

- Farber recommends that students try a practice SAT and ACT before choosing one over the other. He recommends taking the writing portion of the ACT, since most competitive schools require it. Many schools accept the ACT with writing in place of SAT and SAT subject tests, but check with individual schools.

Based on his experience as an admissions officer at Yale for two years, Michael Motto said that applications officers look for a story line when they review applications: Who is this person, what makes him/her tick? What does he/she offer the school and vice versa? The most important question for Motto is how applicants have met and exceeded their potential in whatever context they come from, whether it's one of privilege or hardship. He then broke down the components of the application:

- Transcript: What courses did the student take and were they rigorous? Has the student challenged him- or herself? What was the trend of the grades through the four years? (Ninth grade grades count less, and senior grades do count a great deal.)
- Test scores: Students don't need perfect scores on the SAT or ACT. In fact, perfect scores will lead the officer to scrutinize the grades to make sure they measure up. Motto recommends taking the SAT more than once.
- Extracurricular activities: How long has the student been involved? Has he/she tried a number of different activities and eventually moved into leadership commitments? Schools like a well-balanced citizen/scholar. Math and science research are always attractive.
- Personal statement: This is an opportunity for students to tell something separate from the other qualifications. They can use a family hardship story if it illustrates growth, commitment and depth. Motto recommends being very descriptive—talking about what the student loves—and then making a statement. For example: "Being a team player is important to me and explain' or 'school spirit is important to me because ..."
- Letters of recommendation: For the very select schools, these include two from teachers and one from a school counselor, and they are vital. (Students should provide sufficient input for these to be helpful).
- Interview: Not usually required, but if offered you should take advantage of it. Applicants shouldn't go in looking to impress the interviewer with a long resume. Instead they should go in looking for answers after having done their research about the school, and then explain why the student is interested in the school. "The interview is a two-way street."
- Most Ivy League schools are need-blind, which means that the admissions officer never even sees a financial statement. The early applicant pool is smaller, but Motto does not recommend playing it as a numbers game.

Steven Goodman, an educational consultant and author of *College Admissions Together*, began by saying that there's nothing wrong with Harvard and Yale but there are other schools; the goal is to find what's right for the student. The family also needs to establish its priorities: Are they maximizing financial aid? Prestige? Geographical area? He took a more cynical stance than Motto's, saying that the admissions process is designed to keep you out and that it's your job to make the process work in your favor.

A few recommendations for parents:

- Never use the term "we" when discussing the applicant. The parent is not applying, it's the student. Assess what you are looking for: For example, does cost matter? Is prestigious name a factor? Is location important?
- If your child is a procrastinator, you can help by getting him/her excited about the process and the outcome. When they are excited, they will drive the process.
- The student needs to distinguish him or herself from others. How is he or she different? What does the student bring to the table?
- If financial aid is a major concern, consider applying to schools that are not

typical for Stuyvesant applicants.

- The most powerful peer pressure comes from parents. Don't be embarrassed to say that your child is taking a year off or attending a lesser known college. Only half of college students graduate in four years, and 54% take six years to complete their degree. It's important to have the courage to choose the school that's the right fit for your child.
- And finally, pick the right "fit" for the student.



The Importance of Extracurricular Activities: An Interview

by Inna Deshkovich

I sat down with my son's college admissions counselor, Steve Schwartz, to discuss the role of extracurricular activities in the college admissions process. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

Inna Deshkovich (ID): Why should children devote time to extracurriculars? Wouldn't this take time away from classwork? Grades should come first!

Steve Schwartz (SS): Of course top grades are necessary for admission to first-tier colleges, but grades alone no longer guarantee admission. In fact, many students believe that their grade point average is given more emphasis in the college admissions process than it actually is. Most applicants to selective universities are academically qualified, but there are simply not enough spots available. Students looking for an edge should seek to distinguish themselves through their extracurricular activities. These activities provide another set of criteria by which admissions committees make their decisions.

ID: Is it better to join several clubs or to focus on a few?

SS: An ability to demonstrate lasting dedication to a few meaningful extracurriculars, rather than mere membership in many, can make a significant difference. Students should aim to demonstrate a significant contribution to their school or community and the ways in which their participation or leadership has influenced themselves on an individual level.

ID: Is it really necessary to obtain a top leadership position in a high school club? Everyone is competing for these positions at Stuyvesant!

SS: I understand your concern. It can be extremely difficult to gain the top leadership positions in school clubs when there are so many other qualified candidates. I recommend that students at Stuyvesant pursue their extracurricular passions outside of the school environment in addition to those organizations within the school. Opportunities abound in community organizations, nonprofits, internships, and the Internet. A student who wants to make a substantial impact on his or her community should think about a problem or need and how it can be addressed. Some common methods are to launch innovative fundraising campaigns for worthy causes or to mobilize a group of peers to tackle it head-on. Teachers, parents, friends, and college counselors can help to plan these types of endeavors. Founding a community organization, a nonprofit, or a school club can demonstrate leadership and organizational skills that indicate ambition and future success. These are traits that admissions committees seek in applicants.

ID: This sounds like a significant investment of time and effort. How can a student start an organization while excelling in classwork?

SS: Of course, taking on any of these challenges is not easy, but neither is getting into a top college. Through adequate planning and efficient use of summer and winter vacations, high school students have the ability to accomplish a great deal without detracting from classwork or grades. The Internet is not just for MySpace and YouTube; researching a topic and finding communities of students around the world with similar interests can lead to collaboration and skill-sharing on any topic.