



Summer is special. It can't come soon enough and it always ends too quickly. Summer is everything that school is not. Where school days often seem to drag on, during the summer whole months skip by before we know it. The learning that takes place in summer is of a different sort that the kind you find in school. Summers fill your head with dreams. Summer is about filling your time the way you choose. It is about discovering your own interests, at your own pace, and in your own way.

It doesn't take too much imagination to see the three precious summers of high school as the three magic beans given to Jack in the fairy tale about the beanstalk. Jack plants his beans in the garden and out grows a magic beanstalk that reaches far beyond Jack's limited horizons. When he began to climb, he had no idea what was at the other end. It wasn't easy, but in the end he got his mother's approval and the golden goose. Your high school summers are like that: If you plant them in fertile ground, they will lead to adventure.

The benefits of a summer adventure are very real. The opportunity to reinvent yourself, to discover that you are capable of so much more than you ever thought possible, to discover that other people hold the same fears and dreams that you never dared to share out loud, to collide with another culture, to work as a team, to overcome authentic challenges, to face questions of personal and cultural identity, to expand your view and understanding of the world, and, most of all, to discover who you are and where you come from by stepping out of your comfort zone, can only be described in one way: priceless.

And these direct benefits lead to residual benefits. You become a more interesting and thoughtful person, which can help with college admissions. You may have a clearer sense of your own personal interests and learning styles, which will lead to a more successful academic career. You will have a greater sense of self confidence, which will help overcome peer pressure, loneliness, and the feeling of being trapped. You will be better equipped to deal with the transitions that we all face from high school to college–or from dependent to independent–and better equipped to deal with the unexpected crises that come up in all lives.

Besides, how many new challenges do you think you are likely to bump into while sitting on your couch at home? Let's look at some specific reasons to participate in a summer program.

Why Study Abroad?

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Changing Your Perspective

Understanding another walk of life not only enriches your understanding of the world, but it also makes you a more capable person, ready to tackle and solve complex problems that involve real human beings. When you bring this change in perspective from your summer experience home with you, it will act equally on those truths that you thought you knew. This is especially true of students returning form particularly intense service programs. Richard Webb, the founder of ProPeru, puts it this way: "Returning students often describe to me a newly found sense of what is important and what is not important. The interpersonal dramas that once consumed their lives no longer seem to have any significance. Students experience a new sense of peace and balance as a result of understanding how petty [their] previous issues were when seen in relation to the hunger and poverty–but also joy–that they have seen over the summer."

Dry Run for College

When you get to college, you will have to walk into an unfamiliar environment and spend long periods away from home. You will be leaving your friends and the comforts of home behind. You will have to face new challenges emotionally, physically, academically, and socially. Your personal weaknesses will be tested, and you will have to find new strengths to pull you through. Sound familiar? A summer program will test you in all of the same ways, but the length of commitment is shorter, the environment is smaller (20 kids vs. 2,000), the stakes are lower, the activities more fun, the support groups better. Putting yourself in this challenging environment now is a perfect way to learn to manage dramatic, unsupervised, unsupported transitions later.

Trying On a Life for Size

Summer programs offer you the opportunity to try out skills, job descriptions, or fantasies that normally require years of commitment to achieve. They also provide an opportunity to travel to exotic places, meet people from different countries, develop arcane but interesting skills, and to generally do things that you could never do at home.

Reinvent Yourself

Summer programs provide you with a chance to be whoever you want to be. Many challenging programs create an environment where teamwork is a survival skill. Other programs focus on creating an atmosphere of open, honest communication. No posturing, no being cool, no playing to the audience, just talking about issues that are confronting the entire group. Summer programs that push the whole student–mentally, physically, emotionally, and socially–create a space in which a teenager can develop skills and personality traits that may have been stifled in school. If you are feeling typecast, pigeonholed, or trapped in a particular peer group, summer programs allow you to change the channel.

Push Personal Limits

If the notion of expanding your personal limits sounds scary to you, don't worry. Good summer programs are not in the business of setting people up for failure. If they confronted students with challenges but did not help them to succeed, no one would come back. They are created for students just like you. If you're not sure, call the references that they give you. They will all tell you the same thing: "If you think that it won't work, don't worry. You can do it. I didn't think that I would ever do it, but I did, and now I'll never forget it!"

It's Fun

There is nothing boring about sitting in a kayak off the coast of Alaska. Rebuilding old Romanesque chapels in the south of France is way more interesting than painting houses in Pennsylvania. Spend a summer with twenty of your peers doing community service in Peru where just walking down the street is fun. Most of the students that we've spoken to tell us that the programs that they went on made for the dirtiest, hottest, hungriest, most exhausting–but quite possibly the happiest–summers they ever spent. What more do you need to know? These are people just like you.