



# ***How to Nail Your US Common Application Activities List!***

*Read our step-by-step guide on  
how to make your extracurricular  
profile stand out above the crowd*



If there is one thing we know for sure about the US university application process, it is that US colleges are genuinely interested in who you are and what matters to you.

When wading through tens of thousands of applications — many from great students all over the world — admissions officers need a way to get a better understanding as to who you are beyond your school grades and standardised test scores.

While your personal statement is an integral part of this holistic assessment process, it is your activities list that provides admissions officers with a real insight into your leadership and extracurricular

achievements and more importantly, how passionate, creative, entrepreneurial and original you have been when it comes to taking these activities to the next level.

But what does the Activities section of the Common App actually look like, and how do you make sure your list stands out above the rest?

Let's take a look at what top US colleges are looking for when assessing your extracurricular and leadership profile.



## 01. Commitment

Universities are looking for evidence of commitment and consistency of effort over time. They will be much more impressed if you devote one hour a week to a cause over the course of a year than if you spend 40 hours on a project over the course of one week. This is not to say that all of your involvements ought to be long term commitments. However, you should strive to maintain involvement in three or more extracurricular activities over the duration of two or more years.

All students are different - some may fill their calendars with 20 different activities each week while others may have a central 2 or 3 that align with their personal passions. The trick is to find a happy medium which shows variety but also a 'well lop-sidedness'. This means narrowing down on 4-6 activities or projects that:

- ✓ Align with your personal study goals
- ✓ Showcase your enthusiasm
- ✓ Explore your ability to think beyond the obvious and take your activity to the next level
- ✓ Evidence your desire to make a difference to your broader community



## 02. Genuine Interest

In addition to looking for evidence of dedication, US universities are also looking for indications of thoughtfulness and genuine interest in the activities you have chosen.

It is natural for a student to have a variety of interests, but it can become concerning if a student lists 10 different activities on the application that are drastically different from one another. This could indicate that the student has not chosen these activities with care, and that they've not yet developed an understanding of the types of activities they find rewarding and meaningful.

A great way to present yourself in the most compelling way possible is to **narrow down on activities which can be grouped into themes** (e.g. sports, philanthropy, entrepreneurial ventures, creative pursuits, technology competitions). These themes help admissions officers to get a real feel as to who you are and what you will bring to campus.

## 03. Going Beyond Your Comfort Zone

To really impress US universities, especially those ranked highly on national and international lists, it is important that you demonstrate a willingness to stretch yourself and push beyond your comfort zone. This could be communicated by taking on leadership positions, by participating in competitions at the regional, national, or international level, and by creating a project or organisation from scratch.

Top universities are looking to attract students who **openly embrace challenges as opportunities to grow**, and who are able to positively impact others during the process. If you can demonstrate both personal growth and impact through your extracurricular activities, then you'll succeed in differentiating yourself from the majority of your peers.



# So what does the Activities section on the Common App actually look like?

The Common Application is the most widely used college application platform in the US. While some schools, such as the University of California family (eg: UCLA and UC Berkeley) and MIT for example, have their own processes, the great majority of colleges use the Common App.

So how is the Common App Activities page formatted and how can you communicate years of your extracurriculars on a single form submission?

Here is a quick view of what the page looks like:

The form requires you to indicate:

- The type of activity undertaken (a drop-down menu is provided)
- A description of your leadership position within any organization involved
- Details as to your achievements
- How long you have been engaged in the activity (during which school years/grades)
- An estimation of your time of commitment
- An indication as to what level you took this activity eg: school, local community, state, national or international

The screenshot shows the Common App interface. On the left is a navigation menu with 'Common Application' at the top and options for Profile, Family, Education, Testing, Activities (highlighted), and Writing. The main content area is titled 'Activities' and shows 'Activity 1' with a red asterisk. The form includes: 'Activity type' with a dropdown menu and a red 'x' icon indicating a required question; 'Position/Leadership description and organization name, if applicable' with a text input field; 'Details, honors won, and accomplishments' with a text input field; and 'Participation grade levels' with checkboxes for 9, 10, 11, 12, and Post-graduate. On the right, there is an 'Instructions & Help Center' section with sub-sections: 'Participation grade levels' (explaining acronyms 9-12 and PG), 'Character limits for details, honors won, and accomplishments' (150 characters for details, 50 for honors), 'Order/reorder of activities' (instructions on listing by importance), and 'Activity type not on the list' (instructions to select 'other').

**The tricky part is describing your involvement in each activity in only 150 characters (including spaces)! With the opportunity to list 10 activities in total, communicating your efforts succinctly but effectively is key to your list resonating with admissions officers.**

## How should the activities be presented?

Start by listing your most meaningful and most impressive activities first. Whenever possible you should group your activities thematically, in order to quickly communicate your main areas of interest.

If you're not sure if you should list an activity or not, think about what you are trying to communicate to the admissions officers. Sometimes it can be tempting to include an activity in order to fill up more spaces on the list, but **if the activity doesn't communicate something important about you**, and is not something which you can reflect on in detail, then **it might not be beneficial to include it** in your list.

## Are extracurriculars really worth the time?

A common question we are asked at Crimson is: "If I do really well in my exams and on my standardised tests, and I write a set of really compelling essays, can I then focus less time and effort on my extracurriculars?"

If you are aiming to gain admission to a top university, then the answer is definitely 'no'. In fact, even less competitive universities will expect to see evidence of consistent dedication to some of your core areas of interest.

Of course, it's not always easy to juggle several extracurricular activities alongside school work and personal commitments. But by narrowing down on your personal passions early, and choosing extracurriculars that add to your personal development, lift your spirits and help you form meaningful connections with others, you'll find these activities aren't a burden but a blessing in the busy school year.

Ultimately you need to:

- Plan your schedule in advance
- Find activities you truly enjoy
- Choose activities which allow you to spend time with friends and the people you value in your community
- Have confidence in your own ability to make a unique impact on others around you



## How Crimson Can Help

At Crimson, our extracurricular and leadership mentors have helped thousands of students find and develop activities that not only helped them gain admission to their dream universities, but also helped them form lifelong friendships, and develop skills and insights which furthered both their professional and personal development.

Many of our students come to us with little idea as to what activities they should commit to. But one of the most rewarding parts of supporting students comes in helping them narrow down on their passions and identifying the activities that will 'stick'.

We also help our students identify somewhat difficult to see 'connections'. We've helped students combine even the most seemingly disparate of interests such as sport and robotics, computer science and drum playing, debating and sewing - just to name a few!

Crimson also helps students who may feel a little intimidated by the prospect of taking on additional responsibilities and challenges, be it guiding you in securing leadership positions you may never have thought possible, preparing you for academic competitions, directing you step by step in planning for and completing an impressive independent project... Our Crimson students continue to amaze us and more importantly themselves.

As for that restrictive character count, admittedly nailing your activities in 150 characters is a challenge for many students. But our mentors — many of whom are graduates from, or current



students at, the very universities our students are aiming for — have read thousands of student activity lists and know exactly how to both capture the reader's attention, and to communicate key interests in a matter of seconds!

Of course none of what we do would be possible without the talents, enthusiasm, creativity and hard-work of the amazing high-schoolers we are lucky enough to work with. Through their extracurriculars our students have developed lifelong friendships, skill development and insights which went on to further both their professional and personal development.



# 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\*\*](#)

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