

## **Extracurriculars: the extras that count**

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Impressing an MBA admissions committee is sometimes as simple as telling a good story about your interests, your activities, and yourself.

Like everyone in junior-high gym class, business school admissions committees want some of the cool kids to play on their team, too. One way to show the admissions committees at top business schools that you're a cool kid—someone who is more than his standardized test scores and résumé—is through your extracurricular activities. "No business school wants a class of nerds or workaholics," says Linda Abraham, president of the admissions consultancy Accepted.com. Although you can get into business school as a traditional candidate, who likely tutors or works for Habitat for Humanity or sits on a board for some company or nonprofit, there's no denying that the more unique your extracurricular activity, the more you can use it as a way to stand out from the other applicants.

One misconception is that your extracurricular activities have to be altruistic. Admissions committee members and admissions consultants will tell you business schools are looking for applicants to participate in activities for which they are truly passionate. This could be anything from playing the guitar in a garage band to running marathons. Your extracurricular activities bring another dimension to your application, says Jeremy Shinewald, president and founder of admissions consultancy MBA Mission, who adds that those with the best stories to share come by them naturally. People with outrageous activities, such as Shinewald's client who took care of exotic animals that had been confiscated while authorities found homes for them in zoos, usually fall into that category. "You can't fudge a story like that," says Shinewald. "That's why it's so good."

The list of unique, memorable extracurricular activities is endless. James Brooman, a first-year student at Dartmouth's Tuck School of Business, left his job in corporate finance to ride a bicycle from northern Alaska to the southernmost point of Argentina. It took him from June 16, 2003, to Mar. 3, 2005 to complete the journey. His only training: Three bicycle rides per week in London for a month before his departure. During the course of his cycling adventure, Brooman had his tent invaded by ants, was almost burned to death in a California forest fire, and was held captive by a tribe in the Brazilian rainforest.

### Seeing the World

An adventurer, Brooman had the time of his life, he says. "The two most spectacular sites were the Northern Lights in Canada and Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world, in Venezuela," he adds. Motivated by Jon Krakauer's bestselling book, *Into Thin Air*, and the tale of Goran Kropp—a Swedish climber who bicycled 7,000 miles to Mount Everest, climbed the mountain solo, then rode back home—Brooman says business school was at the back of his mind when he traveled but was not the reason for the trip. He simply wanted to see the world from a completely different perspective, he says.

"When you travel like I did, you see other viewpoints and appreciate other perspectives, and this informs your judgment," says Brooman. "I hope to bring these qualities to my career." In his application, he used the trip to show the admissions committee he is determined even in the face of great challenges, can break things down to accomplish his goals, and is open to different cultures and ideas. Brooman considered the trip a "unique selling point of his application."

Few people could ride a bike from Alaska to Argentina, and admissions committee representatives don't expect you to take on such adventures. There are other activities—much

closer to home and less threatening to your life—that can help you stand out. A hobby is often a great place to start. Matt Gallagher, a first-year student at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, was always the class clown.

In his yearbook, friends wrote he should become a stand-up comedian, and for a while he did, even taking a job with Scholastic Books in New York to be closer to the industry and venues where he could perform. From 2002 to 2007 he performed several shows a week and launched and performed in a college tour with comedian Brian Francis.

Stand-up student?

In his application for business school, Gallagher wrote about his love of stand-up comedy. While he no longer wants a career in comedy, he feels as though his experiences provided useful transferable skills, made him interesting to the admissions committee, and helped differentiate him from all the other accomplished MBA candidates. In addition, his comedy experience is something he directly brought to the Wharton table as he is now the president of the school's comedy group. While he is shifting gears and looks forward to a treasury position with Tyco Electronics (TEL) during his upcoming summer internship, Gallagher says he'll always find outlets for his creativity. For starters, he's hoping to find a publisher for a humorous novel he recently wrote.

Indeed, sharing your creative side with the admissions committee is one way to impress. Having written his first opera at 14, Amir Satvat breathes music. He says he has no stress, even when he is working 100 hours per week, because as long as he listens to two minutes of classical music, he feels better. But he doesn't want to make music his career. "It's been a major, major love for me," says Satvat. "It's so special to me that I didn't want it to become mundane as a job."

His hobby, even if it isn't a career, provided plenty of opportunity to showcase his creativity, teach and lead others, and build organizations similar to the way a manager would. Satvat first founded the Boston College Fine Arts Society, which put on the first all-student opera at BC. Next, he founded Opera Oxford, a group that organizes performances at Oxford, wrote two compositions for the school that are now housed in the Oxford Library, and has lectured about opera in an adult-learning program in Connecticut. Despite all of his creative work, he says he is most passionate about studying opera as a musicologist and conductor. With a collection of 100 to 120 videos and over 1,000 CDs of classical music, Satvat says he has plenty to study as a hobby.

The complete person

Naturally, he wanted to share his passion with the admissions committee at Wharton, where he'll be pursuing his MBA starting next fall. He wrote one full essay on how he launched Opera Oxford and all the obstacles he had to overcome—from finding financing and corporate sponsorship to leading the group. Extracurricular activities help you become more of a complete person, says Satvat, which doesn't only help you get into business school but helps with your whole life.

While these unique extracurricular activities can help you shine, they can not guarantee you a seat at a top business school. There are many pieces to the application, and you have to meet many other requirements. But even typical extracurricular activities—if they're a big part of your life—can help you stand out as much as someone who eats fire or rescues babies from burning buildings. "Applicants must educate us about what they do, why, and how it is relevant to business school and their future career goals," says Dawna Clarke, director of admissions at Tuck.

For those still in the market for an extracurricular activity, you should consider whatever interests you and would be fun, so that you are motivated to make an impact and really get involved. You don't want to fake passion because admissions committees will weed you out, say admissions consultants. Clarke adds that you should avoid solitary activities, such as reading, because they're less compelling and do not involve teamwork and leadership, skills prized by many B-schools. And don't bother mentioning the checks you write for charities, recycling, or anything else that involves little or no effort, she says. These things don't count.

The key to finding the right activity for business school—and just for yourself—is simple really. "Do what you love," says Shinewald. "And the story will follow."

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