The Importance of Extracurricular Activities for Teens

Academics are an important part of each student's high school years, especially since high school grades play an integral role in college acceptance. Parents spend a lot of time encouraging their teens to study more -- and play less -- in the pursuit of this goal. They believe that devoting a great deal of time to studying guarantees success in future college applications.

However, there is another more playful component of a well-rounded education -- outside the regular academic program -- that may positively impact students' success. Extracurricular activities, such as basketball, baseball, tennis, debating, chess clubs, student government, yearbook, drama, choir and computer clubs can round out students' academic careers to great effect.

Besides being fun and a great way to socialize with peers, extracurricular activities can enhance students' time management and stress management skills, improving overall productivity. Extracurricular activities also increase a candidate's appeal when applying to college.

"Studies show that students in extracurricular activities have higher [academic] scores. They learn to manage their time, relieve stress and learn to strive for excellence in more than one thing," says Kenny Smith, a school counselor in Thatcher, Arizona. "Students who are involved in team sports learn to work in groups. Their written and oral communication skills improve. These things cross over into 'real life.' The students who participate in extracurricular activities are held to a higher plane. There are no team breaks. The privilege [to play on a team] must meet specific requirements."

"Participation in extracurricular activities is a privilege and students may have to meet and maintain a minimum grade point average to play sports or take part in clubs." So says Parent Spot, produced by the Capital Region BOCES Community Service in Albany, N.Y.

Some extracurricular programs are designed to help at-risk teens. One program, Students Keeping Attitudes Towards Earning Rewards and Success (SKATERS), in Moreno Valley, California, involves tutoring, academics, running a food pantry, and participating in service learning activities. To make it easier for students to participate, the group meets at lunchtime rather than after school. Having started with 20 at-risk students, there are now as many as 500 participants per year.

Faye Arco is the counselor who started the SKATERS program. She says, "Participation in extracurricular and school club activities increases resiliency in youth by promoting protective factors and reducing risk factors. Data shows that participants have a higher GPA (0.98 percent), fewer suspensions (13.9 percent), and better attendance (15.8 percent) than non-participants. Counselors come from as far away as New Zealand and Poland to observe the program, which has now been implemented in many schools."

Adding extracurricular activities to an already rigorous high school schedule can be tricky. There may be times when academic requirements, family life and social activities conflict.

"For example, kids who participate in tennis must prioritize how they use their time," says Smith. He tells the story of one student who had a conflict between an algebra class and a tennis match. Being proactive, she worked out a way to attend the match and still keep up with her algebra class lectures.

Despite the time and effort involved in extracurricular activities, there are clear rewards in the form of fun and enhanced life skills. But there's also the fact that college admission officers are generally impressed by a student's extracurricular activities.

Parent Spot notes, "College admissions officers are looking for students who have applied themselves academically during the high school years and have used their free time in enriching ways... A roster of extracurricular activities lets colleges know that teens have made a meaningful contribution to something larger than themselves, can maintain long-term commitments and can juggle their priorities successfully."

How do colleges view the extracurricular activities chosen by a high school student? The activities offer colleges a snapshot of a student's personality and interests. Parent Spot notes, "The activities that teens choose to take part in outside of the classroom tell prospective schools much more than grades on paper."

Overall, students who participate in extracurricular activities will likely see an improvement in their academic and life skills, including discipline, goal-setting, teamwork, accountability and responsibility. They will also find themselves better prepared for post-secondary education. Ultimately, students may even discover that the lessons they learned outside the classroom, in basketball or chess club, help them cope with future challenges in the workplace.