



HOW TO HELP YOUR TEENAGER CRAFT A MEANINGFUL SUMMER EXPERIENCE FOR THEIR COLLEGE APPLICATION



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INTRODUCTION

As a college counselor with Collegewise, I have the privilege of working with high school students on every aspect of their college search and application process, including the many decisions they make throughout high school. One of the best parts of my job is helping students identify and explore their academic and non-academic interests. Not only do we talk about what that looks like during the school year, but we also spend meaningful time discussing what they'll do over summer break. In most cases, we begin talking about summer plans as far back as January (and sometimes even earlier!). Often, these conversations focus on ways students can have purposeful, meaningful summer experiences that enable them to stay active and develop their interests.

While I've had many conversations with my students about this topic, it's equally important to involve parents and guardians, too. You all play critically important roles in supporting your child as they decide how and where to spend their precious time, energy, and effort over the summer.

Before I go on, let me cut to the chase by answering a question many of you may be asking: ***What's the best way for my student to spend their summer?*** The truth is, there is no singular "right" way. A question I often ask my students as they plan their summer is: What would you want to do if you had more time to do it? Summer break, when your teen is not taking a full course load, or their time commitment to sports and activities has either paused or declined, is the perfect opportunity to try something new or do more of something they already love. I always tell my students that above all else, I want them to spend their summer doing something meaningful that they genuinely enjoy. Something they will learn and grow from and that will help develop their interests. Focusing on experiences that meet those criteria, rather than trying to find a specific name-brand program or internship, is a better use of time, and will help them demonstrate in their college application narrative how they've explored their interests. In this guide, we'll provide examples of the many ways students can engage in successful and meaningful summer experiences and how, as a parent/guardian, you can support them in planning a memorable summer.

TAKING A CLASS

Some students may elect to take a class over the summer, whether to get ahead in an academic subject or to make room in their schedule during the school year to take more classes they're interested in. Here are some examples from students I've worked with:

- I had a student this year take her U.S. History class over the summer so that she could take two math classes senior year. As an engineering applicant, she wanted to have room in her senior year schedule to pursue both AP Statistics and a Dual Enrollment Multivariable Calculus class.
- Last year, I started working with a student who, in the winter of his junior year, had not taken any language classes in high school. I helped him find virtual programs over the summer so he could enroll in an online Spanish class to ensure that he reached two years of a language other than English by the time he graduated.
- Sometimes, I'll even have students take their gym or health class over the summer so they can add another core academic class into their schedule during the year.

If they can't take a class at their high school, there may be a class at their local community college that interests them, or through another university that offers credit-bearing courses for high school students. Whether they take a class to advance in a subject, to easily meet a high school graduation requirement, or to open up more time during their school year schedule for another class they want to take, the summer can be a great time to focus solely on one subject.

LEARNING A NEW SKILL

Credit-bearing classes aren't the only ones that "count." There are tons of platforms like [Coursera](#), [EdX](#), or [Udemy](#) that offer free (non-credit-bearing) classes where students can learn a new skill or dive deeper into a subject that interests them. I've had students explore classes through these platforms on topics including:

- Introductory Coding or Python
- 2D Animation
- Positive Psychology
- ...and so much more!

There are tens of thousands of courses to choose from, and many of them are free, offered at varying levels of skill, and self-paced so students can complete them on their own timeline.

ENROLLING IN AN ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Another popular option for many students over the summer is to enroll in an academic program, often on a college campus. For example, this summer I have a student who will be enrolling in a Sports Medicine program through Wake Forest, another student who is going to take an Immunology course through Vanderbilt University, and one who just signed up for an animation program at an art school in France. While academic experiences such as these can be expansive, I always want my students to know that attending a program that is tied to a specific university will not have any bearing on their eventual admission to that school. But for many students, programs like these, especially if they're in-person, can be a great way to get a feel for a campus and what it's like to be a college student for a week or two, living in a residence hall, eating in a dining hall, or even taking public transportation. Simulating the college experience can make the thought of going away feel less intimidating and help them discover the type of environment that could be the right fit for them.

INTERNSHIPS

Internships can be a great way to gain hands-on, on-the-job experience, giving students the chance to apply what they've learned in a classroom to a real-world setting or industry. This option is best for students who have a more defined area of interest, rather than students looking for an introduction to a field they know less about. Internships span all subject areas, from health and human services to lab research, business and finance, and anything in between. There are many formalized, structured internship programs out there, including (but certainly not limited to):

- [NASA's High School Internship](#)
- [The Scripps Student Science and Medicine Research Internship](#)
- [Bank of America Student Leaders Program](#)

Many of these internships (especially those that include a stipend) are highly competitive, with admission rates that rival the most selective colleges and universities. But you don't have to land a "name-brand" internship to gain valuable work experience.

I often tell my families that an internship, especially if unpaid, is not much different than volunteering. The downside is that it will probably require more legwork. Students will need to reach out to companies and organizations to introduce themselves, state their interests and relevant experiences, and inquire about an opportunity to lend a hand. For many, it can feel scary to pick up the phone or send an email to a stranger, but learning to network and communicate with an adult is an important life skill. If your teen doesn't have a counselor, you can offer to help with crafting emails. You might even have a few connections who may be receptive to putting your teen to work. If not, I recommend that you encourage your student to cast a wide net and send emails out to a variety of contacts in the hopes of hearing back from just a few. I'm willing to bet that many places would be happy to accept a volunteer's help in exchange for the opportunity to learn the ropes of an organization. This is also a great way for students to network and expand their professional contacts — you never know how useful they might be in the future!

PART-TIME JOB

Lots of students don't think a part-time job "counts" as an extracurricular activity, or they rank it lower on their list of priorities. The truth is, I wish all my students had a part-time job at some point during high school! When I worked in admissions, I always loved seeing a part-time job on a student's Activity List, and I hear this same sentiment echoed by my colleagues who are current or former admissions officers. I'll let you in on another secret: There is no hierarchy when it comes to how "important" or "impressive" you might perceive a job to be; the job itself does not matter nearly as much as the lessons a student learns from it. I've had students work as lifeguards, babysitters, sales associates, restaurant hostesses, and summer camp counselors, and others who flipped burgers at a fast-food joint or shelved books at a library. It really doesn't matter what they do. A part-time job is going to equip students with essential life skills, including time and money management, customer service, the ability to work well with others, and so much more. Whether your teen chooses to work to earn a little money, save for college, or because they need to play an active role in financial contributions within your family, there is much to be gained from a part-time job, especially if it's doing something they enjoy.

PASSION PROJECTS AND HOBBIES

I sometimes fear students think they don't have room for their hobbies. But students are so much more than just the line items on their resume; they are full people with multitudes of interests, and colleges genuinely want to know about them, including their hobbies and passions. It's not unusual for students to feel pressured to complete an academic or intellectually stimulating endeavor or else it won't "count" for college. But everything they do has value. Brown and Princeton, for example, each have supplemental essays asking students to talk about something that brings them joy — this reflects colleges' interest in learning more about the things that are unique to each student, including how they enjoy spending their time. Think of your student's hobbies as an opportunity to channel their creativity, fuel their interests, or simply commit to something that gives them respite from their busy lives.

I've seen students turn hobbies into scalable projects that help them widen or deepen their community impact. For example:

- A student who loved painting in her free time created an online storefront on the popular website RedBubble, sold her artwork, and donated proceeds to a charity she cared about.
- Another student with a passion for recycling started his high school's first recycling club and organized a city-wide park cleanup event.
- Another student started a podcast where she interviews medical professionals so that other students can learn more about various careers in the medical field.

I've also had students maintain a personal hobby simply because it's important to them and they don't necessarily seek to connect it to a wider audience, like:

- Planting a vegetable garden at home.
- Thrifting clothes.
- Learning hieroglyphics (simply because this student was interested in Ancient Egypt and curious about this form of writing!).

Whatever their interest is, know that even — or especially — the things students do for the pure, intrinsic love of it are valuable.



RESEARCH

Sometimes, a student might turn a passion project into a research project. In fact, one trend that I am seeing more and more is an increased interest in pursuing academic research over the summer. This can be a great option for students who have a question they want to answer, and in doing so, seek to create new knowledge and contribute meaningful findings to the greater academic field. There are many roads that lead to conducting original research:

- A student may reach out to professors at local colleges and universities and ask if they have the capacity to take on a research assistant (the process of finding these opportunities looks very similar to inquiring about internships).
- There are also structured programs, such as [Indigo](#), that pair students with professors or graduate students for mentored research opportunities.
- Or a student may decide to embark on independent research on their own.

Spoiler alert: Research is not just for STEM fields! I've had students complete independent research projects and papers on economics, international relations, fine arts, psychology, and more.

THREE TOP TIPS

1

Whatever your student does this summer, they should be genuinely interested in it. There's no need to pile on the pressure to pursue something they're not really excited about because you think it might "look good" to a certain college. Admissions officers would much rather students pursue something they love, and that helps them develop their interests, than something they're going to regret or resent. I can also promise that when students engage in activities that they really care about, genuine excitement will come through in their application, essays, and overall narrative, and it will help colleges understand their motivations and contributions.

2

The theme of the summer should be “balance.” I tell the parents/guardians I work with that students should not feel so overscheduled during the summer that they return to school in the fall already feeling exhausted and burnt out. Among all your calculations for how they spend their time over the summer, please make sure to factor in some much-needed downtime. Kids should shoot some basketball hoops with their neighborhood friends, crack open a book (that is not required reading for a class!), or pick up a new hobby they’ve always wanted to learn. Whatever it is, make sure they do something for the pure love and enjoyment of it, and know that it’s also ok to build in some time to relax.

3

There is no “right” or “wrong” plan for summer. What your teenager is interested in may look very different from what their friends want to do, and that’s ok. Everyone is on their own path, and as long as you keep checking in with your teen (ask them, “How does this activity make you feel? Is this experience helping you get closer to articulating your interests?”), you can feel confident that you are doing your best to steer them in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

If you take only one thing away from this article, I hope it’s that there is no right or wrong way to plan a meaningful summer. The students who start the new school year feeling refreshed and invigorated are often the students who found a healthy intersection of exploration, productivity, and self-care. Instead of thinking about summer as a way your student can impress a college, think about it as an opportunity to develop their academic and non-academic interests as they explore the things that light them up. Make sure to take the time in the winter or spring to plan ahead and set some goals with your student for the summer. What do they want to learn? How do they want to grow? And instead of trying to check all the boxes they think a specific school is looking for, encourage them to follow their genuine sparks — I guarantee that when they do that, their passion, skills, and enthusiasm will come through naturally.

COLLEGEWISE COUNSELOR BIO

Sam Joustra, Collegewise Admissions Counselor

Sam is a thoughtful and supportive counselor with a desire to help students find joy in self-discovery so they can gain acceptance to a great fit college. Before joining Collegewise, Sam spent ten years working in college admission, first at Hampshire College, then Vanderbilt University, and then the University of Michigan, where she read 2800 applications.



Sam earned her Bachelor's in French and English from Goucher College and then her Master's in Higher Education with an emphasis in Enrollment Management from Vanderbilt University. She's an active member of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the Michigan Association for College Admission Counseling (MACAC), where she was the recipient of the Rising Star Award during their annual conference.

When she's not counseling, you might find Sam updating her color-coded spreadsheets (please ask her about the 590 restaurants she cataloged and visited while living in Nashville), daydreaming about her next travel adventure (and making a corresponding color-coded itinerary), and eating Jeni's ice cream.

COLLEGEWISE COMPANY BIO

For over 25 years, [Collegewise](#) has been at the forefront of college counseling and tutoring, ensuring that families, schools, and nonprofits have the most up-to-date, honest information about admissions. Collegewise is committed to helping communities around the world understand that applying to university should be an exciting time, not a stressful, anxiety-ridden rite of passage.

With more than 500 years of combined experience, Collegewise's expert counselors have guided 30,000 students from all walks of life. From navigating high school to finding their students' ideal university matches and securing acceptances, Collegewise counselors infuse the process with a sense of calm and joy, giving families the confidence they need to succeed.

Collegewise also partners with schools and outside counselors to enhance the college application experience within their communities. The company develops an array of free events, guides, podcasts, and blog posts, so every family can embark on a less stressful and more successful journey to college.

If you are interested in learning about Collegewise's 1:1 services, please visit [collegewise.com](#) to schedule a free one-on-one consultation with an expert program advisor. During the 45-minute meeting, your advisor will answer all of your pressing questions and gain a deep understanding of your family's goals. Then, they'll develop a personalized program, which may include: college counseling support, development of success skills, extracurricular and leadership guidance, athletic recruitment support, and/or financial aid and scholarship support.

Looking for more? Check out additional resources below:

- [Upcoming Webinars & Seminars](#)
- [Resource Library](#)
- [Wiser Notes: The Collegewise Blog](#)

