Maximizing the Summer: A Guide to Finding Programs & Building Extracurriculars

By Collegewise counselors and lovers of all things summer: Tom Barry, Colleen Boucher-Robinson, Jazzmin Lu, and Liz Marx.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Three Myths of Summer Planning	5
Important Questions to Ask	9
3 Ways to Start Summer Activity Search	10
Summer Planning Timeline	11
Summer Program Categories	13
Examples from Collegewise Students	24
How to Create Your Own Summer Program	26
Additional Resources	26
Tips on Finding A Part-time Job	27
Collegewise Summer Research Worksheet	28
About the Authors & Acknowledgements	29
Want More?	30

Introduction

Which of the following summer activities would be most impressive to colleges?

A. Attending Harvard summer school
B. Working part-time bagging groceries at the local grocery store
C. Taking a cooking class and learning how to make pasta from scratch
D. Attending a summer service program in Costa Rica
E. Going to soccer camp

It's a trick question. They can all be equally impressive.

Planning for college can be a confusing time, and many families feel pressure to create a summer strategy that will improve their student's chances of admission. From taking courses to get ahead of the masses to expensive summer programs promising to improve your admission chances, summer has become less about what kids want to do and more about getting ahead in the college admissions race.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Why did we write this guide?

Many of our students at Collegewise ask us for advice about how they should spend their summers. There isn't one right answer to this question, and there are seemingly limitless options to consider. So we help our students think about what they enjoy, what they might like to learn, and what they *actually* want to do with their summer months.

3 Myths of Summer Planning

There is no right or wrong way to spend the summer. And while some of the programs in this guide might sound exciting, there is also no substitute for taking the reins and creating your own summer experience. Whether it's planning a two-week backpacking trip with friends, calling a local business to see if there is some job shadowing available, or spending every evening getting caught up on the books you've always wanted to read, what's important is that you [the student] pursue the activities that genuinely interest you. It's a great way to learn, and there isn't a college admissions officer in the world who will look at your list of accomplishments and say, "Hmmm—it looks like Johnny took too much initiative in high school. We're not looking for that at Stanford."

So let's dispel some of the myths surrounding summer planning and college admissions.

Myth #1: Your summer must be "impressive"

Unless a student's summer activities result in the discovery of extraterrestrial life or the authorship of the next Great American Novel, there's pretty much nothing they can do in two months that will cause an admissions officer to stop reading their application and choose the "admit" option. Summer is an important part of high school, but it's certainly not the only part, and colleges know that.

Students who try too hard to impress colleges often find themselves in summer programs they don't really enjoy AND end up doing things that lots (and lots) of other students do.

So don't worry about what "looks good." Guardians and students should focus more on what will help them to grow, whether it's personally, socially, intellectually, athletically, or artistically. Remember, admissions officers are just people, and what's impressive to one person isn't always impressive to another. Most importantly, students don't have any control over what their application reader finds impressive. But no matter who is reading that application, everyone will be impressed by the student who takes the time to figure out what they want out of their summer and then does everything they can to make it happen.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION

But what if I want to go to a really competitive college?

Really, there isn't a summer program out there that will "guarantee" you admission to those colleges with single-digit admit rates. While some programs have developed reputations for being the proverbial "Golden Ticket" to an Ivy or other highly selective college, it's important to remember that correlation is not causation.

These are programs with extremely selective application processes that tend to draw some of the most creative, ambitious, intelligent, and hardworking high school students out there–the same kind of students who are already successful in applying to places like Swarthmore and Princeton.

So if your family is considering a highly selective school, don't look for shortcuts. There's no summer program or activity that will magically ensure a student's admission. Instead, the admissions officers will look for evidence that they are hungry to learn and that they'll have a positive impact on the community around them. And while some programs absolutely provide for that kind of experience, so do a lot of other things that don't involve flying halfway across the world to practice your Spanish or scuba dive in the Bahamas in the name of science.

In fact, one thing that we've learned over the years from our students who attend places like Duke or Amherst is that they're not typically the sorts of kids who packed their summers with formal "programs." Sure, many of them had a couple of experiences like this—especially in the summers before their sophomore and junior years. But many more of them simply built themselves a great summer by bagging groceries at the local market, wedging in an online course or two in the evening, and spending their weekends diving even deeper into a volunteer program they'd already been a part of throughout high school. In other words, doing more of what they already loved—even if it didn't come with a fancy certificate of participation.

Myth #2: You need to spend a lot of money to have a productive summer

If your family has the means to send you to shear sheep in Tibet this summer, knock yourself out. But please don't do it because you think you need a splashy or expensive summer experience to get into college. Parents and guardians, there is no need to break the bank to ensure your teen is having a successful summer. And you won't impress Harvard, or other selective colleges by paying thousands of dollars to attend their summer school. There are plenty of low-cost things to do.

As you look through this guide, you'll find that some of the programs and summer activities our students have done are free, and some of them cost money. Some of them cost A LOT of money. What's important is that students choose what they want to do (not what someone else tells them to do) and that they do it well. So, if a language immersion program isn't in the cards, that's completely fine. Get a job at the supermarket. Take a cooking class. Volunteer or intern at the community newspaper, or coach a Little League team. Students shine just as brightly in their college applications as the kid who went to robotics camp at Caltech.

Myth #3: You can't have downtime during the summer

We don't really know who came up with the idea that students shouldn't relax or have any fun at all during the summer (and if we did, we might let the air out of their tires). You officially have permission from us—and from colleges—to take a step back and enjoy yourself without feeling just as busy and rushed as you do during the school year. Colleges know that being a student is more than a full-time job. Students put in long hours, including nights and weekends, and they deserve to have some time to recharge their batteries and get ready for the upcoming school year. Sure, if a student spends three months doing nothing but sleeping in and watching TV, colleges will start to wonder what kind of a contribution they'll make to their campuses. But work ethic, curiosity, and passion aren't seasonal traits.

Learn, be productive, have fun, and relax. You really can have it all.

Important Questions to Ask

Before students start their summer activity search, here are some questions to consider:

01. How much time do you have to devote yourself to an activity?

02. Do you want to earn or spend money? Perhaps both?

03. What do you hope to gain from your summer experience?

04. Are there goals you've set for yourself that you'd like to meet?

05. Is there something you've always wanted to learn? A skill maybe?

06. Is there anything you need to do to prepare for the upcoming school year?

07. Would an extra course help you get a leg up next year?

3 Ways to Start Summer Activity Search

#1: Start Local

No matter what a student is interested in pursuing, local opportunities should always be considered. Whether it's volunteering, college courses, summer programs, or local business opportunities, students should take a look at their communities and see where they can help drive an impact.

Ask your guidance counselor/teachers if they know of any opportunities available such as state college programs, and other enrichment programs.

Useful Search Engine Keywords:

"community colleges near [hometown]"
"[area of interest] near [hometown]" Ex: "environmental organizations near Sonora, CA"
"summer activities for high school students near [hometown]"

Useful Online Resource:

- www.teenlife.com

#2: Focusing on Interest

There are some students that know exactly what they want to focus on, and if you're that student (or know a student like that) then taking those interests on a national scale is just what you may need. This may include online research programs or immersion programs abroad.

Useful Search Engine Keywords

"summer [area of interest] programs for high school students"
"high school [area of interest] research"
"learn about [area of interest] as a high school student"

#3: Doing the Research

There's a lot more to this process than meets the eye. While students may find programs that seem like a great fit, it's important to be aware of things such as deadlines, eligibility, reference letters, cost, and application requirements.

Students should always read the fine print and ensure they have the necessary prerequisites to apply to a specific summer opportunity.

Summer Planning Timeline

Just as it’s never too early to start gathering information on colleges and visiting them, there is no right or wrong time to start developing a summer plan. While a few select summer programs have early and rigid application or scholarship deadlines, most will welcome applications from interested students well into March and sometimes as late as June or July. Summer programs are unlike college admissions in that way: most want you to enroll if you are a good fit, and submitting an application nine months early probably isn’t necessary—or even possible!

Nevertheless, for programs that require an application (as opposed to the ones that just ask you to sign up), it's important to **be aware of the program's application deadlines and selection criteria.** Many of the more selective summer programs will ask that students provide an essay and one or two teacher recommendations, just like a college would, and students want to make sure that they give themselves and their recommenders enough time to do a thoughtful job. To be on the safe side, we typically recommend that students **start exploring summer programs by the end of December** in order to get a sense of application requirements, deadlines, enrollment dates (many programs will have multiple sessions throughout the summer), cost, etc., and begin narrowing down options by the end of February or March.

By taking the time to do the research and assess goals for the summer, students can set themselves up for a truly unique summer experience that any college admissions office will want to read about. And if you need help narrowing down program options, then see our **Summer Research Worksheet** in the **Additional Resources** section of this guide for a handy way to compare programs. But also bear in mind that plenty of students have just as much success constructing meaningful summer experiences for themselves, and you don't need to submit an application three months early to do something worthwhile.

And parents and guardians (we know you're out there), this is a great opportunity to practice taking a step back and letting your child take ownership of the process. Imagine a year from now, when your kid is sitting down for a college interview, and the interviewer says, "I see you volunteered at a doctor's office last summer. How did you get involved with that?"

Let's say a student answers it by saying, "I've always been interested in medicine, and I thought this would be a good way to see what it was really like to be a doctor. So I called my family practitioner about a shadowing opportunity and was offered a volunteer position," and one who says, "My guardian signed me up for it." Stepping back allows your teen to take more initiative, and that's what will really impress colleges.

Summer Program Categories

For students interested in applying to a more formal summer program, you'll first want to decide what *type* of program is the best match. To get you started, we've chosen to highlight some specific categories that tend to be most popular with our students at Collegewise (Academic, Business, Leadership, Scholarship Programs, STEM, Language Immersion, Travel, and Visual and Performing Arts). If your interests lie outside of those areas, that's fantastic, and hopefully, we'll still provide you with some good ideas.

We'd like to remind you, good reader, that these programs are by no means the only programs worth doing. And we're not endorsing these particular programs over any others that you may discover either. They're just summer opportunities that our students have had experience with, or that we've heard good things about.

Academic

While many students may want to run as far away from school as possible over the summer, some students can't get enough. Academic programs can be a great fit for the student who wants to dive deeper into a certain subject. Of course, for a more affordable alternative, students can always take coursework at a local community college or online. More formal programs will usually have the advantage of social time built in, may include an overnight component, and will be limited to fellow high school students. They also are frequently hosted on college campuses, so it's a great way to familiarize yourself with dorm living.

On that note, we do want to include an **academic program disclaimer: academic programs abound on college campuses all over the country.** But there is a misconception that a student attending a summer program at Stanford (for example) will have a better chance of being admitted to Stanford as an undergraduate. This is simply not the case. Stanford actually used to address this very topic on their FAQ page:

Q

Would attending Stanford summer programs improve one's chances for freshman admission?

A

We do not have a preference for students who attend Stanford-specific summer programs, but engaging in enrichment opportunities and advanced courses may demonstrate your enthusiasm for learning and discovery. The fact that you are taking summer or enrichment programs is not in and of itself the value-add to your application [...] how that experience has enhanced your intellectual life that is of importance.

Examples:

- **Telluride Association Summer Program**
- **Summer Discovery**
- **Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth**

Business

During the college search process, a lot of students tell us that they're interested in majoring in business. Usually, this interest stems from one of two things: either they had an especially successful lemonade stand/cookie sales experience, or they're picturing themselves as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. In reality, business, and being successful in it, has many components.

If you're thinking about majoring in business, here are a few Collegewise resources to consider:

- **Extracurriculars for Students Interested in a Business Major**
- **Top College Admissions Tips for Aspiring Entrepreneurs**

And if you can't find a program that fits your interest, think about other ways you can get involved.

Examples:

- **Economics for Leaders**
- **National Student Leadership Conference – Business and Entrepreneurship**
- **Wall Street 101**
- **The Michigan Ross Summer Business Academy**

Leadership

Leadership has become something of a buzzword in college admissions these days. Students vie for a limited number of president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary slots as a way to check off that imaginary "leadership" box on their applications. But as was noted in a Collegewise blog post, **"Holding a formal leadership position isn't necessarily the same thing as leading. Leading means seeing a future and rallying people to join you in reaching it, often without step-by-step instructions."**

Leadership is not about checking off a box or holding a fancy title. True leadership takes many forms. It can be something as small as starting a club or leading tutoring courses for classmates. That's leadership. And leadership matters to colleges because of its impact. The same impact they hope to see at the college level.

Examples:

- **Global Youth Village**
- **World Affairs Seminar**

STEM

STEM is an acronym that stands for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. Now, we know what you're thinking. Aren't technology and engineering basically just science and math?

The answer is yes, which is why STEM has become one of the most overused shorthand terms in the world of educational jargon. Google the term “STEM Summer Programs,” and you will come up with scores of hits, only a smattering of which might actually be related to something you’d like to take part in over summer break.

Rather than taking all STEM summer programs at face value, we encourage students to do what an engineer might do and break it down into its component parts. And we've done exactly that. This section breaks down each component of STEM and offers specific programs related to that field of study.

If you want to go deeper on what STEM programs (and STEM careers after college) are really looking for, check out our guide: **Creativity in STEM: A Key to Education and College Admissions**.

Science

There are many different branches of the scientific tree, starting with the “big picture” subjects that you’ve already heard of, like chemistry. But even if students search for programs within the field of, say biology, they are still going to be overwhelmed with options. Students will find their research productive once their interests and passions have been narrowed down.

For example, if a student is interested in marine sciences and conservation, programs specializing in marine biology might be the right choice.

Examples:

- **University of Pennsylvania Summer Research Academy**
- **University of Colorado Science Discovery**
- **Boston Leadership Institute**
- **Summer Discovery University of California Santa Barbara Research Mentorship Program Technology**
- **Interning with a local hospital or doctor's office nearby**
- **National Youth Leadership Conference on Medicine**

Engineering and Technology

Obviously, the STEM fields have a lot of overlap, which is why they can share a single acronym. But while fields like science and math are relatively easy to differentiate, technology and engineering really go hand-in-hand.

For the purposes of this guide, we'll use the distinction coined by college counselor Meredith Graham: "Engineers really focus more on theories, ideas, and initial prototypes, while technologists focus more on the hands-on component of making things happen and improving and maintaining something once it has been created. An engineer will design a new car while a technologist will 'tweak' the design to improve it for future models."

So we invite you to look at technology and engineering as two sides of the same coin, and if there is an area of study that you find particularly appealing, you shouldn't think twice about jumping in with both feet.

As you begin to research traditional engineering or technology summer programs, you will probably find that most of them fall into one of three main categories: exploratory programs, research and apprenticeship programs, or academic and college prep programs. It's important to think about what you really want to get out of your summer experience and how the program you choose will help you achieve those goals. And try to look at each program more for what it offers than for where it happens to take place.

Examples:

- **IdTech Camps**
- **Notre Dame Introduction to Engineering**
- **Michigan Summer Engineering Academy**
- **Frontiers WPI Pre-College Experience**

Math

Just about any local college will offer math classes in order to give students an opportunity to review, get ahead, or just stay fresh with their mathematics concepts during the summer break. Math-specific summer programs, on the other hand, tend to go beyond the numbers to look at the discipline from a more philosophical perspective–just the sort of thing that a mathematics major in college would do. If you are the type of student who thinks about math as an art rather than a science and dissects calculus proofs with the same level of enthusiasm that an English teacher dissects a poem, a mathematics summer program just might be for you.

Examples:

- **Ross Mathematics Program**
- **The Hampshire College Summer Studies in Mathematics**
- **University of Washington Mathematics Academy**

Language Immersion

Language immersion programs offered abroad can give students a wonderful opportunity to see the world and dive deeply into another culture. Students don't necessarily need a passport in order to learn a new language or advance in one that they've been practicing for years. There are plenty of great language immersion programs offered in the USA as well, so it's important to some key questions before deciding which language program is the right choice. Here are some of those questions:

1. Do you want to live in a dorm with other students, or would you prefer a homestay with a local family?
2. Do you want to spend your time in the classroom, out interacting with native speakers, or some combination of the two?
3. Do you feel comfortable traveling halfway around the world, or would you be better suited to one of the many immersive programs closer to home?

Examples:

- **Middlebury Monterey Language Academy**
- **Concordia Language Villages**

Travel

Although many people associate study abroad programs with junior year of college, high school students will also find that summer can be a great time to visit a country abroad. Immersing oneself in another country's language and traditions (and let's be real here—eating the food!) can have an extraordinary impact on their perspective and worldview.

Examples:

- **Global Leadership Adventures**
- **Oxbridge Academic Programs**

Visual and Performing Arts

Students aspiring to be like Zendaya or Michelangelo who are wondering what their options are now that they've decided to follow their dreams? Well, before heading off to college, it will be important to figure out if you're interested in a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), which would give you a well-rounded academic education within your chosen arts major, or a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.), which would require a much more intensive, hands-on approach to your chosen discipline. For instance, an actor getting a B.A. will still take all the general education courses that every student takes. For a B.F.A. student, however, the degree is considered a professional degree and course requirements will revolve around the arts. Students will take classes on set design, lighting, and playwriting. Exploring a summer program can help you decide which path is best for you. It can also be a lot of fun even if you're not considering a visual or performing arts major in college. And since most major art museums offer summer programs, you have the option of staying local or traveling farther afield.

Examples:

- **School of the Arts Summer Institute Residency Program**
- **French Woods Festival of the Performing Arts**
- **Pre-College Intensive in Studio Art**

Tuition-Free Programs

As we've stated before, attending a summer program is by no means essential to the success of a college applicant. There are plenty of other ways to demonstrate enthusiasm, interest, and the love of learning But the cost of a summer program doesn't necessarily mean you have to forgo the opportunity. Many of the programs we've mentioned throughout this guide offer scholarships, but we also wanted to highlight a few programs that offer full financial assistance.

Examples:

- **Bank of America Student Leaders**
- **Girls on Ice**
- **Summer Search**

Online Options

By now, we've talked at length about the various summer opportunities available to students. But we also know that there may be students–and parents–who have gotten to this point in our guide without really finding an option that feels like a fit for them. It happens! For those of you who haven't found that program that screams, "This is for me!" This section is for you.

Examples:

- **Codecademy**
- **CreativeLive**
- **edX**
- **SciStarter**

Examples From Collegewise Students

If you just decided to fast-forward to this section, please go back and read the beginning of this guide, too. But, if you've gone through the entire guide and are still looking for more inspiration on potential programs, we've compiled an extensive list of programs, initiatives, and activities our very own Collegewise students explored during their time with us.

These ideas came straight from our counselors in response to the question: “What are some cool things your students have done over the summer that really stuck out to you?” As you look through these ideas, you’ll see that they are as diverse and unique as the students themselves. Again, this isn’t intended to be a prescription. It’s just an illustration of how varied individual students’ summers can be.

But let’s be clear: our students didn’t just come up with their summer plans on the spot. It took a lot of questioning, thinking, and conversation to determine what was most important to them and to figure out exactly how they wanted to spend the summer months, so don’t expect any shortcuts.

Flip to the next page for 30+ examples of summer activities!

- Memorize 1,000 digits of pi
- **Yale Young Global Scholars**
- Record an album with your garage band
- **Stanford Institute for Medicine and Research (SIMR)**
- **Lewis and Clark Fir Acres Writing Program**
- Read as many books in the local library as possible
- Set up an informal job shadowing experience with a local pediatrician
- Fastidiously document, blog about, and watch every single World Cup game
- National Youth Leadership Forum on Medicine
- Arrange an internship with a local technology startup
- **Wash U Pre-Engineering Institute**
- Volunteer with **Bikes Not Bombs**
- Self-study for the SAT
- Organize a hackathon
- **African Leadership Academy Global Scholars Program**
- Train for (and run) a half marathon
- Run for charity
- Complete a specialization in music production through Berklee College of Music on **Coursera**
- **Volunteer at Camp Jabberwocky** and work with children and adults with a wide range of disabilities
- Volunteer at a local veterinarian's office
- Take advanced studio art classes
- Start a technology tutoring non-profit in nursing homes
- Do maintenance on the Appalachian Trail
- Attend the **residential Governor's School of Virginia** in visual and performing arts
- Complete a guided research project with **Pioneer Academics**
- Work as a dockhand
- **Girls Who Code Summer Program**
- Become a certified EMT
- **Crow Canyon Archaeological Field School**
- **Stevens Summers at Stevens Institute of Technology**
- Take a canoe trip and document all of the wildlife you see.
- Immerse yourself in **medical research at UCSF**
- Explore various opportunities with **NASA**

How to Create Your Own Summer Program

We can't say enough about the importance of taking initiative, and a great way to do that is to find your own way to get more involved with something you enjoy or explore a brand-new interest. That might mean taking your résumé to the local office of an organization you admire and asking about volunteer opportunities. Or contacting a business leader in your community to find out about a possible internship. Or organizing a weekly nature sketching group at different spots around your town. Remember, communicating with an individual makes a much stronger statement than just submitting a form online.

Additional Resources

We've done our best to get you started with your summer program research, but we'd also like to pass along these helpful resources to guide your family on this journey.

- **Summer Discovery**
- **Summer Apply**
- **Teenlife**

Tips on Finding A Part-time Job

For students that are planning to spend their summer building their work experience and gain a little extra cash, we've got you covered. And for those parents and guardians that may be looking to encourage their teen to learn some skills, we have a few tips on how students work toward securing a part-time job this summer.

01. Keep a look out for the "We're Hiring" posters on local businesses
02. Research if the business participates in National Hiring Day
03. Before inquiring (or applying), be sure to get your information in order
04. Proof-read your resume!
05. Turn a skill into a business opportunity (e.g., tutoring classes)
06. Reach out to neighbors about paid opportunities (e.g. babysitting)
07. Love taking care of animals? Do what you love for a small fee with **Rover**

Collegewise Summer Research Worksheet

Name of activity, summer program, and/or affiliated institution (if applicable)			
Location			
Duration of activity and/or program dates			
Cost (if applicable)			
What do you hope to gain from this experience? What are your learning goals for this activity/program?			
What do you like about this program?			
What do you dislike about this activity or program?			
Application requirements or next steps?			
Rate your interest 1 to 10 (10 being the highest)			

About the Authors & Acknowledgements

Tom Barry is a graduate of Colorado College and Stanford University, and a college counselor at Collegewise – Bellevue, Washington. Back in high school, he spent his summers playing baseball, delivering prescription drugs for a local pharmacy, and swimming in the delightful lakes of his Adirondack hometown.

Colleen Boucher-Robinson is a graduate of Loyola University Chicago and Boston University, and a college counselor at Collegewise – Bay Area, California. A recovering theater geek, Colleen spent her summers in *Grease* (the musical, not the country), mastering the triple time step in *42nd Street*, and rocking some gold lamé in *A Chorus Line.*

Jazzmin Lu is a graduate of Yale University and was an online college counselor living in Southern California. During high school, Jazzmin spent her summers working at a tutoring center, providing free childcare for her extended family, and spending her precious toddler-free hours holed up in her local public library.

Liz Marx is a graduate of Wesleyan University, and was a college counselor at Collegewise – Conejo Valley, California. Liz shelved books at Barnes & Noble, used her loud speaking voice to corral diners to their tables at Beefsteak Charlie's, and delved into an intensive language immersion program in Salamanca, Spain during her high school summers.

As with everything we do at Collegewise, this guide is a product of the collective genius and experience of all our counselors. Special thanks to Kevin McMullin, Mamie Cosentino, and Casey Near who helped us edit this down to a reasonable number of pages.

Want More?

If you'd like to learn more about how we can help you or your student enjoy a more joyful college admissions process, just reach out and ask.

Collegewise is a private college counseling company that embraces two beliefs: (1) The college admissions process should be an exciting, adventurous time for every family, and (2) accurate, helpful college information should be made available to everyone. So, even though we are private counselors who work with families who can afford to hire us, we also enjoy working with anyone who is interested and willing to listen, whether we're writing, speaking, or teaching as much as we can.

Additional Resources

Collegewise's Resource Bank offers a complete collection of helpful resources!

Upcoming webinars offer a complete collection of helpful resources!

Schedule a Free Consultation

@collegewise

@collegewise

info@collegewise.com

(888) 648-9473