

How to

Build an Extracurricular Profile

for Top US Universities



Extracurricular activities play a big role in your college application.

How will you make sure yours stand out?

As the US college admissions landscape continually evolves, one rule holds true: admissions officers look far beyond academics to find the best candidates. While top grades and impressive test scores can help your application get past their first glance, extracurriculars, leadership positions and personal experiences are what truly set successful students apart from the growing pool of qualified applicants.

To put it plainly, a stellar extracurricular profile can make the difference between getting accepted or not!



On the US university application, your Activities List sums up the extracurricular activities you've participated in and the leadership roles you've held in order to paint a picture of who you are and what's important to you. It demonstrates how passionate, creative, entrepreneurial and original you are outside of the classroom — and it can take years to build.

So how do you create an extracurricular profile fit for top universities?

In this eBook, we'll break down the answer into four parts:



PART 1

Why extracurricular activities matter

PART 2

When and how to get started on your extracurricular profile

PART 3

How to build your Common App Activities List

PART 4

Success stories from Crimson students who nailed their extracurriculars

PART 1

Why Extracurricular Activities Matter



When wading through tens of thousands of applications — many from star students all over the world — admissions officers need a way to get a better understanding of who you are and what you would bring to their campus.

Gone are the days of the most well-rounded students standing the best chance of getting into top universities. With applicant pools growing larger and more competitive each year, admissions officers now look for 'well-lopsided' students.

Well-lopsided students differ from well-rounded students in an important way. Anyone can present themselves as well-rounded, with balanced extracurriculars, good grades, and strong essays; but well-roundedness doesn't necessarily showcase a student's ability to pursue, in depth, the things that are most important to them.

A well-lopsided student is one who:

- Can do everything expected of them in the classroom and on campus
- Has an in-depth passion or skill that goes far deeper than their peers'

Essentially, well-lopsided students possess a combination of intelligence and discipline demonstrated by their academic performance; along with creativity, resourcefulness, and authenticity demonstrated by their unique set of extracurricular activities.

An impressive extracurricular profile is imperative for students looking to show admissions officers that beyond their test scores and essays, they are passionate, active members of their community and will contribute something unique to the campus they end up at.

By establishing a well-lopsided extracurricular profile, you'll demonstrate your ability to zero in on the projects and activities that are most meaningful to you, and apply a range of leadership skills to those areas of interest. Being class president, captain of a sports team, and the star of your school's annual musical are all impressive accomplishments — but they don't necessarily illustrate what matters to you on a personal level.



How to show you're well-lopsided

Quality over Quantity

Focus on 2-3 main activities or projects that have a cohesive theme and show what matters to you. These should contribute to the personal narrative that's woven throughout your application.

Choose the Right Extracurriculars

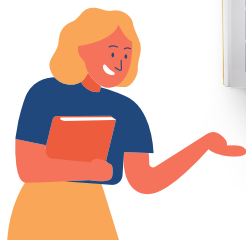
Activities based around your genuine interests will be most effective. Lean into your passions and let them guide the theme of your extracurriculars and essays!

Demonstrate Leadership

Take on leadership roles within organizations you're part of, as well as independent leadership roles that require you to start something new or execute an original idea — like hosting a charity event or starting a school club!



To read more about each of these steps in-depth, check out our [How to Crush Your US College Application eBook!](#)



PART 2

When and How to Get Started on Your Extracurricular Profile

A strong, authentic extracurricular profile is sometimes years in the making. Any student can sign up for a plethora of clubs and activities in the year or two prior to applying to college, but admissions officers won't be fooled — they know that top applicants have been exploring their interests, building their leadership skills, and contributing to their community throughout their time in school.



The 'When'

The truth is, it's **never too early to start building your college candidacy** — and that usually begins with extracurriculars! However, that's not to say that you need to dedicate all your free time to extracurriculars from the moment you start high school. Most successful students' extracurricular profiles consist of Activities and Projects, which have different timelines.



Activities

Your **extracurricular activities** are **longer-term commitments** that you dedicate a smaller, continuous amount of time to. An example could be a student organization (such as the environmental club or a sports team) that you participate in once a week throughout your high school career.



Projects

Your **extracurricular project** is usually **one larger initiative** you start working on in the 6-12 months (or more!) before submitting your college application. At Crimson, we call these capstone projects and work with students to brainstorm, ideate, plan, and execute them. Examples include organizing a charitable event, building an app, patenting an invention! The opportunities are endless and often provide a chance for you to either continue the project at university or hand it on to another budding college aspirant who benefits from your legacy.

The 'How'

Whether you're trying to figure out which activities are best suited to your interests or what kind of project you can take on, here are three key steps to help you get started.

Figure out what's important to you.

When it comes to your extracurricular profile, **authenticity is key** — so it's vital to make sure that the activities you're spending time on actually matter to you. Maybe you love working with animals and want to volunteer at a shelter? Perhaps you're passionate about mental health and want to contribute to a community wellness initiative? Wherever your interests lie, there are ways to nurture them through your extracurriculars.

Try different things.

Every student has a unique set of opportunities available to them based on their circumstances, and what some students love doing, others may hate. If student council isn't your thing, don't force yourself into that mold! Maybe theatre is a better fit — or volunteering, or coding, or debating. **The activities you choose are less important than the roles you take on** and the impact you make as a member of a club or community.

Exhaust your resources.

It may be the case that your high school doesn't offer the clubs or opportunities that speak to your interests. Don't let that limit you! At Crimson, we help students find the opportunities they wish to explore — or make their own! With the right resources and enough ambition, you can nurture any passion and turn it into a project or activity.

The sky's the limit!



PART 3

How to Build Your Common App Activities List



We've gone over the why, the when and the what. Now let's talk about how to best showcase your extracurriculars when it comes time to submit your application.

Most US universities use the Common Application, which includes a dedicated Activities List for students to briefly describe their extracurricular and leadership activities in order of importance. It's essential to meaningfully communicate your extracurriculars on that all-important, character-limited Activities List.

To help you understand how to strategically build your Activities List when applying to world-leading universities in the US, we've compiled some tips from Crimson senior strategist Gabe Gladstein.



Gabe is a graduate of Harvard and the New England Conservatory of Music and has worked with hundreds of Crimson students to help them gain admission to the Ivy League, Stanford, MIT, Duke, UChicago, UC Berkeley and many other top US universities.

Here are his expert tips on organizing your Common App Activities List:

Fill in all 10 available tabs on the Activities List page

At Crimson, our goal for students is to always have at least 10 activities on the list — because that's as many as the Common App will allow! If you have more than that, awesome! You may be able to use the Additional Information section of the Common App to describe those extras later on.

Examine the list categories carefully

The Common App offers a series of Activities categories including Academics, Art, Athletics, Career, Community Service, Computer/Technology, Cultural, Dance, Debate/Speech, Environmental, Family Responsibilities, Foreign Exchange, Journalism, ROTC, LGBT, Music, Religious, Research, Robotics, School Spirit, Science/Math, Student Government, Theatre/Drama, Work Experience and 'Other'. Suffice to say, there are a multitude of options to choose from!

Every student will have categories they naturally gravitate towards, but don't overlook others such as 'Family Responsibilities' which may be relevant to your everyday life and commitments, and speak more to who you are as a person.

Make every character count

The Common App Activities List only grants you 150 characters to describe each individual activity. When it comes to writing those descriptions, the goal is to summarize your responsibilities and the outcome from your activities using direct and specific language. Where applicable, try to use numbers of other clear points of reference to directly measure your impact.

Be intentional about how you order your 10 activities

As mentioned, you should try to fill in all 10 available activity slots — but in doing so, try to list your activities in order of importance. The ones you're most passionate about should come first; or if you've chosen a major at the schools you are applying to, activities related to that major should be near the top of your list. If you've won any impressive awards, particularly at the national or international level, those should come at the top as well!

Make sure your list reflects your unique personal passions

Your Activities List should shed a light not just on what you have accomplished, but what you will bring to campus given both your past experiences and your desire to contribute in a unique and authentic way. Admissions officers aim to fill their campuses with a diverse range of students from all walks of life, with a rich variety of interests and ambitions; so be yourself and make sure your Activities List shines as a true compliment to all the other areas of your Common App.

As a general rule, you'll want to **start by listing your most meaningful and most impressive activities first**. Whenever possible, group your activities thematically, in order to quickly communicate your main areas of interest.

Finally, if you're not sure whether or not to include something on your Activities List, ask yourself what that extracurricular says about you. If it merely fills a space on the list, but doesn't communicate something important about you and is not something you can reflect on in detail, it may not be beneficial to include.



PART 4

Student Success Stories

Read about these Crimson students who nailed their extracurriculars and got accepted to their dream universities!



FROM SINGAPORE TO USC

Anushka's Story

Anushka worked with Crimson to gain admission to the World Bachelor and Business Program at the University of Southern California. She was involved in many activities in high school and filled leadership positions in several student organizations, including participating in student council for the majority of her time in high school and even representing her high school at the district level!

Anushka held leadership roles in her school's cultural club, its business club, and its debate and politics club — building a consistent narrative with extracurriculars that illustrated her interests and academic intentions. Outside of school, she spent her summers organizing events and summer camps for middle and high school students, such as a summer coding bootcamp she created during her junior year. She even did some volunteering teaching art classes and caring for younger children!

To learn more about how Anushka got into USC, watch her 'How I Got In' video on Crimson's [YouTube channel](#)!



FROM AUSTRALIA TO STANFORD

Maggie's Story

Maggie will be attending Stanford University beginning this fall, and her extracurricular profile focuses on a podcast she started that was eventually recognized by the Australian Red Cross! As a Chinese-born student who immigrated to Australia, Maggie was familiar with the plight of immigrant students trying to assimilate to life in an English-speaking country. After spending a summer volunteering as an English teacher for children in Nepal, her podcast idea was born.

Working with the leadership coordinator at her high school and her Crimson strategist, Maggie launched Behind the Pages with Maggie — a podcast that aims to help immigrant children, asylum seekers and refugees learn English. In each episode, she reads a children's book in English, adding subtitles and filming each page so viewers can read along. The podcast gained such traction that a representative from the Australian Red Cross approached her to brainstorm ways to include it as one of the organization's enrichment activities!

To read a full interview with Maggie about her journey to Stanford, head over to [Crimson's blog](#) — or listen to the interview on our [Top of the Class](#) podcast!



FROM JAPAN TO YALE

Takenoshin's Story

Takenoshin excelled in his academics in high school; but it was his extracurricular focus on filmmaking that made his college applications unique and helped land him acceptances from Yale University, as well as Harvard and Columbia! In year 10, Takenoshin made a documentary about the historic Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011 and, in his words, seeks to “build a bridge between people who are for and against nuclear energy” — a polarizing topic in Japan.

The documentary appeared at multiple local film festivals including the Fukushima Film and Media Festival in Tokyo, where it was the first film created by a high school student to be featured! Further, Takenoshin's interest in documentary making led him to conduct a research project on the effectiveness of documentaries on high school students in terms of raising awareness and shifting their perspectives. He used these experiences, with guidance from his Crimson essay mentor, to ace both his Activities List and his Personal Essay!

To read the full story of how Takenoshin got into Yale, check out his [student story!](#)

FROM NEW ZEALAND TO BROWN

Rohan's Story

Crimson student Rohan says that in high school, he spent about 70% of his time on his extracurricular activities — and now he's a student at Brown University! Among his key extracurriculars, Rohan organized two speaker series events featuring well-known domestic speakers to offer advice to students at his school in two different areas: sports and academics. When COVID forced him to take the initiative online, he founded Youth Careers NZ, a series of online webinars featuring successful young people known across New Zealand who provide students with career advice.

Rohan's other activities included competing on his school's debate team for five years (and serving as captain in his last year), participating in two New Zealand Model UN events, and joining the New Zealand delegation for the Harvard & Yale Model UN conferences. He was also a prefect at his school, among many other achievements!

To learn more about how Rohan gained admission to Brown, watch his 'How I Got In' video on Crimson's [YouTube channel!](#)



What will your extracurricular profile look like?

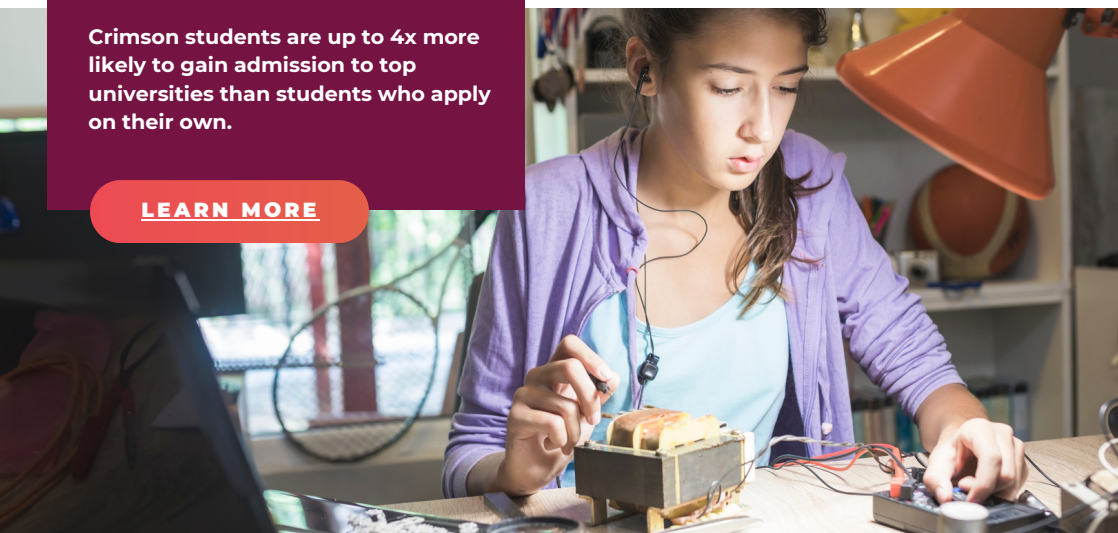
Applying to top US universities can feel overwhelming as the process is a complex one and many students don't know where to start. Building your candidacy for the most competitive schools means starting early and getting ahead on our academics and extracurriculars alike.

We hope this booklet has helped you understand the role that extracurriculars will play in your application, and how you can optimize your extracurricular profile with activities and projects that show who you are and what's important to you.

If you need help building an extracurricular profile fit for top US universities, click the link below to learn more about how Crimson helps students from around the world gain admission to world-leading universities in the US, including personalized extracurricular mentoring.

Crimson students are up to 4x more likely to gain admission to top universities than students who apply on their own.

[**LEARN MORE**](#)





Ready to Get Started?

Book in a free one hour consultation with one of our expert Academic Advisors who can answer all your individual questions and create a plan for you or your child.

[Talk To Us](#)

