



Not-fun in the Summertime is No Hit with College Officials

Some would rather see personal growth than prep camps, classes.

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For many hyper-scheduled, ultracompetitive teens, gone are the days of scooping ice cream and lying on beaches. Summers are for biological anthropology and heavy SAT prep, making contacts and getting an edge on an Ivy League application.

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Business is booming for get-into-college camps and other enrichment programs across the nation and in the area, where students are shadowing doctors, delving into international relations, and cultivating A-list references.

The trend toward precollege achievement is, in fact, so pronounced that it has produced a backlash, with admissions officials and child psychologists wondering if such intensity is good for children.

In a paper aimed at prospective students, three Harvard University officials beseeched youngsters to "bring summer back."

"Students need ample free time to reflect, to re-create . . . and to gather strength for the school year ahead," they wrote.

Marlyn McGrath, Harvard's director of admissions, said some students' compulsion to spend the summer polishing resumes might not help them.

"We have no evidence in Harvard admissions decisions over time that shows a consistent favorable judgment on packaged summer programs," she said. "You could just be a lifeguard, or spend a whole month reading Dostoyevsky, or visit your grandparents. All of those things are so rich in human terms."

Indeed, admissions officers and child psychiatrists warn that activities designed only to bolster a teen's credentials are problematic at best, unhealthy at worst.

Jeannie Borin, president of College Connections, a college-admissions counseling firm in Los Angeles, said that teens needed to know how to find balance, and that enrichment is impressive only if it matched a student's genuine interests.

By the same token, Borin said, ambitious students need to do more over the summer than play video games.

"GPA and test scores are no longer sufficient no matter how high they are," she said. "Colleges are looking for standout features."

Fox, the Berwyn teen, settled on a business camp at Haverford College. On a recent day, the gregarious boy said he figured studying venture capitalism and stocks at a Julian Krinsky enrichment program would give him a jump on his future career.

The University of Pennsylvania's dean of admissions, Eric J. Furda, is all for horizon-broadening, but said he wanted students who know how to relax.

"People shouldn't feel that this is another box they need to check - 'Summer experience, check, I did that, now how does it look on my application?' " Furda said. He looks for motivation - what a student gets out of a program and how he or she articulates it.

Fancy summer pursuits are by no means a must, he said.

Still, parents are clamoring for them, said Wil Burns-Garcia, director of residential life at Summer Discovery at Penn. In that four- or six-week program, students from around the world take classes for credit or pursue noncredit courses in subjects such as physics and forensics.

Parents "cross their fingers and hope a rigorous program at Penn will get their kids a leg up on acceptance to Penn or a school like it," Burns-Garcia said. Summer Discovery programs, held all over the country, have gained in popularity every year, he said.

Programs throughout the region and around the world offer opportunities for students looking to achieve. You can enroll in A+ Summer Camp at Stanford University, shadow doctors at the Drexel University Medical School, or perfect your French in Paris.

Entry fees for many programs are steep; Krinsky prices, for example, range from about \$1,000 for one week for a day student to more than \$12,000 for a residential student staying eight weeks.

Achievement is fine, said Eileen Bazelon, a local child and adolescent psychiatrist, but students also need balance and time to explore.

Whether such pursuits are healthy "depends," Bazelon said. "Is it just a means to an end as opposed to, God forbid, learning something? It needs to be done in the right context, like taking

general college chemistry to see if you're really interested in science, not just to pad your resume."

Lincoln Bitting, a senior at Central Bucks East, is devoting much of his summer to heavy SAT prep. His college short list includes the University of Virginia, Clemson University, and Penn, and his first SAT score - 1,800 - needs a boost, he thinks. "My grades are good, but colleges really look at SATs," said Bitting, 17, who lives in Plumstead Township. "I work so hard in school, and I don't want to nullify my chances, so I'm working hard this summer, too."

Like her son, Bitting's Mom is fretting over college admissions, and said she felt that a summer spent studying for the SAT would give him an edge.

"It's just scary," she said. "There's so much competition and pressure for these kids. We've heard so much about how hard it's going to be to get into the school you want."

But while Lincoln Bitting's pressure is self-imposed, Christin Lee, a 16-year-old from Great Neck, N.Y., feels different. She's spending six weeks at the Summer Discovery program at Penn, taking courses for credit.

"My parents forced me to do this," Lee said, pulling her rhinestone-festooned baseball cap low.

"But I didn't say no. I want to challenge myself with college courses."

Lee plans to make good use of her time, preparing for the SAT and writing her college essays, for Penn and other Ivies.

"That's what my parents have in store for me," Lee said, shrugging and heading off to study.