

Productive Summers © The College Board

It's Not What You Think

Summer school may make you think of remedial classes for students who slacked off during the school year. But that's not the whole story.

Yes, lots of high schools do have mandatory summer school for students who have underperformed. But summer school can also mean attending classes at a college, in programs students must compete to get into.

A Variety of Programs and Benefits

These days, there are summer schools for just about every type of student, whether you'd like to work on academic subjects or developing skills such as playing an instrument or sport.

Pursue Your Interests

Use a summer program to develop a talent or interest in the arts, humanities, or sciences. For example, the California State Summer School for the Arts, held on the campus of the California Institute for the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, has programs in film and video, creative writing, visual arts, animation, dance, music, and theater.

Meanwhile, the Michigan Tech Summer Youth Program allows you to participate in week-long "Explorations" in engineering, math, science and technology, ecology, outdoor adventure, and a variety of social sciences and humanities areas.

To stay closer to home, check out your local performing arts centers, science museums, and community colleges; many have summer programs where you can get hands-on experience, ranging from set design to environmental education.

Gain Experience Outside of the Classroom

Summer school programs often involve a lot more hands-on learning than you'll find in your regular classes. Many residential summer school programs include sports, travel, and social activities in their curricula. Personal development and leadership skills are also major themes.

For example, students at the University of Wyoming Summer High School Institute take a personal growth seminar, in addition to their academic classes.

Improve Your High School Transcript

Attending a challenging summer school program may increase your chances of getting into a competitive college. In fact, some summer school programs are as competitive as colleges, requiring an extensive application complete with SAT[®] or PSAT/NMSQT[®] scores, teacher recommendations, and a personal essay.

While attendance at a high-powered summer school like Harvard's Secondary School Program (SSP) does not guarantee that you will get into an Ivy League school, it does add a certain luster to your college applications. Nonetheless, a cutting-edge internship or a job that requires responsibility and leadership can look just as good on your college applications.

Try Your Hand at Real College Work

If you're craving more in-depth study of a subject you're interested in, and high school classes leave you wanting more, college-level classes may be the answer. Or, if you simply want to explore a particular school, or experience college classes, it's a great preview.

Most colleges welcome anyone who wants to learn into their normal college-level classes. Of course, they give priority to students who are enrolled full time, but more often than not room is available. Call or research online any colleges on your wish list. Ask if they have a summer semester and get them to send you a catalog.

If you are motivated and able, it's also possible to enroll in college classes during your normal school year. But make sure the extra workload won't interfere with your high school work.

The Cost

Private summer schools can be expensive, but the good news is that Governors' Schools and similar programs supported by state and federal education funding tend to be less so - some are even free of charge, and most offer financial aid based on need.

If you come from a low-income family or you'll be the first member of your family to attend college, you may be eligible for an Upward Bound TRIO program, in which you could spend part of your summer at a nearby university or college, essentially getting a preview of campus life while building skills and meeting other students from across your region.

Private summer schools, like the program offered at Harvard, also offer a limited amount of financial aid, so don't cross them off your list just because they carry a hefty price tag.

Summer School Tips

When looking for a summer school program, here are some important factors to consider:

- How much of the summer do you want to commit to school? Programs range from five days to eight weeks.
- What do you want to get out of summer school? Do you want to turbocharge your academics? Act in a play? Teach young children? Learn how a political campaign is conducted? Polish up a second language? Work with engineers in the computer industry?
- Where do you want to stay? Do you want a residential program where you live in dorms with other students or would you prefer to live at home, attending school only during the day?
- Can you get high-school (or college) credit for summer school courses? Receiving credit depends both on the school where you take the course and on your high school (or college).
- How much can you spend on summer school? If the answer is nothing, are free programs available in your state or school district?

Bottom Line

When evaluating whether summer school is right for you, the real question is what you aspire to learn and what type of summer program provides the best experience for it.