



**Scott Anderson, Contributor**

Senior Director for Access and Education at The Common Application @commonapp

## You Have a Story to Tell. Colleges Want to Hear It.

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How did you spend your summer vacation? Maybe you took a class or went to a camp. Perhaps you did some community service. Or napped. (Admit it. You definitely napped.)

It's also possible you worked—scooping ice cream, mowing lawns, bussing tables, selling movie tickets, babysitting neighborhood children. If that sounds like your summer, you're not alone—but your ranks are dwindling.

Since Memorial Day, at least two articles—one in Bloomberg, the other in Time—have explored the decline of the summer job among American teenagers. The Bloomberg article cited this statistic that would raise the eyebrows of any Gen Xer: “In July of last year, 43 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds were either working or looking for a job...In 1988 and 1989, the July labor force participation rate for teenagers nearly hit 70 percent.”

Both articles speculate on reasons for the drop in teen employment. One theory suggests that you and your peers are getting squeezed out by older workers remaining in the workplace for longer and immigrants seeking a foothold in the American workforce. Another hypothesis is that some of you are simply opting for something different—something that is tied to the calculus of college admissions.

The thinking goes like this: Extending the school year into the summer impresses through academic enrichment or acceleration. Community service at home and abroad conveys citizenship and cultural understanding. Athletic and extracurricular camps showcase ability and seriousness of intent. And together, these summertime pursuits create a compelling college application.

Is there merit in this pragmatic approach to summer? There certainly can be. To the extent that these activities reinforce who you are as a student and person, they help colleges understand you better. But that doesn't mean that camps and academies and mission trips are preferable to a traditional summer job. Work teaches invaluable life lessons, and colleges understand this implicitly. And if you can articulate what you learned, all the better.

The point here is not that one type of summer experience—or even one type of extracurricular experience—is inherently better than another. It's not. Everyone needs to choose the path that is right for them. But choice is a luxury that not all students have. For some of you, a summer job is a rite of passage. For others, it's an economic necessity. And for this reason, it's the responsibility of those of us who orchestrate the college application process to help you tell that part of your story. Put another way, it's our job to help you see yourself in the application—

because if you can't see yourself in the application, it's going to be harder for you to see yourself in college, especially if you will be the first person in your family to attend college.

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There's a reason "paid work" is an option in the activities menu on the Common App. It's because we know that juggling a part-time job can hold a significant place in your schedule or identity—or, for many of you, both. Working is inherently no more or less valuable than other activities you might report. But including it alongside more "traditional" activities like school clubs and athletics sends the message that work is just as valid and valued as any other pursuit. The same, incidentally, can be said for family responsibilities, another option within the activities menu; caring for siblings or older relatives while your parents are at work is an important obligation and time commitment that colleges want to know about.

The other section of the application that invites you to tell your story is, not surprisingly, the essay. Here again, it's our responsibility to help you see yourself in the writing options available to you. To that end, we've revised the prompts for 2017-2018 in our continuing effort to make sure that they speak to the experiences and backgrounds of all students. If you want to write about a job you've had and its influence on you, you can. If you want to write about something else, you can do that too. We're not just trying to help you write a personally meaningful essay. We're trying to help you look at the prompts and realize, "Wow, these schools are genuinely interested in who I am as a person."

Applying to college is a two-way street. We need to make sure we provide you with the opportunity and license to tell your story. *You* need to have the confidence that your story matters, because it does. Summer jobs and all.