



Empowerly's Guide to



EXTRACURRICULARS

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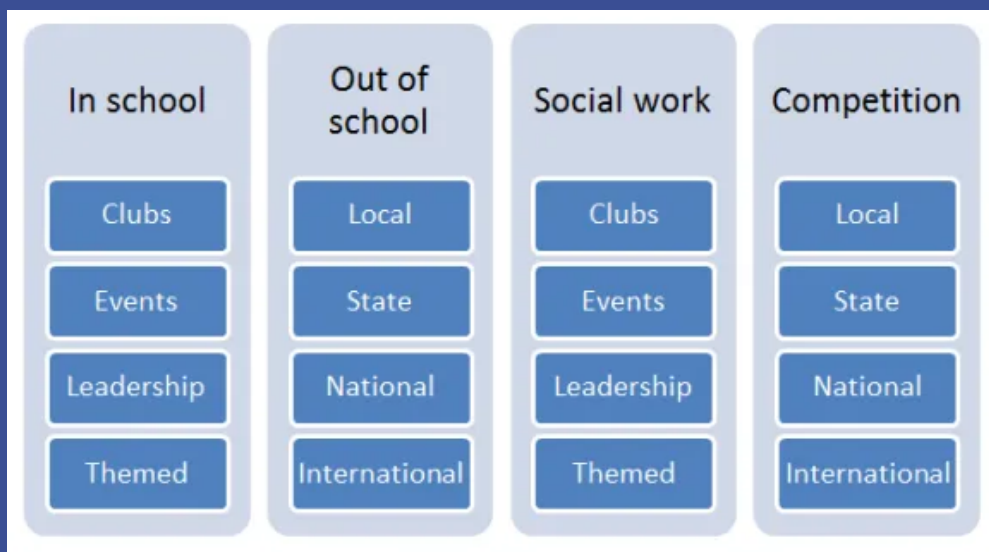


Introduction

At Empowerly, parents and students often ask us questions about extracurricular activities and how important they are for college admissions. These activities offer a rich intellectual opportunity that demonstrates your initiative to learn outside the classroom. Not only that but the sooner you can start exploring your options, the better!

We've developed a model we call the **Activity Matrix** to think about the different types of extracurricular activities. Let's get started.

The Activity Matrix



We believe there are four main types of activities for high school students. Further, within each of these types, there are multiple sub-types into which every activity can fall (and therefore, a range of potential impacts). The main activities you'll find are as follows.

- in school,
- out of school,
- social work, and
- competitions.

The main tiers of impact for activities range from local, to state, to national, to international recognition. Each of these elements plays an important role in your growth, so don't worry if you never reach beyond state or national audiences. Instead, celebrate how far you are able to go!

With this in mind, our goal at Empowerly is for students to find activities that interest them within these broader categories instead of constructing a false story for college admissions.

To accomplish this goal, students need to think seriously about why they like doing what they do in their free time. If they play video games, that is not a bad thing. It is something to explore. We have helped dozens of students with this exact interest find professions and a story in computer science animation, game development, or program management, for starters.

Parents sometimes dismiss an interest because it does not seem resume-worthy. It does not stack up to the activity of their friends' children that have got into great universities. This is the exact opposite way we need to think. Start small, and then work your way up.

Looking for a place to start?

One exercise we do with students is listing all of their activities in each of the types and sub-categories in the Activity Matrix above. Our goal is to find activities that align thematically across different types. This is what we call an **activity thread**.



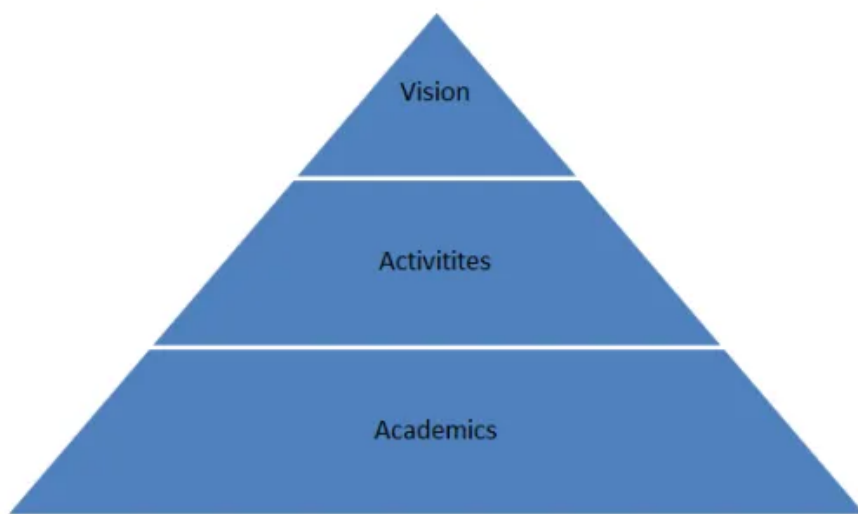
The activity thread is a combination of 2 or 3 activities that link together across types. The thread forms the basis of the Common Application main essay and the thesis that a student writes about.

Hot Topics (FAQ)

Now, let's address some of the common concerns right off the bat...

1. How important are extracurricular activities?

We believe activities constitute up to 50% of an applicant's admissions chances along with their essays. We can represent extra activities in a pyramid that might help explain this in more detail:



- **Academics** form the base of the successful applicant profile. Without sufficient grades, it is hard to apply to competitive colleges. Therefore, this should be your student's first priority.
- The second layer is **Activities**. On one hand, an applicant with insufficient activities that somewhat tie together is difficult to position. If you have good scores and mediocre activities, it can work—but it is harder. Interesting and impressive activities, on the other hand, can launch you forward.
- Finally, the top of the pyramid is **Vision**. Applicants must have the ability to understand why they are doing certain activities and reflect on how that shows who they are and who they hope to become. The best applicants have this maturity and it shows through their essays.

The brilliance of this pyramid is that any applicant can have all three of these components. It just takes time, effort, and some thought.

Activities are important because they help show admissions officers how you thought and acted on those thoughts in high school. The reflections on actual experiences matter as much as the activity itself! This is a key learning that many parents and students underutilize.

2. I am in 11th grade and do not have any activities. What should I do?

First, don't be afraid to branch out now! Start looking and finding things to express your interests, from personal projects to group engagements.

Second, most students and parents who say this are not being true to themselves. Students might spend their time doing something not resume-worthy, but in fact, they have great experiences.

One example was playing video games. That can be the genesis of a great essay on why the student wants to study animation. Other nontraditional activities may count for more than you think... For instance, paid work experience of any kind and childcare or tutoring for siblings can demonstrate excellent personal characteristics!

Altogether, accomplishing essays that tell your story is a great exercise because it makes students reflect more deeply.



3. Are school clubs important?

On the grand scale, there are millions of high school clubs. Unless you are in a position of leadership, the area of differentiation for most students is the second type of activity in the Activity Matrix – the out-of-school activities. This bucket allows students to pursue activities at the state and national levels, which can help set them apart.

Other awards like National Merit are great, but again—not a major differentiator on their own. When possible, take note of any awards or honors you do earn in case you want to reference them later on. Primarily, though, students and parents should focus on internal introspection on existing activities and building a story across types, especially in your community.

As you know, the Activity Matrix is a mental framework we use at Empowerly to help students and parents think through their list of extracurricular activities – both existing and new. The main thing in high school extracurricular activities that students and parents often miss is how important reflecting on activities is. Reflection and writing on these experiences are as important as actually doing them.

Your Matrix: An Exercise

Wondering how to set up your very own activity matrix? Let's look at a great example of how you can apply this to your college experience so you can submit your most authentic applications:

List activities by grade year and type of activity.

Start in the ninth grade and move forward in time.

- This big picture helps you visually see if the number of activities has increased or decreased, as well as which ones are the most consistent, and so on.

Create clusters.

Fit two to three activities that follow a certain topic or theme. These will become your activity threads!

- For example, Student Lou wrote out a particular theme sentence and clustered activities around it. He said, "I like to use data to solve problems." Then, he proceeded to write two or three activities that demonstrate that particular theme.

Construct your 1 Sentence – it is the thesis of your story and your essay.

By distilling all your four years into one sentence, you can help craft your narrative and create a focused, cohesive story about you, and your unique assets.

- For example: "I'm a scientist who enjoys applying data analytics to cancer problems." It's wise to use an evidence-based approach to support your 1 Sentence. For instance, "...and I've done this through my cancer research, and my internship."



The above is a sample framework, but the same bare-bones analysis can be applied to your high school record. Feel free to work through it on your own. If you need help getting started or constructing your own framework, reach out to an Empowerly counselor!

It's never too soon to start getting involved in extracurricular activities. If you start early enough, there's plenty of time to find the right activities and get embedded within them. Start with your interests, and work your way out into school organizations, academic programs, and summer work. Make sure you prioritize along the way, asking yourself how long you can stick to each activity and whether the time and effort you put into it are worth it. Over time, you'll be in all the right places and will have a much stronger college application.



Generating Activities

Okay, so if you've followed us this far, you've heard us say how important outside activities are for college admissions these days. Getting a 4.0 GPA and perfect test scores just isn't enough; being a well-rounded student with a hand in a variety of areas is essential to be considered a competitive and worthy applicant to any selective university.

Because of this, getting involved in extracurricular activities is a must for high schoolers (and the earlier the better – colleges love to see development within these activities over time). Here are four ways to get going on your search for things to do outside of academics and bolster your competitive standing among your peers.

First:

Ask yourself what YOU want to do. As you're doing these brainstorms, keep in mind two crucial questions: How long can you do an example activity? Is it worth it (in the long run) for your college strategy? Timings vary on a person-by-person basis, but in general, anything that takes up more than 3 hours of your day outside of school is taking a serious toll on your academics (and other activities) and should strongly be reconsidered. Only continue if you can handle it, or if you know it's worth it.

Second:

Take a look at your school's various clubs/organizations. These can provide a list of extracurricular activities that range widely in scope: you'll find academic clubs, sports clubs, investment clubs, volunteering/community service clubs, and many more. Aim to stand out by achieving leadership or officer positions, if you can.

Third:

Look for academic programs offered outside of your school. Many summer camps, educational institutions, and companies offer programs for high school students that can take place on weekends or over summer break. These are great for building a foundation in a certain discipline.

Fourth:

Work! Consider paid internships and other volunteer opportunities, too. You might not have known, but paid work looks good on college applications. Almost any kind of job can be sold as valuable experience if you know how to phrase it right.

There are times when none of these options work out. If your high school or local community is not able to provide you with traditional extracurricular activities, consider what other work you can do. Students can investigate online, digital, remote, and/or hybrid enrichment programs or even request individual support from a counselor.



Taking Your Extracurriculars to the Next Level

There's no doubt that extracurricular activities are essential to a good college application; long gone are the days when test scores and class grades were enough to guarantee admission into a top college. Nowadays, college application reviewers want to gain insight into character — who are you outside of school, and what do you do that shows your strengths? Grades and test scores are still obviously very important, but with so many students showing remarkable academic ability, the best extracurricular activities for Ivy League and similar schools are where best-of-breed applicants are made.

For students earlier in their journeys (aka middle school or even freshmen or sophomores in high school), you still have time to shape your extracurricular narrative.

A quick note: simply pursuing a dozen or more extracurricular activities and throwing them onto your college application won't accomplish much (it might even hurt you). You must follow some basic guidelines when assessing which types of extracurricular activities are worth getting into because quality certainly matters more than quantity.

Longevity and Commitment

One key component of a good extracurricular activity is the commitment you show to it (which is usually expressed in how long you've been involved, or how many hours you've put into it). Why does this matter? Because anybody can join an extracurricular activity for a few months and then drop it! Staying shows that you care about that activity, and aren't just involved to pad up your college application. Try to stay involved for as long as it's feasible to do so, and when it's time to document that activity on your college application, do your best to note how many hours/years you committed to giving a true sense of your dedication.



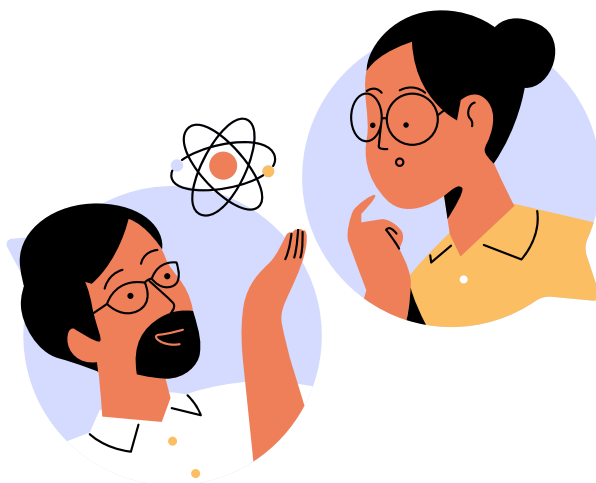
That being said, don't feel obligated to stick to any particular activity if it isn't plausible to do so anymore. If it's taking too much time out of your week, is excruciatingly boring, or is too difficult, it's better to reevaluate your situation and find something else than stay just because you want longevity to show on your college application. Changing your mind and priorities is perfectly normal. Even if there are two or three activities on your college application that didn't last very long, don't hesitate to list them anyway (the idea is to show that you generally commit to what you pursue).

- For example, if you're doing something like school sports, try to stay in each sport for at least two years (of course, the more the merrier, and it's especially impressive if you stay all four years).
- Things like summer jobs, on the other hand, don't have to be pursued every single summer; summer jobs are known to be temporary and nobody will care much if you only worked as a lifeguard one summer and as a cashier the next; if you can show that you gained something out of that experience regardless of its length, you'll be fine (more on this later).

Depth/Takeaways

Colleges don't just count off how many extracurricular activities you had and assign you a score. In other words, they don't really care that you did a given activity, they care about what you got from it. If you simply write down "summer camp counselor" and don't provide an explanation, all those hours as a counselor may be nearly useless if your college application reviewer can't determine what your time as a summer camp counselor reveals about you.

It's important to come up with some sort of takeaway — ask yourself what you learned from any given experience. If you don't feel like you learned anything (and this should be rare), think about what you at least developed or improved in.



Don't wait until the college application process before you determine the takeaways from your various high school activities. Instead, actively write down everything you do as you partake in that activity, and take notes on what you're learning or mastering (it's a lot easier to remember what you did this way). Once college applications come around, be prepared to phrase your takeaways in a brief one or two sentences (which is what most applications give you to talk about any given activity). Doing so will provide some much-needed insight into your character, and you'll be a much more competitive applicant when you make clear how your activities made you a better person.

- For example, let's say you were the captain of your high school swim team in your senior year. That's a nice title, but it can be further developed by providing some depth. What were your responsibilities as a captain? How much pressure was on you to make certain decisions? Were you a leader, an organizer, or both? One way to describe your position could be, "Practiced leadership and communication skills to guide the rest of the team into many successful swim meets while providing oversight on strategy and training". Notice how that sentence, however brief, covers ground on your responsibilities, the new skills you learned/developed, and your prior abilities in action. Adding a sentence like this to each of your extracurricular activities will give colleges a vivid picture of your skills and evidence that you have them.

Progression

The third and final element of a great extracurricular is progression. It's important that if you stay in a given activity for a while, you want to show that your commitment and abilities were rewarded via promotions and the like. Showing progression lets colleges know that you gave a commendable effort in a given activity and that you were worthy of moving forward in whatever hierarchy was available to you.



- For example, being a general member of a volunteering club at your school for four years isn't particularly impressive because anyone can do that; on the other hand, starting as a general member and then becoming vice president (and eventually, the president) shows remarkable dedication and potential. This is the kind of thing colleges want to see in activities in which you were involved for a considerable time.
- Likewise, if you were on a high school sports team for three to four years, starting at the junior varsity level and working your way up to varsity or even captain/assistant coach shows great ability; on the other hand, being a lower-level player for four years shows that all that time didn't go to good use (unless, of course, you had other commitments, in which case it's fine to occasionally have a few activities in which you weren't able to progress much).





Conclusion

Overall, we can sum up the pillars of great extracurricular activity with three qualities: commitment, depth, and progression. Participating in something isn't enough to stand out. Rather, engaging with your comfort zone and reflecting on your growth will assist your student in the quest for a well-developed vision.

You must do your best to stay in your activities for a considerable time, show some sort of learning/development within that activity, and do your best to rise the ranks to provide evidence of your efforts. It may be hard to find all three qualities in every single activity/organization that you partake in, but it's a good rule of thumb to look for at least two of the three in anything you consider.

Once you've developed a considerable portfolio of extracurriculars with these qualities apparent, you'll be that much closer to being considered a top-notch college applicant.