



Empowerly's guide to summer programs





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Does summer really matter? *Yes!*

Summer is about more than just SPF and beach days. It's a prime opportunity to enrich your education and distinguish yourself, especially if you're aiming to attend a selective university. While classmates may be relaxing, engaged students can leverage summer to stand out. Meaningful summer activities are crucial for college applications.

“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 time to travel, and fewer scheduled obligations.

Sure, you can sleep in until noon and binge-watch cartoons if that’s what you feel like doing. But if you’re itching for more of a challenge and looking for chances to take your education outside the classroom walls, then don’t sleep through all of these precious sunny days.

“Wait – don’t I deserve a break?”

At Empowerly, we believe in balance. Constant activity isn’t the ultimate goal. 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.

While it’s important to stay engaged over the summer, it’s equally important to protect your mental health. Try not to overcommit. Pick one or two core experiences to focus on and also allow time for rest, hobbies, and social connection. Colleges want to see real humans, not burnout machines. Remember: sustainability beats intensity.

More than anything, we also recommend thinking ahead to reduce your stress load. The spring semester is the ideal time to start planning to avoid a

last-minute crunch before summer. When the pressures of the high school schedule are in full swing, it can be difficult to remember the big picture. Both competitive summer programs and college admissions deadlines approach faster than you might think.

“Okay, I’m convinced...”

Empowerly can help you maximize your summer. We offer 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, our experienced counseling team can help.

From our work with thousands of students, we know that those who actively pursue their interests—regardless of whether they stick with that field—tend to thrive in college and beyond. Even more importantly, learning more quickly who they are as a person. Let us help you discover your next favorite memory!



Choosing the right summer plan

How do you determine the value of summer programs for high school students?
What's the mark of a good summer program, and what should it offer?

It's important to know that not all summer programs are created equal. Before we go any further, let's talk about the major types you might encounter:



Competitive programs

These require a full application, sometimes an interview, and often have tuition (with potential financial aid). Admission is based on dedication, aptitude, and motivation.



Paid programs

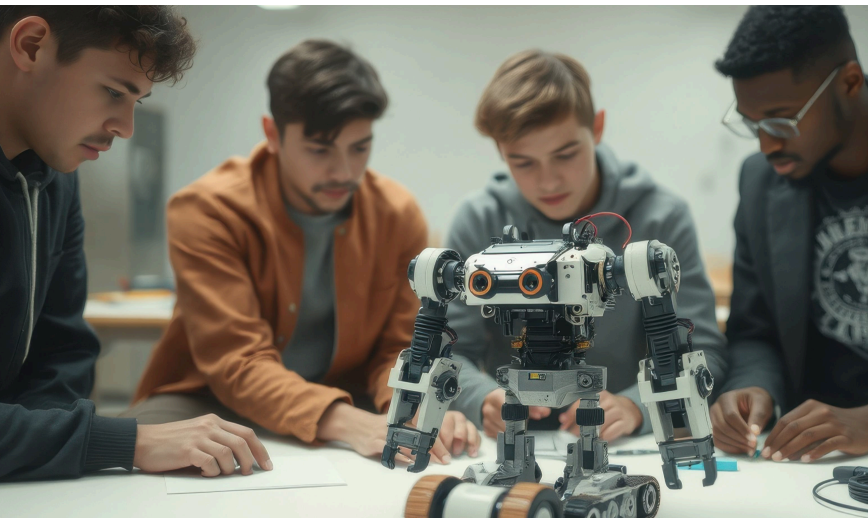
These primarily filter by cost and have a less rigorous selection process. They offer good experiences but are viewed as less competitive by college admissions officers.



Local programs

Offered by local companies (e.g., biotech, tech, finance), these are good for students with specific interests and potential connections. They may offer internship credit.

Here are a few key cornerstones to look for when you are evaluating your potential options:



Hands-on or Project-Based Learning

Great programs make the most of your time to allow students to gain firsthand experience in new ways. Practical experience is invaluable.



Affordability

Many of the most competitive, highest-quality programs are free or offered at minimum cost. Research internships often offer plenty of one-on-one time and hands-on learning, too.



Student-to-instructor ratio

Good summer programs for high school students will often be instructed by well-established academics who have published a fair amount of research. A university-sponsored program hosted within the relevant academic department may indicate a higher level of expertise offered.

Once you've covered those bases, you're one step closer to finding a great program for you. A summer program should be joyful and exciting. So how can you make it fun?



1 Choose a program that matches your interests

Does the program match up with who you are and what you want to do? Avoid feeling pressured to attend a program just for prestige. Ultimately, finding your passions will take you farther than just going through the motions.

If you already have a sense of what you'd like to study in college, consider choosing summer programs or experiences in that area. Admissions officers often look for thematic consistency in your application, and this can show your long-term dedication to your field.

Furthermore, don't be afraid to mix subjects; interdisciplinary programs and experiences are increasingly valued! Try to find programs that combine your unique passions—even if they seem unrelated at first glance. Creativity often lives at the intersection of fields.

2 Understand your talents and passions

Do you have a good sense of their talents, passions, and personality? If not, summer is the perfect time to explore a plethora of extracurricular activities!

You might start by visiting a college adviser, mentor, or career center and asking for guidance. You could take self-assessment tests, such as the Myers-Briggs, to get a better sense of who you are, and try various extracurricular activities offered by your high school, local community college, or some local organization. Then, at the end of the summer, try to pick at least one extracurricular activity to pursue during the school year.

3 Research summer programs offered by your dream colleges

A pre-college program can range in scope and might focus on leadership, law, science, the arts, journalism, and more. The best part? Most will offer college credit for their attendance, and can help showcase your interests in the school.

Once you have a shortlist of programs that interest you, consider reaching out to past participants. Many programs have forums, social media groups, or even contact pages where alumni share their experiences. This can give you insider tips on what the program is really like and how to strengthen your application. It's also a great way to start building your future network.

Next, we'll look at some examples of worthwhile programs to get you started on your search.

Structured high school summer programs

When it comes to structured activities, most programs for high school students are organized and hosted by universities. Students can expect a mix of classroom learning and coursework, and some project-based learning, too.

Today, we'll spotlight the so-called "Big 5"—the camps that, year after year, remain heavy hitters for high-achieving students looking to stand out. You will probably have heard of most of these since they draw applicants from across the country. However, keep in mind that the ranking of the best programs depends on you as a student. Rather than half-heartedly aiming for one of these for the sake of prestige, take the time to find a summer activity that works for you. That's what brings out your talents, and where you'll have the most fun.

Now that we've discussed how these programs were chosen, let's review them. The following are presented in no particular order.

California State Summer School for Mathematics and Science (COSMOS)

This is a great program for California students in particular since the state has a strong public school system. If you're not in California, find out if your state offers anything similar!

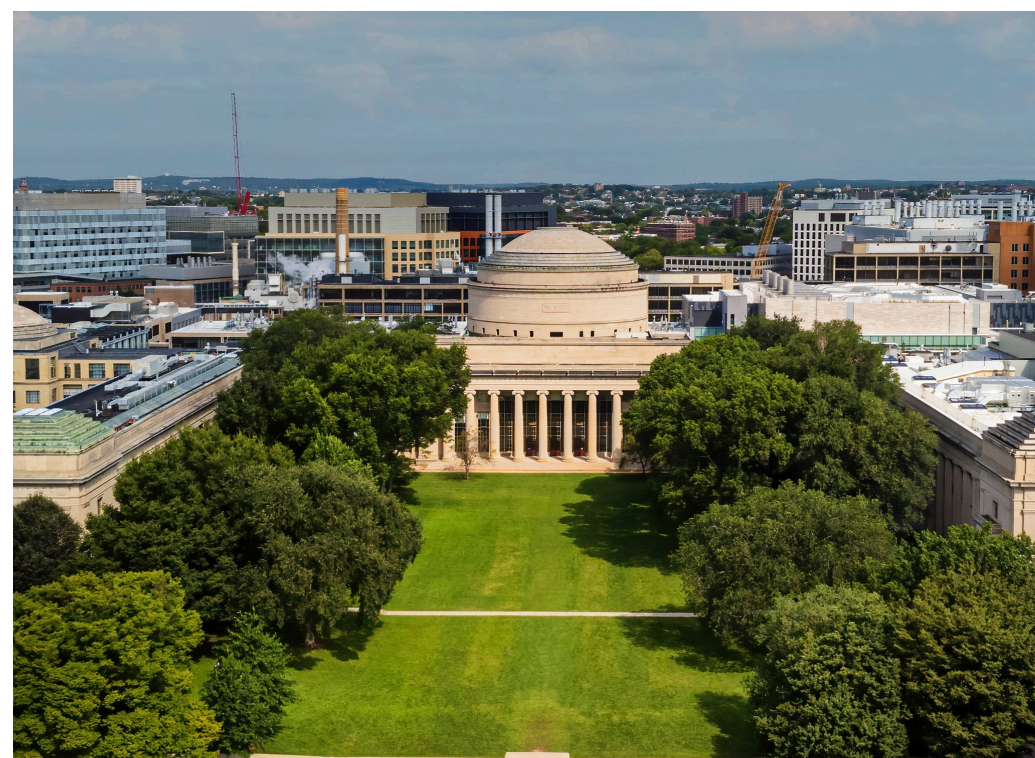


Stanford University's Mathematics Camp (SUMac)

SUMac is another great West Coast find. Some of the team at Empowerly have gone to SUMaC themselves! For the scoop on what it takes to get there, it's worth doing the research.

Center for Excellence in Education's Research Summer Institute (RSI)

RSI is well-known in STEM circles and a great option for students with high ambition and drive, though low acceptance rates makes it extremely difficult to attend.



Stanford Institute of Medicine's Summer Research Program (SIMR)

Also at Stanford, SIMR is renowned for providing great medical STEM opportunities. Liking the Stanford system? While you're at it, check out Stanford's Genomic Research Internship Program (GRIPS), which features a focus on genomics. Each of these West Coast-based summer programs offers unique advantages.



MIT's LaunchX Program (LaunchX)

LaunchX offers young entrepreneurs a learning environment to develop their business idea beyond the classroom. In addition to discovering more about MIT, it's a great way to stand out from your peers with an original business concept.



COSMOS (California State Summer School for Mathematics and Science)

Location: California (Multiple UC campuses)

Cost: Approx. \$4,000 (financial aid available)

Competitiveness: High — selective application process

Application Deadline: Mid-February

Stanford University Mathematics Camp (SUMaC)

Location: Stanford University, CA

Cost: Approx. \$3,550 (financial aid available)

Competitiveness: Very High — selective with rigorous math background required

Application Deadline: Late January

Stanford Institute of Medicine Summer Research Program (SIMR)

Location: Stanford University, CA

Cost: Approx. Free (stipend included for some participants)

Competitiveness: Very High — competitive STEM applicants

Application Deadline: Mid-February

Research Science Institute (RSI) - Center for Excellence in Education

Location: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MA

Cost: Free (fully funded)

Competitiveness: Extremely High — acceptance rate <5%

Application Deadline: Mid-February

MIT LaunchX

Location: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MA

Cost: Approx. \$6,000 (financial aid available)

Competitiveness: High — entrepreneurial focus, selective

Application Deadline: Rolling admissions, final deadline around March

Strategies for success

The most popular summer programs receive thousands and thousands of applicants each cycle. Some—like RSI—are even harder to gain acceptance to than the college itself. Knowing how competitive the field is, how can you prepare for the application process?

Applying for competitive summer programs is great practice for packaging your narrative and applying for college. Similarly, you'll need strong grades and test scores, cohesive extracurriculars, and compelling essays. Because a lot of summer programs for high school students focus on niche and advanced topics, admitted students usually have a mission-driven extracurricular profile. Participation in project-based clubs like a robotics club, or conducting research with a professor, are activities that read well for math summer programs.

Additionally, letters of recommendation from teachers are valued pretty strongly in the summer program 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, try to ask at least one of your STEM teachers for a letter of recommendation.

Unstructured high school summer activities

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.



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.



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. The options are endless.

Wondering how to show off your independent work? Try showcasing your work online. Whether you're writing, coding, creating art, or launching a business idea, consider building a simple website or digital portfolio.



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 on how to get the ball rolling. Reaching out to professors and researchers isn't easy, but it's an important step in the process. Ultimately, what you do with your research is what matters; so make the most of it! If necessary, you can always ask Empowerly for help here. 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

Create a meaningful impact in your community—organize a cleanup day, repaint graffiti, or start a community garden. You can get some friends together to take on a project that can help others and make your neighborhood a better place to be. Be sure to check with community leaders for permission or information about how to undertake the project.

Find your dream team? Consider teaming up with a classmate or friends to launch other joint projects if you work well together—shared projects not only build leadership and teamwork skills,



they also make the experience more fun.



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](#). Many prestigious programs and volunteer opportunities are now virtual and available to international students as well.

Final Tip

As you explore new paths over the summer—whether it's through a personal project, internship, or volunteering—take time to journal to track your progress. Reflection helps you process your experiences, recognize growth, and will come in handy when it's time to write your college essays.

As you can see, there's plenty to keep us all busy. Finding the right balance and the high school summer programs that make you excited is the key to a successful summer.

Your summer horizon awaits

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, it's time to chase that horizon.

Ready to build the ultimate summer plan? Book a free consultation with an Empowerly counselor today to unlock expert guidance, exclusive program lists, and a strategy tailored just for you. Don't wait—competitive programs fill fast!