

Application Tips for Activities and Leadership

Georgia Tech Admissions Blog August 11, 2020; Author: Rick Clark @gtadmission

Earlier this week, [The Common Application](#) sent out an email indicating 166,948 students have created an account to start the process of applying to college this year.

If you are a senior working on your application, you will find the first few sections go pretty fast, and you quickly arrive at the Activities section. On the surface, this is relatively self-explanatory and the directions provided are clear. In other words, completing it should not be hard or confusing.

However, it is always helpful to get some perspective “from the other side.” I believe that’s particularly true during Covid when many colleges will not be using test scores to make admission decisions and some of the activities you usually participate in have been canceled or modified over the last six months.

What method are they using to evaluate?

Just like individual high school grading scales, the rubrics colleges use to evaluate this section are not uniform. So, if you are applying to five or seven schools, your application will likely be evaluated on a variety of scales. Same application, same activities, same applicant – different systems. While one college may use a scale of 1-5, another could be out of 10 or 100. Alphabetic evaluations, check marks, +/-, or perhaps even emojis and .gifs could be used. Some schools fold their evaluation of this section into an overall admission decision recommendation without even assigning points or a score.

Who is reading?

People– not robots or algorithms. I’m always amazed that students believe we’re just feeding their applications into some kind of a machine that calculates the number of words you’ve used or hours you’ve reported in this section. Nope. These are actual living humans with families and dogs. They have been living through this quarantine just like you. They understand that life looks really weird right now. They get that your drama production was canceled and the internship you had lined up fell through.

The way colleges will read your activities is not going to change this year. They always make assumptions and inferences-and those *always* (and I use that word intentionally) lean toward providing you the benefit of the doubt. I believe that will be particularly true this year because my prediction is colleges in general will see applications go down and admit rates go up. *Translation:* They want and need students who are going to contribute on their campus.

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...So *What are they looking for?*

While the training of staff, the number of committee members, and the flow of an application between admission officers will vary from one college to the next, the fundamental questions they are asking as they review your activity section are the same:

- What was this student *involved* with outside the classroom?
- Is there evidence this student made an *investment* beyond that *involvement*?
- What *impact* is evident through this student's *investment* and *involvement*?
- Is there evidence that this student's *involvement*, *investment*, and *impact* influenced others?

In an effort to help you get inside the mind of the admission committee, and also to receive tangible and actionable tips, I dug through the archives of our blog to find helpful advice we've provided over the years.

What: [The Nuts and Bolts \(Part 2\)](#)

When: October 2017

Who: Mary Tipton Woolley, Senior Associate Director of Admission

Why: Because Mary Tipton answers questions students and families always want to know, including how many files do we read a day and how many people are in the room where it happens. But she also provides sage wisdom in her recommendation to "front" your most significant activities by listing them first.

"Then put the remainder in descending order of importance to you. It could be descending order of time spent, or significance of impact – you know best what will work for you. We discussed the review of activities in our staff training, emphasizing the importance of looking at both pages of activities in our review, but we all confessed we'd missed significant activities because they were at the end of the list."

You can also apply this concept to your essays and admission or scholarship interviews. Make your most important point quickly. "Hook" the admission officer intentionally by prioritizing what matters most to you.

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What: [Subtle Leadership](#)

When: October 2019

Who: Dr. Paul Kohn, VP for Enrollment Management

Why: Because this blog, written before any of us could have come up with the word “Covid” in a game of Scrabble, demonstrates the continuity of college admission. The way Dr. Kohn articulates leadership and impact proves my point that admission committees’ review of community involvement has not changed due to Coronavirus (Thanks, boss.).

If we were counting hours invested or the number of words on each line of your application, then sure, you would likely have less to include or describe during this pandemic. But check out his instruction to think about the filter in which you consider your influence, and how that comes across in the Activities or Community Involvement section:

“Truly examine your experiences and look for the times you inspired others, demonstrated good decisions, set an example of honesty and integrity, or showed commitment and passion for a goal. Look for moments in which you cooperated with others to achieve an outcome, or you displayed empathy for others.”

Importantly, the questions he enumerates are arguably even more helpful this year than when he originally wrote his blog:

- Have you demonstrated and preached tolerance of divergent ideas and thoughts?
- Have you helped a classmate accomplish a goal?
- Have you helped members of your family through a difficult time?
- When have you helped others know the path without literally ushering them down it?
- Have you given a speech or written an op-ed piece about the benefits of voting or contributing to certain causes?

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What: [Which Activities Will Make Me Competitive?](#)

When: April 2019

Who: Katie Mattli, Senior Assistant Director of Admission

Why: Because she keeps it simple. Aaron Burr may have rap sung/ sung rap/ the [10 Duel Commandments](#) in *Hamilton*, but Katie rocks the Three Extra Curricular Tenants here (apologies in advance for my attempt to lyricize her wisdom).

Number 1 – If you love it, you naturally become more competitive. The challenge demands satisfaction. This is not a reaction. She’s unapologetically repetitive. Simplicity and consistency are her sedative. Don’t write this off as sappy, because it’s true, “What activities make you *happy*?’ Do... more of those things!”

Number 2 – If you are interested, I’ll be *more* interested. If you are sitting pat, applications fall flat. Don’t concern yourself with what we want to hear. Be sincere. “Nothing engages me more than a student who tells me, “I love XYZ!” See? “Trying to craft a summary of undertakings that you really don’t enjoy.” Oh, boy. No. Want the bottom line? Fine. Don’t let this cause you strife. “Applications have a life and an energy when a student is trying to use every available space to expound on a passion project.”

And if you didn’t know- now you know.

Number 3 – Activities that are difficult can still make you happy. “I said this was not a softball answer and I meant it.” Hold on a minute. That’s right- “easy and happy are not the same thing.” That line should be on a cover. And that’s why we love her. Because she can cover the basics and make great suggestions. Read her full blog for more insight and guiding questions.

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What: [Is it OK if I?](#)

When: October 2018

Who: Ashley Brookshire, Regional Director of Admission, West Coast

Why: Because what you do in high school, what you do in college, and what you do throughout life should not be about playing the game or trying to win the approval of others. That box checking, resume padding climb will end up with you looking down/out/over what, exactly?

As we've said before, your college admission experience is a foreshadowing of your overall college experience. Don't miss the important lessons it can teach.

In this piece, Ashley helps you "reverse this idea" and "apply to the colleges that model YOUR interests and values, rather than molding yourself to fit a school." Now *that* is a life lesson. You can apply that same thinking to relationships, jobs, and many others decisions. Ashley went to Tech. She worked as a student in our office, and began her career as an admission counselor with us.

She's since gotten married, moved to California, and had a baby. Lots of changes in her life, but what has not changed is her ability to things down to their essence and help bring out the most salient and important point. In this case:

"Is it ok if I...? Yes. Yes, to however you finish the question, because it is, and will be, okay! You can and should invest your time and energy in the things that feel most beneficial for your personal development and growth, regardless of which college you end up attending."

What does all of this mean for you?

Ultimately, your job is to convince the admission committee that *you will be missed* once you graduate—whether that be by a coach, a club sponsor, a boss, your family, a non-profit in your community, or another group or organization.

I'm confident after reading these excerpts you will have no problem doing that. Enjoy the experience. Take some time after you've completed this section to marvel at what you have done—and equally as important what you will inevitably contribute on a college campus.

<https://sites.gatech.edu/admission-blog/2020/08/11/application-tips-for-activities-and-leadership/>

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