

Summertime for Talented Teens

“Summertime, and the livin’ is easy,” begins the famous ballad by George Gershwin, who stopped in the middle of 1930s New York City to imagine summer among the African-Americans of rural South Carolina. He sets a wise example of using summer to switch pace, indulge the imagination, experiment. While some high-school students worry about spending the summer productively, it is most important to remember that summer lends time for the three “Rs”: Rest, Relaxation, and Rebalancing.

Teens accustomed to schedules crowded with homework assignments and extracurricular activities can enjoy the summer months to slow down and change pace. Summer provides an open invitation to vary the usual routine. One student I advised on college used the summer away from his robotics team and math courses to join the sheriff’s search-and-rescue team for training in combing rural areas and beaches in times of emergency. A student busy with advanced cello lessons during the school year turned his attention to his organic garden plot during the summer, while a budding scientist, needing to fulfill an art requirement for the University of California, took a glass-blowing class and found that he loved the artistry as much as the hot-fluid physics.

The mind-body connection is always important, but with more flexible schedules, teens can develop new interests in fitness or sports during the summer months. Michelle Obama reminds us of the health benefits of being active. Research on adults finds that the best thing for mental agility and memory is not working crossword puzzles but, in fact, aerobic exercise. And the pleasure that comes from team sports or individualized activities like hiking or swimming can boost one’s sense of confidence and capacity for learning.

Why not use summer to extend a talent in a new direction? Unsegmented time allows for longer stretches of reading. Perhaps that lengthy novel (“War and Peace”? “House of the Spirits”? “Infinite Jest”?) calls to you from the bookshelf. Passive and active learning go together. Try something new: fly fishing, dancing, a water sport. Musicians on one instrument may wish to learn another, compose music, or play the guitar. Learning need not be solitary. Go to a concert or see a play with a friend.

Rising juniors and seniors are often aware that colleges ask about how you have spent your summers. Summer Enrichment Programs or camps or jobs are easy answers. But the answer need not be organized activities. Create your own way to balance your life whether through travel, working outdoors, or finding time for a passion like cooking or juggling—things pushed to the fringes during the school year. Spend time with older relatives and younger friends. Doing something for others through volunteering enlarges your understanding while putting teen-age worries in perspective.

Colleges these days know that talented teens can burn out if they focus too tightly on academics, grades, and testing. Colleges seek students who are enthusiastic about learning and willing to share their enthusiasms with others both at the seminar table and the dining table. Balance is a recipe for college success--and success in life. So use

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summer leisure in a way that adds pleasure and encourages future experimentation. A fourth “R” stands for Replenishment, but if you thought it stood for “Romance,” well, Gershwin would approve of that, too.

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