SIGNET
EDUCATION

SIGNET'S GUIDE TO SUMMER PLANNING

How to Have A Great Summer

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INTRODUCTION

Summer has an energy that is unmistakable. While the promise of backyard cookouts and lazy beach days has a strong pull on adults in the working world, summer is especially sweet for high school students as a welcome break from their regular routine.

Most students are highly scheduled during the school year. There's homework, sports, club meetings, socializing with friends and family, personal time, standardized tests, and college applications all vying for those precious few hours when students aren't in the classroom.

Summer offers a refreshing change of pace. It provides teenagers with a unique opportunity to create their own schedule to build their agency and self-determination. Being able to deliberately choose how to spend your time is an important skill, and students who learn to do this well in high school will benefit in college and into their adult lives.

PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

The purpose of this guide is threefold. First, we'll give an overview of the various options students have for how to spend their summer, including benefits of each option. Second, we'll offer a process students can use to plan for an effective summer that is in line with their personal goals. And third, we'll talk throughout the guide about navigating the line between kicking back for a much-needed rest and turning into a couch potato.

We've designed our recommendations to be accessible to all students. Whether a student spends a month with their grandparents every year, has to work 30 hours per week to help the family out, or is involved in intensive sports training, they can still use their summer to do something just a little bit different. It doesn't take endless resources (i.e. money), and it doesn't even take a ton of time for students to spend their summer in ways that are interesting and unique.

WHAT IS SUMMER FOR?

So what exactly are students supposed to do with all of that downtime? Well, there are options, and we've listed some below! Students may choose to focus on one of these areas, or to build a summer that includes several of them. However, students do NOT need to feel like they have to be engaged in all of these areas to have a successful summer. One of the gifts of a summer break is that students have more choices and more agency than they likely do during the school year. Summer is a perfect time for students to explore an activity that interests them, rather than participating in a project out of obligation. Here are some of our recommendations for how to spend that summer time:

Develop Existing Interests

If a student has already demonstrated a strong interest in a particular subject area, they can look for opportunities to gain real-world experience in that area of interest.

This could look like: **Pursuing a passion project, taking a workshop or class, or enrolling in a topic-specific camp.**

Gain Workplace Experience

The days of old-fashioned teenage summer jobs—mowing lawns, running a lemonade stand—may be numbered, but your student can still gain valuable workplace experience over the break. It's great if the work is in something a student is interested in (which would also be developing an existing interest), but any work will expand your student's horizons and introduce them to the reality of life after school. Work doesn't always have to be paid, either.

This could look like: **Working a job, landing an internship, or shadowing a professional.**

Seek Out Academic Enrichment

Academic programs at colleges or universities are a popular way for students to spend the summer. While freshman year may be a little early for enrollment, it is never too early to begin researching the right program. These programs are often interest-specific. A note of caution: students should pursue these programs because they are interested in the material, not to give themselves a boost on their college applications! Academic enrichment doesn't have to break the bank, either: skip the overpriced programs at elite colleges, and think about enrolling in a course at a local college instead.

This could look like: **Pre-college programs or enrolling in the summer semester at a local college.**

Engage in Service

Service is a valuable way for students to spend their summers. Similar to workplace experience, service opportunities may reflect a student's areas of interest, but they don't have to. Service is an amazing way for students to give back to their community. We especially love it when a student discovers an organization that they return to for multiple summers!

This could look like: **Volunteering with an organization the student has interacted with during the school year or with a community organization.**

Build Non-Academic Skills

The life skills a student will develop over the summer are a result of the experiences they create for themselves. Whether at a volunteer organization or a workplace, students learn the importance of taking responsibility, showing up on time, being able to take direction or provide it for themselves, and working with people of different backgrounds. Service in particular works on a student's character to help them develop the quality of empathy.

This could look like: **Passion projects, summer jobs, internships, travel, and service opportunities. Pre-college programs can also help students build non-academic skills, especially if they involve living away from home.**

Having Fun!

It seems almost blasphemous, but summer is also a time for recreation. That means pursuing enjoyment for its own sake, not because an activity will help students get into an exclusive college or solidify their career path by the time they graduate high school. Summer is a beautiful time of year, so students should get out of the house, enjoy the weather, and spend a little bit of time doing whatever they darn well please.

This could look like: **Going to the beach, planning a picnic or hike, taking a road trip, catching up with friends, or reading a good book. And of course, we hope that any summer activity a student chooses has an element of fun to it.**

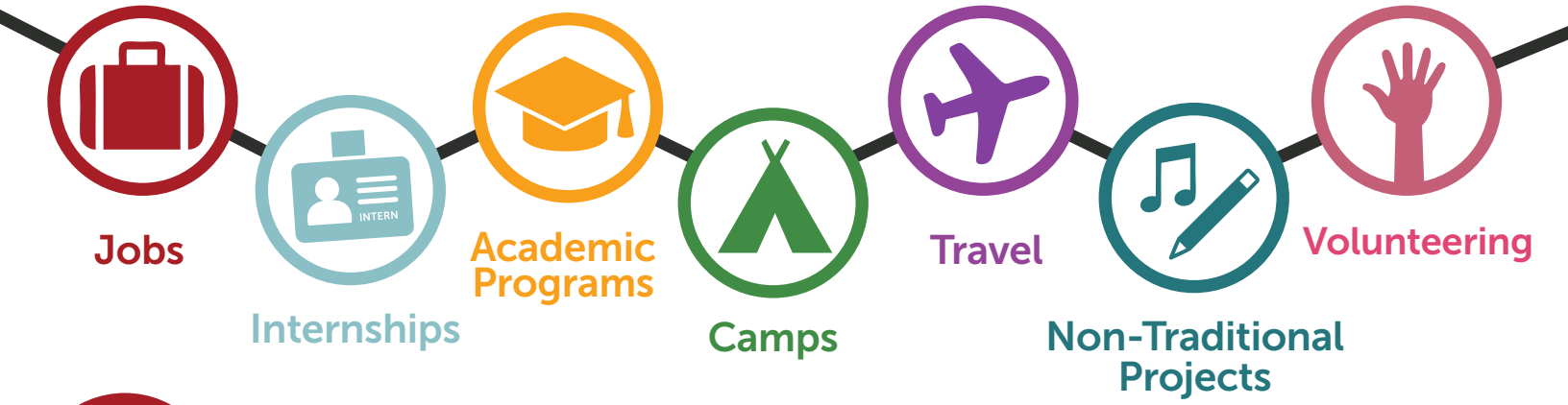
Reflection: A Student's Secret Weapon.

No matter what activities students engage in during the summer, they should make time to reflect on their experiences. Reflection allows students to consider what they're learning and to more deeply integrate those lessons into who they are becoming, contributing to their development and growth as a whole person. **Our Semester Reflection Tool** (also vailable in **Appendix A**) can easily be adapted to the summer. It may also be helpful for students to process and analyze their experiences with the help of a trusted mentor. In general, guided reflection encourages students to dig deeper and helps them more clearly articulate what they are learning and discovering.

HOW DO STUDENTS GET THERE?

Now that we've established all the ways in which students can learn and grow during the summer, let's turn to the specific activities they can choose to get there. The most common summer activities for students include:

- Jobs
- Internships
- Academic Programs
- Camps
- Volunteering
- Travel
- Non-Traditional Projects



Jobs

Jobs can be a great experience. Some students may work throughout the year and bump up their hours during the summer, while others may pick up a seasonal gig for a few months. Regardless of whether they are in a field that interests them in terms of career, jobs not only teach students non-academic skills, but also earn them income! Students may need a job to help their family out, pay for college, or save for a big ticket item they really want; whatever their motivation, there's great opportunity for students to learn some basics about finances and money management before they head off to college.

Internships

Students are often interested in a particular field but don't necessarily have the credentials to be paid for work in that area. Enter internships, which provide excellent workplace experience while also exposing students to areas they might be considering as career paths. Internships are likely to be unpaid or come with a small stipend, but students should treat their responsibilities as interns seriously. Internships can lead to paid work, and positive impressions can lead to excellent references later on. We'll talk more about finding great internships later in this guide.

Academic Programs

Academic programs are designed for intellectual enrichment over the summer. While these programs can be valuable, they run the risk of being too similar to a student's school year experience. Additionally, there is a lot of hype about pursuing academic programs at elite schools. These programs are often very expensive and not actually very selective; in other words, if a student can pay the tuition, they are accepted. As a result, college admissions offices don't put much weight on some of these programs, so pursuing them with an eye to college admissions may be an ineffective use of a family's resources. Students should consider academic programs on their own merits, not because they are attached to a prestigious school or carry a hefty price tag.

Camps

High schoolers may be able to attend camps as counselors or as campers. As counselors, students are working a job, so they receive all the benefits of workplace experience. Summer camps are unique because they are one of the few workplaces where teenagers can take leadership roles by working with younger campers. As campers, summer camps are great opportunities to meet new people, engage in a diverse range of activities, and unplug in an idyllic, natural setting.

Volunteering

There are many ways a student can give back to their community. They could check out local non-profits, get involved with a religious institution, or simply offer to donate their time to an organization that interests them. Volunteering can be formally structured or on a help-out-when-you-can basis. Even in casual circumstances, students should consider their word as their bond, and show up when they say they will. Volunteering gives students a broader awareness of the world around them and the people in it, and fosters the skills of responsibility, integrity, and being part of a greater whole.

Travel

Travel and volunteering actually share a number of benefits, because they both open doors and expose students to new ways of thinking, speaking, and believing. Traveling widens the perspective of human experience. Plainly put, it lets us meet people we might not normally encounter, deepen our knowledge of other cultures, and eat different (and delicious) food. There is a sense of wonder that comes with being in a new environment and seeing things for the first time, and nothing beats travel for facilitating new experiences. Travel can be as exotic as spending a month halfway around the world or as simple as exploring the town next door.

Non-Traditional Projects

These are activities that are student-directed and -executed, such as writing a book or filming a movie. Also known as passion projects, this is one of our favorite summer activities for students, as it sparks a kind of creativity and ingenuity that many other opportunities don't provide, as well as self-motivation and persistence. Summer offers the time and space to devote a lot of attention to something they care about without worrying about that chemistry assignment that's due tomorrow. Non-traditional projects also distinguish students in a sea of college applicants with top grades and excellent test scores.

USING THE SUMMER TO REST (WISELY)

We want to re-emphasize that students should *not* try to take on all of these activities over the summer! In part, that's because there is one more major component that every student needs to be building into their summer schedule: time to rest.

The idea of building rest into one's life is heavily charged in our busy, modern world. Parents and even students may associate rest with laziness, weakness, or a lack of motivation. At Signet, parents often approach us with concerns about students whose summer calendars don't seem full enough. They are full of questions:

> *Is it really okay for my kid to play video games all day?*

> *Are they jeopardizing their future by not being productive enough in the summer?*

> *How much rest is too much?*

The short answers are: maybe (although probably not), not necessarily, and it depends. Most of the parental concerns we hear boil down to grappling with this idea of rest and recreation. What qualifies as relaxation, what qualifies as mind-numbing activity, and where should parents and students be drawing the line?

We'll start with a language lesson. The word "school" comes from the Greek word "*scholé,*" which actually means leisure. Learning happens when one is in scholé, but in a less structured, more playful way. There is plenty of time and space to follow any given strand of knowledge or line of inquiry and see where it leads. Contrast that with today's school environments, which are often anything but leisurely, so much so that sometimes school can get in the way of learning.

We suggest that summer is the time when students can embrace this classical understanding of school, "scholé," and pursue learning in a more leisurely manner. This includes taking time for staring at the clouds and taking plenty of breaks.

TAKING BREAKS

Despite what current cultural norms may indicate, taking breaks is a natural part of the process of living. Breaks allow our bodies and minds the rest they need to continue operating at their highest levels.

What is a break?

A break is a time to disengage. That might mean pausing one activity and not doing anything at all. It also might mean engaging in a new activity that interrupts the pattern of what you were doing before. The activity chosen for a break needs to be thoughtfully selected. In general, single-minded activities are much more effective because they engage and hold students' full attention.

If taking breaks is so great, why isn't everybody doing it? The reason is that our society embraces a mentality of "if a little is good, a lot must be better". But when it comes to hard work, that simply isn't true.

Here are some tangible, practical reasons to consider taking breaks:

- **Breaks actually improve efficiency.** If a student wants to get more done, research shows they should be taking at minimum a quick break each hour in order to maximize their productivity.[1]

- **Breaks foster creativity.** There is plenty of evidence[2] that when a student stops working on that essay to take a walk around the block, their subconscious mind fires up and starts running in the background. It's from our subconscious that we get our best ideas and our most creative solutions, and it's also why those ideas come to us in unusual places, like in the shower.

- **Breaks help course correct.** Students who work without rest often get trapped down a rabbit hole, devoting outsized attention and time to one particular element of an assignment. By taking a break, students not only return to their work refreshed, but with new perspective, allowing them to climb out of the rabbit hole and move on to something else.

Taking breaks helps students reach their fullest potential. Otherwise, they leave a lot on the table. In addition, not taking breaks over a period of years can have serious consequences on physical and mental health. Breaks are an opportunity to step off the treadmill of life and check in with ourselves.

So does playing video games count as taking a break? We'd put video games more in the recreation/fun category than the break category. If a student plays video games because it helps them clear their head and recharge, then the activity is providing concrete value for them. On the other hand, we don't think students should be playing 24-hour game-a-thons for the entire summer. Summer schedules should incorporate a blend of activities and levels of engagement.

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[1] University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, "Brief diversions vastly improve focus, researchers find," *ScienceDaily*, February 8, 2011, https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/02/110208131529.htm.

[2] Meg Selig, "How Do Work Breaks Help Your Brain?" *Psychology Today,* April 18, 2017, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/changepower/201704/how-do-work-breaks-help-your-brain-5-surprising-answers.

STAY ENGAGED, BUT TAKE TIME FOR SELF-CARE

The bottom line is that the balance between work and rest, engaged and disengaged, active and passive, will be different for each student. Students shouldn't overwhelm themselves with activities in a time of year that's supposed to be a bit more laid back (we don't recommend taking on too many activities during the school year either!), but they also need to do more than sleep late and catch up on all their favorite Netflix releases.

A student who just finished a tough academic year (often junior year) may need to build in more time for simple, straightforward rest. That balance is not just determined by course load, but by an individual student's needs as well. Students should be protective of how they spend their time. When students pay attention to their needs, they are learning the valuable skill of self-care. Self-care includes physical health (nutrition, sleep, and exercise habits), as well as recognizing when it's time to do something that's less rigorous or intellectually challenging.

In order to heighten their self-awareness, students should routinely take a self-inventory. This involves evaluating physical health and how they feel inside their bodies, examining their eating and exercise habits, and tracking whether they are getting consistent, high-quality sleep. Adjustments and course corrections should happen throughout the year in order to optimize a student's health and well-being.

Paying attention to self-care also has practical benefits for a student's academic performance. A student who gets burned out in the summer, or is burned out from the previous year and doesn't get enough time to recharge in the summer, won't be mentally ready for school to start back up in the fall. The single most important thing a student provides to a college is their high school transcript, so students teetering on the edge of burnout are in a dangerous position; crashing and burning in their schoolwork is much worse than skipping that pre-college program or cutting back on the number of hours they volunteer over the summer.

A student might feel they need to build in several weeks of their summer for nothing but unstructured, restful free time — and that's great! Students can speak with mentors or parents to determine how much rest they need, and find the right balance of engaging in activities vs. taking breaks. Parents who get to be part of those conversations should take care to acknowledge rest as an important element of personal growth, and celebrate their student for speaking up about their personal needs.

HOW TO PLAN A GREAT SUMMER

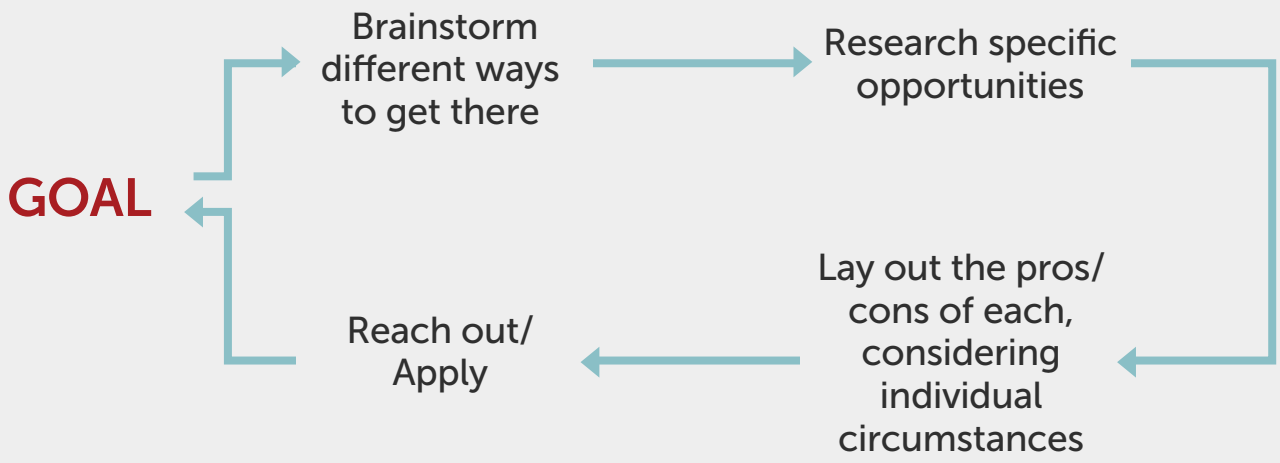
Students who want to successfully plan their summers will do two things: 1) start early, and 2) begin with the end in mind.

Start early. Put the wheels in motion for internships, academic programs, and even some summer jobs well before the last day of school. As a general rule, ***students should be thinking about their upcoming summers in February.*** They may or may not need to take action at that time, but giving some thought to summer a few months out will ensure that they don't miss a deadline for an opportunity that could have been a great fit for them.

Begin with the end in mind. Before choosing a summer activity, a student should consider what they really want to get out of their experiences during this period of time.

For example, a student might identify that they want to learn more about the business world. From there, they could explore business-oriented academic programs, internships or part-time jobs at local financial firms, or volunteering with a 501(c)(3) if they're interested in non-profit business.

Once a goal has been identified for the summer, move methodically through a process for engaging in appropriate summer activities.



Set a Goal: We've discussed setting goals in the section above. This is a vital step and students should take care to thoroughly think it through! While it's fine to set ambitious goals, it's also important to ground goals in reality. Making a million dollars or going to the moon this summer ...not realistic. Learning more about investing or studying physics in depth, on the other hand, are excellent summer goals that are achievable and also put students on track toward realizing bigger dreams.

Brainstorm Ways to Get There: Students should give themselves permission to spitball ideas here. They can refine and bring themselves back down to earth later in the process. For now, consider even far-fetched ideas: a motivated student might find a way to get that internship with Richard Branson. Parents or other adults who act as coaches or mentors for students can play a role in contributing ideas and possible connections at this stage.

Research Opportunities: The next step is for students to take their big ideas and see what kinds of related opportunities are out there. Find local companies in relevant fields, email university administrators, scan internship lists (provided by a student's high school), and review the databases of academic programs. (We've compiled a handy list of programs that you can find in **this blog post http://bit.ly/2zdsXBs**). Use a spreadsheet to stay organized, including contact names and information, a short description of available positions, application deadlines and program dates, and links to websites. A sample spreadsheet appears below:

Program Name	Contact Person	Contact Info	Available Position(s)	Application Deadline	Program Dates	Website Link

Lay Out the Pros and Cons: Students should lay out the benefits and drawbacks of the opportunities they are most interested in, taking their considerations and restrictions into account (see sidebar below). For some students, this will mean comparing options within a single category, such as internships. For others, it will mean comparing options in multiple categories, e.g. choosing between academic programs and job opportunities. Students should also make sure they are crystal clear about what each option is really offering them: for example, some pre-college programs are less about the academic benefits and more about giving students the "college experience."

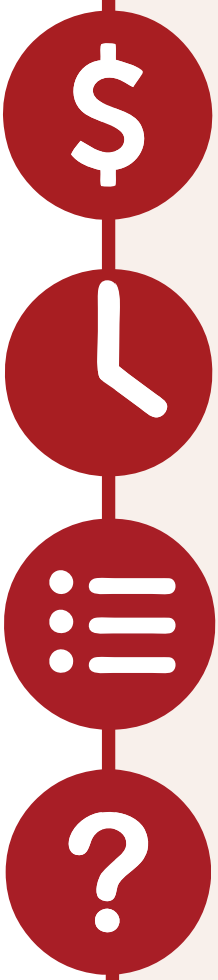
Reach Out/Apply: This final step will look different depending on what the student decides to pursue. Academic programs will have formal applications. Jobs and internships will probably require students to submit a resume and go through an interview process. Travel arrangements may be booked now or postponed for a month or two. Students should be tenacious with this process. Keep things professional but definitely follow up, particularly with jobs and internships. If the first few tries don't yield any results, move on to the next best options and keep trying!

As students are moving through this process, being mindful of their personal considerations, the schedule of their summer will start to fall into place. We recommend building in a week or two at the beginning and end of the summer where students have little to no responsibilities and can devote a lot of time to relaxation and recreation.

Although we recommend students get started on their summer planning early in spring semester, students who are behind don't need to panic. Our blog post on last-minute summer planning will help students make strategic decisions about opportunities that are still available: **http://bit.ly/2jVq0gL**

CONSIDERATIONS AND RESTRICTIONS

It's important that students plan their summers taking any considerations or restrictions into account, including:



Finances

Does a student need to earn money over the summer? Is there a set budget that their family is able to allocate toward academic programs or travel?

Time

Does a student have any scheduled traveling or time away? Are they already committed to certain activities that might limit their other options? Are they studying for standardized tests or preparing college applications?

Responsibilities

Is a student responsible for babysitting younger siblings? Do they need to be available to cook dinner, or drive a relative to doctor's appointments?

Other

This category includes practical considerations, such as if a student can't drive and/or doesn't have access to a ride or public transit. It also includes physical, mental and emotional considerations: manual labor might not be the right fit for every student; ditto for computer data entry and working with populations with mental health concerns.

GRADE LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Grade Level	Employment	Volunteer Programs	Academic Programs	Other Notes
9th Grade *(rising sophomores)*	These students are often ineligible for summer work.	This is a great time to explore volunteering and service opportunities.	Students can ease into academic enrichment by enrolling in a one-week program this summer, then consider longer programs in subsequent years.	This summer may be one of the last chances students have to attend camp as a camper.
10th Grade *(rising juniors)*	These students may or may not be eligible for summer work.	This is a great time for students who are too young to work to explore service opportunities.	Students can consider academic programs if they are interested in something specific, but academic programs are not necessary.	
11th Grade *(rising seniors)*	These students will have a broader range of employment opportunities open to them.	This is a great time to explore Internships, camp counselor positions, academic programs, and service opportunities.	Students should take special care to leave some space in their summers for the college application process, which can require significant time and effort.	
12th Grade *(high school graduates)*	These students may be enrolled in summer school at their new college, while others will want to build in extra time for friends and family during this final summer at home.	This is a great time for students looking for academic enrichment to consider research opportunities, which often come along with the resources that a college campus can provide.	Students may also want to spend one last summer at a seasonal job, volunteer with a local organization, or use this time to travel and explore.	

Remember that summer activities should help develop your student's strengths and introduce them to new ways of approaching the world. Any activity your student takes part in will help them become fuller, richer people.

ROLE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCES IN THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS

What role should college admissions play when choosing summer experiences? The short answer is that students should be guided by what they find interesting and valuable, not by what they think colleges want to see. An impressive summer experience is not enough to get a student automatically accepted anywhere, but it will add color to a student's profile and is an opportunity to showcase what's unique and different about them.

But what's more important than listing the activity itself is that students be able to articulate their summer experiences on their college applications. That means documenting the experience as it's happening or shortly thereafter, before key details become muddied in a student's memory. Students can refer to the **My Summer Experience Worksheet** in our Resources section for specific questions to ask and answer (in writing) when preparing college applications or essays.

Colleges value and appreciate all kinds of summer experiences. Admissions officers understand if a student has a legitimate need to make money, or has to spend part of their summer babysitting a younger sibling. They recognize that in some cases, volunteering might give students a better taste of a particular area of study than an internship, and they know when an academic program is the perfect fit for a student's interests.

What colleges are really looking for is the ways students have grown from their summer experiences. Whether a student has developed a greater sense of self, built their ability to empathize, grown their self-awareness, and gotten outside their bubble is what matters to colleges most. Admissions officers can tell when students have shifted their perspective, or if they are just blowing smoke. Students should focus on getting all they can out of the experiences, reflecting on they ways they have grown, and then honestly and thoughtfully conveying what they've learned on their applications. **Our Semester Reflection** and **My Summer Experience Worksheet** (both in **Appendix A**) can help students thoughtfully capture their experiences while they're still vivid and fresh.

CONCLUSION

When students are planning their summers, they should be willing to take risks. If there was ever something they wanted to try, now's the time! It's totally okay to decide after the fact that an activity or interest wasn't the right fit; every experience yields valuable information and insights.

RESOURCES

Semester Reflection Tool
https://signeteducation.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Summer-Reflection-Tool.pdf

Signet Blog: 20 Summer Programs You'll Love
https://signeteducation.com/resources/20-summer-programs-youll-love

Signet Blog: Last-Minute Summer Planning
https://signeteducation.com/resources/last-minute-summer-planning

APPENDIX A:
WORKSHEET: MY SUMMER EXPERIENCE

1) Describe what you did this summer.

2) What did you learn from the experience?

3) How did it change you? How are you different now?

4) How did your experience affect the way you're thinking about the future? What does this mean for you going forward?

SEMESTER REFLECTION TOOL

Complete this semester reflection when you are in a calm, quiet place, both physically and mentally. Winter break is a great time; exams are completed but the semester is still fresh in your mind.

Allow yourself approximately 60-90 minutes to complete this assignment, and give it your full attention. While you want to be attentive to the questions, remember this is not about getting the "right" answers. Often the first answer that materializes in your brain is the best one.

Semester in Review

This section is intended to help you evaluate your past semester. This will give you a sense of the progress you have made so far, and help you identify areas where you'd like to see growth as you look toward next semester.

- On a holistic scale of 1 to 10 *(1 = never want to go through that again; 10 = that was awesome!)*, how would you rate your semester? Why?

- What are three things that went well?

    1.

    2.

    3.

- What are three things you'd like to work on?

    1.

    2.

    3.

Looking Forward to Next Semester

- Review your Semester Roadmap and update if needed.

- Pick three goals for next semester. These goals can be academic, health-related, social, extracurricular, relational, or spiritual. *While it may be tempting to choose more, limit yourself to three in order to keep your goals manageable. Bring your goals to life. For example, you might create a Health-related goal of "getting more sleep," but also include "feeling well-rested and energized throughout the day."*

    1.

    2.

    3.

- How will you measure each goal? How will you know when you've reached it?

    1.

    2.

    3.

- When will you review your progress? With whom? Set yourself up for success by reviewing on an ongoing basis (weekly or even monthly). Revisiting your goals often makes it easier to maintain focus throughout the semester. Set a specific time to review your progress, and ask a friend, parent, teacher, or tutor to help you review. The extra accountability will help you stay consistent.

    1.

    2.

    3.