

August 5, 2011

For a Standout College Essay, Applicants Fill Their Summers

By [JENNY ANDERSON](#)

Josh Isackson, an 18-year-old graduate of Tenafly High School in New Jersey, spent the summer after his sophomore year studying Mandarin in Nanjing, China. The next year he was an intern at a market research firm in Shanghai. When it came time to write a personal statement for his college applications, those summers offered a lot of inspiration.

“When I was thinking about the essay, I realized that taking Chinese was a big part of me,” he said.

So Mr. Isackson wrote about exploring the ancient tombs of the Ming dynasty in the Purple Mountain region of Nanjing, “trading jokes with long-dead Ming Emperors, stringing my string hammock between two plum trees and calmly sipping fresh green tea while watching the sun set on the horizon.”

Jill Tipograph, who founded a consulting company called [Everything Summer](#), helped Mr. Isackson plan the China trips. To Ms. Tipograph, his experience was the best possible outcome: he loved China, and the trips offered priceless fodder for the cutthroat college application process. (Mr. Isackson will attend Yale University this fall.)

“Students are planning their summer experiences to augment who they are and discover who they are, and that absolutely helps the college process,” she said.

Students preparing to apply to college are increasingly tailoring their summer plans with the goal of creating a standout personal statement — 250 words or more — for the Common Application in which to describe “a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.” Specialized, exotic and sometimes costly activities, they hope, will polish a skill, cultivate an interest and put them in the spotlight in a crowded field of straight-A students with strong test scores, community service hours and plenty of extracurricular activities.

A dizzying array of summer programs have cropped up to feed the growing anxiety that summer must be used constructively. Students can study health care in Rwanda, veterinary medicine in the Caribbean or cell cloning at Brown University, or learn about Sikkim, India’s only Buddhist state.

For those who lack the means to pay for an essay-inspiring trip, at least one scholarship program exists to help. Ten 11th-grade New York City public school students won the [Palazzo Strozzi Renaissance Award](#), which entailed traveling around Italy for a month this summer to study the culture, philosophy and arts of the Renaissance. The students were required to keep diaries and write a final essay, which the foundation said would be used with their college applications.

Suddenly, the idea of working as a waitress or a lifeguard seems like a quaint relic of an idyllic, pre-Tiger Mom past.

“The reality is that the whole process of getting into school is extremely competitive, and it’s not only what you do during the school year — your grades and extracurriculars,” Mr. Isackson’s mother, Marla Isackson, said. “It’s your whole package, including what you do in the summer.”

Students do not have to spend a summer abroad for an essay-worthy experience. When Mary Lang Gill was a rising senior at the Atlanta Girls School, a private school, she hired Pam Proctor, an independent college counselor and the author of “The College Hook,” a college admissions guide. After learning that Ms. Gill loved to paint, Ms. Proctor connected her to the [Florida Highwaymen](#), a band of renegade painters active during the 1950s and '60s.

“I spent a whole day with them,” painting and observing, said Ms. Gill, who just graduated from Dickinson College. “It was one of the coolest things ever, and I love that and I got to put it on my application.” Ms. Proctor said she spent a great deal of time with students helping them find the right topic for the college essay. “Picking the essays is as important as writing them,” she said. After that, she said, the stories “write themselves.”

As colleges look for specialization, “mastery” and “passion” have become buzzwords at many New York City private schools. Along with the perception that perfectly developed essays are essential is the sense among some parents and teachers that colleges have shifted from valuing balanced students who excel in several areas, like history and ice hockey, to demanding students who perform well across all subjects and have an area of “mastery,” like squash or fencing, that showcases one’s depth.

“Colleges have moved people from thinking they should be exceptionally well rounded to using the vocabulary that ‘well rounded’ means ‘no edge,’ ” said Bruce Poch, the former dean of admissions at Pomona College.

Mr. Poch said members of his office staff sometimes joked that they were witnessing the “complete disappearance of summer jobs,” especially among upper-income applicants who opted for “decorative” internships at places like investment banks, where they could work with friends of their parents. He said

further evidence of overspecialization was the disappearance of the multisport athlete. “It’s all but vanished,” he said.

Mr. Poch wonders if the specialization emphasis is going too far. “It can rob children of their childhoods,” he said.

Susan Warner, an independent college counselor, said she believed an application essay should be about the student, not about an activity.

“Parents always ask, ‘What should my child do this summer to assist in the college application?’ ” Ms. Warner said. “I tell them it’s as significant to scoop ice cream as it is to build houses in a foreign country.”

Some students make sure to cover several bases during the summer. Rebecca Weinberg, who will be a senior at the Dalton School in Manhattan, loves writing and theater. She built a summer around both. For two weeks, she worked as a camp counselor at Applause Theatrical Workshops, a performing arts program on the Upper East Side that she attended as a child. Then she attended a three-week creative writing program at Columbia University. For the last part of the summer, she is working as a camp counselor, preparing for the SATs and trying to squeeze in some beach time in the Hamptons.

“I’ve always been really interested in theater and creative writing, and I wanted to do things that included those things and helped my college application,” she said.

She said her friends were doing fellowships with surgeons, taking engineering classes at Columbia and working alongside interior designers.

“If you can find something in the summer that marries your interests, it’s a home run,” her mother, Pamela Weinberg, said. “Your child is happy, and it will help them stand up in a sea of very well-qualified kids.”

RESOURCE:

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/06/nyregion/planning-summer-breaks-with-eye-on-college-essays.html?_r=1&ref=education&pagewanted=print