



# Extracurricular activities:

Bill Lawhorn

**A**cademics are the focus of high school and college. But for many students, participation in activities outside the classroom is what they enjoy the most.

Athletics, clubs, and other extracurricular activities have benefits beyond the enjoyment they provide. These pursuits assist students in developing personally, socially, and intellectually. They might even help students to advance their academic and professional goals.

The pages that follow highlight extracurricular activities that are often available at the high school and college levels. The first section of the article describes the general benefits of participating in extracurricular activities. The second section discusses some of these activities, along with the advantages they offer to participants. A final section provides suggestions for finding more information. And a box on page 20 describes some activities that are integrated with academic programs instead of supplementing them.

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# The afterschool connection

## The benefits of extracurriculars

Much of students' time outside the classroom is already spoken for. So why add extracurricular activities to an already busy schedule? The benefits to participants—including making friends, developing skills, and improving academic and employment prospects—are a strong argument in their favor.

A primary reason that students take part in an activity is personal interest. And an immediate benefit of pursuing interests through extracurriculars is meeting others who share those same interests.

The opportunity to form friendships also gives students a chance to develop social skills. For some students, social interaction in extracurricular activities is their first experience working with others toward a common goal. And teamwork is an important skill that most instructors and employers view favorably.

Teamwork often evolves into leadership

in the extracurricular environment, because each club or organization has leadership posts. For example, Michael Falkowitz, formerly an assistant dean of students at the University of Kentucky, has identified about 2,500 opportunities for students to develop leadership skills on campus each year. "These opportunities are something that you can't teach in a classroom," he says. "Officeholders in clubs and in campus organizations get an on-the-job executive experience of running a small franchise."

In addition, studies suggest that participating in extracurricular activities helps students in their academic performance. Researchers found that self-motivation is a factor: Achieving success in an activity that interests them requires students to develop good time-management habits that carry over into schoolwork. And eligibility for participating often requires students to maintain a minimum gradepoint average—so taking part in extra-



curricular means keeping up with academics.

Researchers also discovered that the adult mentors who are involved in some activities are a positive influence in young people's lives.

For students planning to attend college or graduate school, extracurricular activities may improve their school-acceptance prospects.

Extracurricular participation is often an indicator of students' ability to accept responsibility, manage multiple commitments, and balance their pursuits of study, interest, and leisure.

Extracurricular activities also can help in the world of work. In addition to skills developed in activities that are applicable to careers, extracurricular connections may be a source of networking. Sandra Ruesch was responsible for planning a blood drive as a member of the student nurses' association at South Dakota State University. "The organizational skills needed to plan the drive will look great on my resume," she says. "And



the contacts I made may have helped me get multiple summer internship offers, too."

## Choosing activities

The number and type of extracurricular activities available is sometimes overwhelming. Students should choose activities that are based on their interests and then weigh the potential conflicts those activities would have with other demands for their time—including academic study. Prospective college- or graduate-level students should also consider the potential for scholarships that exist with many types of activities.

Some activities may be more prestigious than others, but genuine appeal should outweigh ulterior motives. Students should not attempt to boost their credentials with activities that do not match their interests or abilities. Whether they seek to improve their skills or enhance their future prospects, students should pursue an extracurricular activity for at least one other reason: to have fun.

**Academic clubs.** In high schools and colleges, many academic subjects have a related club. These clubs promote their members' shared interest in the subject and supplement classroom learning. Club members may hold leadership positions and arrange to invite guest speakers, take field trips, or organize study groups.

Academic clubs provide students with an opportunity to discuss topics beyond the scope of the classroom. Language clubs, for example, allow students to watch foreign films or eat delicacies that are native to the country of origin. These cultural experiences are enjoyable and help make learning a language more meaningful.

**Academic competitions.** Not all competition takes place on fields and in gymnasiums. Many schools offer students the chance for intellectual contests.

Academic competitions might be limited to a single subject, such as mathematics or history, or cover a broad range of subjects. Competitions may take place within a single school, or school teams might participate in State, national, or international events. To



participate in these competitions, students must first qualify for their school's team.

Academic competitions usually require significant preparation. It is likely that the study skills of students who are selected for the team are already well developed; however, competitions give them the chance to hone these skills further. Participants also learn to work together with other team members.

**Athletics.** Athletics are among the most prominent and popular of extracurricular activities in both high school and college. Participation in varsity athletics usually requires major commitments of time and effort. But many students take part in another popular option: intramural sports.

Although intramural athletics may not require the same commitment as varsity sports, both help students develop the same kinds of skills. In team sports, for example, participants usually develop a sense of camaraderie and learn to work together with others. And physically active students learn to appreciate the benefits of an active lifestyle.

**Debate.** Debate, sometimes called forensics, requires a wide range of skills.

In debate competitions, participants present an argument they have researched, based on established topics and rules. High school and college debate teams might compete intramurally or against other schools.

Debaters must have strong research skills, be able to think quickly, and be able to communicate well. In addition, debaters must be comfortable performing in front of an audience—and having the confidence to do so is a valuable workplace skill, especially when it comes to making presentations to coworkers or superiors.

Debate clubs help students develop analytical and logical reasoning skills, as well as the ability to think and speak extemporaneously. Both colleges and employers value these skills. Students interested in law-related or political occupations—in which effective debate skills are critical—are especially likely to benefit from participation in debate.

**Performing arts.** Most high schools and colleges have performing arts organizations, such as music (band, orchestra, chorus) and drama clubs. Like elite athletes, student performers usually must make a major time com-

## Career and technical student organizations: Another way to get involved

Career and technical student organizations offer activities that are not a formal part of the curriculum but are integrated with it. Therefore, career and technical activities are cocurricular rather than extracurricular.

The U.S. Department of Education endorses 10 career and technical student organizations. Each organization serves students who are pursuing a specific category of vocational education. Despite their different educational focuses, all of these organizations share some goals: All seek to build the academic, interpersonal, career, and leadership skills of their members—and all of them seek to improve students' self-esteem and encourage civic involvement.

Career and technical student organizations focus on leadership development, competitive events, career skills development,

and community service. Activities complement and reinforce classroom instruction. For example, members of the Distributive Education Clubs of America, a business-oriented organization, might operate a school-based store.

For students pursuing a specific career goal, career and technical student organizations provide a structured supplement to classroom instruction. And for students who intend to enter the workforce after high school, the personal development skills acquired in these organizations might be especially useful.

Information on career and technical student organizations, with links to each organization, can be found at the U.S. Department of Education Web site at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/vso.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cte/vso.html).

mitment. This includes time with the group and, often, individual practice time.

These performers don't just play for their own benefit, however: Many also take part in group competitions between schools. Both musical and theater organizations may compete in festivals around the Nation. Such performances allow students to receive feedback from judges and share their work with peers from other programs.

Not all members of these groups perform onstage. Backstage and other support activities allow nonperformers to pursue their interests while helping to work toward the shared goal of a successful concert, play, or other performance.

**Service organizations.** Service organizations provide students with a structured environment for charitable work. Participation in these organizations allows students to meet other socially conscious people and perform rewarding work with them.

There are many different types of student

service organizations, and new ones are created all the time. Many large organizations have student branches at schools nationwide. But small, independent clubs also exist.

Students can't always find a local club with an issue that interests them. In those cases, students should consider creating a new service organization by finding a group of like-minded friends who are willing to devote the time and energy to start one.

**Student government.** Students elected by their peers to their school government serve as a bridge between the student body and the school's administration. These students communicate with both groups to facilitate cooperation and understanding. They also might lead projects, such as organizing and conducting fundraisers for homecoming and other annual events.

Participating in student government is often a lot of work, but it provides an opportunity to develop leadership skills. Positions available vary by school but often include

class president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary; larger schools might also have coordinators for specific activities. Colleges and universities may have numerous openings, including student-run honor committees, judiciaries, and alumni councils.

**Student publications.** Most schools have opportunities for interested writers: Publications by students and for students offer future writers and editors a chance to gain experience and build a portfolio. Newspapers, yearbooks, and literary magazines are common publications in high school and college.

These publications allow students to practice writing and editing, learn basic publishing methods, and, in the process, produce a source of information for their classmates. Many entry-level writing jobs require applicants to submit published articles, known as clips—and working on a student publication provides a good source of material for such articles.

**Other organizations.** There are other ways for students to get involved in organized activities outside the classroom. Examples include honor societies, clubs affiliated with political parties, and, on college campuses, fraternal social organizations (fraternities and sororities).

Like many extracurricular activities, the activities offered by these groups promote social interaction with like-minded peers. They also provide students with other opportunities, such as leadership development and community service.

### For more information

To learn more about the types of activities available

at your school, start with the school's career counseling office. There, you should be able to find out which activities are open to anyone and which have specific requirements for joining.

For general information about the national organizations that provide support to many activities, visit your local library or look online. If you find an organization with an activity that interests you but is not yet available at your school, consider making inquiries to learn how to start a chapter. The legwork involved in establishing an activity is often as rewarding—and impressive to future employers—as participation itself. ∞

