

What extracurricular activities do colleges love to see?

By Maggie Harden
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When applying to college, it can be easy to fall into the trap of trying to seem like the “ideal” applicant – someone who has a high GPA, strong standardized test scores and a wide variety of extracurricular activities. However, there are so many things to consider in regards to a student’s extracurriculars that the ideal applicant might not exist.

Does having a part-time job affect a student’s admissions decision? Is it better to have a few activities and a leadership role, or 15 activities and no leadership? The extracurricular struggle is real, but here are some tips to help your activities stand out.

1. Don’t join activities because you think they’re what colleges want

Joining an activity out of genuine interest is one of the most important steps you can take. Colleges aren’t necessarily looking at what extracurriculars you participated in, but how involved you were. It’s much easier to be involved if you’re passionate about the activity.

“Some students just sign up for tons of extracurriculars left and right, and I don’t think that’s necessarily in the best interest of the student,” said University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh admissions counselor Drew Kopitzke. “That might look good on paper, but for the satisfaction of the student and their overall experience, I think it’s better to sign up for however many extracurriculars that they can be really dedicated to, actually go to the meetings and maybe be an executive board member.”

It’s also important to note that colleges will look at your extracurriculars in totality. For example, if you have a part-time job, you may only be able to participate in one or two clubs at school, but admissions officers will see that you are working and take that into consideration.

“We consider each student within the context of their application and opportunities offered by their school and community,” said Ohio State regional recruiter Josephine West. “Some students are passionate about a single activity and have many years of commitment, while others participate in a variety of activities to find those that suit them best. There is no ‘perfect’ activity, work or leadership list for students.”

2. Use the CommonApp’s activity limit to your benefit

Students applying to college through the CommonApp can only list 10 activities, which can seem limiting if you participate in more than that. However, use this number as an opportunity to slim down your list and highlight the experiences you were really invested in.

“I think if you have 10 activities that you’re really involved with, that’s going to be plenty,” said Purdue assistant director of admissions Mike Borovsky. “You don’t need to list activities where you only went to the meetings once or twice a semester.”

Most extracurriculars are weighed equally in the college admissions process, so don’t worry about cutting out three years of participation in theater just because you think a college would prefer to see a sport. Instead, highlight the activities you were really active in. This will strengthen your application and highlight your devotion to things inside and outside of school.

“As a rule of thumb, I would say all extracurricular involvement is going to be beneficial,” Kopitzke said. “When I’m methodically combing through a student’s application, there’s not really any activities that weigh heavier than others. It’s just good to be very well-rounded and have a holistic experience in high school.”

3. Get your feet wet for college

Colleges like to look at extracurriculars to get a better picture of you and how you’ll fit in on campus. If you’re passionate enough about an extracurricular you started in high school, utilize that experience and try to stay involved with the activity in college.

“When I was in high school, I was the kid that signed up for everything I could possibly do, and I went to college and I did that too,” Kopitzke said. “It ended up really helping me a lot, and I would encourage students to stay involved when they go off to college because that’s going to open up a lot of doors and give you a lot better, more well-rounded experience.”

High school activities are a great way to find a niche before going to college. If you show that on your application, colleges will take note and begin to envision you as an active part in their future student body, which will help with their admissions decision.

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4. Consider writing about an extracurricular experience in your essay

Many students shy away from writing about an extracurricular experience in their essay or personal statement because they've been advised not to repeat what's in their resume. However, extracurriculars can make for a great essay if you had a truly meaningful experience through one of them.

"I do prefer that the essay tells me more about (students) and helps me to get to know them," West said. "If this means they want to tell me about a significant extracurricular experience, I would love to hear about it."

If you do choose to write your essay on an extracurricular, make sure to focus on how the experience impacted you, instead of just that you were involved in it; otherwise, it will become a repetition of what's already in your application.

"If it's something you were really involved in and important to you, write about it," Borovsky said. "If it's something you just want to mention as a 'By the way, I was involved in this, this and this,' it's not going to help you at all."

Admissions officers use the essay as a way to get to know you, and your activities are a good opportunity to convey your interests and personality.

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