



Western Reserve Academy

COLLEGE ESSAYS 2019

Introduction

The College Counseling Office is very excited and proud to share with you our annual College Essay Collection. For the seventh year, we engaged our seniors in a blind essay competition, and the essays contained here include the three top place winners.

Though these few essays were deemed to be the best submissions of the 29 entries into the competition, it is worth sharing that these topics and these qualities are commonplace in the work of our students here at WRA. We feel amazingly fortunate to work with such talented and multifaceted students. I hope you will feel their energy and enjoy their stories.

I would be remiss not to thank the committee who evaluated the submissions: Mathematics Department faculty member Laurie Allen, Associate Director of College Counseling Emily Parlman, Science Department faculty member Beth Pethel, Associate Director of Admission and Coordinator of International Admission Jordan Shriver, Science Department and Student Life Office intern Michael Weinzierl, and English Department faculty member Brandi Wheeler.

Enjoy the essays!

Jillian Nataupsky
Associate Director of College Counseling

MARY NING '19 (The University of Chicago) 1st Place



Prompt: Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

You may not think about the size or shape of your eyes very often, but I have. Your eyelids likely have a crease in them: that minute line above the eye. This shouldn't matter at all, but it is noticed in many Asian cultures. When I was a young girl, a stranger in an elevator once told me I looked cute, but that my eyes were too small. The comment made me feel I wasn't beautiful enough.

I dreamed of looking prettier. Bombarded by images of famous Asian actresses with big, bright eyes, I felt pressure to conform to popular standards of beauty based on Western features, even cartoonish proportions. Like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, who prays for the elusive blue eyes of whites, I too craved my own pair of "Caucasian eyes."

Everywhere, young women obsess over beauty and body shape. Perfectly beautiful women among my friends, classmates, and family spend time and money on makeup and even plastic surgery to reach the feminine beauty ideal, whereas my male relatives focus on earning money and more productive pursuits than "correcting" their natural appearance.

My world brought the gender gap into focus and I've immersed myself in research on gender and feminism. Sophomore year, Simone de Beauvoir's idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" struck a chord with me. I realized that seemingly innate gender roles are social fabrications, and my dream of becoming a powerful female politician seemed somehow tougher to reach, since it requires me to override stereotypes and challenge the "cult of domesticity," while still being expected to fulfill my caregiving roles and look pretty.

I still remember how petrified I was to run for class president in middle school even though I'd prepared a great speech. My male opponents stood confidently on the podium throwing candies to win our classmates' votes. I became a candy-less, but more feminist, vice president. Further inspired by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, I understand that gender, far from being static, is a spectrum that everyone should have the freedom and courage to slide along fluidly at any point. During my San Francisco-based internship in the summer of 2017, I found a great role model in California Assembly Speaker and Board of Equalization Chair, Fiona Ma. Her fearless example inspired my project on the under-representation of women in California's political leadership and the research into the benefits of more egalitarian governments. I also felt heartbroken to witness the city's homelessness crisis, including women and infants on the streets. "Pregnant & stressed" read one woman's sign, which caused me to stop and donate all I could. I then co-sponsored food service for the homeless with NGO Curry Without Worry. Helping women and children in poverty remains a top priority for me.

Last year, I continued my fight by taking pride in a policy proposal project spotlighting the too-high rate of US women living in poverty. Presenting my proposal to repeal the Maximum Family Grant Rule and expand existing education and training programs for single mothers, I enjoyed preparing for future professional legislative experiences. I've also leaned in to my school's Lean In program, discussing the lack of female leadership in school and teaching gender equality to preschoolers. I override gender stereotypes by working harder in traditionally male-dominated subjects such as Calculus and Government. In family life, I defend a gay older cousin and encourage my mom to compete for department chair at her hospital.

My eyelids used to be my greatest source of self-awareness and even self-loathing, but I've climbed upwards and beyond. This morning, I opened my beautiful eyes, looked in the mirror, and saw a young leader committed to embracing herself and inspiring others to construct their own understanding of gender identity. I will become an assertive female politician, breaking down any and all barriers to fight for gender equality and social justice.

MEIMEI TANNEHILL '19 (The Ohio State University)

2nd Place



Prompt: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

One of my earliest memories is telling my mom she was ugly. We were sitting on the floor of my room.

"Mommy, you're ugly," I said plainly.

She didn't appear hurt or offended. She simply asked, "What about Dad?"

"Daddy is handsome," I replied.

Mommy's face is round. Her lips are not thick, but not thin either. When she smiles, she smiles wide, cheekbones protruding like they're trying to escape. Her plump nose fills the center of her face. Thick eyebrows sit over almond-shaped eyes that are so brown they're almost black. Mommy doesn't look like anyone else I know, and she certainly doesn't look like Daddy. Mommy is Chinese.

We lived in a rural Ohio town called Garrettsville. With just over two-thousand people, a 97.8% white population, a perimeter of corn fields, and an alarming five-to-one ratio of pizza parlors to traffic lights, Garrettsville was its own little bubble. Furthermore, to a young half-Chinese girl, Garrettsville was a lie. It raised me on a fallacy about the world outside the bubble. Every person in my school, save my older brother and myself, was white. Every person I encountered in day-to-day life, save my mom, was white. I told my mother she was ugly because she was different. I was too young to understand that different is beautiful, and that I was different myself. I didn't realize it until, years later, my peers brought it to my attention.

"Why don't you just go by your real name?"

"That's just not me. I'm Meimei, not Jessica."

My classmates stared at me with a look somewhere between confusion and contempt. I didn't know why they couldn't accept who I said I was. Jessica was just a name. Meimei was the nickname my aunt had given me before I was born — "younger sister" in Chinese. It stuck, first within my family, then soon everyone I knew referred to me as Meimei. I tried to explain that my name was a part of who I was, but they weren't listening. Looking back, I don't think they ever were.

While my peers attended church, I spent Sunday mornings at Chinese school. I resented it. I felt no desire or need to learn about a language that was, in reality, just as much a part of me as English. I figured that next time I traveled to China, I could rely on my mother's language skills. Becoming proficient would take too much time and effort. When writing in Chinese, Mom always reminded me to use the correct stroke order. I remember carefully tracing characters in my textbook, attempting (but often failing) to get it right. I never understood the importance. I'd begun to internalize the comments from my peers; I didn't know why they viewed my culture negatively, but I was aware that they did. That notion manifested itself in my subconscious. I stopped going to Chinese school when I was ten.

After transferring schools my sophomore year, it was possible to take Mandarin as my foreign language. It wasn't offered in Garrettsville and everything I'd learned in Chinese school had faded. During the first days of class, we learned basic terms: hello, teacher, you, I. "Top to bottom, left to right," my teacher recited when writing on the board. Stroke order, I thought — how it was emphasized both in Chinese school and by my mother — only now, it made sense. As my teacher continued, she wrote one of the few words I remembered: mama. I watched as the characters took shape and noticed, for the first time, their complexity, elegance, and beauty. I didn't know how I never noticed before. Then, she wrote one more: meimei. My name was displayed on the board in a mosaic of other characters. They were beautiful — their aesthetic, their form, and most of all, their meaning and the culture from which they came.

HARLEQUIN FISHER '19 (Rhode Island School of Design)

3rd Place



Prompt: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

My first kiss was with a girl named Alexis.

It was horrible.

Her breath smelled like mayonnaise and her palms were sweaty, and she wore a teenage mutant ninja t-shirt with a mustard stain by the collar.

I was twelve.

That's when I realized I was gay.

It was like a bucket of ice got tossed on my head - I was even more of a freak than I'd thought. I was a foster kid. I was Hispanic in south Texas and didn't speak a word of Spanish. I was twelve years old, and I didn't know how to read, or write, or do basic addition. And now I was a lesbian.

Fun.

I grew up in the barrio of San Perlita, an oasis for Latin culture in the concrete jungle near Brownsville, Texas, another city that segregates immigrants based on race. I was the only one of my siblings who hadn't been adopted, stuck in a foster home thousands of miles away. And being mixed race in an environment where one half of who I am hates the other is isolating. It's lonely. Lots of misplaced self-loathing about cultural identity. I had paler skin and straighter hair and a build made of stocky blocks and stubby legs, shooting over and outwards and just around 5'1". Being a half-white bisexual labeled me like a stain in the community. I was the gringo, huevo, spoke the dialect and ate the food, yet never belonged. Being half-white made me fake. As if I was stealing the culture and claiming it, not as my birthright, but as appropriation. I hated myself, hated my parents, hated the church, hated the world for leaving me on my own. I can't explain the crushing loneliness I felt, the depression and numbness and days spent not talking, lost in my own head with regrets too old for my age. Carmel skin told the white people that something was off; I definitely wasn't one of them, but I wasn't quite like anybody else they'd ever seen. And the primos y tios and everybody else never believed me when I told them I'm Hispanic, I'm Hispanic, I'mHispanicI'mHispanicI'mHispanic.

I want you to understand that pain does not make you stronger. Hardships and trials do not build us to be better people. There are times where suffering is just suffering.

It's a sexist, patriarchal, tight-knit religious society. And being gay is supposed to be liberating and you're supposed to be free and proud. Instead, I was looking in the mirror and seeing something that shouldn't exist. There were days spent counting the marks on my skin, looking at the differences between me and my mother and trying to find out where biology went wrong. There were whispers and angry looks and slurs muttered under breath in the hallways. But I no longer try to hide it.

My thought process was, is, always will be: My identity is something that neither side can share, my experiences something nobody else can have. Who I love and who loves me in return is something I will never regret. And I don't want to change.

So yeah, I'm gay. I'm a mixed race Mexican. I sing in the shower and my language is Spanglish. I am no one thing, created not of my race nor gender nor sexuality, but of what I chose to become regardless of it all. I have dreams for college, dreams for the future, dreams for a bigger, brighter world that I never thought I'd have. And what I have been through does not define me. I have gotten to where I am today against all odds, on my own merit, by my own skill and work and effort and determination. I am Harlequin Sky Gomez-Fisher, a writer and an artist and a human being who is more than the sum of my parts.

And I wouldn't change a single thing.