

How to approach your ECAS EFFECTIVELY

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When applying to American universities, what you do outside of the classroom holds considerable weight in your application. Extracurricular activities (ECAs) can take the form of hobbies, sports, community service, and participating in various competitions.

In this article, we explore how to best pick the most impactful activities and how to present them effectively in your application.

Picking the right activity

Very often, you see students realise their lack of ECAs and scramble to seize every opportunity they come across, without realising it may actually be counterproductive. The most important factor to consider when choosing ECAs is their level of recognition.

As a rule of thumb, prioritise doing international-level competitions, summer courses, and internships over national-level ones. Of course, while inter-school and intra-school competitions hold relatively less weight, they are still a great way to get some practice and experience.

Next, consider the impact of an activity. For instance, it is better to be the founder of a high school club or a non-profit than to simply be a member of one, as the former showcases leadership and the drive to take initiatives of your own.

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Also, instead of participating in multiple small-scale projects, focus on one that makes a significant impact. For example, organising disaster relief for over a hundred people is a very impactful initiative.

One thing to keep in mind is not to engage in an ECA solely for the sake of applying abroad. Admissions officers can easily see through last-minute additions,

especially if you pick up an ECA a year before applying. Showing long-term dedication to something you're passionate about, such as music or research, helps your case much more.

While US colleges don't require you to commit to a certain major when applying, having some relevant experience in your intended field helps you stand out from a pool of well-qualified individuals. So, for example, if you're applying for a Computer Science programme, strong performances in national robotics competitions or advanced programming projects or contests will strengthen your application.

Quality over quantity

What most people seem to agree on is that a "spiked" profile is much more desirable than a "well-rounded" one. That means, instead of being a jack of all trades, it's better to master one.

Especially, in the context of students in their final two years of high school, when time is running out and academic pressure keeps piling up, it is extremely important to prioritise one activity that you can present as your "hook".

That is not to say that you shouldn't diversify your portfolio. However, commit most of your energy and time to excelling in one specific area.

The art of presenting your ECAs

Most US colleges use an app called the Common Application, or the Common App, to receive undergraduate applications. Unlike the UK's personal statement, the Common App personal essay focuses on your personality and ambitions. Therefore, the only places you can brag about your ECAs are the "Honors" and the "Activities" sections of your applications.

In the Honors section, you only have 100 characters to describe each of five awards you want to mention. The Activities Section, meanwhile, allows ten activities to be described within 150 characters.

While filling up those sections, it will soon get



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painfully obvious that there is nearly not enough space to elaborately talk about your passions. To get past this, it is important to make every character count.

For starters, use well-known abbreviations like "nat'l", "IMO", and "&" to save space. Next, show, don't tell. Numbers and powerful phrasing can make the difference between a successful and unsuccessful application. Don't say "earned n-th place at xcompetition". Instead, say "placed n-th out of 4000+ participants".

Moreover, the order in which you present your activities also matters. Common App has a very convenient tool that lets you shuffle them for this very reason. Admissions officers review thousands of applications daily and may only spend around ten minutes on yours. So, tactfully place the most impressive or impactful activities at the very top.

Finally, before you submit your application, have someone close to you read through your work to make sure it makes sense and that there are no grammatical errors.



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