

How Colleges Weigh Applicants' Extracurricular Activities

Colleges appreciate applicants with meaningful extracurricular achievements, not just club memberships.

By [Ilana Kowarski](#), Reporter | Oct. 25, 2018, at 4:48 p.m.

High school students eager to stand out in the [college application process](#) often participate in a litany of [extracurricular activities](#) hoping to bolster their chances of admission to a selective [undergraduate institution](#). **However, college admissions experts say that the quality of a college hopeful's extracurricular activities matters more than the number of activities he or she participates in.** Experts note that merely participating in an extracurricular activity is not enough to impress admissions committees at prestigious colleges, which typically seek students with significant extracurricular accomplishments in addition to strong academic credentials.

Some ways to distinguish oneself in the college admissions process include winning awards in competitions, getting elected to leadership positions, producing compelling research or beautiful art and performing meaningful community service, experts suggest.

Sue Rexford, the director of college guidance at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School, a religiously affiliated high school in Maryland, says it is not necessary for a student filling out the [Common Application](#) to list 10 activities in the application. **Although there are 10 activity slots on the activity list portion of the application form, colleges don't expect every student to have 10 activities, she says.** "No college will expect that a student has a huge laundry list of extracurriculars that they have been passionately involved in each for an extended period of time," Rexford wrote in an email.

Cynthia Crum, director of college counseling at The Episcopal Academy, a private high school in Philadelphia, suggests that it's not mandatory for someone to specialize in one extracurricular activity in order to get accepted into a selective college. Contrarily, both "pointy" students with a narrow extracurricular focus and "well-rounded" students with a variety of extracurricular activities can get into their dream college, Crum says.

She encourages students to participate in activities that will help them clarify their career goals and guide them toward the undergraduate degree program that's the best fit. Crum says that career exploration activity helps students demonstrate self-awareness and maturity in their undergraduate applications. "That's a signal to colleges that says, 'I understand what I'm walking into. I have found awareness to back up my thoughts that I might want to do this,'" she says.

Crum adds that colleges are understanding of how students with financial constraints or care-taking responsibilities may not participate in as many extracurricular activities as their peers without these limitations. Colleges are cognizant of the fact "that there are students who are not in a position to be able to afford to do activities," she says.

Experts say it is tougher to distinguish oneself in a school-affiliated extracurricular activity that is common among high school students such as school orchestras, newspapers or a sports team than it is to stand out while doing an uncommon activity. "The competition to stand out and

make an impact is going to be much stiffer, and so if they're going to do a popular activity, I'd say, be the best at it," says Sara Harberson, a former undergraduate admissions dean at both [Franklin and Marshall College](#) and the [University of Pennsylvania](#) who is now a college admissions consultant. "That should be your goal. The alternative is to do something else, to do something that no one else around you is doing, but still, your goal should be to be the best at it."

High school students who have an impressive personal project they are working on independently often impress colleges, because their commitment to a successful solo endeavor conveys initiative, self-discipline and originality, experts say. "For example, a student with an interest in entrepreneurship could demonstrate skill and potential by starting a profitable small business," Olivia Valdes, the founder of Zen Admissions consulting firm, wrote in an email. "A student with a passion for arts and education could demonstrate skill and potential by teaching a painting class at a community center that attracts larger numbers of students every session."

Joseph Adegboyega-Edun, a Maryland high school guidance counselor and author of several student success handbooks, **says unconventional extracurricular activities can help students impress college admissions offices, assuming they demonstrated serious commitment**. "Again, since one of the big questions high school seniors must consider... during the college application process is, 'What makes you unique?,' having an uncommon extracurricular activity vs. a conventional one is an advantage," he wrote in an email.

Experts say demonstrating talent in at least one extracurricular activity can help in the college admissions process, especially at top-tier undergraduate institutions. "Distinguishing yourself in one focused type of extracurricular activity can be a positive in the admissions process, especially for highly selective institutions, where having top grades and test scores is not enough," Katie Kelley, admissions counselor at IvyWise admissions consultancy and a former senior director of admissions at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), wrote in an email. "Students need to have that quality or hook that will appeal to admission officers and allow them to visualize how the student might come and enrich their campus community."

Extracurricular activities related to the college major declared on a college application are beneficial, experts suggest. "If you already know your major, having an extracurricular that fits into that major can be a big plus," Mayghin Levine, the manager of educational opportunities with The Cabbage Patch Settlement House, a Louisville, Kentucky, nonprofit community center that assists at-risk youth and that offers disadvantaged college applicants guidance throughout the college admissions process. "Even just a tangential connection, like robotics club when you're majoring in biology or glee club when majoring in art, shows the school that you are passionate about the subject you're wanting to study."

High school students who have had a strong positive influence on their community through an extracurricular activity may impress a college and win a scholarship, says Erica Gwyn, a former math and science magnet program assistant at a public high school who is now executive director of the Kaleidoscope Careers Academy in Atlanta, a nonprofit organization. Gwyn cites as an example a high school student whose public service project providing local homeless women with feminine hygiene products resulted in that student winning a full-ride college scholarship. "Look and see what's in your community and where is there a gap and (ask yourself), 'How can I creatively solve this problem?'" Gwyn says.

Gwyn also says students who have had to function relatively independently from their family by [earning a living](#) because of a family crisis but thrived in spite of this personal adversity tend to be competitive college applicants. These students demonstrate the grit necessary to succeed both academically and professionally, she says.

Students whose extracurricular activities defy gender norms may also have an advantage, she says. "I think it shows your propensity for having a broad perspective and wanting to learn and expose yourself to new things." Gwyn also suggests students with international extracurricular activities, such as church mission trips to foreign countries or volunteering trips abroad, can excel in the college admissions process, since their activities convey a kind of cosmopolitanism that is attractive to colleges.