

ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

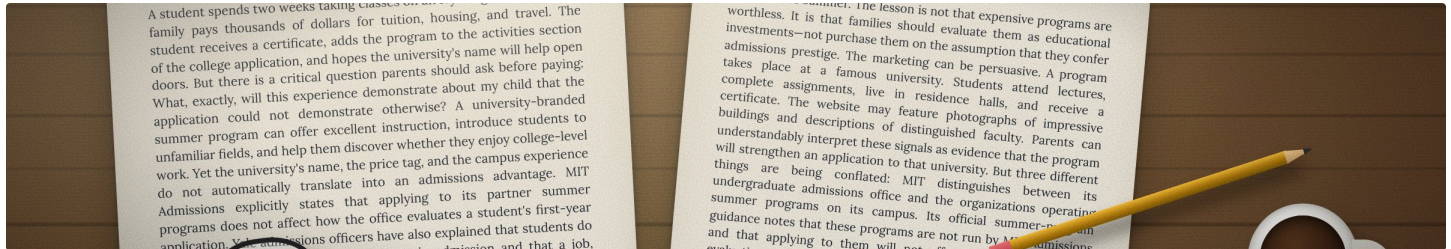
The \$10,000 Summer Camp Mistake: How Admissions Officers Evaluate Expensive Pre-College Programs



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October 20, 2026



A student spends two weeks taking classes on an Ivy League campus. The family pays thousands of dollars for tuition, housing, and travel. The student receives a certificate, adds the program to the activities section of the college application, and hopes the university's name will help open doors.

But there is a critical question parents should ask before paying: What, exactly, will this experience demonstrate about my child that the application could not demonstrate otherwise?

A university-branded summer program can offer excellent instruction, introduce students to unfamiliar fields, and help them discover whether they enjoy college-level work. Yet the university's name, the price tag, and the campus experience do not automatically translate into an admissions advantage.

MIT Admissions explicitly states that applying to its partner summer programs does not affect how the office evaluates a student's first-year application. Yale admissions officers have also explained that students do not need special summer programs to gain admission and that a job, volunteering, or continuing an existing activity can be equally reasonable ways to spend the summer.

The lesson is not that expensive programs are worthless. It is that families should evaluate them as educational investments—not purchase them on the assumption that they confer admissions prestige.

THE UNIVERSITY NAME DOES NOT GUARANTEE AN ADMISSIONS ADVANTAGE

The marketing can be persuasive. A program takes place at a famous university. Students attend lectures, complete assignments, live in residence halls, and receive a certificate. The website may feature photographs of impressive buildings and descriptions of distinguished faculty.

Parents can understandably interpret these signals as evidence that the program will strengthen an application to that university.

But three different things are being conflated:

- The institution hosting the program: Where the experience takes place.
- The program's admissions process: Whether students are selected competitively, admitted broadly, or enrolled through another process.
- The college admissions process: How the university evaluates the student's eventual undergraduate application.
- These are not interchangeable.

MIT distinguishes between its undergraduate admissions office and the organizations operating summer programs on its campus. Its official summer-program guidance notes that these programs are not run by MIT Admissions and that applying to them will not affect first-year application evaluation.¹

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This is an unusually direct example of why families should read the program's actual admissions language rather than infer an advantage from the university name.

A selective summer program can still be valuable. A broadly accessible program can also be valuable. The distinction is what each experience offers and what the student does with it—not whether one category automatically impresses admissions officers.

WHAT ADMISSIONS OFFICERS SAY ABOUT SUMMER ACTIVITIES

Yale's admissions officers have addressed the idea that students need special summer programs to be competitive. Their guidance is clear: applicants do not need to attend a college-campus program to be considered for admission. A summer job, volunteering, or continuing an existing extracurricular activity can be a productive alternative. Yale Admissions: "Should I Even Apply?"

MIT similarly advises students to spend their summers in ways that suit their personal needs and goals. Its guidance discusses a range of possibilities, including work, independent pursuits, family time, and academic programs.²

Harvard also acknowledges that students have unequal access to extracurricular opportunities. Its application guidance says admissions officers consider the opportunities available to applicants and how effectively they have used them. Financial limitations, travel requirements, and the cost of participation can affect which activities a student can pursue.³

Taken together, these sources support an important conclusion: students are not required to purchase an expensive summer experience to demonstrate engagement, initiative, or intellectual curiosity.

They do not establish that every paid program is ineffective or that every self-directed project is superior. They do show why families should resist the assumption that spending more money necessarily produces a stronger application.

HOW TO TELL WHETHER A SUMMER PROGRAM IS WORTH THE COST

Instead of beginning with the university name, begin with the educational experience itself.

1. INVESTIGATE THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

Does the program select participants through a competitive application? Are students admitted broadly if they meet basic requirements? Is there a meaningful academic prerequisite?

A selective application process may provide evidence that a student was chosen from a pool of candidates, but selectivity alone does not establish educational quality or guarantee an advantage in undergraduate admissions.

Likewise, a program that accepts many qualified applicants is not automatically a waste of time. It may still provide instruction, structure, mentorship, or exposure to a new subject that the student genuinely wants.

2. EXAMINE WHAT STUDENTS ACTUALLY DO

Look beyond the photographs and promotional language.

Does the student conduct an investigation, solve challenging problems, create a substantial project, receive detailed feedback, or work closely with an instructor? Or does the experience consist primarily of introductory lectures and a participation certificate?

The answer depends on the specific program. Families should examine the syllabus, project requirements, instructional format, and opportunities for individual feedback.

A well-designed course can be worth paying for because the student learns something important—even if the experience contributes little directly to admissions.

3. CALCULATE THE FULL COST

A program advertised at \$5,000 may cost considerably more once transportation, housing, meals, supplies, and other expenses are included.

Compare the total price with realistic alternatives. Could the same goal be achieved through a local university course, a library-based research project, an internship, a community organization, or an affordable online course followed by an independent project?

The cheapest alternative is not always the best. A paid program may provide specialized equipment, supervision, or access the student cannot otherwise obtain. The point is to identify what the additional money actually buys.

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4. ASK WHAT WILL REMAIN AFTER THE PROGRAM ENDS

A meaningful summer experience can change what a student does next.

A student who attends a biology course might discover an interest in genetics and subsequently read research papers, interview local professionals, or pursue a school project. Another student might realize that laboratory research is not a good fit and explore a different field.

Both outcomes can be educationally valuable. Students should not feel obligated to convert every summer experience into a multiyear extracurricular project just to justify having participated.

The important question is whether the program serves the student's goals—not whether it produces an impressive-sounding line on a résumé.

WHY A SELF-DIRECTED PROJECT CAN BE A STRONG ALTERNATIVE

Consider a student interested in environmental science who wants to understand water quality in the local community.

One option is a paid summer program that introduces students to environmental research. It may provide excellent instruction and useful laboratory experience.

Another option is to work with an appropriate local organization, learn which measurements are scientifically meaningful, collect data under suitable supervision, and prepare a report explaining the findings and limitations.

Neither option is inherently superior. The second could become particularly informative if the student takes genuine responsibility for a question and follows the work beyond an initial activity. The first could be more appropriate if the student needs foundational instruction, equipment, or expert guidance.

The key is not to manufacture an independent project simply because it sounds better in an application.

Harvard's guidance about evaluating students in the context of their available opportunities reinforces this principle. Students should use the opportunities they have thoughtfully rather than assume they must reproduce the experiences of families who can afford expensive programs.

A paid job, caregiving responsibility, school activity, local project, or structured academic program can all be meaningful. Their value depends on the student's actual involvement, not a predetermined hierarchy of prestige.

THE RESUME-PADDING PROBLEM: WHEN AN ACTIVITY ADDS LITTLE INFORMATION

An activity can be legitimate and enjoyable without adding much to a college application.

Suppose a student attends a one-week business program, lists it among their activities, and then moves on. The experience may have provided useful exposure, but the application entry alone may reveal little about the student's individual contribution or longer-term interests.

Now suppose another student completes a similar program, develops a genuine interest in a particular business problem, and later explores that question through coursework, a job, or an independent project.

The second student's later work may provide additional evidence of initiative and intellectual engagement. The difference is not necessarily the cost or the program itself. It is the substance of what the student did.

Yale admissions officers have cautioned against assuming that applicants need a single extracurricular “spike” or one defining activity. They have also explained that no single ordinary extracurricular experience is likely to determine an application outcome on its own.⁴

This matters because families can become trapped in a cycle of buying activities to fill perceived gaps. A summer program is added to the résumé, followed by another program, followed by another certificate—without necessarily giving the student time to explore anything deeply.

More activities do not automatically mean more evidence of the student's abilities.

A FIVE-QUESTION CHECKLIST BEFORE PAYING FOR SUMMER CAMP

Before committing thousands of dollars, parents and students should ask:

Would my child want this experience if it had no admissions value? If the answer is no, investigate whether the program offers a concrete educational benefit that justifies the expense.

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What will my child learn or produce? Identify the actual coursework, skills, projects, feedback, or experiences included.

How does admission to the program work? Understand whether it is selective, broadly accessible, or open to qualified applicants who can pay.

What are the realistic alternatives? Compare local, online, school-based, employment, volunteer, and self-directed options.

Can we comfortably afford it? Do not assume that a costly program is necessary to remain competitive at selective universities.

If the program is genuinely appealing, affordable, and educationally worthwhile, it may be an excellent choice. If the main selling point is the possibility of impressing admissions officers, the family should demand much stronger evidence before spending the money.

HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS FAMILIES EVALUATE SUMMER OPPORTUNITIES

Scholar Coach helps families connect summer planning to a student's actual interests, academic development, and college goals.

Clarify the objective. We determine whether the student needs subject exploration, foundational instruction, research experience, mentorship, or simply time to pursue an existing interest.

Compare programs with alternatives. We examine curriculum, selection criteria, costs, project requirements, and realistic alternatives rather than relying on institutional branding.

Identify meaningful learning opportunities. We help students look for experiences that develop relevant skills, encourage independent thinking, or expose them to

questions they want to investigate.

Document the student's actual contribution. When an experience becomes part of an application, we help students describe what they did, learned, or produced accurately, without inflating participation into an accomplishment it was not.

Build a sustainable academic trajectory. We help students decide what deserves further exploration and what can simply remain a worthwhile experience, without forcing every summer activity into an admissions narrative.

The best summer decision is not necessarily the most expensive, the most selective, or the one with the most recognizable university name.

It is the decision that makes sense for the student.

A summer program can be an excellent investment in learning. But when a family is buying it primarily because it appears to promise an admissions advantage, the most important step is to stop and examine that assumption.

Pay for the experience because it is worth having—not because you hope the price will make the application worth more.

NOTES

¹ MIT Admissions: Summer Programs

² MIT Admissions: Summer Programs

³ Harvard Admissions: Application Tips

⁴ Yale Admissions: What Yale Looks For—Mythbusters

SOURCES

MIT Admissions: Summer Programs

MIT Admissions: How to Spend Your Summer

Yale Admissions: "Should I Even Apply?"

Yale Admissions: What Yale Looks For—Mythbusters

Harvard Admissions: Application Tips

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