



WESTERN RESERVE ACADEMY

COLLEGE ESSAYS 2024

Introduction

The College Counseling Office is very excited and proud to share with you our annual College Essay Collection. For the 12th year, we engaged our seniors in a blind essay competition, and the essays contained here include our three top place winners. The essays that follow are powerful, raw, and authentic and contain strong language that some may find troubling. However, we felt it was important to share our student's voices as they were intended.

Though these few essays were deemed to be the best submissions of the 25 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 my fellow committee members who evaluated the submissions: Science Department Chair Hannah Barry '10; Assistant Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging Iyannaa Graham-Siphanoum; Instructional Librarian Cole Campbell; English Department faculty member Sasha Maseelall; and Integrated Studies & Design Department faculty member Eric Miller.

Enjoy the essays!

Anna Hutchins
Assistant Director of College Counseling

ANYA MATHUR '24

1st Place



In my home, bleeding was a secret. The most I'd seen was an empty pack of tampons under the sink as I searched for my Christmas presents. Then, that Christmas morning, I found an extra surprise. A blood stain in my underwear. My first period. I really had no idea what was happening. I'd heard the word "period" before, but nobody ever explained to me what it was. The one thing I did know from the murmurs in my home was that this was a secret.

In whispers behind closed doors, my mom taught me how to use a pad. We drove from store to store, hoping to find products to last me through the night. Unfortunately, on Christmas morning, it's impossible to find anywhere open. I went through my first period layering toilet paper until I could buy actual pads the next morning.

As time went on, the most I'd hear about periods in school would be from whispers in the bathroom, asking if any girl had an extra tampon.

That's all a period ever was to me— a whisper.

Growing older, my period gave me much more pain and discomfort, oftentimes causing me to stay in bed all day. I knew I needed help and support, but I feared asking. I continued to grow more exhausted from my pain, to the point that my mom took notice. She knew what she had to ask me but was clearly afraid to. For a moment, I wondered why both of us were afraid to speak up.

Tired of my fear, I opened up about my pain, and the words began flowing back. Finally, my mom broke out of a whisper and spoke. She told me about all of her own experiences with periods, some of which were similar to mine but others extremely different.

In India, menstrual products were extremely limited, and the stigma surrounding the topic was even worse. She had to be crafty with how she made it through her periods, making pads and products by hand with fabric and paper. She said she was taught these methods "through a whisper," the whisper leading back to her mom, my nani. My nani took silence and made it into a whisper; my mom took a whisper and made it into a voice; I would take this voice and make it into a roar.

The second I opened up to others about my own experiences, loud and proud, they began doing the same. Small conversations about period pain grew into larger discussions about dysmenorrhea and serious symptoms. I learned more about my own body from talking to other girls about their experiences. These stories connected me to women on a deeper level, and I needed to share this connection. I wanted to advance the stories I'd heard, ranging from pride to pressure, so that women would know that they weren't alone and could learn as I did. I wanted to use my roar to allow women to empower their own bodies.

Educating myself more through books and people's stories, I followed a journey to create my own justice. While still honoring the stories that taught generations of women, I've transformed what kind of change these stories can make. I connected with leaders in the menstrual movement to hear their personal insights and stories, eventually inviting many of them to join a discussion with me on my podcast, "The Period Theory." Every episode explores a new topic that offers both education and advocacy.

With more new knowledge to offer, I designed a menstrual health curriculum that is now used to teach globally in connection with multiple organizations, bridging real education to real experiences. My work aims to change the bathroom whispers into classroom discussions and open storytelling.

While listening to my podcast, my mom whispers something new to me.
"I can hear the courage in your roar."

CAVIN XUE '24

2nd Place



As I walk toward the two cases, a pair of muffled voices crescendo into fervent bickering.

Kneeling down, I begin to overhear the conversation within.

"I bet you he's gonna pick me."

"No way. It's concert day. He's not taking you to Severance."

I chuckle. If instruments could speak, this dialogue might mirror the banter between my two violins, Coco and Cheri. I side with the latter statement, offer a silent apology to Cheri as I leave, and sling Coco over my shoulder.

In the music community, naming instruments is a contested debate. After years of avoidance, I settled upon names that both reflect individual identities and resonate with my own life. Like the delicate duality of Yin and Yang or the necessity of scientific equilibrium, I live through a daily duet between Coco and Cheri, finding their distinct yet overlapping voices in various disciplines.

Coco exhibits a bold sound with a bite of bitterness, resembling the dark chocolate hues of his wooden frame. His chipped edges, like battle scars earned from concertmaster solos and recitals, display a side of me for all to see: a love of expression.

Through music, the euphoria of creation captivates me on various stages. As part of an English project, I composed sprawling staves transcribing the fantastical dreams and ugly dissonance of Toni Morrison's writing. In the sanctuary of my room, I find satisfaction in audio editing, experimenting with the combination of jazz vocals with violin and trumpet harmonies. Under the brilliant lights of Severance Music Center, where a thousand pairs of eyes and ears witness my vulnerability, I surprisingly find belonging.

My musical explorations mirror the same voice I sharpen through the canvas of journalistic storytelling. When Photoshopping satirical images and providing a platform for a Santa vs. Elf debate through publication, I believe in the power of language to amuse, educate, and electrify.

Cheri's sound, in juxtaposition, blends luscious sweetness with the nuanced rosy tones of her varnish. Like subtle tartness breaking through a cherry, I derive comfort from indulgent curiosity and the triumphs of discovery.

Amid the rhythmic deluge of evening rain, I dive into research from esteemed professors, aiming to comprehend the intricate interplay of bio-printed organs, nanoparticles, and immune cells, each combating the same cancer cells I grow in the laboratory. While experimenting on mice in the sweltering lab, I am delighted to find a tart breakthrough: my carefully chosen protein is a successful candidate for a lymphoma vaccine. Like the explosion of 3D-printed models on my desk perfected for optimal function, I am also drawn to refining my vaccine project, resculpting my voice to mirror the scholarly papers I enjoy.

Wedge between Desmos and the New York Times, my bookmarks tab houses the latest scientific updates from Science News, enriching my morning with developments in pharmacotherapy. Within this realm, my educational blog BioBlab springs to life, echoing the spirit of exploration propelling me toward Quizbowl packets detailing scientists, philosophers, and royal dynasties.

Although my violins cannot form actual words, their voices are essential to my voice: one I have honed throughout my life experiences. With each lyric I pen, every crescendo and decrescendo of research, and the cadences marking critical shifts in my life's symphony, I strive to share an opus of my passions.

Everyone has their own internal conversations appearing on two sides of a lustrous, diverse coin. Just as my violins create a harmonious unity of expression and exploration, I look forward to meeting those with different passions who write their own vibrant symphonies, testaments to the beauty of embracing every aspect of their identity.

For me, these sides are bursting with a sonorous sound and a soft pastel of sweetness. They communicate through music, words, and journals. They are named Coco and Cheri, and they are part of my every conversation.

Now, back to the bickering...

PETER MCGINNES '24

3rd Place



From Seed to Self-Identity

After gingerly poking my fingertip into the soil, I inspected a packet of pepper seeds for the perfect candidate. Eventually deciding on the most symmetrical, I held it up to the light and chose a name: Borus. I laid him gently in the divot, covered him with the surrounding soil, and wished him luck.

Two years earlier, I had felt a lot like Borus; I was trapped, unsure of the future. It was 5:55 a.m. on a dark, December morning. Sitting in the passenger seat of my mom's car, I didn't say a word. I wanted to disappear and skip swim practice - an activity I had once loved. Too scared to tell my mom the reason for my fear, I stayed silent; I felt like I was buried in soil. I couldn't feel comfortable at practice because my teammates might see the real me. And I wasn't yet ready for my mom to know that I wasn't "normal." So there I sat, an insecure, closeted 14-year-old masking his inner fear with outward tranquility.

For days, Borus sat on my windowsill seemingly unchanged. Concerned he wasn't making progress, I doubted my seed choice. But, beneath the surface, he was proving me wrong. He was invisibly developing his root system: the foundational step in becoming

a strong, productive pepper plant.

My turmoil continued to plague me throughout the school year. Despite trying to build friendships, success eluded me because I wasn't being true to myself. But the following summer, I had the time and strength to begin the journey of developing my own, strong root system. I learned to love myself, came out as gay to my supportive family, and, deciding I needed a fresh start, chose to switch schools. I finally felt ready to break through the surface.

On the seventh day, Borus poked through the soil with two delicate leaves angled toward the elusive Cleveland sunlight; he wasn't much, but he was beautiful. I continued to care for him every day, providing him with the resources he needed to thrive. Two pots, lots of water, and three months later, he produced his first pepper. Plucking it from his stalk, I felt proud. I was amazed that the little seed I had met a quarter of a year ago was now strong enough to support not only himself but my family as well.

After assimilating to my new school environment, I too began prospering and giving back to the community. I first noticed the shift when I spotted a middle-aged woman wandering apprehensively through the LGBTQ+ history exhibit that I had created with support from others on the Student Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. As I approached to offer my assistance, she said she was fine, just emotional. She told me that she had spent her entire life knowing she was lesbian but had only recently found the strength to come out. This was her first time seeing queer representation in the Midwest, and she told me that if she had seen the exhibit when she was younger, she might have come out sooner. Realizing I was helping people accept themselves, I struggled for words; I was now the emotional one. As she squeezed my hand, I realized I had never before felt such a strong connection to a stranger. That was the moment I knew I had blossomed.

And now, sitting in my room with Borus and my many other houseplants, I think back to how each of them started as a delicate seed - requiring the necessary resources to flourish. Admiring the progress they've made, I'm nostalgic thinking about how far I've come. Recalling the time I cowered in my mom's car, I feel proud. Proud of the person I've become but, more importantly, inspired by the results of the courage I showed when I chose to emerge from hiding.