

Are Clubs Crucial?

By Katherine Cohen, Ph.D.

Good grades and high test scores alone will not guarantee you entrance into the most selective colleges. College admission directors are looking for candidates who will enrich their college communities. Therefore, colleges want to know how you spend your time outside of the classroom, and specifically how you have made an impact or significant contribution to both your high school and the community in which you live.

They will look at your résumé or your “brag sheet” to see exactly which extracurricular activities you engaged in over time. Extracurricular activities count!

But they have to be of a certain nature.

Colleges are not looking for the “Jack of All Trades, Master of None.” They are not particularly interested in the student who dabbles in many activities but is not known for any one in particular. They are also not looking for what I like to call “serial joiners,” students who join different clubs year after year—and who then drop out of those clubs year after year.

Colleges are specifically looking for consistency, commitment, responsibility and leadership in your extracurricular activities. Instead of “well-rounded” students, colleges seek angular students, or specialists. So that means you only need to pursue a few areas of interest—those in which you are talented and that you love—throughout high school. If you are interested in sports and writing, perhaps all of your extracurricular time is spent on those two endeavors. You might be the quarterback of your school’s football team, write for the sports section of the school newspaper and organize fund-raisers to pay for new school athletic equipment. You may also write poetry and publish it in the school’s literary magazine—or *start* the school’s literary magazine.

Make sure that you are spending significant amounts of time on each activity. One-hour-per-week clubs are considered superficial. Find extra hours in the week to plan something new for the club. Also, make sure you are participating in those activities you enjoy for all four years of high school. A college admissions director often does not look favorably on a student who starts community service in 12th grade!

Also, summers count! You do not want to spend your 12 weeks of summer working...on your tan. Think of long programs you can do (eight to 10 weeks) of summer school, travel/study abroad, employment or an internship, or a unique program that matches your interests.

Whatever you do with your extracurricular time, keep in mind how you are making an impact on your community. In other words, if we were to pluck you out of your school setting tomorrow, what would your school miss?

Ask yourself, “What am I good at? What do I love to do? How can I help my school/community/peers use these unique skills and talents that I possess?” Some schools do not offer much in the way of clubs and community service. I say if you can’t find it, found it! Being a pioneer—especially one who thinks outside the box—is very attractive to the most selective colleges. Extracurriculars are a great vehicle for demonstrating initiative, leadership and good citizenship.

Go out there and make an impact!

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