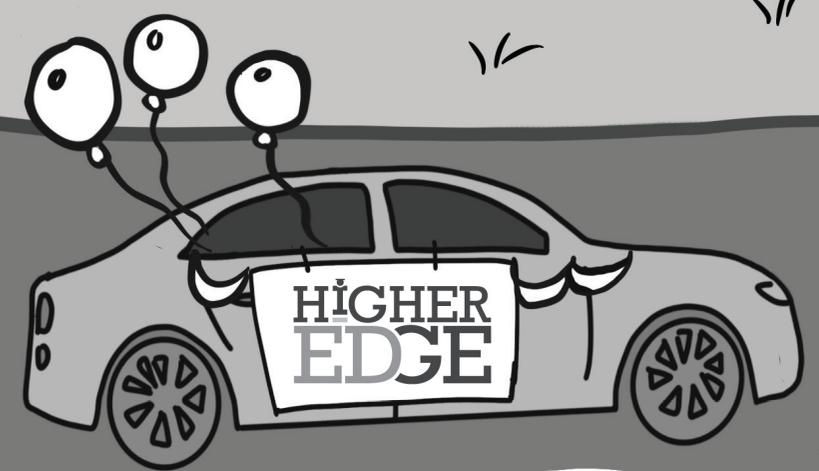


Congratulations Class of 2020



2020 = grads!

We did it!

Class of 2020

COLLEGE ESSAYS  
2019-2020

## The Stages of Writing a College Essay

The college essay — perhaps the single most important piece of writing high school seniors compose. Students are tasked with diving deep into their personal histories, plucking a small moment that encapsulates who they are, and producing a piece that, at the same time, highlights their writing abilities... No pressure, right?

Not only is the writing process an emotional journey, sometimes the stories themselves carry deep emotional threads. The stories that students choose to recount range from lighthearted, happy moments, to life-altering difficult times.

This book showcases seven of the essays written by our 2019-2020 College Access Program cohort. It reflects the breadth and depth of the students we serve.

# CONTENTS

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## The Girl With No Words

3-4

KEREN GABRIEL

---

## Bonds

5-6

DESTINY ROSA

---

## Cartoon Truths

7-8

SHARIENA GREEN

---

## Running

9-10

TAYNA CASTILLO

---

## After School

11-12

JOEL ORTIZ

---

## Eleven Hours

13-14

NASHALEE FERRER

---

## My Math Skills

15-16

JULIA HENCK

# The Girl With No Words

Take a look at me and guess my story. You will never be able to guess it! The life of Keren Gabriel began as a quiet girl who hardly uttered a single word. All she would do was smile: smile in times of joy, smile in times of pain, smile in times of confusion, and smile in times of rage. She was labeled as “the girl with no words”.

I grew up in a third world country; heartbreaking and disturbing sights were part of my daily life. Freedom of speech and belief could cost a person his life, especially if you were a Christian. I am the daughter of a Pastor which in India was like having a target on my head. I feared for my safety and the safety of my family whenever I stepped out of my home.

Christians in India suffered severe persecution. Mobs of extremists used to set the pastors on fire and watch them burn to death or they would strike them with a machete into pieces. These horrific acts made me fear for my life and my family. I never felt safe in my own home. The girl who was always quiet became even more quiet and she slipped into the background wherever she went. But seeing and hearing these things at such a young age really affected me but I wouldn't change a single thing because everything that I witnessed and experienced has shaped me to be the person that I am today. If you were to tell me back then that I would be going to college and majoring in international business I would have never believed it. This was more than I could ever imagine yet today this is my reality.

Today, I can tell you that the “girl with no words” has broken out of her shell. She has overcome many trials that could have ended her life. She has buried that label. The only reason I was able to do this is because of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I never knew exactly what I wanted to be when I was little but one dream that I still hold close to my heart is to help those who are suffering all over the world from oppression or poverty or ill health. I witnessed too many people and children in pain and in poverty without a way out, even

within my own family. There was no one to fight for those people or speak up for them; their voices were locked away and I was once just like them. I want to help these people have a better future. I chose international business for a reason. I want to establish a successful business worldwide and I will create an international network that will be focused on helping the less fortunate and those who cannot defend themselves. This is also the reason as to why I want to double major and also attend law school. If I am given the opportunity to attend a prestigious college, my desire is to gain as much knowledge as I am able to and share it with those who were never given the chance to earn an education. The once quiet Keren Gabriel who was afraid to speak now strives to achieve something that the world deemed impossible for her. She will be the voice for the mute.

When I think about this moment, I realize that everybody has something special that makes them different. It could be a little something that makes you brighter outside. You do not have to pretend to be someone to be appreciated. Every human being is unique. I am unique in how I talk, how I express myself, and even how I laugh. Astyana is now my best friend, but I could never have imagined it. I am now a thousand miles away from her, but I will always remember that listening to people and helping them is what makes me who I am. She helped me realize that my authenticity lies in who I am and in the choices I make.



**KEREN GABRIEL**

**Science & Technology Magnet High School**  
Bentley University

# Bonds

Growing up, my biggest dream was for my brother to get out of my hair and leave me alone. I will never forget the time he insisted that if I stood on the kitchen table and closed my eyes, he would catch me. Being young and gullible, I wound up on the hard kitchen floor on my back. This is what he calls a "trust fall." His name is Dez, and he is 22 years old, leaving a 5 year gap in between the two of us. Everyone knows how pestering and abrasive older brothers can be. A month before his graduation he had decided he wanted to enlist in the Army. My mom was absolutely devastated and I was just clueless as to what life would be like when he actually left.

July 7th was the day. One of the most dejected days of my life. I was way too grieved to even be excited for him. I could not stop crying for days and even weeks. Despite how crazy he drove me, I missed him more than anything. I even missed being bothered and wanting to pull my hair out. We actually had a very close relationship. The next day and days after he left were so completely different. I was so clueless, I didn't realize it would just be my mom and I at home. All focus and attention was now on me.

My family and I wrote him thousands of letters and called him every second possible. Feeling so tense and anxious for my brother really made me realize how much I love him. I was still so subdued until his graduation for AIT. The entire car ride to South Carolina I was more than happy. Everyone was. The second I saw him I couldn't bear but run and jump on him. This was the biggest hug I had ever given him. I didn't even know happy tears were real until I felt them fly down my cheeks. Just being with him made me feel so much better. I knew he was safe and everything would be okay.

Still sad, I accepted the fact that he was getting older and things do change. I even supported him going off and having to live in Germany. That just led to 10,000 more calls a day. Even though I still missed my brother, I learned to be happy for him.

The idea of my brother being away in the Army, really shaped me into a different person. It shaped me into being more independent and I didn't always need him there right by my side.

His absence helped me appreciate him more and everything he has done for me. I learned to accept big change, look at the positive side of things, and remain loving to those who love me. It is actually very gratifying to have him back at home, especially for my senior year. I understand that despite sadness and distance; we can grow stronger and closer. My brother chasing his dreams and exploring the world has really inspired me to dream big and desire success. I am more capable of achieving my own goals and overcoming adversity.



**DESTINY ROSA**

**New London High School**

University of Connecticut - Avery Point

# Cartoon Truths

" The biggest show around is Huckleberry Hound, for all you guys and gals. The biggest clown in town is Huckleberry Hound, with all his cartoon pals. It's Huckleberry fun, it's for everyone..."

One day he was a cowboy, the next a police officer, even a lion tamer. His personality is so kind, thoughtful and wise towards others. Huckleberry knew exactly what to do in any problem that he faced and was well aware of how to conquer obstacles that came his way. He always managed to learn a lesson from the complications he was involved in, along with others learning from them as well.

Life is not a cartoon. Though things were never easy going in life for me since youth, characters such as Huckleberry would truly astonish me as they had the freedom and happiness that us as individuals all desire, including me. Seeing the way he could handle anything gave me a slight feeling of jealousy. Though I went through and still go through countless hardships, I know why they happen, I know why they are caused. How can I, this one person, make that better or even a little less painful? That's when I thought " I want to be just like Huckleberry, he shows no weakness and has such strength, why not me?"

As I persisted in life, abhorrent problems would still continue. I tried everything in my power, everything I could possibly think of to make complications better. Consequently, I always ended up being the one who got hurt trying to fix what had been broken. "Why" questions were all I asked myself. Why can't I have this great power just like him.

Each problem I encountered always required a new strategy to overcome it. Over time it progressively got more and more difficult for me to handle. Though I tried to be tough just because of what I saw through a screen, I had many breaking points. There is so much a person could handle, yet I always wondered, " How do they do it and why can't I? Why couldn't I be just as strong, intelligent and manage to always find a way?"

With these breaking points that I endured, came lots of thinking. I knew I could keep fighting these troubles but I needed a new way to approach them. Never will I be stuck in this time period forever which is what I didn't realize for a long time. There is so much more the world has to offer which needs to be found. I only saw my weakness but not how it could be turned into strength. I didn't allow my weakness to get the best of me due to my strong desire for freedom. I wanted to keep reaching without even realizing it. Everything I said that I once was not, I am. I am strong, intelligent, and can make a way.

I admit, I have not truly been myself at times, which is strong, confident, and a leader. I realize that I must stay true to myself. In this world you can handle obstacles in your life any way that you want, but lying and faking your way through puts more burden on you. Eventually, you cannot endure any longer and give up. I have learned that you must live by your truth. There are consequences for living by lies and for truth as well. Live by your truth and die by your truth - never by a lie.

That is why I will continue for as long as I have. Continuing to be the wise and strong person I am. I disciplined myself which is why I have been able to push through till this day. Could I be like Huckleberry? Simple answer is no, what I can do is have that strength, that determination, endurance, and that dedication to push through as I continue on my path in the world and my dreams.



**SHARIENA GREEN**

**New London High School**

Eastern Connecticut State University

# Running

The short girl who smelled like fresh coconuts as she walked in the classroom, the student that everyone was inspired to be like, the perfect child a parent would want and the employee of the month a job would die to have. She had demons she was trying to run away from but she couldn't get away even if she tried. Society portrays her to be the strongest soldier but on the inside she was scared and afraid, afraid of taking a step back and falling into the trap of the wolves. Her life was a nonstop tornado, a broken hearted girl that couldn't keep her emotions together at times. They called her the runner, the one that runs after her dreams, the one that runs for a "bag" even the runner that begins to run away from love when someone begins to care too much.

She felt at peace when it was time to head to bed as she would lay herself onto the soft warm bed sheets that kept her warm from the cold, the type of comfort she wished she had from a parent. As she would lay her head, she would feel as if she was resting her mind, a mind full of thoughts that struggled to come out from her. She was trapped in her mind feeling as if she were a zombie. She knew she was not okay but would decide to sleep in order to think less. The young girl wondered if her pillow cases could talk, they would be tired of observing her cold heavy tears of fear. As each day passed her soul was drained and tired.

Walking around the streets of her town, she would hear the kids of the streets calling each other n.... as if it was nothing. Feeling the sadness, and looking at kids settling for less, made her feel as if her town was also crying out for help - from those who were hurting she could hear the desperation for love and need of support. She herself the broken girl wished to glue everyone back together, refresh their minds with knowledge so they could run with her to the path of success.

She found a way of escape, education, it was her gasoline to keep her going. Now instead of running she began moving at a speed that no one could

understand; she was afraid once again of falling behind. She was going 1000 miles per hour, not wanting to just stand around - hungry for success. She would climb the mountains if they got in her way. She was just tired of it all and wanted something different. She was a leader, a leader of those who struggle but shine like the high beams of a fast race car. She was that flashing race car - behind the wheel that no one had the control to slow down.

She is full of life again as she wears her yellow and gold jersey representing her city. She is not afraid to screw up and pick herself back again. She is now courageous, even if she was walking with a crooked smile and had no role models around. She knew from that thundering foggy morning that she was now the light of the day. Her feet are balanced, finally understanding the reason for running - running to capture someone's attention - for an eye to look beyond where she grew up and school she attended.

This girl is me, Tayna Castillo, a young Latina that falls into the stereotypes, the girl that everyone thinks is okay but can break down at any moment. But even so, she is the glue of her mind, strengths and soul. She, herself, is what keeps her together. The runner that will continue to run after people who begin to fall and need a lift, a lift of self love and guidance. I am not ashamed to say that I struggled but picked myself up, that I failed but tried again or that I doubted myself but gained strength.



**TANYA CASTILLO**

**New London High School**

University of Connecticut - Avery Point

# After School

January 26, 2014. I came from the Dominican Republic to the United States for the first time. I was waiting for the taxi that was going to pick me and family up from the Boston Logan International Airport. It was cold and I didn't quite understand what the people walking by were saying. They were simply speaking English. I thought to myself, "Damn, I'm going to have to learn English now! But hopefully everyone in my new school speaks Spanish like me." I hoped that because I didn't want to learn English. I thought learning English was going to be too hard.

When I went with my parents to sign up for school, the principal was bilingual so he talked to my parents. The principal told my parents about how English was really important for me to learn, understand and speak in order to pass the sixth grade. To this day, I still remember how the principal told my parents and I that if I didn't make the grade I would have to go to summer school, and potentially stay back and repeat the grade.

When I started school a few days later, I had to take two English classes and the principal told me I could stay after school for extra help. I lived two blocks away from my school, which was good since I was going to stay after school a lot. My English teacher told me, "Trust me, learning a new language is really hard but extremely helpful." I knew that if I wanted to be able to pass middle school, high school, and potentially go to college with good grades I had to learn it ASAP! So I tried my hardest by studying as much as I could. From time to time I practiced by trying to have small conversations in English with some of my bilingual friends, but that didn't work very well.

One day, the teacher told my mom something when she came to pick me up after school. "Don't get me wrong, but your kid is learning really fast and is excellent at writing and spelling in English. However, he needs to work on his pronunciation because he has an accent and some people might not comprehend his English." I thought that I was never going to be able to speak

or learn proper English. But, I noticed that I had just been trying to learn the language for two months nonstop and I had made some major progress. I already understood when people would talk to me in English. I wasn't just going to give up so soon, right?

I continued to trust the process and stay after school for extra help for the rest of the year. My English teacher was surprised by how fast I was learning and by how dedicated I was. By the end of sixth grade I had a B average in English class. I was proud of myself for passing with a good grade that year. My parents and teachers were also very proud of me. I did not have to stay for summer school or take extra classes the year after. But I still stayed after school because I was trying to help myself more with English and helping improve my pronunciation.

From this experience, I learned that hard work pays off and quitting is not an option. When I thought I had no chance of speaking English well, I still didn't give up and kept trying. No matter how hard it seems or how much you think you can't make it, keep trying and you will succeed. This way of looking at things has helped me out so much during high school. By being persistent, I was able to learn and to succeed. This attitude has opened many doors in my life and it makes me feel really special for my dedication.



**JOEL ORTIZ**

**Grasso Tech**

Three Rivers Community College

# Eleven Hours

Eleven hours in a hospital room, eleven hours desperately waiting, eleven hours worth of the fetal ultrasound beeping in the room, eleven hours of nurses in and out of the room. April 1, 2019 was the day all my life goals took a turn. This was the day I realized that labor and delivery was the career pathway for me.

Early that Monday morning, I woke up excited to spend my birthday with my sister. Little did I know, that day would go completely sideways. I decided I'd just go with my sister to her OB/GYN and then we would continue to do our planned activities. However, by the end of the appointment we had to go to the hospital. Arriving at the hospital it was still early in the afternoon. As naive as I was, I thought the whole process would be quick. It was not.

The environment of the hospital wing was still, mostly quiet except for occasional yells from women and babies crying. Time passed slowly, we were all waiting for the news of full dilation. At around 10:30 p.m. there was excitement in the room, as we were all waiting for the arrival of our newest family member. All of a sudden, nurses and midwives were in the room, encouraging her to push. However, in the midst of all this excitement, the baby was stuck. This brought shock to all of us. It felt like time was still. The nurses quickly rushed us out of the way and got to work. One of them got on top of my sister and started pushing down on her abdomen. My sister not knowing what was going on, she thought everything was fine. There was yelling and multiple buttons being pushed, then more nurses came in. There was a rush of adrenaline going through my body at the time. I wanted to do something, help in any way I could. At that moment, I felt useless.

Right before the clock struck midnight, everything was okay and the baby was born. I became a new aunt to a baby girl. The excitement was endless. I went up to the incubator and the nurse handed me the clamp and scissors. At that very moment I realized this was what I wanted to do as a career. The feeling

of cutting the cord was a feeling like no other. I had this rush going through my body.

This day is one I'll remember forever as the day I finally decided on a career. As a young emerging adult this is very important because not many students know what they want to do at this point in their lives. Nursing is something I have always looked up to, the work they do is truly incredible. I want to be able to have the same impact on people and their families in the future. I know if I work hard enough I will be able to conquer this career pathway.



**NASHALEE FERRER**  
Windham Technical High School  
University of Connecticut - Storrs

# My Math Skills

I stare blankly at a sheet of numbers.

It doesn't add up.

The numbers glare back at me: black--bold--intimidating.

A tear leaks from my eye.

I don't know the answer; I don't understand.

My chest swells. My throat tightens. I can't breathe.

"Julia worked hard but did not understand," my mom has written on so many previous math assignments. "She needs some extra help. Please excuse this assignment."

Shame washes over me.

From elementary school on, math was a source of frustration. I remember years of counting on my fingers, homework crinkled with dried tears, and the time my math teacher condescended to congratulate me on passing a quiz. But, finally, something clicked. Suddenly I realized I love the patterns, the routine of plugging in an equation and finally figuring out the right answer. The victory I feel is sweeter because it is not English or history: I wasn't born good at it. My math skills are entirely my own, and for that I'm proud.

For the longest time, math seemed like a lock to which I did not have the key, but because I have practiced, worked hard, and stretched my mind I can apply all of my math skills to real problems.

My favorite playlist jams in the background; Regina Spektor intones bitter words to an upbeat tune. I bounced my head to the music, relaxed and focused on the problem in front of me. The question wants to know where Quartile 1 begins. I look at the normal model. It doesn't say anything about Quartile 1.

I look through my notebook. Nothing.

I bite my lip and run through my memory of today's class. Nothing.

Okay. Think about it.

Quartile 1. Quarter. Quarter = .25

On a hunch, I reach for my calculator.

$\text{InvNorm}(.25) = .667$

I keep going, bopping along to the music, falling into a rhythm, and plug in the next equation.

The answer comes: 112.56 lbs.

And... it... worked!

Satisfaction courses through my body like ice water on a hot day.

I will always love history, theatre, English, and art, but I am more proud of my math skills, because math did not come easily to me. I fought through the confusion and discovered something that I love. Now, math challenges rather than terrifies me. It is a source of pride rather than shame. I am excited to learn more and keep improving, especially when the odds are stacked against me.



**JULIA HENCK**  
Windham High School  
Bennington College

# Higher Edge

Higher Edge gets low-income and first-generation high school seniors to and through college. Our goal is to level the playing field in college admissions by providing the resources and knowledge necessary for success. Higher Edge students participate in one-on-one meetings with their advisor, attend college tours, and engage in workshops and events focusing on the college application process.

Once admitted into college, students receive continued support throughout their college career, until they graduate with a bachelor's degree. Higher Edge currently serves 70 high school seniors and 175 college students. By supporting Higher Edge, you are helping to break the cycle of poverty, uplifting communities, and empowering future leaders.

**THERESA ARMENDAREZ**

Executive Director

**GRACIELA GUZMAN**

Success Program Manager

**KATIE HALLISEY**

College Access Program Manager

New London

**JASON PELLUM**

College Access Program Advisor

Willimantic

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Learn more at [HigherEdge.org](https://HigherEdge.org)