

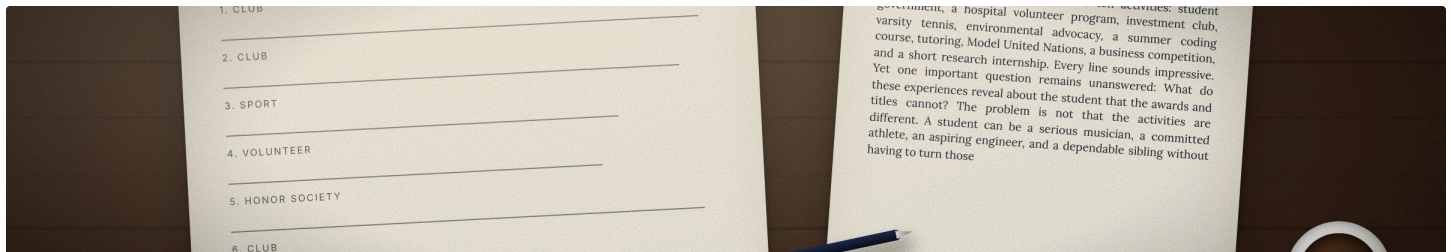
ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

The Laundry List Fallacy: Why 10 Unrelated Activities Can Weaken an Application



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October 20, 2026



A student's Common Application lists ten activities: student government, a hospital volunteer program, investment club, varsity tennis, environmental advocacy, a summer coding course, tutoring, Model United Nations, a business competition, and a short research internship.

Every line sounds impressive. Yet one important question remains unanswered: What do these experiences reveal about the student that the awards and titles cannot?

The problem is not that the activities are different. A student can be a serious musician, a committed athlete, an aspiring engineer, and a dependable sibling without having to turn those identities into one grand narrative. The problem arises when the activities list becomes a collection of credentials rather than evidence of how the student spends time, pursues interests, contributes to others, and grows.

At highly selective colleges, where many applicants have strong grades and impressive accomplishments, the goal is not to make every activity fit a manufactured academic identity. It is to help the reader understand the person behind the list.

The Common Application Gives You Ten Slots. That Does Not Mean You Need Ten Activities.

The Common Application allows students to report up to ten activities. That maximum is an opportunity, not a target.

Harvard explicitly advises applicants that they do not need to fill every line. Its admissions guidance emphasizes the quality of participation, the time invested, and the nature of a student's contributions. Harvard also recognizes family responsibilities, employment, and other commitments as meaningful parts of a student's life.¹

MIT makes a similar point from a different angle: its application asks students to identify up to four activities that matter most to them. MIT encourages applicants to choose activities because they find them interesting, challenging, or enjoyable—not simply because they appear impressive.²

Neither policy establishes a universal ideal number. Instead, both challenge the assumption that more entries automatically create a stronger application.

Consider two hypothetical students.

Student A lists ten activities, most involving brief participation, occasional meetings, or titles without substantial responsibilities. The descriptions provide little evidence of what the student actually did.

Student B lists six activities: two years of debate, a part-time job, sustained participation in a school orchestra, peer tutoring, a personal project, and family caregiving. The descriptions show how the student contributed, what responsibilities they assumed, and how their involvement developed.

Student B has not necessarily built a better application merely by listing fewer activities. The advantage, if the

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descriptions support it, is that the reader can see more clearly how Student B spends time and what each commitment means.

The distinction is not ten versus six. It is the difference between reporting participation and demonstrating engagement.

WHY A DISCONNECTED LIST CAN LEAVE QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

An activities list is a limited space in which to communicate a great deal. Each entry can reveal something different: an interest, a skill, a responsibility, a relationship, an accomplishment, or a commitment.

When the entries are disconnected and described vaguely, the reader may struggle to distinguish meaningful engagement from résumé accumulation.

Imagine an applicant interested in computer science. Their list includes a robotics team, a programming project, a mathematics competition, and a research experience involving data analysis. These activities could reinforce one another, but only if the descriptions show the substance of that involvement.

Did the student design a working component? Identify a problem in the software? Analyze data independently? Help teammates understand a difficult concept?

Now imagine a different applicant whose activities include theater, soccer, volunteering at a food pantry, and helping a younger sibling with schoolwork. These experiences do not need to support a single academic interest. They can reveal creativity, teamwork, community commitment, and responsibility—dimensions of the applicant that grades alone may not show.

Yale's official admissions guidance recognizes both exceptional ability in a particular endeavor and the importance of students bringing varied interests, talents, backgrounds, and perspectives to campus. Yale also evaluates applicants in the context of the opportunities available to them.³

The lesson is not that every applicant needs an intellectual thesis. It is that the list should give the reader useful evidence about the student's actual priorities and contributions.

THE STRONGEST ACTIVITIES OFTEN HAVE A RELATIONSHIP—NOT A MATCHING LABEL

A coherent application does not require every activity to involve the intended major. It requires the student to be able to explain, honestly, what they found meaningful and what they did with the opportunity.

Consider a student interested in biology who participates in a science club, tutors middle-school students in mathematics, works at a grocery store, and plays competitive soccer.

A superficial approach might try to connect all four activities to biology. The grocery job becomes a story about nutrition; soccer becomes a metaphor for physiology; tutoring becomes evidence of a desire to teach science. If these connections are artificial, the application becomes less credible, not more.

A more useful approach asks what each activity genuinely demonstrates.

SCIENCE CLUB: DOES THE STUDENT INVESTIGATE QUESTIONS, CONDUCT EXPERIMENTS, OR CONTRIBUTE TO A TEAM PROJECT?

MATHEMATICS TUTORING: HAS THE STUDENT LEARNED TO EXPLAIN COMPLEX IDEAS CLEARLY OR ADAPT TO DIFFERENT LEARNERS?

Grocery-store job: Does the student manage responsibilities, solve practical problems, or contribute to household expenses?

SOCCER: HAS THE STUDENT DEVELOPED DISCIPLINE, SUPPORTED TEAMMATES, OR RESPONDED CONSTRUCTIVELY TO SETBACKS?

The activities can reveal different dimensions of the same person without being forced into a single theme.

This distinction matters because a student's intended major is not a contract requiring every part of their life to demonstrate the same interest. Harvard notes that students' plans may change and that there is no single correct way to describe their interests. Yale similarly encourages applicants to pursue a balanced, challenging academic program rather than narrow their preparation to one field.⁴⁵

A coherent application is not necessarily a narrow one. It is

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one in which the experiences, descriptions, and reflections feel consistent with the person the student actually is.

THE BETTER FILTER: WHAT DOES EACH ACTIVITY ADD?

Before removing an activity, students should evaluate what it contributes to the overall picture. A useful review asks five questions.

1. WHAT DID I ACTUALLY DO?

Replace vague descriptions with concrete actions. “Member of environmental club” says little about participation. Organizing a campus waste audit, presenting findings to the school, or coordinating a cleanup gives the reader more specific evidence.

The action does not need to be extraordinary. It needs to be accurate.

2. WHAT RESPONSIBILITY DID I ASSUME?

A leadership title is not the only evidence of responsibility. Training a new employee, caring for a sibling, maintaining equipment, managing a team schedule, or consistently completing a difficult task may reveal substantial commitment.

The Common Application's activities guidance encourages students to consider experiences beyond formal clubs, including work, hobbies, sports, volunteer service, and family responsibilities.⁶

3. WHAT CHANGED BECAUSE I PARTICIPATED?

Look for concrete contributions: a process improved, a younger student learned a skill, an event ran successfully, a team completed a project, or a responsibility was handled reliably.

Not every activity produces a measurable outcome. Students should not invent numbers or inflate their impact simply to make an entry appear stronger.

4. WHAT DOES THIS ACTIVITY REVEAL THAT THE OTHERS DO NOT?

If two activities communicate nearly identical information, consider whether both deserve limited space. But do not eliminate one automatically. A second activity may demonstrate sustained commitment, a different level of responsibility, or a distinct contribution.

The objective is not maximum thematic consistency. It is maximum useful information within the space available.

5. WOULD I STILL VALUE THIS EXPERIENCE IF IT NEVER APPEARED ON AN APPLICATION?

This question helps expose activities pursued primarily for appearance. The answer does not have to be an enthusiastic yes to every commitment—students sometimes take jobs or assume family responsibilities out of necessity. Rather, the question invites an honest distinction between meaningful engagement and résumé maintenance.

MIT's advice is especially clear on this point: students should choose activities that genuinely interest, challenge, or delight them, and they do not need to manufacture an impressive-looking collection.⁷

WHEN SHOULD A STUDENT REMOVE AN ACTIVITY?

A student should not delete an experience simply because it falls outside their intended major, lacks a prestigious title, or seems ordinary next to a research internship.

Instead, consider removing or deprioritizing an entry when:

- Participation was minimal and the description adds little meaningful information.
- The activity duplicates information already communicated more clearly elsewhere.
- The entry is included mainly to make the list look longer.
- A more consequential commitment, including work or family responsibility, is being crowded out.
- The student cannot accurately explain their role or contribution.

There is also a strong case for retaining activities that demonstrate balance. Music, athletics, creative work, friendships, community involvement, and personal interests can all help explain who a student is beyond academic performance.

A student does not need to transform every hobby into a leadership initiative or every interest into a nonprofit. Sometimes the honest description of an activity is its strongest feature.

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BUILD A PATTERN FROM EVIDENCE, NOT A PERSONA FROM STRATEGY

The most useful activity review begins with what the student has actually done. Patterns may emerge: a recurring interest in how systems work, a habit of teaching others, a commitment to solving practical problems, or a willingness to take responsibility when help is needed.

Those patterns can inform essays and college research, but they should not dictate every future choice. Students are allowed to explore, change direction, and discover interests they could not have predicted as freshmen.

Yale describes extracurricular activities as one part of a broader evaluation that includes academic strength, curiosity, initiative, contribution, and the applicant's individual context. It also cautions against the idea that applicants must present a single narrowly defined academic identity.⁸

That is a more useful standard than trying to create a perfectly unified résumé.

The goal is not to make ten activities look like one activity. It is to make each selected entry earn its place by showing something real about the student.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS STUDENTS BUILD A STRONGER ACTIVITIES LIST

Scholar Coach helps students evaluate their activities as evidence of engagement, growth, and contribution—not simply as a collection of titles.

Inventory the real commitments. We review clubs, work, family responsibilities, independent projects, athletics, creative pursuits, and service to identify experiences that may deserve space.

Identify meaningful patterns. We look for recurring questions, interests, methods, responsibilities, and contributions without forcing unrelated experiences into an artificial academic narrative.

Strengthen activity descriptions. Students replace generic membership statements with precise descriptions of their roles, actions, and results, using only claims they can substantiate.

Prioritize the available space. We compare entries for depth, distinctiveness, and relevance to the overall application, then decide what deserves emphasis within the activity limits.

Connect activities to essays and recommendations.

Where the evidence supports it, students use their experiences to develop more specific reflections and help recommenders recall concrete examples of their work.

The result is not necessarily a shorter list or a more narrowly focused applicant. It is a more informative application—one that helps a reader understand not just what a student joined, but how the student chose to spend their time and what they contributed along the way.

NOTES

¹ Harvard's application guidance

² MIT's extracurricular guidance

³ Yale's explanation of what it looks for

⁴ Harvard's application guidance

⁵ Yale's course-selection guidance

⁶ Common App's Activities Section guide

⁷ MIT's extracurricular guidance

⁸ Yale's admissions guidance

SOURCES

Harvard College: Application Tips

MIT Admissions: Extracurricular Activities

MIT Admissions: What We Look For

Yale Undergraduate Admissions: What Yale Looks For

Common App: Approaching the Activities Section

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