INNOVATIVE COLLEGE PREP

GUIDE

Building Meaningful Extracurricular Activities

Depth, genuine interest, initiative and impact, without résumé-padding

For: Students, families, counselors and teachers

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Revised November 2026. General guidance only. Admissions policies and deadlines vary by college and change; always confirm with each institution.

Do what matters. Do it well.

There is no required list of activities and no single path. Colleges read applications to understand who you are. They are better served by a few commitments that reflect you than by a long list you do not care about.

Start from genuine interest

The strongest activities begin with curiosity. Ask: *What would I do with free time? What do I keep coming back to? What would I like to improve around me?* When you care, effort lasts, and it shows.

What counts

- School clubs, teams, music, theater and art.
- Jobs, internships and family responsibilities, such as caring for siblings or translating for family.
- Community service, faith and cultural activities.
- Independent projects: building, writing, researching, coding, making, repairing.
- Summer programs, though paying for one is never required. Free or local options are just as valid.

There is no target number. Application forms such as the Common App have room for up to ten activities, and you do not need to fill every space.

Depth, then breadth

Trying many things in ninth and tenth grade is healthy. As time goes on, more depth helps you grow and gives you more to say. ICP's grade guides call a sustained interest a **"spike."** It is one useful idea, not a formula; colleges describe many kinds of applicants, and no activity pattern guarantees an outcome.

Stage	Goal
9th	Explore broadly. Keep what you enjoy.
10th	Choose a few commitments and begin taking responsibility.
11th	Deepen. Lead or create where it fits your interests.
12th	Finish strong. Reflect on what you learned and describe it accurately.

Initiative, leadership and impact

- **Initiative:** You noticed a need or opportunity and acted on it.
- **Leadership:** You helped others succeed, whether or not you held a title.
- **Impact:** Something is different because of what you did. Describe it with honest numbers where possible (people helped, hours, money raised, improvements made) and plainly when it cannot be measured.

Padding the résumé	Building something real
Joining many clubs at the last minute	Staying with a few and growing in them
Collecting hours at any service project	Choosing a cause you care about and returning
Starting a club only for the application	Starting something that solves a real problem and continues
Exaggerating titles or results	Describing exactly what you did and learned

Be honest. Information on applications should be accurate. Admissions officers may verify claims, and a misleading entry can harm an application.

Document what you do

Keep a simple record. You will need it for applications, scholarships and resumes.

Activity	Dates / grades	Hours per week	Role and responsibilities	What changed or what I learned

Describe activities clearly

Application forms allow very little space, so use specific verbs and facts.

Vague	Clear and specific
Member of robotics club	Built and programmed a sensor module for the club robot; trained four new members on the software
Volunteer at library	Ran a weekly reading hour for about 10 children for two school years
Part-time job	Worked 12 hours per week at a family restaurant; opened the kitchen and trained new staff

Reflection questions

- Which activity would I continue if nobody gave me credit?
- What have I created, improved or taught others?
- What responsibility have I taken, and what did I learn from a mistake?
- How have my interests changed, and why?

Official sources: ICP Essential Spike guide · ICP Grade Level Guides

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