

# Standing Out in a Crowded Applicant Pool

How Special Talents Help



**W**hile grades and course load are the top factors in the college admission decision, highlighting special talents or skills can help students stand out in a crowded applicant pool.

Evan Forster, founder of Essay Busters, a nonprofit that works with high school students from families of lesser economic means, said one of the best ways students can stand out is to pursue their passion and dreams irrespective of the naysayers.

"If you choose any idea that three people you respect tell you can never happen, that is what you do to make yourself stand out," said Forster. "That is the extracurricular or the job that will get you noticed by admission officers."

Forster said the most interesting example of a student with a unique talent was a high school student who taught skydiving to CEOs and vice presidents of major companies to help them overcome their fears.

"She basically did leadership training by helping them jump out of airplanes in New Jersey," Forster said of the student, who went on to get admitted to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

But even if students have more mundane jobs or volunteer positions, they can still seek to add value to whatever organization they're part of, and that will help them stand out in the admission process, Forster said.

"Where is something missing?" is the question high schoolers should ask about the organization where they work or volunteer, Forster said.

"Do they need more volunteers? Do they need a better teaching manual so that people can hit the ground running when they start their internships at a particular job?" Forster said. "And that is what you create and that is what you write about (in an admission essay)."

Counselors and students must put considerable thought into how an applicant will highlight their talents in a college application, according to Nathan Lockett, college counselor and college access program director at Georgetown Preparatory School (MD), as well as an admission reader at Occidental College (CA).

"The way students discuss their talents is very important and can be different depending upon which part of the application they're discussing it," Lockett said, a former associate director of admissions at George Mason University (VA).

For items listed in the activities section, Lockett said, students should use active language that clearly, and briefly, articulates their responsibilities, amount of work done, and successes.

"They do not need to write in prose," Lockett said. But for essays and a personal statement, the discussion will need to be deeper.

"Students should start by identifying the personal qualities that they want admission offices to see in them, such as leadership, concern for others, talent, etc." Lockett said.

"Regardless of what talent or event they choose to base their essay on, students need to describe the situation, their decision-making process and/or actions, and then thoroughly discuss the results those actions had on them personally and/or on the organization/event being discussed. After this, it is important to go back and ask, 'Did I clearly demonstrate all the personal qualities that I hoped, or is this just a good story?'"

Jennifer Yu, a high school senior in Ashburn, Virginia, reached this conclusion on her own. Though she is talented and had a unique story—in 2019, she became the first teenager in nearly two decades to win the US Women's Chess Championship—Yu purposefully did more in her college applications than highlight her chess accomplishments.

"Since chess is such a major part of my life, it was the subject of most of them. However, none of my essays were just a grocery list of my chess achievements," she said.

"I focused more on what I learned from chess, including how to handle setbacks and pressure. My experiences through chess shaped me as both a player and a person and I wanted to emphasize that more than a ranking or a title."

Lockett agreed with this strategy.

"Because demonstrating personal qualities in a meaningful way is crucial, it's important that students know that their greatest talent may not necessarily be the best essay topic," Lockett said. "For example: A student who has become a top athlete through standard practice might not be able to discuss many of their best personal qualities by discussing their sports life. In this case, it is better to use the sports topic just in the activities section and discuss another area of their life in the personal statement."

**Students should start by identifying the personal qualities that they want admission offices to see in them, such as leadership, concern for others, talent, etc.**



# articulate their responsibilities, amount of work done, and successes

Beyond helping students stand out in the admission process, having a special or unique talent can also be useful as they look at financing college and preparing for a future career.

Mark Kantrowitz, publisher and vice president of research at [savingforcollege.com](http://savingforcollege.com), said students and counselors should use free scholarship databases to look for scholarships that match a student's background and specific talent.

"Every scholarship provider is looking for the candidate who best matches their selection criteria, so excellence can help students win the award, if they match the goal of the scholarship," Kantrowitz said. "Students can also look for organizations that promote their talent, to see if they offer any scholarships."

Tai'Lon Jackson earned a four-year scholarship to George Washington University (DC) and credited some of his success to the lessons he learned from chess.

Though he wasn't a record-setting national champion like Yu, he represented the District of Columbia in the 2012 Denker Tournament of High School Champions.

At the tournament, Jackson finished 48 in a field of 48 players. But the value of his experience can't be measured strictly in terms of wins, losses, and rating points.

"The experience my mother and I had in flying across the country to play in the chess tournament changed my ambitions," Jackson wrote in a letter to David Mehler, executive director of the US Chess Center, in 2015. "Without the US Chess Center, I would not be in college now."

Jackson graduated from George Washington in 2018 and is now employed as an information security analyst at a business consulting firm.

Employment is really the end game, noted Harvard sociologist Hilary Levey Friedman, author of *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*.

Nurturing a specific talent, Friedman said, should not really be about becoming the best in the world, but about "developing the skills that will enable you to succeed when you're applying to college or a job." ▢

.....  
**Jamaal Abdul-Alim** is a journalist living in Washington, DC.