chess, cheerleading, chopin: what gets you into college?

Do extracurricular activities increase students’ likelihood of attending college, including prestigious institutions? Yes, but grades, test scores, and family background still matter more.

Emma Daugherty, a promising student at a Catholic high school in Saint Paul, Minnesota, had not even finished tenth grade when colleges and universities began contacting her. Her mailbox filled with brochures, key chains, and pens; her phone rang with calls from college students encouraging her to apply to their schools. The attention was flattering, but she remained nervous about her prospects of admission. It was not clear what selective institutions like Georgetown and Notre Dame were looking for. “It was very difficult to decide exactly what mattered to schools,” says Emma, now a sophomore at Notre Dame. “When I visited schools, they all mentioned the same handful of things that mattered for admissions, but they rarely ranked them.”

The college admissions process is increasingly stressful and mysterious for students, parents, and guidance counselors alike. State schools and regional universities, once seen as fallback options, now draw from a widening pool of applicants and are increasingly selective, while the most prestigious universities have become even more desirable—and much more difficult to get into. Top colleges attract so many highly qualified applicants that it is hard to predict which ones they will admit. In this competitive environment, what makes the difference? What distinguishes applicants in admissions officers’ eyes? Unsure of the answer, students often sign up for numerous extracurricular activities. While she enjoyed her active schedule, Emma admits that she had an eye toward college admissions when she signed up for her school’s student council, French Club, National Honor Society, newspaper staff, and varsity volleyball team.

Of course, only a fraction of high school students aim to attend selective schools like Georgetown or Notre Dame. Many high school graduates do not attend college at all, and in disadvantaged neighborhoods, high school dropout rates remain high. Annette Lareau has documented the contrasting lifestyles of economically advantaged children (whose parents shuttle them from soccer to piano lessons) and economically disadvantaged children (whose parents lack the time or resources to involve their children in such activities). For the latter, the question is not what will gain students admission to Berkeley or Stanford but what activities help kids get to college, period.

For both groups, what matters—if anything? Will participating in 4-H make Whitney more attractive to Harvard? Will playing varsity football make Ken more likely to get into North Dakota State? What about intramural sports? Field trips to museums? Dance lessons? Math Club?

ten thousand teenagers can’t be wrong

In 1988, researchers at the United States Department of Education sat down with thousands of eighth-graders nationwide to ask them hundreds of questions about their activities and achievements at home and at school and to gather information about their families and communities. The National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS), as it was called, has followed these students to the present day. We recently looked at the results of this survey and made some interesting discoveries about which activities matter when it comes to college matriculation—and which do not. Because much research has demonstrated that students of different races face distinct challenges and opportunities in school, we decided to make the several thousand white students followed by NELS the focus of our initial study. We used a statistical technique that allowed us to correct for the fact that one of our outcomes (matriculation at an elite college) is a subset of another (matriculation at college). Thus, we are able to ask two questions: (a) What activities and attributes increase a given student’s chances to matriculate at college? (b) What activities make it more likely that, given college matriculation, a particular student will matriculate at a highly competitive school? (Note that our research focuses upon matriculation. That is, we are not yet certain whether a given activity changes a student’s likelihood of applying versus being admitted to college—we only know whether or not it makes someone more likely to get in the door.)
Grades and standardized test scores, of course, matter a great deal, as do parents’ income and education. Even when we consider these, however, we find that participation in some extracurricular activities in high school makes it much more likely that a student will go on to college. The accompanying table summarizes the results for these extracurricular activities.

**basketball or bruegel?**

Participation in varsity team sports makes college matriculation much more likely; participation in student government does also. Among activities pursued outside of school, taking dance or music classes also makes a difference. To understand the importance of these activities, consider some of the seemingly fundamental attributes that do not matter much: whether English is a student’s first language, whether a student lives in a rural or urban area, and even whether parents limit TV or check whether homework is done. None of these, independently, makes a student more likely to attend college.

We were interested, however, not only in whether extracurricular participation mattered for college entrance in general, but in whether it mattered for admission to highly selective colleges in particular. To answer this question, we looked at which students attended one of the colleges most highly ranked overall (or just most selective) according to U.S. News in the year the NELS respondents were college-shopping. The list included both prestigious research universities such as UCLA and Penn, and selective teaching colleges like Carleton and Vassar. Only a small percentage of high school seniors went on to attend one of these nationally known institutions.

What activities make a college-bound student more likely to attend a highly selective institution? Some of the obvious choices turn out to make little difference. When it...
comes to these elite schools, sports do not matter—nor, surprisingly, do student council or French Club. Working on the school yearbook or newspaper makes a difference—but music, dance, and art lessons do not seem to matter. Surprisingly, participation in a school hobby club makes a student much more likely to attend one of these selective institutions—though the survey question wording prevents us from knowing whether participation in the carpentry club or photography club matters as much as, say, chess club.

Perhaps our most interesting finding, however, concerned not what the students themselves did—but what their parents did. Students whose parents visited art museums regularly were much more likely to attend an elite college than students whose parents did not. It does not even seem to matter whether students themselves visit museums—so long as their parents do. This is true across the spectrum, even when we take parents’ income and education into account.

polishing apples

So what does this all mean? Are there any lessons here for social scientists—or for students aspiring to college? Though our study is unique in considering all these activities together and in looking at highly selective institutions in particular, sociologists have long been asking related questions, and their insights may help us make sense of our results.

Several authors have pointed to the “resumé factor”—most notably Randall Collins, author of The Credential Society. It makes sense to think that activities or achievements should make students more likely to gain admission to college (whether or not they actually gained any skills or knowledge from the activity), just because admissions officers are impressed by lists of activities.

An impressive list of activities on an application cannot hurt, but the histories of the NELS participants suggest that more is going on. Although some activities, like student council or school band, make a student more likely to attend college, the advantage they confer is not always clear. For example, why does student government participation make a student more likely to go to college but no more likely to attend a particularly selective institution? Why do photography club make a difference but not membership in the National Honor Society? Why do activities like dance lessons taken outside of school—activities that are less likely to be listed or mentioned on a college application—make such a significant difference? All these pad a resumé equally well.

One answer may lie in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who coined the term cultural capital. According to Bourdieu, knowledge about elite culture (for example, fine art) is an asset just as surely as money or social connections are assets. Someone who can show familiarity with classical music or modern art probably has a privileged background: the person knows about and has developed a taste for art forms (for example ballet or abstract art) and for activities (for example foreign travel or squash) that are not widely experienced outside elite circles. Teachers, employers, and others in gatekeeping positions detect this sophistication and reward those who display it.

Critics have argued that Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, based upon research in France decades ago, is less relevant to contemporary life in the United States. This is a fair criticism, but elite knowledge can take many forms. In the United States today, children of highly educated, well-to-do parents may share a taste for popular music or movies with their less privileged peers, but they are also more likely than those peers to be familiar with more diverse art forms and pastimes, from ballet to golf and world music. Even on a college application, these differences in students’ experiences are likely to be apparent. Elite colleges are especially likely to pay attention to these differences. Admissions officers at these schools must choose a few students from a large number of highly qualified applicants; with competition so intense, even relatively subtle clues might make an applicant seem more like “college material.” These schools often conduct applicant interviews and place great weight on applicants’ personal statements, and a chance mention of the new Bertolucci film or the Ruscha show at the Whitney may tip an applicant from one pile to the other.

Besides making admission to college more likely among students who apply, cultural tastes may also increase the likelihood of applying to college in the first place: teachers and guidance counselors may be more likely to encourage such students to apply to college.

If Bourdieu is correct—and much research suggests he
is—this might help explain why dance lessons make more of a difference for college admission than cheerleading. Cultural sophistication also seems the best explanation for our finding that parents’ patronage of art museums makes students more likely to enter elite schools. Students from such families are likely to be surrounded by information about elite culture, from coffee-table art books to DVDs of foreign films. Professional educators—who tend themselves to be well educated and conversant in this culture—are likely to favor such students. Family life, argued Bourdieu, is the crucible of cultural capital—occasional school field trips are not enough to change a child’s fundamental outlook on life. The children of the wealthy have a valuable leg up in today’s educational rat race.

while cultural awareness may impress an admissions officer at Amherst, most high school students do not even get to that interview. Among the seniors in our nationwide sample, barely half applied to bachelor’s degree programs. The great majority of those who did apply ended up attending four-year programs, though not always at their first-choice school. Might some extracurricular activities help motivate students to seek higher education? Can playing for the school’s basketball team increase students’ interest in school itself?

Willard Waller, a pioneering sociologist of education in the 1930s, thought this was the primary justification for extracurricular activities. School-based extracurriculars, he argued, serve to win students’ hearts and minds. Cheering for the Central High hockey team is equivalent to cheering for Central High and all it stands for. If this is true, cheering for Central High may encourage investment in the educational process more generally, thus promoting college attendance.

This might help explain why we found that students who played varsity team sports were more likely to attend college. Athletic recruiting and scholarships probably play a role as well. If we extend Waller’s logic to nonathletic extracurriculars, this might also explain why students who participate in activities like student council are more likely to attend college but not more likely to attend so-called elite colleges. Cultural sophistication matters more for the latter; social “investment” in school matters more for the former.

Interestingly, participation in varsity sports based on individual competition (for example, swimming or track as opposed to hockey or football) does not seem to make a difference in predicting college matriculation. This could be for any number of reasons. Colleges’ demand for players of these sports may be less intense, with fewer recruiting slots for golf stars versus basketball stars.

Or Waller might be on to something, and the school solidarity fostered at a football game or a basketball game might do more to invest students in school life, thus making them more likely to apply to college. Star football players are more likely to be heroes for their fellow students and teachers than star swimmers. Sociologists since Emile Durkheim have emphasized the importance of collective rituals in shaping individual beliefs and motivations—and interscholastic competitions are certainly collective rituals. (From this perspective, it is not surprising that intramural sports do not increase participants’ likelihood of achieving higher education, since they are not as tightly intertwined with school life as are varsity sports.)

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. Cultural awareness seems to explain why experiences and background outside of school can make students more likely to attend selective institutions, and the credential value and socializing effects of activities like student council and varsity sports help explain why students who participate in them are more likely to attend college than those who do not. Further, it seems reasonable to think that something more straightforward is happening: many of these activities increase students’ technical skills and social competence, making them more attractive candidates for colleges in any number of ways. Such skills would also be evident to the counselors and teachers who steer students toward college—and write their recommendation letters. These processes are not mutually exclusive—music lessons
may well improve students’ study skills, cognitive skills, and cultural capital.

sociology homework

Many questions remain. Our results for white students may not hold among African-American, Hispanic, or Asian-American students. There are also important differences between boys and girls: for example, prior research shows that cultural awareness is especially important for college-bound girls. Our look at the NELS students supports this: regular visits to the library, for example, appear to improve girls’ (but not boys’) chances of attending selective colleges.

The bottom line? Extracurricular activities matter. Some activities significantly increase students’ likelihood of attending college and may even make them more likely to attend a prestigious institution. That said, there are no magic bullets. Grades and test scores still trump the effect of any extracurricular activity. Further, several seemingly desirable activities ranging from library use to honor-society participation had no mentionable effect on college attendance.

Many extracurricular activities may accomplish precisely what they are intended to do: build students’ skills and self-confidence while raising their aspirations. Yet our research shows that it is harder to bootstrap one’s way into an elite college than previously thought. Only a few activities matter, and the most important predictors in our data have to do with family background rather than extracurricular activities. Meaningful participation in extracurricular activities of real interest to students may be beneficial in many ways, but a wall full of participation ribbons will not by itself open college gates.

recommended resources


Randall Collins. The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification (Academic Press, 1979). The book perhaps most closely associated with the argument that much social stratification is built on formal educational credentials—or the lack thereof.


Willard Waller. The Sociology of Teaching (Wiley, 1932). A classic text in the sociology of education, describing the school as a functional system that works first and foremost to perpetuate itself.

out of context: the avian flu statistics bug

joel best

Most coverage of the avian flu threat repeats a scary statistic: the H5N1 virus has killed more than half of those who have become infected. (Most of these early cases occurred in Southeast Asia.) Coupled with claims that a flu pandemic might kill millions—even a billion—people worldwide, the danger seems grave.

However, the “one-half-died” statistic suffers from poor wording. No one really knows how many people have been infected by the H5N1 virus. Some of those infected may not have had symptoms; others may have stayed home and suffered a more-or-less routine bout of flu. The statistic counts only those sick enough to have sought medical care. Certainly avian flu poses serious health problems, but equating the number of patients who go to hospitals with the total number of people who experience an infection exaggerates the lethal threat.