



EMPOWERLY

Empowerly's Guide to



**COMPETITIVE
SUMMER
PROGRAMS**

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www.empowerly.com

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Call Us: +1-(800)-491-6920



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Does Summer Matter?

Ah, summertime: sunny days, plenty of rest, cool drinks in the shade... paradise! But while most of your classmates are snoozing the days away, some are still highly engaged and busy. Are these busy bees completely off base? Well, not exactly. If you think about your summer for college admissions as a chance to stand out from the pack, then it's a genius idea to be strategic with your time. Ever wondered how you could go about maximizing your summers to enhance your college application?

“High school summer programs, for college admissions?”

It's true. Summer break is a unique opportunity in high school to immerse yourself in ways that are not possible during the standard school semester. You have more flexibility, the opportunity to travel, and fewer obligations! Sure, you can sleep in until noon and binge-watch cartoons if that's what you feel like doing. But if you're still itching for more of a challenge and looking for chances to take your education outside the classroom walls, don't sleep through all of it.

“Wait – don’t I get a break?”

Now, before we start hitting the drawing board, let’s be clear: at Empowerly, we do fully support taking some time to decompress after finals. Take a few days to catch up on sleep and spend time with your family. Once you feel recharged, then you can dive back in!

Why you should start planning for summer programs now:

More than anything, we also recommend thinking ahead to how you can maximize this time. The spring semester is the perfect runway to start sketching out a plan for how you will spend the warmer months away from school. Don’t put it off and miss important deadlines! Both competitive summer programs and college admissions deadlines approach faster than you might think. When the pressures of the high school schedule are in full swing, it can be difficult to remember the big picture.

So what’s next?

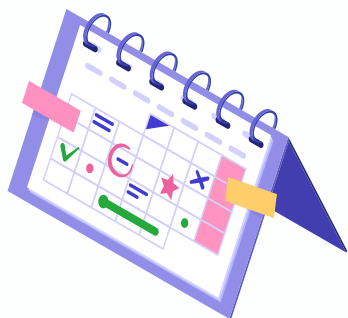
Ready to get started on your summer plans? We have a host of resources and databases to help you expand your horizons and make the most of your summer. Whether you’re looking for academic experience, volunteer opportunities, or even an internship, Empowerly can help.

Summer programs are a big area of focus for our students, all the way up through your senior year. Honing in on a passion, pursuing it full-time over the summer, and reflecting on the experience... each is a highly important part of the iterative growth process here at Empowerly.

Having seen thousands of students, we know that those who actively pursue interests (regardless if they end up focusing on that field) end up doing very well—and even more importantly, learning more quickly who they are as a person. Once again, the deadlines are [always] fast approaching, so we recommend starting this process in December for the following summer at the latest. By the time we meet with many high school students, we often find there’s no time to waste!



Plan Ahead



Letters of recommendation from teachers are valued pretty strongly in the high school summer programs' application process. Applicants need to ask teachers who will enthusiastically endorse them and can speak to their genuine interest in the relevant academic field.

If you're applying to a STEM summer program, ask at least one of your STEM teachers for a letter of recommendation. Lead Counselor Brooke notes, "When possible, I recommend that students ask for LORs before winter break since applications [for high school summer programs] are typically due between January and March."

Keep in mind, there are many highly competitive summer programs that can be quite expensive (especially if they offer college credits). This is not necessarily a detractor from the quality of the program, but it's important to make sure you're getting value out of the money spent. Of course, there are many ways to get tangible results out of your summers, such as self-guided projects, volunteer work, or independent research as well. More on this to come.

Structured High School Summer Programs

Most summer programs for high school students are organized and hosted by universities. Programmatically, you can expect some classroom learning and coursework, and some project-based learning, too. Summer research programs provide opportunities for learning how to read peer-reviewed, published scientific research, and learning to collect and analyze data. Additionally, these programs will introduce how to use statistical or analytics software specific to the niche industry.



Unstructured High School Summer Programs

On the other hand, there are various reasons why one of these structured summer programs might not work for you. From travel to timing to the subject matter, cost, and more—plenty of factors can change the plan. Not to mention, many of these more competitive summer programs are highly selective, meaning that they can only admit a small portion of the total applicants.

If any of these cases, apply to you, it's always prudent to have a Plan B. After all, the adage is "you are what you eat," not "you are where you were accepted." So, let's talk about how to put together an amazing and self-driven "Plan B" summer activity. (Plus, you gain bonus points for independent initiative, resilience, and a growth mindset!)

So, what should high schoolers be looking at doing to fill their summer vacation? Academic summer programs, research, community service, electives, SAT prep classes? The options are unlimited... however, some summer activities are best suited to some grade levels over others.

Looking for middle school summer activities? Our team wrote up a few resources for parents on planning for younger students as well. First, some [general advice](#) about how to approach educational summers; and second, [tips on where to search](#) for kid-friendly summer programs.



Take online college classes.

This is a great choice for younger students especially, as an opportunity to build the skills that could land you an internship in the future! Plus, online college classes might even count for actual college credit. You'll want to check the [rules and regulations](#) for transferring credit. Nonetheless, educating yourself with your initiative always demonstrates strong intellectual vitality. Find something you're passionate about and pursue it.

Explore a variety of activities.

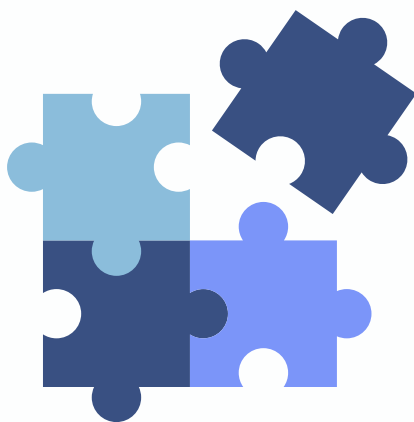
For younger students, trying lots of different activities is good. Don't forget to mix it up! Unlike the academic year where most of your time requires sitting in a classroom, you can spread your time doing a variety of summer activities. Just make sure you include free time and rest in the mix of everything else!

Activity theme-building.

For 11th and 12th graders, on the other hand, the emphasis should be on your overall narrative. One major element we see lacking is a personal theme formed by these extracurricular activities. Actively seeking a passion, which can lead through college, is one of the gifts that high school summers give us. Here are three ways to pursue or find a new passion during summer (you can [read more on each type for context](#)):

1. Competition Gear-Up
2. Academic Preparation
3. Round Out Activities

In 11th and 12th grade, we recommend a focus on one of the areas with a secondary pursuit. This fills out the time and allows our brains to function in different ways. In turn, this fosters creativity and with good time management can garner better results in both pursuits.



Work on your own project.

Perhaps you could use this time to develop your own independent project like building a web page or writing a blog. It takes self-discipline and determination but the two combined can take you far. Some of our students have built mobile apps, published children's books and research papers, and built homes for underserved communities in Africa and Asia. We've even had one of our students who loved to solve tricky AI problems land an internship with a well-known AI research company and go on to study at MIT. The options are endless.

Conduct independent research with a professor or grad student.

Have some burning questions you need to answer? Rather than seeking out competitive summer programs, consider contributing your knowledge. If you're looking for a starting point on this one, check out [this article for tips to get the ball rolling](#). Additionally, you can [reach out to a counselor](#) to connect you with mentorship to bring your work to an even higher level. Ultimately, what you do with your research is what matters; so make the most of it! Using the summertime to flesh out an independent research project is a great use of time.

Volunteer.

Volunteering is another great use of your summertime and is accessible to students of all ages. It builds character, gives you real-world experience, and allows you to help others in your community. Look for volunteer opportunities that align with your interests. You may just make the connections that will lead you to a paid internship or even a job further down your career path.

Or, start a community project.

Do something to help your community such as repaint graffiti or pick up trash. You can get some friends together to take on a project that can help others and make your community a better place to be. Be sure to check with community leaders for permission or information about how to undertake the project.





Work a summer job.

Take up a summer job such as a lifeguard, camp counselor, or waiter/waitress. A job teaches you life skills, gives you a foot in the door for part-time work during your university studies and you earn your own money! Just make sure you are over the minimum working age before you apply.

Or, shadow a job you're interested in.

Investigate your career options now. What is a day in the life of a veterinarian like? What does an electronic engineer do for work? You can ask to shadow someone at work or look for an opportunity to help alongside professionals to see what their jobs are like. Whether you volunteer or take a paid position, being in a work environment can help you narrow down your choice of college major and give you great work experience that even competitive summer programs might not give you.

Look for a summer internship.

Participating in summer internships is a great way to show dedication. We advise students to look for internship positions in 11th or 12th grade, as they're more likely to have marketable skills by that time. The hands-on experience is very valuable. As a matter of fact, we wrote a whole guide about high school internships! [Check it out for more information](#) and guidance on seeking internships as a high school student, no matter where your starting point is.

Visit colleges (if it's possible).

Visiting colleges is fun as well as directly beneficial to your odds of being accepted. Many top schools consider interest as an important factor in college admittance and determine interest by tracking if you attend their events! However, since it's not always possible to do so, we also wrote up some tips for [virtually exploring campuses](#).

As you can see, there's plenty to keep us all busy. For further reading, you can check out this article about [planning a productive summer during a pandemic](#). Finding the right balance and the high school summer programs that make you excited is the key to a successful summer. You've got this.



Your Senior Summer

If you've finally made it to your last semester of high school—congratulations! It's a moment to reflect on your hard work and be proud of how far you have come. However, given the circumstances, it might now feel like you're sitting around twiddling your thumbs. The application crunch is over, you're back in the swing of school after winter break, and you can't yet start planning your college career since you don't yet know where you're going. It's time to start planning the summer before college so you stay busy.

Luckily, there's something plenty you can focus on to take your attention off the waiting game! The summer before college can be an amazing time, and there's no reason not to start planning it right away. At best, these few months will be a once-in-a-lifetime experience of the perfect combination of familiar, comfortable, and fun experiences with new, exciting opportunities for growth.

There are tons of awesome lists out there with specific recommendations for exactly what to do with your summer. Instead of replicating those, let's take a different approach. Think of your summer as an essay. Use the questions below to create your general outline. From there, it should be easy to fill in the details!

So, let's discuss a few strategic, well-planned moves you can make this summer. Being thoughtful with your time will set you up for the college experience you worked so hard for.

Summer Time at Home Versus Exploring Your Next Home

You probably don't yet know where you're going to school, so this one can be tough to answer exactly. Even so, it's worth coming up with a general idea of how you want to split your summer. Do you want to dash off to your new college town as soon as you can? Or stay at home until the last possible minute and get to your new home as late as possible?

Chances are, neither of these extremes will be exactly right for you, but take some time to consider a general area on the spectrum where you'd like to fall. Maybe you'd like a couple of weeks in your new college town to get acclimated before classes start, for example, or maybe you only want to stay at home for a couple of weeks to say your goodbyes and pack.

Make New Friends in College, but Keep the Old

One of the most bittersweet parts of approaching university is the sudden awareness of your high school friend group. Realizing that it will never be like this with these people again may make you appreciate them more than ever before. It's important to make time to spend with these people, having fun, relaxing, and cherishing these final moments of this phase of your life.

At the same time, remember that these people will probably stop being your primary social group very soon. You may want to spend part of your summer making connections that will go to college with you. For example, do you know of anyone in your high school who has the same dream school as you?



If so, this can be a great time to reach out and get to know them better, so you'll already have some friends in place if you end up going to the same schools. This also ties into your decision about when to move away; the opportunity to make friends before classes start can be one factor that points to going earlier than necessary.

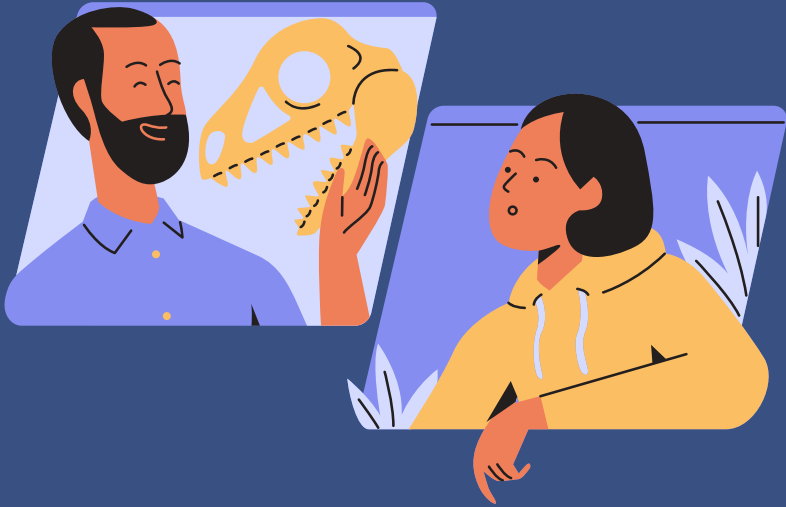
Balancing Growth with Summer Relaxation Before College

You've just come through some pretty stressful times with college applications, every college decision, and life choices, and at this point, it may feel like you're careening toward your adult life with this summer as the last opportunity to relax. If so, you'll be glad to hear that it's important that you recharge and relax before going to university. You want to show up rejuvenated, excited, and ready to learn — not exhausted from pushing yourself too hard all summer. Make sure you plan some time over the summer to relax in a way that works for you, whether that's by playing sports, hanging out with friends, or even watching TV or playing video games.

Don't relax so hard that the whole summer gets away from you, though. There needs to be some growth in there too. This doesn't need to be boring and can take lots of forms depending on your interests. Read great books, take a class or two in a subject that interests you, volunteer, get a summer internship, take a part-time summer job... the possibilities are pretty much endless. What matters is that you're learning something new and keeping your brain active so it'll be ready to go once your university classes start.

Need a more concrete example? [This article describes a case study](#) that you can read for tips and advice on setting up your ideal summer plan.





Conclusion

By now, we hope you see summers the same way we do: as a wonderful opportunity to indulge your creativity, passion, and thirst for knowledge! This guide discusses a range of thought-provoking intellectual activities and programs (plus advice on getting into the programs you want). Now, the rest is up to you—the summer you've been waiting for is just around the corner. As they say, let's "make hay while the sun shines!"



About Empowerly Lead Counselor Brooke:

Brooke graduated with Honors from Stanford, where she studied Human Biology, and has been accepted to medical school at Icahn Mount Sinai. She has extensive experience mentoring, especially in the science and pre-medical areas. She is also experienced with science fairs and has helped many students find research opportunities and edit science fair posters. In high school, she conducted research in the SIMR program at Stanford and was a semi-finalist in the Regeneron Science Talent Search.