



Extra-Curricular and Summer Activities: What Matters and What Doesn't

The more selective the college, the more important a role your extra-curricular and summer activities will play in the admissions process. The common application as well as applications for colleges not on the common application all ask students to list their activities outside the classroom both during the school year and every summer that they're in high school.

Applicants are generally required to list the number of hours per week and number of weeks per year that they engaged in each activity, as well as the highest position held.

What looks good to admissions officers?

Pursuing interests and committing time to something you care about looks good. So does working at any kind of job for an extended period of time for the purpose of earning money. No matter how menial the tasks you may be performing, being able to hold a job reflects a good work ethic, maturity and responsibility.

Leadership is also extremely important. Not everybody can be a leader, you say, and leaders need followers. Never mind: most admissions officers demonstrate a preference for students who are leaders of something. You don't have to be a student council officer or a team captain, though. If your passion is community service, you can create fundraising events or start a club to raise awareness of a particular cause. You can also become drum major of the marching band, or head of the stage crew for the school's theatrical productions. Or you can start your own band, perhaps write music for them, and find venues for them to perform before an audience.

The possibilities are numerous and varied, but one important reason to become involved in activities as early as possible is that you'll have a better chance of landing a leadership position when you're a junior or senior. It doesn't matter whether the activities are in or out of school so long as they're completely separate from what's required for your classes.

College admissions people like to see students doing community service because it suggests that they care about something other than themselves and are willing to give back to the community. It's fine to be a hospital volunteer, serving as a clerk or wheeling supplies around, but it's even better to engage in an activity that puts you outside of your comfort zone and

demands a degree of grit or creativity. Signing up with a community service program run by someone else is nice, but identifying a problem and coming up with your own solution is even more impressive.

If entrepreneurship is your thing, the Internet makes it easy for you to get to work. You can find all sorts of merchandise online that can be re-sold at a profit if you target the right audience, and you can even turn those efforts into community service by donating the profits to a cause of your choice.

There is no rule, though, that everyone has to do community service or anything else in particular so long as you're obviously doing more than watching television and hanging out with friends whenever you're free. If you're devoting 15 or more hours a week to a single activity, be it a job or sport, artistic endeavor or anything else, all the while keeping up with your schoolwork, nobody will ask for anything more from you.

Will engaging in more unusual activities give you an advantage when applying to college? It might, and the reason is twofold. First, admissions officers endeavor to create a diverse freshman class, so they might anticipate that you will enrich your college community by sharing your passion or skill with classmates who don't know much about it. Second, coaches, orchestra directors and the like will identify for the admissions office the positions they need filled. So, for instance, if you are really good at archery and the archery team is graduating some of its members or if you're a really good oboe or bassoon player and the orchestra is going to need students to play those instruments, you may well have an edge over applicants whose activities are more similar to lots of other people's.

What Does Not Impress Admissions Officers

Joining random different clubs each year makes it look as if you're more interested in following your friends than in making a real commitment to an activity you find meaningful. Admissions officers like to say that depth is more important than breadth, meaning that persevering with a few activities is more impressive than dabbling briefly in lots of different ones. Joining a bunch of clubs for the first time at the end of junior year will raise suspicion that you're only doing it to be able to list them on your college applications.

Participating in expensive programs that take students to perform community service in faraway places can be as much of a turn-off as a turn-on to admissions officers, who have been known to question why you didn't just find a way to help needy people closer to home. Certainly, no one will think less of you if your family's finances have deprived you of such opportunities. That said, for the privileged young people whose parents are willing to pay for them, the experiences they afford can be transformative. Even traveling in the U.S. or abroad with a teen tour can be an eye-opening or broadening experience for those young people who

go with the right attitude, eager to learn about the wider world. To make such experiences work to your advantage, be prepared to explain in a compelling way what you gained from them.

Telling admissions officers that you did nothing during your summer vacation would be a serious mistake, as would saying that you spent the whole summer preparing for the SAT or ACT. However, if you set yourself a goal and then met it, like for instance, reading all the novels of Dostoevsky or teaching yourself Mandarin, they might well decide you're just the sort of interesting, self-motivated individual who would be an asset to the college you wish to attend!