

Ask the EXPERTS

Master Class with Evan Forster and David Thomas

Summertime is one of nature's few great pure things—at least until the college admissions process begins. Instead of worrying about the Hamptons, you're worried about Rustic Pathways and Asphalt Green. Evan Forster and David Thomas of educational consulting firm Forster-Thomas Inc. say that worry doesn't need to play into the summer activity equation at all, if you just understand why schools are so interested in activities in the first place. *The Educated Observer* talked to Forster and Thomas recently about how to get a head start this summer.

So many kids want to just hang out with friends doing anything but academics when school is out. How do you get your child to make the most out of his or her summer?

Evan Forster: With all the drama about summer programs—and I get asked this question obsessively by my college candidates and their parents—there is one little detail I don't want to get lost: Summer is a great time to, oh my gosh, be a kid.

David Thomas: If you're looking at summer programs or activities as a way to help develop your child's college résumé, that's all well and good. But there's an old expression that sums it up: 'You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.' Children are the same way.

Forster: And why does this matter? Because colleges don't care about entries on a résumé nearly as much as they care about the impact you have in that organization. Johnny can join the 10 most prestigious organizations on campus, and attend the five most prestigious summer camps, but that just says that Johnny is a follower, a joiner. You can join all

the organizations in the world, but what's going to stand out is what you do as a member of an organization. Can you identify an opportunity for growth, change, and/or evolution? Do you seize such opportunities? Can you execute on your plans? I'd rather see a student involved in a handful of organizations he really cares about—and make a difference—than be an observer on countless trips.

Thomas: I like what our colleague Jill Tipograph—founder of Everything Summer (everythingsummer.com) and an expert in helping families choose activities—said about parental pressure and expectations regarding how college-bound teens spend their summers. She said, 'Colleges don't expect students of coming up with the next scientific invention. They want to see the students grow. Growth comes from being exposed to a lot of different things, or going deeper into something they enjoy. If you push them into doing something they don't want to do, it will backfire. You cannot and should not force a teenager into doing something they absolutely don't want to do.'

What kinds of summer activities are best?

Thomas: Well, you want your child to be engaged by his activities so he can really develop instead of resist. So I would steer athletic children in a totally different direction than an avid musician. Likewise, a kid who is good with her hands and is practical-minded will thrive in different activities than an abstract thinker who enjoys mysteries and research.

Forster: Except for the most natural leaders, developing leadership qualities requires leaving your comfort zone. The most literal way to leave your comfort zone is to travel. Travel is also a typical summer activity



Evan Forster and David Thomas.

for many families—which makes travel-based summer activities so popular. But let's get one thing straight. While summer high-school programs at universities abroad and even those stateside at schools like Princeton and Penn that offer excellent summer scholarship programs are wonderful experiences, to be sure, they are not tickets by any stretch of the imagination into those schools or any top school. All an admissions officer sees is, 'Oh, he came and studied at our school for a summer program, how nice,' rather than 'Oh, let's put a big shiny gold star on his application since he spent some time here last summer.' There's no red carpet for graduates of tuition-based summer programs.

Does that mean that there is no value in all those fee-based programs where you build toilets in Mexico, or good old-fashioned teen tours of Europe or Israel?

Thomas: I never said that!

Forster: There can be tremendous value in these programs. Really, it's all about what you do while you are there or afterward, rather than the simple fact that you can produce a receipt for the program. For example, Rustic Pathways, you go off for a week to a Third World country. It's very 'mind-expanding'—for seven days. And then you get to come back and you head out to the Hamptons. Wonderful. If

you're going to do something with Rustic Pathways, which I would wholeheartedly recommend, don't just spend time with the Maleku tribe in Costa Rica. Before you go, raise money for their school. Organize a supplies drive in your town and come not just with your suitcase, but with a shipment of boxes of pencils, papers and notepads. That's what one candidate of mine did, and it was not just an act of leadership and impact, but also showed that he had compassion, that he goes above and beyond and that he had foresight into the living situation of the Maleku tribe. Now, contrast these two students to the kid recently who told me about how excited he was to do a summer program in Barcelona. I asked him why he had chosen this program. He said, 'I had friends going there. And who wouldn't want to be in Barcelona?' Well, yes, I have to agree with that, but this trip isn't going to help him get into college. Transforming his mind-set into one of leadership and coaching him on how to make an impact starts in our next session.

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