laborer.

Eventually as my sister enrolled at UC Irvine, financial conditions worsened, and it was then that I realized I couldn't rely on my parents, and that I needed to create my own opportunities.

One day, while studying at the local library, I found and read *A Guide to Repair iPhones* by Timothy Warner, and this revolutionized my perception of iPhones. Before, I had viewed them as flashy/fragile devices. Now, they were fixable commodities.

I would negotiate for broken iPhones, buy parts, and make them new by following Warner's directions. I was enthralled by the microscopic LCD digitizer and the infinitesimal screws that my hands could access with fluency.

At age 14, I would fix two phones each week and post convincing advertisements utilizing proper grammar for professionalism. When scheduling my "business meetings", I would lie about *my car being broken*, when in reality, I was two years away from a license and four years underage from being a legal, licensed Craigslist user. But technically, since I was selling through one-on-one meetings, and not directly off Craigslist.org, it was considered normal, legal trade.

Because of Craigslist's notorious reputation for scams and theft, my "business associates" always came in twos. They arrived with back-up, essentially, and I loved seeing their faces when they were met with a 4'9" South Korean boy.

Most would ask: "Aren't you a little young to be selling iPhones on Craigslist?"

"Define 'young'," I replied with a smile (I learned definition arguments in debate).

Many underestimated my negotiating powers due to my innocent look, but I was a fast learner. When I encountered low-ballers, I sternly rejected them and walked away. But it was just a show. I knew nine times out of ten they'd take my offer.

Texts after texts, negotiations after negotiations, I accumulated around \$10,000 which helped pay for my sister's tuition and our family's monthly bills. But it didn't end there; my iPhone money also paid for UC Berkeley's Debate Camp and College Preparatory courses in Irvine. I became resourceful, properly allocating my income on programs that would benefit me later (sort of like an investment). And I became fluent in another language: bargaining and negotiating.

After interacting with the market economy, I've decided to continue on the business path with a concentration in market finance. Nothing in this world satisfies more than doing *good business* -- when both parties can leave the parking lot smiling. By constantly stepping out of my comfort zone, solving problems unconventionally, and reminding myself that my capabilities are limitless, I'll make the best out of my next four years.

And, just as I did in the past, I'll be able to dictate my life, instead of letting it dictate me. As the second one in my family to go to college behind my older sister, my parents have considerable expectations for me, as I also do for myself. But with my ability to adapt and learn quickly, I'm ready to make those expectations into reality and eventually climb the business ladder.

Five years later, if anyone asks me: "Aren't you a little young to be a multi-billionaire CEO?"

I'll say what I've always said, "Define 'young'." Then I'll ask, "Got time for a quick story?"

Montage Example Essays

Essay Types “B” and “D”

[Click here](#) for examples of “trampoline” essays, which are those that begin with one particular theme and then bounces to another idea (or several other ideas) over the course of the essay.

Attended: Dartmouth

My mom has the coolest eyes you will ever see. Resembling somewhere between the ocean surrounding a Caribbean island and the “share” button on a Google Doc., her eyes, and thus her genes, spell out very clearly that the OCA2 promoter should not produce melanin in her iris. My dad, albeit with significantly less cool eyes that look more similar to a cloudy day, has fallen victim to the same mutation. Recessively inherited, our eyes are unique, a marking of an increased susceptibility to certain forms of ocular disease but still cool enough to warrant the stares of people on busy New York City streets. To us, on a less scientific note, they represent a shared upbringing: a shared hatred of honey mustard, a shared memory of my sister lighting her hair on fire on her birthday (she was fine), and a shared need to question the unknown.

Growing up at 10 West Deerhaven, where bears would lazily trek across my lawn and the rocks probably had diamonds in them if you hit them just the right way, it was not long before a lab coat and microscope were placed on my Amazon wishlist. My sister would accompany me on my missions, hiking and hiding with me to get a closer look (because every scientist needs a lab partner). More often than not, she was left holding the snacks or carrying my samples back up the hill. But when my microscope finally came, I’d let her look at what we found (sometimes).

Not long after would come the train rides to Kean University, my dad happily (and sleepily) waking up with me for 5 AM breakfasts before my two hour commute. He makes me waffles and asks me about my research, nodding and pretending to understand. I tell him about using RT-PCR to move from the 5’ to the 3’ end of mRNA coding for CAHS1 and about electron microscopes too expensive to be asked for on an Amazon wishlist. He hands me my lunch (6 chicken nuggets) and reminds me to say goodbye to my brother before I leave.

Then would come the bus rides, taking the (totally strenuous) trip into New York City to intern at Columbia University Medical Center. I work with researchers to help determine the genetic basis of epilepsy by studying population models and using CRISPR-Cas9 technology to create petri-dish brains with the mutation of interest. I might get lost in the city or forget which subway to take. My dad may have to come rescue me, joking about how I can microinject in the perfect spot but get lost in a city with numbered streets.

Then would come the car rides, mom in the passenger seat as I drive us to the New York Psychoanalytic Institute to attend lectures on the gut microbiome and the link to autism-spectrum disorders. She shoves the microphone into my hands when I whisper a question to her, encouraging me to speak up in a room full of psychoanalysts who got their degrees long before I was born. I speak, voice quivering, and get a response as if I were no different.

Then would come the walks into our kitchen, sitting with my mother analyzing psychological statistics to aid in making treatment more efficient in her clinic. I laugh at her when she misspells words and she laughs at me for not knowing the difference between affective disorders and mood disorders (trick question: they’re the same).

Living in a household of explorers comes with its challenges: sometimes we neglect to dust and sometimes we forget to order groceries until there is only a stale box of pasta in our

cupboard. But my absent-minded family of best friends, with eyes like $\text{Cu}(\text{C}_7\text{H}_5\text{O}_2)_2$ and CoCl_2 , cracking open rocks and insisting that CRISPR cuts are just like deleting sections of code on a computer, are always up for an adventure.

“Home” Essay (Attended Stanford)

As I enter the double doors, the smell of freshly rolled biscuits hits me almost instantly. I trace the fan blades as they swing above me, emitting a low, repetitive hum resembling a faint melody. After bringing our usual order, the “Tailgate Special,” to the table, my father begins discussing the recent performance of Apple stock with my mother, myself, and my older eleven year old sister. Bojangle’s, a Southern establishment well known for its fried chicken and reliable fast food, is my family’s Friday night restaurant, often accompanied by trips to Eva Perry, the nearby library. With one hand on my breaded chicken and the other on *Nancy Drew: Mystery of Crocodile Island*, I can barely sit still as the thriller unfolds. They’re imprisoned! Reptiles! Not the enemy’s boat! As I delve into the narrative with a sip of sweet tea, I feel at **home**.

“Five, six, seven, eight!” As I shout the counts, nineteen dancers grab and begin to spin the tassels attached to their swords while walking heel-to-toe to the next formation of the classical Chinese sword dance. A glance at my notebook reveals a collection of worn pages covered with meticulously planned formations, counts, and movements. Through sharing videos of my performances with my relatives or discovering and choreographing the nuances of certain regional dances and their reflection on the region’s distinct culture, I deepen my relationship with my parents, heritage, and community. When I step on stage, the hours I’ve spent choreographing, creating poses, teaching, and polishing are all worthwhile, and the stage becomes my **home**.

Set temperature. Calibrate. Integrate. Analyze. Set temperature. Calibrate. Integrate. Analyze. This pulse mimics the beating of my heart, a subtle rhythm that persists each day I come into the lab. Whether I am working under the fume hood with platinum nanoparticles, manipulating raw integration data, or spraying a thin platinum film over pieces of copper, it is in Lab 304 in Hudson Hall that I first feel the distinct sensation, and I’m **home**. After spending several weeks attempting to synthesize platinum nanoparticles with a diameter between 10 and 16 nm, I finally achieve nanoparticles with a diameter of 14.6 nm after carefully monitoring the sulfuric acid bath. That unmistakable tingling sensation dances up my arm as I scribble into my notebook: I am overcome with a feeling of unbridled joy.

Styled in a t-shirt, shorts, and a worn, dark green lanyard, I sprint across the quad from the elective ‘Speaking Arabic through the Rassias Method’ to ‘Knitting Nirvana’. This afternoon is just one of many at Governor’s School East, where I have been transformed from a high school student into a philosopher, a thinker, and an avid learner. While I attend GS at Meredith College for Natural Science, the lessons learned and experiences gained extend far beyond physics concepts, serial dilutions, and toxicity. I learn to trust myself to have difficult yet necessary conversations about the political and economic climate. Governor’s School breeds a culture of inclusivity and multidimensionality, and I am transformed from “girl who is hardworking” or “science girl” to someone who indulges in the sciences, debates about psychology and the economy, and loves to swing and salsa dance. As I form a slip knot and cast on, I’m at **home**.

My **home** is a dynamic and eclectic entity. Although I've lived in the same house in Cary, North Carolina for 10 years, I have found and carved homes and communities that are filled with and enriched by tradition, artists, researchers, and intellectuals. While I may not always live within a 5 mile radius of a Bojangle's or in close proximity to Lab 304, learning to become a more perceptive daughter and sister, to share the beauty of my heritage, and to take risks and redefine scientific and personal expectations will continue to impact my sense of home.

Will attend: Cornell

Since childhood, I have been an obsessive builder and problem solver. When I was 6, I spent two months digging a hole in my backyard, ruining the grass lawn, determined to make a giant koi pond after watching a show on HGTV. After watching Castaway when I was 7, I started a fire in my backyard--to my mother's horror--using bark and kindling like Tom Hanks did. I neglected chores and spent nights locked in my room drawing pictures and diagrams or learning rubik's cube algorithms while my mother yelled at me through the door to go to sleep. I've always been compulsive about the things I set my mind to. The satisfaction of solving problems and executing my visions is all-consuming.

But my obsessive personality has helped me solve other problems, too.

When I was 8, I taught myself how to pick locks. I always dreamed of how cool it must have been inside my brother's locked bedroom. So I didn't eat at school for two weeks and saved up enough lunch money to buy a lockpicking set from Home Depot. After I wiggled the tension wrench into the keyhole and twisted it counterclockwise, I began manipulating the tumblers in the keyhole with the pick until I heard the satisfying click of the lock and entered the room. Devouring his stash of Lemonheads was awesome, but not as gratifying as finally getting inside his room.

As the projects I tackled got bigger, I had to be more resourceful. One day in history class after reading about early American inventions, I decided to learn how to use a Spinning Jenny. When my parents unsurprisingly refused to waste \$500 on an 18th century spinning wheel, I got to work visiting DIY websites to construct my own by disassembling my bike and removing the inner tube from the wheel, gathering string and nails, and cutting scrap wood. For weeks, I brushed my two cats every day until I had gathered enough fur. I washed and soaked it, carded it with paddle brushes to align the fibers, and then spun it into yarn, which I then used to crochet a clutch purse for my grandmother on mother's day. She still uses it to this day.

In high school, my obsessive nature found a new outlet in art. Being a perfectionist, I often tore up my work in frustration at the slightest hint of imperfection. As a result, I was slowly falling behind in my art class, so I had to seek out alternate solutions to actualize the ideas I had in my head. Often times that meant using mixed media or experimenting with unconventional materials like newspaper or cardboard. Eventually

I went on to win several awards, showcased my art in numerous galleries and magazines, and became President of National Art Honors Society. Taking four years of art hasn't just taught me to be creative, it's taught me that there are multiple solutions to a problem.

After high school I began to work on more difficult projects and I channeled my creativity into a different form of art - programming. I'm currently working on an individual project at the Schepens Institute at Harvard University. I'm writing a program in Matlab that can measure visual acuity and determine what prescription glasses someone would need. I ultimately plan to turn this into a smartphone app to be released to the general public.

The fact is that computer coding is in many ways similar to the talents and hobbies I enjoyed as a child--they all require finding creative ways to solve problems. While my motivation to solve these problems might have been a childlike sense of satisfaction in creating new things, I have developed a new and profound sense of purpose and desire to put my problem solving skills to better our world.

Will attend: University of Toronto

Transformers are not just for boys. I loved these amazing robots that could transform into planes and cars the first time I saw them in the toy store. The boys had all the samples, refusing to let me play with one. When I protested loudly to my mother, she gently chided me that Transformers were ugly and unfeminine. She was wrong.

When I moved from China to Canada, my initial excitement turned to dismay as my peers were not as understanding of my language barrier as I'd hoped. I joined the robotics team in a desperate attempt to find a community, though I doubted I would fit into the male-dominated field. Once I used physics to determine gear ratio, held a drill for the first time, and jumped into the pit to fix a robot, I was hooked.

I went back to China that summer to bring robotics to my friends. I asked them to join me in the technology room at my old school and showed them how to use power tools to create robot parts. I pitched my idea to the school principal and department heads. By the time I left China, my old school had a team.

Throughout the next year, I guided my Chinese team--only one of three that existed in the country--with the help of social media. I translated instructions, set building deadlines and coached them on how to answer judges' questions.

I returned to China a year later to lead my team through their first Chinese-hosted international competition. Immediately upon arrival to the competition, I gave the

Chinese head official important documents for urgent distribution. I knew all the Chinese teams would need careful instructions on the rules and procedures. I was surprised when the competition descended into confusion and chaos. Government policies against information sharing had blocked the Chinese teams from receiving information and the Chinese organizers hadn't distributed my documents. I decided to create another source of knowledge for my fledgling robotics teams.

It took me several weeks to create a sharing platform that students could access through the firewall. On it, I shared my experience and posted practical practice challenges. I received hundreds of shares and had dozens of discussion questions posted.

My platform's popularity created an unintended issue; it garnered the attention and reprimand of the Chinese robotics organizations. When a head official reached out to my Canadian mentors, warning them to stop my involvement with the Chinese teams, I was concerned. When a Chinese official publicly chastised me on a major robotics forum, I was heartbroken. They made it clear that my gender, my youth, and my information sharing approach was not what they wanted.

I considered quitting. But so many students reached out to me requesting help. I wanted to end unnecessary exclusion. I worked to enhance access to my platform. I convinced Amazon to sponsor my site, giving it access to worldwide high-speed servers. Although I worried about repercussions, I continued to translate and share important documents.

During the busy building season, my platform is swamped with discussions, questions and downloads. I have organized a group of friends to help me monitor the platform daily so that no question or request is left unanswered. Some of my fears have come true: I have been banned from several Chinese robotics forums. I am no longer allowed to attend Chinese robotics competitions in China as a mentor. The Chinese government has taken down my site more than once.

Robotics was my first introduction to the wonderful world of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. I am dedicated to the growth of robotics in places where it is needed and wanted. I have used my hands and mind to tear down all barriers that separate people, no matter gender or nationality, from the inspiration and exploration of STEM.

Transformers, robotics and STEM are for boys and girls, even in China.

Will attend: Rice

I'm no stranger to contrast. A Chinese American with accented Chinese, a Florida-born Texan, a first generation American with a British passport: no label fits me without a caveat.

But I've always strived to find connections among the dissimilar. In my home across the sea, although my relatives' rapid Mandarin sails over my head, in them I recognize the same work ethic that carried my parents out of rural Shanghai to America, that fueled me through sweltering marching band practices and over caffeinated late nights. I even spend my free time doing nonograms, grid-based logic puzzles solved by using clues to fill in seemingly random pixels to create a picture.

It started when I was a kid. One day, my dad captured my fickle kindergartner attention (a herculean feat) and taught me Sudoku. As he explained the rules, those mysterious scaffoldings of numbers I often saw on his computer screen transformed into complex structures of logic built by careful strategy.

From then on, I wondered if I could uncover the hidden order behind other things in my life. In elementary school, I began to recognize patterns in the world around me: thin, dark clouds signaled rain, the moon changed shape every week, and the best snacks were the first to go. I wanted to know what unseen rules affected these things and how they worked. My parents, both pipeline engineers, encouraged this inquisitiveness and sometimes tried explaining to me how they solved puzzles in their own work. Although I didn't understand the particulars, their analytical mindsets helped me muddle through math homework and optimize matches in Candy Crush.

In high school, I studied by linking concepts across subjects as if my coursework was another puzzle to solve. PEMDAS helped me understand appositive phrases, and the catalysts for revolutions resembled chemical isotopes, nominally different with the same properties.

As I grew older, my interests expanded to include the delicate systems of biology, the complexity of animation, and the nuances of language. Despite these subjects' apparent dissimilarity, each provided fresh, fascinating perspectives on the world with approaches like color theory and evolution. I was (and remain) voracious for the new and unusual, spending hours entrenched in Wikipedia articles on obscure topics, i.e. classical ciphers or dragons, and analyzing absurdist YouTube videos.

Unsurprisingly, like pilot fish to their sharks, my career aspirations followed my varied passions: one day I wanted to be an illustrator, the next a biochemist, then a stand-up

comedian. When it came to narrowing down the choices, narrowing down myself, I felt like nothing would satisfy my ever-fluctuating intellectual appetite.

But when I discovered programming, something seemed to settle. In computer science, I had found a field where I could be creative, explore a different type of language, and (yes) solve puzzles. Coding let me both analyze logic in its purest form and manipulate it to accomplish anything from a simple “print ‘hello world’” to creating functional games. Even when lines of red error messages fill my console, debugging offered me the same thrill as a particularly good puzzle. Now, when I see my buggy versions of Snake, Paint, and Pacman in my files, I’m filled paradoxically with both satisfaction and a restless itch to improve the code and write new, better programs.

While to others my life may seem like a jumble of incompatible fragments, like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece connects to become something more. However, there are still missing pieces at the periphery: experiences to have, knowledge to gain, bad jokes to tell. Someday I hope to solve the unsolvable. But for now, I’ve got a nonogram with my name on it.

Will attend: Rice University

Growing up, my world was basketball. My summers were spent between the two solid black lines. My skin was consistently tan in splotches and ridden with random scratches. My wardrobe consisted mainly of track shorts, Nike shoes, and tournament t-shirts. Gatorade and Fun Dip were my pre-game snacks. The cacophony of rowdy crowds, ref whistles, squeaky shoes, and scoreboard buzzers was a familiar sound. I was the team captain of almost every team I played on—familiar with the Xs and Os of plays, commander of the court, and the coach’s right hand girl.

But that was only me on the surface.

Deep down I was an East-Asian influenced bibliophile and a Young Adult fiction writer.

Hidden in the cracks of a blossoming collegiate level athlete was a literary fiend. I devoured books in the daylight. I crafted stories at night time. After games, after practice, after conditioning I found nooks of solitude. Within these moments, I became engulfed in a world of my own creation. Initially, I only read young adult literature, but I grew to enjoy literary fiction and self-help: Kafka, Dostoevsky, Branden, Csikszentmihalyi. I expanded my bubble to Google+ critique groups, online discussion groups, blogs, writing competitions and clubs. I wrote my first novel in fifth grade, my second in seventh grade, and started my third in ninth grade. Reading was instinctual. Writing was impulsive.

I stumbled upon the movies of Hayao Miyazaki at a young age. I related a lot to the underlying East Asian philosophy present in his movies. My own perspective on life, growth, and change was echoed in his storytelling. So, I read his autobiographies, watched anime, and researched ancient texts—*Analects*, *The Way*, *Art of War*. Then, I discovered the books of Haruki Murakami whom I now emulate in order to improve my writing.

Like two sides of a coin, I lived in two worlds. One world was outward—aggressive, noisy, invigorating; the other, internal—tempestuous, serene, nuanced.

Internal and external conflict ensued. Many times I was seen only as an athlete and judged by the stereotypes that come with it: self-centered, unintelligent, listens to rap. But off the court, I was more reflective, empathetic and I listened to music like Florence and the Machine. I was even sometimes bullied for not acting “black enough.” My teammates felt that my singular focus should be basketball and found it strange that I participated in so many extracurriculars.

But why should I be one-dimensional? I had always been motivated to reach the pinnacle of my potential in whatever I was interested in. Why should I be defined by only one aspect of my life? I felt like I had to pick one world.

Then I had an ACL injury. And then another. And then another.

After the first ACL surgery, my family and I made the decision to homeschool. I knew I wanted to explore my many interests—literature, novel writing, East Asian culture, and basketball—equally. So I did. I found time to analyze *Heart of Darkness* and used my blog to instruct adult authors how to become self-published authors. I researched Shintoism, read dozens of books on writing and self-improvement. My sister and I had been talking for a while about starting a nonprofit focused on social awareness, education, and community outreach. Finally, we had the time to do it.

While basketball has equipped me with leadership skills and life experiences, it is only one part of who I am. As a socially aware, intellectual, and introspective individual, I value creative expression and independence. My life’s mission is to reach my full potential in order to help others reach their own.

Will attend: NYU

My grandparents fled Pakistan to India amidst the joy and mayhem of the 1947 partition. As they created new lives and pursued educations in engineering, they found stability and hope. Ever since, all twenty-two members of my father’s family inherited the gene for studying engineering.

Except me.

While I appreciated how engineering allowed for the creation of innovative ideas, I realized that society could benefit only if the appropriate mindset accompanied the usage of these new innovations. And I believe the key to understanding and developing this mindset is Economics.

Over the years, the hours I spent reading economic journals, analyzing trends on the NYSE and watching university lectures allowed me to connect the performance of the economy with the decisions individuals in society make. As I moved nine times to three countries while growing up, I gained insight into the differences that exist across societies and knowing that these trends could be understood provided me hope as I moved around the world and sought to integrate myself into new communities.

Economics also provided me a unique lens for observing how countries’ differing reactions to large-scale economic problems can influence the everyday lives of its citizens. In a thirty-second trek from my house in India, for example, I could walk to neighborhoods composed of shacks,

but also to mansions with private pools and spas. I also saw class warfare outside my own house in India in the form of arguments between the extremely wealthy and those who are poor and disenfranchised. I saw how Switzerland's isolationist policies have led it to maintain a separate currency from the Eurozone and take a hands-off approach to economic policy, leading to less anxiety amongst consumers in light of the present uncertainty in European markets. In addition, while India's decision to intervene and demonetize its currency in November has curbed illegal black money, it has also negatively affected the lives of those whose living depended on it.

Over time, my life experiences and interest in economics have given me insight into the steps I can take to help alleviate these disparities. In 2014 I launched a project called Water is Life to provide a reliable water filtration system for a village in Morocco. We took inspiration from nature, life's most profound idea guru, and chose a filter that leveraged gravity, didn't require electricity, and lasted up to three years. Being both imaginative and pragmatic allowed me to be open to unconventional solutions but also set achievable goals. This year, I'll be passing the baton to the next batch of environmental economics students and we'll communicate our vision to expand our project to Ghana, Nepal and Tanzania in the hopes of instilling a greater sense of purpose and desire to continue tangibly impacting the lives of others.

This year I also founded an Economics Club, providing a platform for discussions on issues of economic interest beyond reading The Economist. The readings, video lectures and talks by reputed economists helped our group gain in-depth knowledge on topics briefly mentioned in classes. By making connections to real life, I have not only been able to help my peers understand underlying assumptions, but also learned how to adapt my mentoring style for different members.

The world I live in now is vastly different from that of my parents and grandparents. But in the same way that my experiences have helped me move beyond old ways of thinking, I think we as citizens of the world must dismantle old ways of thinking about our roles as individuals living in a global economy. Only then can we build new and progressive ones that allow us to increase utility for all.

In the future, I hope to create long-term solutions to basic economic problems and by studying business and finance, I hope to make sustainable, growth-focused investments to benefit society as a whole.

Will attend: Amherst

My story begins at about the age of two, when I first learned what a maze was. For most people, solving mazes is a childish phase, but I enjoyed artistically designing them. Eventually my creations jumped from their two dimensional confinement, requiring the solver to dive through holes to the other side, or fold part of the paper over, then right back again. At around the age of eight, I invented a way for mazes to carry binary-encoded messages, with left turns and right turns representing 0s and 1s. This evolved into a base-3 maze on the surface of a tetrahedron, with crossing an edge representing a 2. For me, a blank piece of paper represented the freedom to explore new dimensions, pushing the boundaries of traditional maze making.

I found a similar freedom in mathematics. Here's what I wrote when I was 9:

$$N+B=Z$$

$$M^2=P$$

$$\begin{aligned}
E-(L+B)&=G \\
C/Y&=Z-Q \\
B+B&=Y \\
(D-V)^9-(P*L)&=J \\
W&=(I-V)^2 \\
Y+B+C&=R \\
O^2+(Y*O)&=T \\
F^3-(T+W)&=F^2 \\
V-R&=H-U \\
A^3-C&=N \\
Y^2+B&=L \\
J^2-J&=J+(P+I) \\
Y^3&=X \\
X-R&=M-O \\
D*A-B-(V+Y)&=E \\
U-X-O&=W \\
P/P&=B \\
S-A&=U \\
(Z+B)*C&=P \\
C(+/-)B&=A \\
U+C&=H \\
R-L&=S-T
\end{aligned}$$

The object of puzzles like these was to solve for every letter, assuming they each represented a unique positive integer, and that both sides of each equation are positive. These are not typical assumptions for practical mathematics, and I didn't even need 26 equations. Upon formally learning algebra, I was dismayed that "proper math" operated under a different set of assumptions, that two variables can be equal, or be non-integers, and that you always need as many equations as variables. Yet looking back, I now see that mathematics was so inspirational because there really is no "proper" way, no convention to hold me from discovering a completely original method of thought. Math was, and still is, yet another way for me to freely express my creativity and different way of thinking without constraint.

It's all about freedom. The thoughts are there, they just need a way to escape. The greatest single advancement that delivered even more freedom was my first computer, and on it, one of the first computer games I ever played: "Maze Madness." It was a silly and simple game, but I remember being awed that I could create my own levels. Through the years, I've made thousands (not exaggerating) of levels in a variety of different computer games. I get most excited when I discover a bug that I can incorporate to add a new twist to the traditional gameplay.

A few years ago I grew tired of working within the constraints of most internet games and I wanted to program my own, so I decided to learn the language of Scratch. With it, I created several computer games, incorporating such unordinary aspects of gameplay as the avoidance of time-travel paradoxes, and the control of "jounce," the fourth derivative of position with respect to time. Eventually, I came to realize that Scratch was too limited to implement some of my ideas, so I learned C#, and my potential expanded exponentially. I continue to study programming knowing that the more I learn, the more tools I have to express my creativity.

I plan to design computer systems that are as outside of the box as my thoughts. And who knows where it will lead? My way of thinking in different dimensions could be the very thing separating computers from humans, and it could motivate the creation of true artificial

intelligence. To me, studying computer science is the next step of an evolution of boundary breaking that has been underway since my first maze.

Will attend: UCLA Might be good for #6

It was too long ago for me to remember well, but my parents tell stories about how even at only three years old I would beg them to buy me a musical instrument toy every time we went to Walmart. I remember spending countless hours perusing through the “Musical Instruments” demo CD that came with our copy of Windows 98, fascinated by the sounds of the various instruments. Not long after, at 5 years old, I picked up the violin. However, I started lessons not just for an “enriching extracurricular experience,” but so I could make the same sounds I was hearing.

When I was 6, my dad gave me a copy of Cakewalk Studio and introduced me to computer music composition. I used Cakewalk some, but at the time I was too young to understand the software. Most of the time I just plotted random notes into the MIDI sequencer or listened to the example projects.

When I was 10 years old, I started collecting various instruments. Before long, I had a collection of pennywhistles, recorders, a bass, an electronic drumset and even a small saxophone-like instrument called the Xaphoon. I would spend hours at a time in my room experimenting, seeing how they made sound, and how I could manipulate them to make the sounds I wanted. I even taught myself to play drums and bass at a fairly decent level. At this time, I was still doing some composing using Sibelius 4, but my knowledge of computers and music hadn’t quite matured yet.

I only really started writing music when I discovered chiptune, a genre of music that uses the unique sounds of vintage computers and video game consoles, and began writing music using a Gameboy. Before, I felt overwhelmed with all the possibilities that were available in Cakewalk and Sibelius, but the limitations of the Gameboy (three monophonic sound channels and one white noise generator) freed me up creatively. Instead, I could concentrate on using those 4 channels in unique and interesting ways. Through this and my interaction with the online chiptune community, I have made friends all over the world and even gathered a small following. I also had the opportunity to compose music for a yet-to-be-released indie game.

My experiences with chiptune also fostered my interest in Computer Science. Chiptune often uses old technology (Commodore 64, ZX Spectrum, Amiga), so I had to understand how these machines worked. I found that I enjoyed learning about those computers, and decided to take AP Computer Science. It was the first year that the class was offered, and the teacher was trying an “open classroom” environment where students learned at their own pace mostly without a teacher. Since I tended to be one of the faster students, I worked with the teacher to streamline the course, creating a syllabus that pruned unnecessary topics, assigned only the most useful chapter exercises, and had more definite deadlines.

Now, my goal is to merge my interests in music composition and computer science by becoming a part of the demoscene. The demoscene is a niche community that produces demos, non-interactive programming art pieces that push the systems to their absolute limits, with feats such as complex real-time 3D animation on 80s computers and 15-minute animations squeezed into only 128 kilobytes of memory. I want not only to become a part of this rich underground

community, but also to help bring some of their techniques to the commercial software world. With the rise in computing power, programs have grown more complex, and now often are larger than necessary, leading to slower performance. On the other hand, compacted software runs more efficiently. In today's fast-moving society, where efficiency and speed are prized, it is unacceptable that our quickest and most powerful machines are not working at their fastest when they very well could be.