

Extra-Curricular Activities & College Admissions

WHAT EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO KNOW

As reported in *The Wall Street Journal* (13 April 2006, p. D1) and elsewhere, selective schools for more than a decade now have been rejecting the overwhelming majority of valedictorians who apply for admission (a valedictorian, as you may know, is the student who is considered number one in the graduating class). Yes, selective schools routinely turn down applicants with perfect test scores and GPAs. As stated in *The New York Times* (9 July 2011, p. ED6), the top schools are flooded with so many well qualified applicants that other aspects of the application, such as essays and **activities**, have come to **play an increasingly critical role**. Essays are discussed separately in another report. Here we focus on activities. Even if the weight given to the essay trumps the importance attached to activities—as appears to be the consensus among experts—it is the activities that provide key content for the essays. From this perspective, then, activities become equally important.

A question frequently asked of admissions officers, by both students and parents, is: **“Which activities can help a student the most with regard to college admission?”** Like Jeff Brenzel, Yale’s Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, speaking on the website CollegeBoard.org, they almost invariably say the same thing: That’s the wrong question to focus on, they say. The student should do whatever the student most enjoys doing. Just “do the things you truly enjoy ... rather than try to outguess an admissions committee.” There is certainly truth to that. And we would be among the first to agree that part of a parent’s rightful mission is to help a child find the best path for that person as an individual—to help the student develop her potential and “find her bliss,” in a way that contributes positively to society.

But the larger truth is that **certain activities are generally more helpful than others, with regard to college admission**. Many students who come to us in their senior year for help with their applications, for example, have neglected community service activities. Often, these otherwise very strong applicants have engaged in community service to some extent but not seriously enough to be able to feature it in their applications, to draw upon this as material for their essays. Now keenly aware of how this may weaken their applications, they regret this deeply. By this point, however, it is too late to do anything about the deficit in this regard.

Generally, the best approach for students whose parents are concerned about both the student’s personal development and future college admissions situation is to **obtain expert counseling as early in the process as possible**, preferably beginning in middle school. The idea here is by no means to push the child into anything she will not enjoy or run her ragged, depriving her of the joys of childhood. Rather, the idea is to intelligently guide the child in a way that will enhance both her personal development and also be advantageous with regard to college admissions. (See the information box below with regard to obtaining details about our Academics & Activities Guidance Package.)

Every college applicant, by necessity, engages in “**packaging**.” Even if you do not like the term, it is to the applicant’s advantage to do it well. To package oneself does not mean to be fake, phony or untrue to one’s values or beliefs. Rather, it refers to the art of positioning, to present the applicant in a way that works to the applicant’s best advantage. Effective packaging is not easy. It is not easy at the level of a multi-billion-dollar corporation, for commercial purposes. Nor is it easy at an individual level, either for a business professional or college applicant. This is what the top consultants, working at the highest level, accomplish.

To give you some insight into the process, we will briefly **overview three proven, effective packaging strategies, relating to extracurricular activities**: (1) unusual hobbies, (2) “non-teenager activities” and (3) hooks & themes.

Unusual hobbies. As stated in *Acing the College Application (ACA)*: “[A]dmissions directors are constantly searching for students with oddball activities or interests because at the end of the admissions season, all directors have to prepare a summary report on the prospective class. In addition to including statistical information ... directors like to throw in some descriptions of the more interesting accepted students Your job then is to aim for one of these coveted listings if you happen to have a high level of competence or just an unusual talent or hobby” (46-47).

Non-teenager activities (also known as NTAs). College applicants are, overwhelmingly, teenagers. Admissions officers are adults. Most teenagers do pretty much the same things, which are often not of great interest to most adults. What interests adults—and earns their respect—are, naturally, activities of interest to adults. This is one of the best ways to be a stand-out, in the eyes of the admissions committee members.

Hooks & themes. A hook refers to special talent, achievement or personal quality that leaps off the page of a college application. The top ten college hooks, in alphabetical order, are: athletic, drama, humanitarian, international, multicultural, music, political, science, technology and writing. A theme is a clear and consistent “common denominator” that runs throughout a student’s application, both academically and in terms of extra-curricular activities. A theme pulls everything together into a coherent and compelling profile. “What’s really impressive is the weaving together of several related activities with a common thread” (*ACA*, page 45).

While we’ve only had space here for a brief overview, you now have the benefit of more insight than most parents do about how extra-curricular activities relate to college admissions.

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