

Use Your Summers

Don't waste your summers. They are the perfect time for activities that will strengthen your college application while providing education of a different sort. Explore your interests and find out or confirm what you are passionate about. If you already know where your passion is, follow it. Use summer to delve deeper into that area and enhance it. If you don't feel that you have found your true interest(s) yet, use the summer to try something different. Make summer useful and make it count in any of these ways. The bottom line – just do something. Engage. It's all about having something to say about yourself besides simply good grades and strong test scores.

Summer School

If you are involved in activities during the school year, or are having a hard time keeping your grades where you'd like them to be, these and/or other issues might make summer school a good choice for you. As depressing as that may sound, (Juxtaposing "summer" and "school" just seems all wrong to most kids.) think of the upside. You might be able to boost a couple of grades simply by easing the pressure for the following year. You might be able to fit in that other activity you've been thinking about if you just had one class out of the way. You might make new friends that you wouldn't otherwise get to know, all of whom are doing the same thing. If this idea appeals to you, consider whether to take the class through your high school (most have a summer program) or through a local college. Some colleges also offer pre-college prep classes to help you prepare for college admissions. Think about these alternatives and weigh the pros and cons against other options.

Employment

You probably think that getting a job is right up there with summer school in terms of how to ruin a summer. But wait a minute – not all jobs are indoors at desks. Having a summer job can mean many different things and yet all jobs have two things in common:

- 1) They provide income.
- 2) They give you something to put on college applications in the Paid Employment section.

So if you hate to be indoors, consider all the camp counseling positions that open up in the summer. Are you an athlete? Camps are always looking for responsible, athletic and outgoing students to work with their kids. If camp options don't work, consider jobs in an area of interest. Meaningful summer jobs can influence your thoughts about careers and college majors.

Volunteer Work and Community Service

Almost every city or town has volunteer opportunities available. These will probably be unpaid, but can still provide value in other ways. It is hard to quantify the feeling of satisfaction that comes from helping others, especially in your local community. Colleges also pay attention to these types of endeavors, and there is a section on most applications to list them. But before you run out and volunteer a couple of hours at the first place you find, try to volunteer in a meaningful way. What we mean is, try to tie the service to something that you're already interested in and have other connections to. Having several activities that revolve around a theme tends to enhance your college applications because it demonstrates genuine passion and commitment. For example, if you love animals, demonstrate that by volunteering in an animal hospital, taking a class in animal rescue and

participating in a summer program helping to save a near-extinct species. OK, that may be a little extreme. But you get the idea – try to develop a theme that will come through on your applications.

However, if you can't find community service or volunteer work that relates to your other interests, that doesn't mean you shouldn't proceed. Note also that many high schools now make community service part of their graduation requirements (usually a required number of hours), so be sure that what you select will fulfill that need as well. Your high school counseling office may have ideas for you too.

Prep for Standardized Testing

If your school year is jam packed, you might consider whether you could use the summer to practice and prep for standardized tests - then plan to take them in the fall. This option doesn't work for everyone, as taking the tests in the spring is very common. And, in that case, much of your summer test prep may be lost by then. But it still might be worth increasing your summer reading and/or working on vocabulary or a weak area in math. Everyone's situation is different, so think strategically about whether you could find a way to work on a weak testing area and avoid losing the benefit before you take the test. It's a bit of a puzzle, isn't it.

Summer Enrichment Programs

Selecting an Option

Offering students a meaningful way to spend their summers has become big business. The good news – there are numerous options. The bad news – some of them are prohibitively expensive as a result of the “commercialization of summer”. But take heart, there is something out there for everyone and for every budget. You just have to start researching, and the earlier the better. The more time you spend on the research, the better the odds that you'll spend your time, and money, wisely. The internet is full of opportunities but, of course, you need to check them out thoroughly. Always ask for references and talk to people who've experienced the program. It's best if you receive a referral from a trusted friend or associate, but that's not always possible.

The Pricey “Unique” Experience

Be aware that there is wide disagreement about the worth of some of these exotic (read: pricey) programs in college admission decisions. Some counselors feel that they do in fact give students unique growth experiences that may lead to a great college application essay or, at least, valuable education of a non-classroom variety. Others, notably some college admission officers, argue that they don't really give the student a leg up because anyone who can afford the price tag could “buy” that same “unique” experience. They accuse these programs of widening the have/have not gap in college admissions while taking advantage of all the hype about “standing out” on college applications. Factor this controversy into your summer decisions, but we don't think there's an absolute right or wrong answer here.

Cost of Programs

These vary more than you might guess. There are often volunteer opportunities in your area that might be completely free. At the other end of the spectrum are the high-end adventure or cultural immersion programs that can hit \$10,000+ when you include travel and expenses. If cost is an issue for you, ask about scholarships at the pricier ones and you might be pleasantly surprised. Yes, there are need-based scholarships for summer too!

Competitive Programs

Admission to the more popular or academically-oriented programs can vary as widely as the cost. While some are first-come-first-served, others have application processes and students are accepted or rejected. Many of these start taking applications in the January preceding the summer in question, so start early. Most of the opportunities fall in the middle of the pack and are reasonably priced and available to you if you apply on time and make a deposit. Generally the programs have a variety of date options, so you can plan your summer experience around family trips, summer school etc.

Overseas Experiences

Though often expensive, the overseas programs (sometimes called language or cultural immersion programs) often combine community service, education and adventure. We hear wonderful things about these programs if you can afford them. These sorts of experiences become harder to take advantage of when you get older and have a job. However, there are so many choices available that you need to start planning early and research, research, research.

Don't Forget to Have a Life

Feel a little overwhelmed by all these suggestions? Remember, it's your summer and you're still supposed to have time to relax. But watching TV or hanging out with friends the entire time is simply too costly in high school. Princeton Review publishes a book called *"The 500 Best Ways for Teens to Spend the Summer"* and there are other similar ones which you might find helpful. (Search Amazon.com or your local book store.) The Get in 2 College private resource website has a section on summer opportunities so that's one place to start. Here are some more options we've heard of that will give you a sense of the enormous variety available. (Note that we are NOT specifically recommending these or any other programs. You will need to research any opportunity thoroughly before committing.)

- Rustic Pathways: www.rusticpath.com
- Global Routes: www.globalroutes.org
- Special Olympics: www.specialolympics.org
- Points of Light: www.pointsoflight.org
- Action Quest: www.actionquest.com
- Odyssey Expeditions: www.OdysseyExpeditions.org
- Broadreach: www.gobroadreach.com
- Peterson's Summer Abroad: www.petersons.com/sumrabrd
- Peterson's Summer Camps: www.petersons.com/summerop/code/ssector.asp
- Academic Study Associates: www.asaprograms.com - US and international experiences
- Putney Student Travel: www.goputney.com
- Where there be Dragons: www.wheretherebedragons.com – Vietnam, Hong Kong etc.
- Summer tours for teens: www.summerfun.com

Good luck. Enjoy your summer but make it count in a way that is meaningful to you.