

FEBRUARY 2026 NEWSLETTER

MCNEAL SAMS
COLLEGE CONSULTING



WHO WE ARE

McNeal Sams College Consulting provides expert, personalized guidance to students and families throughout the college admissions process. With decades of experience in counseling, admissions and career services, our team helps students identify best-fit schools and build strong, strategic applications.

WHAT WE ARE READING

"They're Ready. Are You? A Parent's Guide to Surviving the College Transition" by Liz Yokubison is a practical, parent-friendly guide to navigating the emotional, academic, and logistical challenges of the transition from high school to college with confidence.

WE'RE EXPANDING!

Join us in welcoming Susan Lutz as a full-time member of our consulting team. Check your email for an announcement from us about new programs we are designing to expand our outreach, including the "Ask Me Anything" webinar on February 23.

IMPORTANT DATES

Feb. 14 - ACT testing

Feb. 16 - Presidents' Day

Feb. 27 - Deadline to register for SAT on March 14

APPLICATIONS: BEYOND GRADES AND SCORES

You've probably heard us say it more than once: your academic credentials are always the centerpiece of your application. That's a fact. But what about that multi-syllabic (ten, in fact) concept, extracurricular activities? Where do they fit in the picture? There are plenty of opinions out there: "If you want to study business, an internship is the ticket." "Don't do a mission trip, they don't like that." "Community service is key." "Make sure you're consistent."



Are certain activities "right" or "wrong"? As with most things in life, the answer is a little more complex than that. Yes, life outside of the classroom "counts". Why? Because colleges and universities are trying to get a sense for your promise of contribution. What sort of positive difference will you make when you get to campus? How will you interact with the community? How will your engagement make the college better—not just for yourself, but for others? Your record of extracurricular involvement over time can help.

Sometimes we have a tendency to define "activities" fairly narrowly. Leading clubs at school, participating in sports, or playing in a musical ensemble are wonderful. But the range of options doesn't end there. No matter what, start with what matters to you. Work from the inside out. Think about what you love doing, what you're good at, and maybe even what you're not good at but would like to try. (See [Elizabeth Schnell's brilliant blog piece](#) about intentional amateurism.)

Also consider what you need to do. Need a part-time job? Awesome - colleges love that because you build skills in a work setting that you can't get anywhere else (dealing with finicky customers, being on time, doing tasks you're not crazy about like mopping the floors or asking "Can I help you find a size?" countless



times during your shift). We've read phenomenal and substantive essays about everything from working the line at a car wash and serving customers at Dunkin' Donuts to babysitting hordes of little kids.

As for community service, yes, go for it. But remember that you don't need to go

to Fiji for it to count. There's lots to do in your own backyard, and making a difference in your own community can add local flavor to your application. As for the amount of service: frequently students come in and are rightfully proud of the number of hours they've accrued. Fair enough. But beyond the numbers, what did you learn about yourself as you helped someone or something in need? And can you express that in a college essay or an interview? That's every bit as important, if not more so.

Of course, there are caveats. Want to apply to an accelerated college-to-med-school program? You'll need to shadow healthcare professionals, pursue scientific research, and find options for volunteering in a healthcare setting. And if you're interested in engineering, check out summer camps and programs on college campuses where you can get hands-on experience. If you have a specific career in mind, talk with us about relevant opportunities that demonstrate your potential.

Yes, consistency is helpful. It allows you to prove yourself over time and can help with gaining leadership positions. But if you're burned out on the sport you've played since you were three years old or realize that marching band just isn't your thing, seek alternatives. We can help you make the most of your new choices.

So are there any activities you should avoid? Well, paintball doesn't go over particularly well, and infinite hours playing video games doesn't either (sorry, but it's true). Again, use your energy in ways that demonstrate your values and the joy you find beyond academics. Reading! Art! Hiking! Scouts! Helping an elderly relative or a younger sibling! It's not all about "what looks good" - it's about what is fulfilling for you. That's what will make you shine.

FEBRUARY TO-DO LISTS

Seniors

1. Track application portals to ensure all materials (including midyear reports) are received.
2. Prepare for alumni or admissions interviews if requested. Let us know if you would like to practice with our interview specialist.
3. Let your consultant and your high school counselor know your results!
4. Complete FAFSA and any required state or institutional financial aid forms. Many state aid programs have February deadlines for FAFSA.
5. Apply for outside scholarships. Let us know if you need any help.
6. Stay academically engaged; colleges expect strong performances.

Juniors

1. Review SAT or ACT results and adjust test prep plans accordingly. Ideally, you will complete your testing by September of 2026 in order to have your results ready for application deadlines.
2. Build or refine your preliminary college list. Meet with your consultant to work on your list.
3. Schedule campus and virtual visits.
4. Meet with your consultant to confirm senior-year course selections are appropriately rigorous.
5. Continue extracurricular involvement and look for leadership opportunities for next year.
6. Finalize your summer plans.

Sophomores

1. Reflect on first semester grades and set academic goals for the rest of the year.
2. Explore new extracurricular activities or deepen involvement in existing ones.
3. Consider summer opportunities, such as programs, camps, internships, volunteer work, etc.
4. Finalize your course selection for next year with your college consultant.
5. Consider planning a tour of "sample schools." Your consultant can help you identify a few schools that will allow you to consider the size, setting and educational approach that works best for you.
6. Start keeping a simple record of your activities, awards, and service hours.

Freshmen

1. Prioritize strong academic habits—freshman-year grades matter.
2. Get involved in at least one or two extracurriculars you genuinely enjoy.
3. Explore your interests: clubs, sports, arts, volunteering, academic competitions.
4. Finalize your course selection for next year with your college consultant.
5. Plan your summer activities.
6. Practice organization and time management skills.