

Editors Column

Navigating College Decisions: Embracing Growth



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Celebrating your friends' successes is important to your relationships with your friends and with the overall college process!
[Source: Author, Rachel Chung]

As college decisions begin to roll in, many students may experience a whirlwind of emotions—excitement, anxiety, disappointment, and relief. After months of hard work, waiting for a final decision can feel overwhelming, no matter the outcome. However, whether it's an acceptance, waitlist, deferral, or rejection, it's important to

remember that a college decision does not define your intellectual value, and it does not determine your future successes.

As a high school senior, hearing the words "rejection is redirection" or "your school does not define you" can feel frustrating, especially after pouring so much effort into your applications, yet

feeling out of control. It's easy to dismiss these phrases as empty consolation, but there is truth in them. The college process is unpredictable and admissions officers make decisions based on a variety of factors—many of which have nothing to do with your abilities. So my first piece of advice is to remember that your worth is not determined by an admissions decision. Even after years of effort, things may not go to plan, and that's okay; a rejection is not a reflection of your potential as a person. Rather than seeing rejection as failure, view it as redirection toward a better fit.

Additionally, college isn't a competition. Today, it's easy for people to get swept up in the name or prestige of their college and this often causes sentiments of competition amongst peers. College isn't about rankings, it's about where you will thrive. The best college for you is one that challenges you in the right ways, cultivates your passions, and allows you to build a future that excites you. If that is at an Ivy League school, that's great—but if it's anywhere else, that is just as

valid. Success isn't defined by the school's name on your diploma but by the experiences you have and the connections you make. To add on, the competitive nature of college admissions often creates unnecessary pressure among peers. Keep your friends close; comparison only leads to stress and self-doubt. Your friends are your constants in a world of uncontrollable factors and outcomes. Everyone's journey is different, and where one person thrives may not be the best fit for someone else. Success is not a limited resource; one person's acceptance does not take away from your own potential. From experience, celebrating friends' achievements and focusing on your own goals turns this time into growth rather than comparison.

Ultimately, the college decision process is just one step in a much larger journey. No matter where you end up, your drive, passion, and resilience will shape your success far more than the name of your school. Trust that you will end up where you are meant to be.

Student Reporter

Music and the Brain - a Path to Mental Health



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What would you think if you knew sparks of electric current coursed through your brain every time you heard or played music you enjoyed? Better yet, did you know this music could play a crucial role in boosting your emotional health and mental clarity? On March 16, 2025, the USC Brain and Creativity Institute presented the Music and the Brain Youth Symposium at the world-renowned Camilleri Hall Auditorium on USC's main campus. The event included multiple presentations on the benefits of music on the brain, music therapy, and future career paths. This symposium was five hours long and offered important information about music and its benefits to young musicians in Los Angeles.

A significant topic discussed during the symposium was therapeutic music. Participants were familiarized with the benefits of listening to music for mental health, like reduced cortisol levels, lower heart rates, reduced negative feelings, unity, and happier emotions depending on the situation. Speakers recommended programs like Eastman Performing Arts Medicine Center, with a mission to combine performing arts and medicine for a healthy environment, helping to create an understanding of



A view of the audience as speakers present about musical benefits to the brain during the event.
[Source: Author, Paisley Park]

why music imposes health and well-being.

As a violinist since age five, I thoroughly appreciated the presentations; especially those speaking on careers tied to the psychology of music and music therapy. Many speakers began their careers in performance majors but later discovered that

their interests lay in the psychological aspect of music and all its benefits which boosted individual mental health. Many questions were raised about music therapy such as, "How can we use music to heal?" and "What effect does listening to music have on stress production in the body?" During the presentations, many ideas

were introduced to answer these questions. For those listening to music they enjoy, the effects of the music would include reduced agitation and anxiety, and improved social and overall strong connections. On a personal level, playing the violin acts as a healing experience. Over the years, learning new music has not only improved my memory but given me purpose and satisfaction. Listening to music I love, be it Beethoven or Kendrick Lamar, provides daily relaxation and happiness.

One of the most substantial things I learned from this symposium was the unquestionable positive impact music has on the brain. Not only does it impact listeners' emotional responses, but it also helps with physical responses like reduced stress, anxiety, and tension within the brain. The ideas brought up during this event suggest that music is a therapeutic tool, while also an art form. Because of the speakers and presentations in the symposium, I can think of how musicians like myself can take advantage of our musical abilities to perform and use them to contribute to the mental well-being of others. I thoroughly enjoyed this experience, and am proud to use the insight in my daily and performing arts life.

Student Reporter

Dopamine and its Effect on Teenagers



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Dopamine is a chemical released by the brain when something enjoyable or pleasurable occurs. It allows us to make sound judgments, prevent diseases, help with mood, and so much more. Despite these benefits, young adults continue to suffer from an addiction to this chemical, leading to a buildup of bad habits.

Dopamine is released in response to fulfilling experiences, like working out, performing well on a test, or doing anything one finds rewarding. It stimulates a good feeling, reinforcing behaviors that bring this chemical out. It's also essential for focus—many studies created by doctors show that having low levels of this chemical may be vulnerable to Parkinson's disease, which causes a struggle with motivation and movement. Healthy dopamine levels allow people to stay focused, productive, and engaged in their occupations.

However, dopamine can work in the opposite way as well—contributing to negative behaviors that give off false feelings of pleasure. Almost all addictive substances and vices, like junk food, video games, and social media, hijack the brain's dopamine system.

These activities give off an artificial spike of the chemical, leading to short-term pleasure, and only to raise the baseline of what one needs to feel 'good.' In the long run, this baseline is raised so high that one's expectation for dopamine five months ago could be nothing compared to what it is at the present, constantly requiring more stimulation for the brain to feel satisfied.

One of the largest driving factors of teen addiction to social media is dopamine. Nowadays, most large social media companies purposely add features or formats in their apps in order to hook users in for as long as possible. These apps inflict constant dopamine, reinforcing the habit of scrolling social media on the phone or checking notifications all the time. After interviewing 20 students at Northwood High School, over 80% of them had a daily usage of Instagram for three hours, and all of these students reported that half of this time was spent scrolling on reels, or short-form content. "I used to read a book night day before bed, but now I can't seem to sleep without looking at my phone for a few minutes," a student I interviewed stated,



"Addiction to dopamine can make it difficult for teens to connect and socialize."
[Source: Jon Lee]

highlighting how tight of a hold social media has on young teens in this generation. An eighth of their day is consumed on their phones, mindlessly scrolling as they become more and more addicted.

I use social media as well, and admit that I have been addicted too. Recognizing this addiction and trying to regulate it is the

key to preventing dopamine from leading to unhealthy behaviors, either by setting restrictions on device usage or blocking certain features. Understanding its positive and negative behaviors allows teens to use the chemical to their advantage, rewarding healthy outlets and avoiding unhealthy ones.

Student Reporter

America's Got Talent: An Opportunity to Shine



Tae Lee

Grade 9
Science Academy STEM Magnet



The members of the DoDream Samulnori team who attended AGT's audition pose together before performing. [Source: Author, Tae Lee]

America's Got Talent. It's a show that shares people's talents and passions with the world. More than just a competition, it's a chance for individuals to showcase their hard work, culture, and hopes. For many, it's the moment they've waited for all their lives. For us, it was a step towards feeling heard.

Growing up, I watched countless clips of contenders performing on AGT. I remember sitting in front of the TV, immersed in the variety of tal-

ents: singers, dancers, magicians, and even talents I had no idea existed. Each of them had their own story their journey that brought them there, and I always thought, "Wow, everyone up there must've gone through so much effort to get there." Little did I know, years later, I'd be standing in front of the judges, waiting for my audition results.

Standing outside the audition doors, we readied ourselves, hearts pounding with anticipation. It was the moment we'd been

waiting for. Stepping inside and carrying our instruments with care felt like a dream. We weren't playing music, we were bringing our culture, our hard work, and our hopes, into that room.

Our journey to AGT started months ago with intense rehearsals, fine-tuning every little noise to perfection. But even with all of that preparation, nothing could quite prepare us for the energy in that room. It was a mix of nerves and excitement, a quiet understanding between other contestants that we were all here for something deeply personal. Some people paced back and forth, psyching themselves up. Others sat silently, eyes closed in deep focus. A few didn't even seem to mind the tension, sleeping through the intermission of auditions.

Hours before the audition, I had the opportunity to speak with one of the AGT staff, who shared how inspiring it is to watch hopeful performers take a leap of faith. One of them told me, "Every season, we see people who have worked their whole lives for this

moment. Winning is important, but being heard and knowing that what you do matters is more. Just being here is already a win."

As we prepared to perform, our representatives briefly explained each instrument's purpose and our motives. We exchanged words of positivity with the judges and began to play our piece.

The moment we struck our first notes, the music separated me from everything, and it seemed like nothing else mattered. The doubts, the nerves, and the pressure all dissolved as we poured ourselves into our music. The room felt different, a bit bigger, like we had created something more out of ourselves at that moment. After finishing, applause echoed through the room. We felt proud. Proud of our performance, proud of our journey, and of the fact that we had taken this step.

As I left the audition venue, I realized AGT wasn't just a show, but a place where dreams are shared. A place where people dare to be bold, sharing a piece of themselves with the world.

Student Reporter

My Experience at the 2025 Science Olympiad Regionals



Joseph Kwak

Grade 10
Canyon Crest Academy

On Saturday, March 15, 2025, the Science Olympiad Regionals competition took place at the University of San Diego. As being one of the 7 winning schools in this competition would secure a spot for the next state rounds, schools were eager to come out on top. Science Olympiad is a rigorous STEM competition covering a broad range of subjects, from physics, chemistry, and engineering to biology, earth science, and technology. My classmates at Canyon Crest Academy and I had been preparing for this event for over five months, dedicating countless hours to mastering different scientific concepts, building devices, and refining our test-taking strategies. We were all nervous and excited, eager to put our skills to the test and see the results of our hard work.

On the day of the competition, I arrived at the center of the University of San Diego where there were numerous tents for different schools. As I approached these, I could feel the buzz of excitement and anticipation in the air, with students eagerly discussing last-minute strategies and



My School, Canyon Crest Academy, at the 2025 Science Olympiad Regionals Competition. [Source: Author, Joseph Kwak]

reviewing their notes. I checked in at my school's tent and nervously waited for my first event to start. I would participate in four events: Geological Mapping, Air Trajectory, Towers, and Optics. When it was time for my first event, Geological Mapping, I was full of nerves, and anxious that I wouldn't perform at my full potential. But after completing the test, I felt relieved and much more

confident for the rest of the day. I returned to my school's tent, now more excited than scared. During these wait times between events, I was able to interact with peers from my school which was really fun. As the day went by, I finished my events one by one while having a fun time being with my friends.

After the competition ended, it was time for the awards

ceremony. We all waited for the results nervously but also held onto hope that our hard work and dedication throughout the last few months would pay off with a spot in the top rankings. As the results were announced, I saw many of my friends get medals after medals, making me more and more anxious. In the end, I earned two medals from my events. And then came the biggest moment of all—our school was crowned the overall champion! The announcement sent a wave of excitement through our team as we celebrated the victory we had worked so hard for.

This event overall was such an enjoyable and entertaining experience where I not only applied and expanded upon my knowledge in geology, physics, and engineering but also hung out with friends and talked to new people I didn't know. Even though I didn't get on the team for the state competition, I am excited to see what my school can do. I am excited about next year's competition and I hope I will be able to have as much fun as I did this year in the future.

Student Reporter

The Impact of Microbial Life



Yejoon Choi

Grade 10
Northwood High School

Among the invisible forces and materials, such as our atmosphere, that keep us alive and healthy, microbial critters are crucial in running and complementing countless organisms, ecosystems, and societies.

Although avoiding germs and maintaining excellent hygiene are staples of most cultures, trillions of foreign microbes live in our skin, guts, and nearly every corner of our bodies, carrying out tasks essential for survival.

Our skin hosts a vast flora of microorganisms adapted to the exterior's sparse nutrients and rigid ground. Although not precisely welcome guests, these microbes have established a symbiosis with us. They secrete chemicals that inhibit the growth of other pathogenic microbes, directly eliminating competition for growth on our skin and indirectly helping our immune defenses against diseases.

Exploring deeper into our microbiome and our stomach, the diverse gut microbiome hosts nearly 5,000 species and weighs approximately two kilograms. These microscopic bugs in our highly acidic stomachs serve a very different purpose from those that line our skin. To effectively power every cell and organ in our body, we must eat and digest foods to collect nearly every nutrient that we can use. It is steeply rugged for one organism to accommodate such diverse needs,

and almost every animal uses the seemingly insignificant gut microbiome to create vitamins. Observing our guts and skin can reveal the vital role that the microbiome plays in individual organisms' lives. However, microbial life serves a greater purpose for the entire biosphere and ecosystem, which contains thousands and millions of creatures.

The first set of DNA-holding lives were all microbial creatures, which withstood the evolutionary pressure and harsh conditions of early Earth and changed the uninhabitable planet through photosynthesis, effectively creating the more complicated macroorganisms that depend on oxygen to thrive. Photosynthesizing cyanobacteria have predated the evolution of plants, and they are still thriving in our oceans, providing nearly 20% of breathable oxygen.

The vital role of microbes does not end there, as observable by looking at rotten foods or moldy bread. Although not necessarily pleasing visuals for humans or most non-decomposer organisms, rot in dead creatures is a blessing in disguise to most organisms. The role of decomposers is simple but irreplaceable for the maintenance of an ecosystem. Although worms or fungi may not look to serve much purpose when observed, not having decomposers would create stagnation and imbalance in an ecosystem where more waste is being produced



Our hand and skin, while taking a mere fraction of our body mass, hosts trillions of microbial life that have adapted to live and supplement our day-to-day. [Source: Author, Yejoon Choi]

than being disposed of. The lack of decomposers would also mean that the waste cannot be converted into valuable nutrients in the atmosphere and soil such as nitrogen and phosphorus, which are useful resources for enriched soils that support plant growth. Although seemingly insignificant, the minute roles that millions of microorganisms serve form to en-

rich and power entire ecosystems and their inhabitants.

The impact of the nearly invisible microbial life that complements the individual functions of almost every multicellular animal and is responsible for the creation and maintenance of our compact and diverse ecosystem shows its significance in our day-to-day lives.