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Are extracurricular activities important for college applications?

— Sally Smith

While a great deal of emphasis is placed on the kind of courses one studied in high school, grades, standardised test scores and recommendation letters, extracurricular activities play a major role in tilting the final decision to accept an applicant at the end of the process, especially for admissions to universities in the US. Being active in extracurriculars helps paint a picture of the values, hobbies and character of an applicant, which is a feature also desired by college admission teams. But what kind of extracurricular activities are of more credibility or of preference for admission? Don't try and get into programmes that you are not interested in just because they sound nice or think they are a selling point. If the programmes that you actively pursue have never been passionately done, it will reflect on your statements and your attitude towards them. You should be able to show what you learned, what motivated you in the first place and at the same time why.

On the other hand, many college-bound students think the idea of having to participate in as many extracurricular programmes is what colleges and universities are looking for. This is not true. In fact being a member of almost everything that comes your way dilutes the quality of experience you would have obtained if one stuck to one or two activities. Hence, knowing clearly one's interest, passions and motivations is essential before getting involved in such programmes.

Overall, admission officers place a great amount of value on how the experience has impacted on the applicant. They are interested in evaluating what was learned, what skills were developed and what was accomplished.

It is therefore essential to be able to communicate the activities one engages clearly and succinctly in line with the expectations of these colleges and universities.

*(Sanjeev Verma began with Ernst & Young and progressed to set up the Gulf operations of IDP Education Pty. He now leads Intelligent Partners, developing a wide range of solutions in areas of international education.)*