

# 14 College Essay Examples From Top-25 Universities (2022–2023)

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## College essay examples from students accepted to Harvard, Stanford, and other elite schools

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### College essay example #1

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**This is a college essay that worked for Harvard University.**

*This past summer, I had the privilege of participating in the University of Notre Dame's Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program. Under the mentorship of Professor Wendy Bozeman and Professor Georgia Lebedev from the department of Biological Sciences, my goal this summer was to research the effects of cobalt iron oxide cored (CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>) titanium dioxide (TiO<sub>2</sub>) nanoparticles as a scaffold for drug delivery, specifically in the delivery of a compound known as curcumin, a flavonoid known for its anti-inflammatory effects. As a high school student trying to find a research opportunity, it was very difficult to find a place that was willing to take me in, but after many months of trying, I sought the help of my high school biology teacher, who used his resources to help me obtain a position in the program.*

*Using equipment that a high school student could only dream of using, I was able to map apoptosis (programmed cell death) versus necrosis (cell death due to damage) in HeLa cells, a cervical cancer line, after treating them with curcumin-bound nanoparticles. Using flow cytometry to excite each individually suspended cell with a laser, the scattered light from the cells helped to determine which cells were living, had died from apoptosis or had died from necrosis. Using this collected data, it was possible to determine if the curcumin and/or the nanoparticles had played any significant role on the cervical cancer cells. Later, I was able to image cells in 4D through con-focal microscopy. From growing HeLa cells to trying to kill them with different compounds, I was able to gain the hands-on experience necessary for me to realize once again why I love science.*

*Living on the Notre Dame campus with other REU students, UND athletes, and other summer school students was a whole other experience that prepared me for the world beyond high school. For 9 weeks, I worked, played and bonded with the other students, and had the opportunity to live the life of an independent college student.*

*Along with the individually tailored research projects and the housing opportunity, there were seminars on public speaking, trips to the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, and one-on-one writing seminars for the end of the summer research papers we were each required to write. By the end of the summer, I wasn't ready to leave the research that I was doing. While my research didn't yield definitive results for the effects of curcumin on cervical cancer cells, my research on curcumin-functionalized CoFe<sub>2</sub>O<sub>4</sub>/TiO<sub>2</sub> core-shell nanoconjugates indicated that there were many unknown factors affecting the HeLa cells, and spurred the lab to expand their research into determining whether or not the timing of the drug delivery mattered and whether or not the position of the binding site of the drugs would alter the results. Through this summer experience, I realized my ambition to pursue a career in research. I always knew that I would want to pursue a future in science, but the exciting world of research where the discoveries are limitless has captured my heart. This school year, the REU program has offered me a year-long job, and despite my obligations as a high school senior preparing for college, I couldn't give up this offer, and so during this school year, I will be able to further both my research and interest in nanotechnology.*

## **College essay example #2**

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**This student was admitted to Harvard University.**

*I believe that humans will always have the ability to rise above any situation, because life is what you make of it. We don't know what life is or why we are in this world; all we know, all we feel, is that we must protect it anyway we can. Buddha said it clearly: "Life is suffering." Life is meant to be challenging, and really living requires consistent work and review. By default, life is difficult because we must strive to earn happiness and success.*

*Yet I've realized that life is fickle than I had imagined; it can disappear or change at any time. Several of my family members left this world in one last beating symphony; heart attacks seem to be a trend in my family. They left like birds; laughing one minute and in a better place the next.*

*Steve Jobs inspired me, when in his commencement address to Stanford University in 2005, he said "Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma--which is living with the results of other people's thinking." I want to make mistakes, because that is how I learn; I want to follow the beat of my own drum even if it is "out of tune." The important thing is to live without regrets, so when my heart ceases to beat, it will make one last happy note and move on.*

*I want to live my life daily. Every day I want to live. Every morning when I wake up, I want to be excited by the gift of a new day. I know I am being idealistic and young, and that my philosophy on life is comparable to a calculus limit; I will never reach it. But I won't give up on it because, I can still get infinitely close and that is amazing.*

*Every day is an apology to my humanity; because I am not perfect, I get to try again and again to "get it right." I breathe the peace of eternity, knowing that this stage is temporary; real existence is continuous. The hourglass of life incessantly trickles on and we are powerless to stop it.*

*So, I will forgive and forget, love and inspire, experience and satire, laugh and cry, accomplish and fail, live and die. This is how I want to live my life, with this optimistic attitude that every day is a second chance. All the time, we have the opportunity to renew our perspective on life, to correct our mistakes, and to simply move on. Like the phoenix I will continue to rise from the ashes, experienced and renewed. I will not waste time for my life is already in flux.*

*In all its splendor  
The Phoenix rises  
In a burst of orange and yellow  
It soars in the baby blue sky  
Heading to that Great Light  
Baptized in the dance of time  
Fearless, eternal, beautiful  
It releases a breathtaking aurora  
And I gasp at the enormity*

### **College essay example #3**

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**This is a college essay that worked for Duke University.**

*As soon as the patient room door opened, the worst stench I have ever encountered hit me square in the face. Though I had never smelled it before, I knew instinctively what it was: rotting flesh. A small, elderly woman sat in a wheelchair, dressed in a hospital gown and draped in blankets from the neck down with only her gauze-wrapped right leg peering out from under the green material. Dr. Q began unwrapping the leg, and there was no way to be prepared for what I saw next: gangrene-rotted tissue and blackened, dead toes.*

*Never before had I seen anything this gruesome—as even open surgery paled in comparison. These past two years of shadowing doctors in the operating room have been important for me in solidifying my commitment to pursue medicine, but this situation proved that time in the operating room alone did not quite provide a complete, accurate perspective of a surgeon's occupation. Doctors in the operating room are calm, cool, and collected, making textbook incisions with machine-like, detached precision. It is a profession founded solely on skill and technique—or so I thought. This grisly experience exposed an entirely different side of this profession I hope to pursue.*

*Feeling the tug of nausea in my stomach, I forced my gaze from the terrifying wound onto the hopeful face of the ailing woman, seeking to objectively analyze the situation as Dr. Q was struggling to do himself. Slowly and with obvious difficulty, Dr. Q explained that an infection this severe calls for an AKA: Above the Knee Amputation. In the slow, grave silence that ensued, I reflected on how this desperate patient's very life rests in the hands of a man who has dedicated his entire life to making such difficult decisions as these. I marveled at the compassion in Dr. Q's promise that this aggressive approach would save the woman's life. The patient wiped her watery eyes and smiled a long, sad smile. "I trust you, Doc. I trust you." She shook Dr. Q's hand, and the doctor and I left the room.*

*Back in his office, Dr. Q addressed my obvious state of contemplation: "This is the hardest part about what we do as surgeons," he said, sincerely. "We hurt to heal, and often times people cannot understand that. However, knowing that I'm saving lives every time I operate makes the stress completely worth it."*

*Suddenly, everything fell into place for me. This completely different perspective broadened my understanding of the surgical field and changed my initial perception of who and what a surgeon was. I not only want to help those who are ill and injured, but also to be entrusted with difficult decisions the occupation entails. Discovering that surgery is also a moral vocation beyond the generic application of a trained skill set encouraged me. I now understand surgeons to be much more complex practitioners of medicine, and I am certain that this is the field for me.*

## **College essay example #4**

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**This is a supplemental essay that worked for Stanford University.**

*In most conventional classrooms, we are taught to memorize material. We study information to regurgitate it on a test and forget it the following day. I thought this was learning. But this past summer, I realized I was wrong.*

*I attended the SPK Program, a five-week enrichment program with New Jersey's best and brightest students. I lived on a college campus with 200 students and studied a topic. I selected Physical Science. On the first day of class, our teacher set a box on the table and poured water into the top, and nothing came out. Then, he poured more water in, and everything slowly came out. We were told to figure out what had happened with no phones or textbooks, just our brains. We worked together to discover in the box was a siphon, similar to what is used to pump gas. We spent the next weeks building solar ovens, studying the dynamic of paper planes, diving into the content of the speed of light and space vacuums, among other things. We did this with no textbooks, flashcards, or information to memorize.*

*During those five weeks, we were not taught impressive terminology or how to ace the AP Physics exam. We were taught how to think. More importantly, we were taught how to think together. Learning is not memorization or a competition. Learning is working together to solve the problems around us and better our community. To me, learning is the means to a better future, and that's exciting.*

## **College essay example #5**

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**This is a college essay that worked for University of Pennsylvania (UPenn).**

*When I was thirteen and visiting Liberia, I contracted what turned out to be yellow fever. I met with the local doctor, but he couldn't make a diagnosis simply because he didn't have access to blood tests and because symptoms such as "My skin feels like it's on fire" matched many tropical diseases. Luckily, my family managed to drive me several hours away to an urban hospital, where I was treated. Yellow fever shouldn't be fatal, but in Africa it often is. I couldn't believe that such a solvable issue could be so severe at the time—so I began to explore.*

*The exploration led me to the African Disease Prevention Project (ADPP), a non-profit organization associated with several universities. I decided to create the first high school branch of the organization; I liked its unique way of approaching health and social issues. Rather than just raising money and channeling it through third parties, each branch "adopts" one village and travels there to provide for its basic needs. As branch president, I organize events from small stands at public gatherings to 60-person dinner fundraisers in order to raise both money and awareness. I've learned how to encourage my peers to meet deadlines, to work around 30 different schedules at once, and to give presentations convincing people why my organization is worth their donation. But overall, ADPP has taught me that small changes can have immense impacts. My branch has helped raise almost \$3,000 to build water sanitation plants, construct medical clinics, and develop health education programs in the small village of Zwedru. And the effect doesn't stop there—by improving one area, our efforts permeate into neighboring villages as they mimic the lifestyle changes that they observe nearby—simple things, like making soap available—can have a big effect. The difference between ADPP and most other organizations is its emphasis on the basics and making changes that last. Working towards those changes to solve real life problems is what excites me.*

*I found that the same idea of change through simple solutions also rang true during my recent summer internship at Dr. Martin Warner's lab at UCLA. Dr. Martin's vision involves using already available digital technologies to improve the individualization of healthcare. By using a person's genome to tailor a treatment for them or using someone's personal smartphone as a mobile-monitor to remotely diagnose symptoms, everyday technology is harnessed to make significant strides forward. At the lab, I focused on parsing through medical databases and writing programs that analyze cancerous*

genomes to find relationships between certain cancers and drugs. My analysis resulted in a database of information that physicians can use to prescribe treatments for their patients' unique cancerous mutations. Now, a pancreatic cancer patient does not need to be the "guinea-pig" for a prototype drug to have a shot at survival: a doctor can choose the best treatment by examining the patient individually instead of relying on population-wide trends. For the first time in my science career, my passion was going to have an immediate effect on other people, and to me, that was enthralling. Dr. Martin's lab and his book, *Digital Healthcare: A New Age of Medicine*, have shown me that changing something as simple as how we treat a disease can have a huge impact. I have found that the search for the holy grail of a "cure for cancer" is problematic as nobody knows exactly what it is or where to look—but we can still move forward without it.

Working with Project ADPP and participating in medical research have taught me to approach problems in a new way. Whether it's a complex genetic disease or a tropical fever, I've found that taking small steps often is the best approach. Finding those steps and achieving them is what gets me excited and hungry to explore new solutions in the future.

## College essay example #6

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**This student was admitted to UC Berkeley.**

*The phenomenon of interdependency, man depending on man for survival, has shaped centuries of human civilization. However, I feel, the youth of today are slowly disconnecting from their community. For the past few years, human connection has intrigued me and witnessing the apathy of my peers has prompted me to engage in various leadership positions in order to motivate them to complete community service and become active members of society.*

*Less than a year before ninth grade began, my cousin and close friend passed away from cancer, and in the hodge-podge of feelings, I did not emotionally deal with either death. However, a simple tale helped me deal with these deaths and take action.*

*I was never fully aware of how closely humans rely upon each other until I read *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia in freshman year. The allegory is about a leaf that changes with the seasons, finally dying in the winter, realizing that his purpose was to help the tree thrive. After reading it, I was enlightened on the cycle of life and realized the tremendous impact my actions had on others.*

*Last year, I joined the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life, a twenty-four-hour relay walk-a-thon designed to raise funds for cancer research and create awareness about its early detection. I started a team at school, gathered thirty students and chaperones, and raised \$800 for the cause. I watched as each student created friendships with other students on our team and members of the Phoenix community. This year, I let a team in*

*the relay for life again with the schoolwide team of 95 members, and we raised \$2,900 for the cure for cancer. At first the group leadership consisted of only my advisor in me; however, I gained the support of the administrators. I spent well over an hour a day preparing for the event, and it was all worth it!*

*The Sonora Eagles were students of different grade levels, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational ability. We joked and played football while volunteering. The most important moment occurred during the night's luminaria ceremony, during which cancer patients of the past and present were commemorated. Our whole team gathered around, and I asked people to share how they have been affected by cancer. As I went through the crowd, their faces illuminated by candlelight, their cheeks were wet with cleansing tears, I realize the impact I had on them, the purpose I was fulfilling; but most importantly, I realized the impact they had had on me. The Sonora Eagles were my means for dealing with the death of my loved ones to cancer.*

*The theme for relay for life is a hope for a cure. Through this experience as a leader, I have come to realize, as a community, we hope together, we dream together, we work together, and we succeed together. This is the phenomenon of interdependency, the interconnectedness of life, the pivotal reason for human existence. I have continued this momentum by starting a Sonora High School chapter of American Cancer Society Youth, a club dedicated to youth involvement and several aspects of the American Cancer Society, including the recent Arizona Proposition 45.*

*Each one of us leaves find a legacy as we for fill our purpose in life. I believe my purpose as a student is to encourage others to become active community members and motivate them to reach new heights. As a student of the University of California, I will contribute my understanding of the human condition and student motivation to help strengthen student relationships within the campus and throughout the community.*

## **College essay example #7**

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**This is a college essay that worked for Cornell University.**

*My fingers know instinctively, without a thought. They turn the dial, just as they have hundreds of times before, until a soft, metallic click echoes into my eardrum and triggers their unconscious stop. I exultantly thrust open my locker door, exposing its deepest bowels candidly to the wide halls of the high school. The bright lights shine back, brashly revealing every crevice, nook, and cranny, gleaming across its scintillating, bare surfaces. On this first day of senior year, I set out upon my task. I procure an ordinary plastic grocery bag from my backpack. The contents inside collectively represent everything about me in high school – they tell a story, one all about me.*

*I reach in and let my fingers trail around the surfaces of each object. I select my first prey arbitrarily, and as I raise my hand up to eye level, I closely examine this chosen one. A miniature Flamenco dancer stares back at me from the confines of the 3-D rectangular magnet, half popping out as if willing herself to come to life. Instantly, my mind transports me back a few summers before, when I tapped my own heels to traditional music in Spain. I am reminded of my thirst to travel, to explore new cultures utterly different from my familiar home in Modesto, California. I have experienced study abroad in Spain, visited my father's hometown in China five times, and traveled to many other places such as Paris. As a result, I have developed a restlessness inside me, a need to move on from four years in the same high school, to take advantage of diverse opportunities whenever possible, and to meet interesting people.*

*I take out the next magnet from my plastic bag. This one shows a panoramic view of the city of Santa Barbara, California. Here, I recall spending six weeks in my glory, not only studying and learning, but actually pursuing new knowledge to add to the repertoire of mankind. I could have easily chosen to spend my summer lazing about; in fact, my parents tried to persuade me into taking a break. Instead, I chose to do advanced molecular biology research at Stanford University. I wanted to immerse myself in my passion for biology and dip into the infinitely rich possibilities of my mind. This challenge was so rewarding to me, while at the same time I had the most fun of my life, because I was able to live with people who shared the same kind of drive and passion as I did.*

*After sticking up my magnets on the locker door, I ran my fingers across the bottom of the bag, and I realized that one remained. It was a bold, black square, with white block letters proclaiming my motto, "Live the Life You Imagine." In my four years at Cornell University, I will certainly continue to live life as I imagine, adding my own flavor to the Cornell community, while taking away invaluable experiences of my own.*

## **College essay example #8**

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**This student was admitted to Northwestern University.**

*As I sip a mug of hot chocolate on a dreary winter's day, I am already planning in my mind what I will do the next summer. I briefly ponder the traditional routes, such as taking a job or spending most of the summer at the beach. However, I know that I want to do something unique. I am determined to even surpass my last summer, in which I spent one month with a host family in Egypt and twelve days at a leadership conference in New York City. The college courses I have taken at Oregon State University since the summer after 7th grade will no longer provide the kind of challenge I seek.*

*Six months later, I step off the airplane to find myself surrounded by palm trees, with a view of the open-air airport. I chuckle to myself about the added bonus of good weather, but I know I have come to Palo Alto, California, with a much higher purpose in mind. I*



*will spend six weeks here in my glory, not only studying and learning, but actually pursuing new knowledge to add to the repertoire of mankind. Through the Stanford Institutes of Medicine Summer Research Program, I will earn college credit by conducting original molecular biology research, writing my own research paper, and presenting my findings in a research symposium.*

*I decided to spend my summer doing research because I knew that I liked scientific thought, and that I would passionately throw myself into any new challenge. I always want to know more – to probe deeper into the laws of the universe, to explore the power and beauty of nature, to solve the most complicated problems. I have an insatiable curiosity and a desire to delve deeper down in the recesses of my intellect. At the Summer Research Program, I found out how much I enjoy thinking critically, solving problems, and applying my knowledge to the real world.*

*While pursuing research in California, I was also able to meet many similarly motivated, interesting people from across the United States and abroad. As I learned about their unique lifestyles, I also shared with them the diverse perspectives I have gained from my travel abroad and my Chinese cultural heritage. I will never forget the invaluable opportunity I had to explore California along with these bright people.*

*I could have easily chosen to spend that summer the traditional way; in fact, my parents even tried to persuade me into taking a break. Instead, I chose to do molecular biology research at Stanford University. I wanted to immerse myself in my passion for biology and dip into the infinitely rich possibilities of my mind. This challenge was so rewarding to me, while at the same time I had the most fun of my life, because I was able to live with people who share the same kind of drive and passion as I do.*

## **College essay example #9**

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**This student was admitted to Harvard University.**

*When I turned twelve, my stepdad turned violent. He became a different person overnight, frequently getting into fights with my mom. I didn't deal with it well, often crying to my mom's disappointment, afraid that my life would undo itself in a matter of seconds. You might say that my upbringing was characterized by my parents morphing everyday objects into weapons and me trying to morph into the perfect white walls that stood unmoving while my family fell apart.*

*This period in my life is not a sob story, but rather, the origin story of my love of writing. During a fight once, my stepdad left the house to retrieve a baseball bat from his truck. He didn't use it, but I'll never forget the fear that he would, how close he'd gotten. And in that*

*moment, I did not cry as I was prone to do, but I pulled out a book, and experienced a profound disappearance, one that would always make me associate reading with escapism and healing.*

*Soon I came to write, filling up loose ruled paper with words, writing in the dark when we didn't have money to pay for electricity. And as I got older, I began to think that there must be others who were going through this, too. I tried to find them. I created an anonymous blog that centered what it meant for a teenager to find joy even as her life was in shambles. In this blog I kept readers updated with what I was learning, nightly yoga to release tension from the day and affirmations in the morning to counter the shame that was mounting as a result of witnessing weekly my inability to make things better at home.*

*At that time, I felt uncertain about who I was because I was different online than I was at home or even at school where I was editor of my high school literary journal. It took me a while to understand that I was not the girl who hid in the corner making herself small; I was the one who sought to connect with others who were dealing with the same challenges at home, thinking that maybe in our isolation we could come together. I was able to make enough from my blog to pay some bills in the house and give my mom the courage to kick my stepfather out. When he exited our home, I felt a wind go through it, the house exhaling a giant sigh of relief.*

*I know this is not the typical background of most students. Sharing my story with like-minded teens helped me understand what I have to offer: my perspective, my unrelenting optimism. Because even as I've seen the dark side of what people are capable of, I have also been a star witness to joy and love. I do not experience despair for long because I know that this is just one chapter in a long novel, one that will change the hearts of those who come across it. And I can't wait to see how it will end.*

## **College essay example #10**

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**This student was accepted at Yale University.**

*I was a straight A student until I got to high school, where my calm evenings cooking dinner for my siblings turned into hours watching videos, followed by the frantic attempt to finish homework around 4 am. When I got an F on a chemistry pop quiz my mom sat me down to ask me what was happening. I told her I couldn't focus or keep track of all my materials for classes. I thought she would call me lazy, accuse me of wasting the gift of being an American that she and my father gave me. Instead, she looked around at the walls covered in sticky notes, the index cards scattered on the computer desk, the couch, the table, and she said, "How are your friends managing it?"*

*It turned out while my peers were struggling to juggle the demands of high school it didn't seem like they were working as hard to complete simple tasks. They only had to put things in a planner, not make sure the deadlines were placed in multiple locations, physical and digital. At my next doctor's appointment my mom mentioned that I had a learning problem, but the doctor shook his head and said that I didn't seem to have ADHD. I was just procrastinating, it's natural.*

*My mom took off from her grocery store job to take me to two more appointments to ask about ADHD, the term the doctor had used, but other doctors were not willing to listen. I had As in every class except for World Literature. But I knew something was wrong. After our third doctor visit, I worked with the librarian after school to sift through research on ADHD and other learning disabilities until we came across the term executive functioning. Armed with knowledge, we went to a new doctor, and before my mom could insist that we get testing or get referred to a specialist, the doctor handed us a signed referral. She asked me about the folder in my hand. I told her it was full of my research. My mom mentioned that some doctors had refused to refer us to a specialist because my grades were too high. "It's because we're Asian," she added.*

*I was shocked at this revelation. The last three doctors had mumbled something about grades but had never said a thing about race. Before I could deny it fervently, the doctor, who was from Taiwan, nodded sympathetically. She said it's common to miss learning disabilities among different races due to biases. And some adolescents learn to mask symptoms by building systems. "You don't have to prove anything to me. I believe you should get tested." My mom thanked her fervently and the doctor said to her, "She's going to be a great lawyer."*

*The semester following the confirmation of my learning disability diagnosis was challenging to say the least. My school switched me out of all of my IB courses to "accommodate my special needs," and I went back to the library, working with the librarian with numerous index cards and stacks of books to make a case for discrimination. The librarian, who had become my close confidante, introduced me to an academic tutor who specialized in learning disabilities and taught me skills like using redundancy and time management to make it easier for me to grapple with moving parts. He noted that with ADHD, the problem wasn't always the inability to focus but rather the difficulty focusing without adequate perceived reward. It wasn't that I was not capable but that I had to make myself sufficiently interested or reiterate why something mattered. This reframe changed my life, and when I came back to the library with my new schedule in hand, the most advanced courses my school had to offer, the librarian said, "You're going to make a great lawyer."*

*I smiled and said, "I've heard that before."*

## **College essay example #11**

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**This student was accepted at the University of Pennsylvania.**

*My brother and I are exactly one year and one day apart. We look like twins — people confuse us — but we couldn't be any more different. As children we wore the same clothes, received the same haircut. By the time we got to middle school it was clear that my older brother preferred quiet, indoor activities, while I was a born performer who preferred the theatrical, even when off stage. I took his relative silence to be disinterest and found it offensive. To the chagrin of my parents, we simply didn't get along.*

*I didn't mind having a tense relationship with my brother because I was involved at school. In particular I delved into the world of musical theater in addition to regularly singing solos at our high school choir concerts. I spent hours after school preparing for shows. And when I came home, I practiced as well, falling into a rigorous routine I thought I needed to remain at my best and be competitive for parts.*

*My bedroom was far enough from my parents so as not to disturb them, but space to practice became an issue with my brother because, well, we shared a room. Imagine him meditating on a window seat while I am belting, trying to sustain a high note. Needless to say, this created tension between us. From my point of view he could have meditated in the living room or while I was at practice, but he wasn't willing to budge. From his point of view, high school was hard enough without the constant sound of Glee arrangements.*

*At the start of the semester, I practiced "Circle of Life" for a concert audition. While I could sing it fine in its original key, I had a hard time singing it along with the music because the arrangement of the song we were working on had a key change that was out of my range. I couldn't change key without my voice cracking as I switched to a head voice. This was the first time I struggled to learn a song, and I was a week from the audition. I was irritable in that period and stopped practicing, declaring I had reached the height of my singing career. My brother experiencing quiet when I got home for the first time in years.*

*After a couple days of this, when I got home, he asked me to join him in meditation. And feeling my anger at my inability to navigate this song gracefully, I did. It was difficult at first. I was trying to clear my head. Later my brother told me that wasn't the point. When your mind drifts away, you simply come back, no judgment. I liked the sound of that, and it became my new philosophy. I kept trying at the song, no longer getting angry at myself, and just in time for the audition I was able to maintain power in my voice despite the key change. It was important for me to learn you don't have to always get everything right the first time and that good things come with continual effort. As for my brother, we no longer argue. I now understand why he prefers the quiet.*

**College essay example #12**

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**This student was admitted to Brown University.**

*My parents are aerospace engineers, humble even as their work helps our society explore new frontiers. They believe that you make a stand through the work that you do, not what you say. This is what they taught me. This is what I believed until my sophomore year when I was confronted with a moment where I could not stay quiet.*

*I live outside of a major city in a small, rural town that's majority white but for a small South Asian population. My high school wasn't diverse by any standards. Some students were openly the children of skinheads. After a racist exchange with a student who insulted her and refused to sit at the same lunch table, my best friend, who was Muslim, did not stand for the pledge of allegiance in homeroom the next day.*

*I hadn't heard about the encounter that sparked this move on her part and was surprised when she didn't stand up beside me, hand against her heart, mouth chanting an oath. She hadn't mentioned any mounting discomfort to me, nor had I noticed anything. Unlike my "patriotic" peers, I was less upset by her refusal to stand up for the pledge of allegiance and more upset that she didn't share with me that she was hurting and what she was going to do to protest how she was treated because of her beliefs and the color of her skin.*

*She was suspended for insubordination and when I called her, she said that surely in this situation I might find a way to think of more than my own feelings. I felt ashamed. It didn't even occur to me to seek to understand what was behind her decision in the first place. I apologized, asking how to best support her. She said it was just important that I listen and understand that she could not thrive in an environment that promoted sameness. She spoke to me with a vulnerability I had never heard before. At the end of our conversation, I apologized profusely. She said she did not need my words and what she needed from me was to take a stand.*

*This was the opposite of the belief my parents drilled in me. I felt conflicted at first, as if by speaking about the situation I was doing something wrong. However, my friend had to deal with a reality that I did not. And perhaps taking a stand would allow my institution and everyone in it to learn to be a more inclusive space for everyone. Maybe there was a way to take a stand and to do the necessary work to change things.*

*I started a petition with my friend's permission to end her suspension and to take disciplinary action instead on the student who had taken racist actions in the first place. Of the 1000 students at my high school, over 200 signed, a number that far exceeded my expectation. When I shared the results with my friend, she said to me, "Because of who you are, you will always have supporters. Use your power to do good."*

*Since then, I have tried to be more aware that not everyone experiences comfort in the same environments that I do. Rather than assume everyone feels safe and supported, it's best to create space to listen and to ask how you can be supportive. My friend and I created a club to foster cross-cultural dialogue. In the past year two other clubs of its kind*

began at other local schools. More than anything I am proud that I have learned to be a better friend and a more thoughtful community member in a way that honors who I am and what I value.

## College essay example #13

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**This is a college essay that worked for Washington University in St. Louis (WashU).**

*I held my breath as my steady hands gently nestled the crumbly roots of the lettuce plant into the soil trench that I shoveled moments before. Rainwater and sweat dripped from my brow as I meticulously patted and pressed the surrounding earth, stamping the leafy green creature into its new home. After rubbing the gritty soil off of my hands, I looked at Brian, a co-volunteer and nonverbal 20-year-old with autism, who extended his arm for a high-five. In the year that I've been working with him, I've watched him revel in planting, nurturing, and eventually harvesting his veggies, especially the grape tomatoes, which we enjoy eating fresh off the vine! Upon walking to the next row of hollowed cavities, we were not contemplating the lengthy work that lay ahead, but rather, we sought to liberate the helpless lettuces, imprisoned in produce cartons that were too small for them to grow in. Finally, after taking a step back to admire the day's last plant, my chest swelled as a wave of contentment flushed through my body.*

*My love for gardening began when I moved to Georgia during my sophomore year. In the time I've spent learning how to garden, I've developed an affinity for watching my vegetables grow to maturity, eager to be harvested and sold at the Saturday market. Though many see gardening as tedious busywork, I find it meditative, as I lose track of time while combining peat moss and soil in the garden's compost mixer. Saturday morning garden work has become a weekend ritual, ridding me of all extraneous responsibilities. My body goes into autopilot as I let my mind wander. I don't actively focus on focusing, but rather I observe myself internally digest the week's events. I'm a bystander to fireworks of thought that explode in my mind as my perception of important matters becomes trivial. Sometimes, it's the physics midterm that suddenly seems less daunting or the deadlines I need to meet for my Spanish project that push back farther. Other times, I contemplate alternative endings to conversations or make perfect sense of the calculus answer that was at the tip of my tongue in class.*

*I met Brian, a close friend of mine who also basks in the tranquility of nature, through my gardening endeavors. While we aren't able to communicate verbally, we speak the language of earth, water, peat, and seedlings. He doesn't speak with words, but his face tells stories of newly found purpose and acceptance, a pleasant contrast to the typical condescension and babying he feels by those who don't think he's capable of independent thought.*

*Throughout my time in the garden with Brian, I began to understand that he, like everyone, has a particular method of communicating. There are the obvious spoken languages, body languages, facial expressions, and interactions we share on a day-to-day basis that reflect who we are and communicate what we represent. Brian expresses himself through various manifestations of unspoken language that he uses to signal how he feels or what he wants. But the nuanced combinations of different methods of communicating are oftentimes overlooked, raising a barrier to mutual understanding that prevents one from being capable of truly connecting with others. I began to understand that in order to reach people, I have to speak in their language, be it verbally or otherwise. Working with Brian over the past year has made me more aware that people can have difficulty expressing themselves. I found that I can positively lead people if I can communicate with them, whether on the track or in my Jewish youth group discussions. As I move into the next phases of my life, I hope to bring these skills with me because, in order to effectuate positive change in my community, I learned that I must speak in the language of those around me. Those are the words Brian taught me.*

## **College essay example #14**

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**This student was accepted at Brown University.**

*It felt like I threw myself out of a plane without a parachute. My eyes firmly shut, I feared for my life as I plummeted towards the ground. In hindsight, perhaps half coming out at a public restaurant wasn't the brightest idea. Then again, living as the half-closeted queer kid meant that I was all too familiar with intimidating situations.*

*I asked my mom: "What would you do if I had a girlfriend?" She instantly replied that she couldn't understand. Immediately, my heart dropped and the emotional free fall began. She explained that Americans choose to be gay for personal enjoyment, which in my Korean culture is an attitude that is severely frowned upon. I sat there like a statue, motionless and afraid to speak, blindly hurtling towards a hard reality I hadn't expected. Rejection cut me deeply and I started to feel the itch of tears welling in my eyes, yet I had to contain myself. I couldn't let the pain seep through my facade or else she would question why I cared. All I could do was keep looking down and shoveling food into my mouth, silently wishing I could just disappear. That night, I realized it would be a long time before I could fully come out to my mom. My eyes tightened as I continued to fall.*

*In the following weeks, I started noticing how discomfort played a natural part in my life. I recognized the anxious reactions of my classmates as I argued with my Christian friends when they said my queerness is a sin. I observed the judgmental glances my mentors gave me as I passionately disagreed with my conservative lab mates over my sister's abortion. Eventually, my friends decided to censor certain topics of discussion, trying to avoid these*

*situations altogether. I felt like vulnerability was the new taboo. People's expressions and actions seemed to confine me, telling me to stop caring so much, to keep my eyes closed as I fall, so they didn't have to watch.*

*Had others felt uncomfortable with me in the same way I had felt uncomfortable with my mom? Do they feel that our passions might uncover a chasm into which we all fall, unsure of the outcome?*

*Perhaps it was too raw, too emotional.*

*There was something about pure, uncensored passion during conflict that became too real. It made me, and the people around me, vulnerable, which was frightening. It made us think about things we didn't want to consider, things branded too political, too dangerous. Shielding ourselves in discomfort was simply an easier way of living.*

*However, I've come to realize that it wasn't my comfort, but rather, my discomfort that defined my life. My memories aren't filled with times where life was simple, but moments where I was conflicted. It is filled with unexpected dinners and unusual conversations where I was uncertain. It is filled with the uncensored versions of my beliefs and the beliefs of others. It is filled with a purity that I shouldn't have detained.*

*Now, I look forward to tough conversations with a newfound willingness to learn and listen, with an appreciation for uncertainty. I urge others to explore our discomfort together and embrace the messy emotions that accompany it. I try to make our collective discomfort more navigable. Since that dinner, my relationship with my mother is still in free fall. It's dangerous and frightening. Thankfully, the potentially perilous conversations I've had with my friends has given me a newfound appreciation for my own fear. I'll admit, part of me still seeks to close my eyes, to hide in the safety I'll find in silence. Yet, a larger part of me yearns to embrace the dangers around me as I fall through the sky. I may still be falling, but this time, I will open my eyes, and hopefully steer towards a better landing for both my mom and me.*