**Participants:**

Lynn O'Shaughnessy

Shirag Shemmassian

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**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Hey, everyone. This is Lynn O'Shaughnessy of the College Solution, and I want to thank you for attending this webinar today with my guest I'm excited about talking to, Shirag Shemmassian. That's a mouthful.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Hello.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

I was nervous about getting the pronunciation right, and I'm sure Shirag is not going to tell me if I did it wrong. Shirag is here today to talk to me about college admissions and particularly about extracurriculars, which is a huge issue for teenagers and parents who are wondering what kind of or why, even though I would say there are no right ones. There's a lot of questions and a lot of anxiety about extracurricular activities. That's what we're going to focus on today. Shirag is one of my favorite college consultants. Here is a little bit about him. That's his website, shemmassianconsulting.com.

He happens to be in San Diego, where I am, and he counsels students are who are interested in going to undergraduate colleges, medical schools, and graduate schools. One thing I wanted to share with you is, he's got some blogs. He also has some fantastic resources. If you're the parent of a high schooler or a high schooler, you can get a 91-page guide to writing about college essays that covers all sorts of topics concerning college essays. I would go to his website and—I didn't see it, but here's his website, shemmassianconsulting.com. You can see a little bio about Shirag and then, if you scroll down, you'll see he has blogs and also a free gift.

If you just go to his website, shemmassianconsulting.com, you'll get the 91-page guide to writing college essays, which is excellent. With that, we're going to jump into some of these extracurricular questions that I have. If any of you have questions, you can just click on the question box and type it in, and I will make sure to ask that question. The first question I have is, you often hear parents and students talking about how it's important to be well-rounded as a college applicant. When it comes to extracurricular activities, is that a wise approach, to be a well-rounded teenager?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. It's a great question. I'm just going to back up one second and say, thank you for the very kind introduction. We put in a lot of work to developing those resources, so I hope the folks who are listening to this find that valuable. Thank you for that.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

That's a great resource.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. To answer your question about well-roundedness, we have to talk about first how, I think extracurricular activities are probably the least understood aspect of the college admissions process. When it comes to grades and test scores, we can all say that higher is better. Higher is better when it comes to academic rigor. We say, the more you challenge yourself and the better you do in those challenging classes, the better it's going to look on your applications. You're going to be, I guess, evaluated more favorably. When it comes to college essays, there's lots of resources out there. It's hard to write good college essays, but there are a lot of resources. We know how to write about things not on our resume. It's easier said than done, of course, but with extracurriculars, there's still so much misinformation out there.

The issue is, I think that things have changed pretty quickly in terms of what college admissions committees are looking for in a student’s extracurricular profile, except our knowledge has stayed stuck in the past. When parents who are watching this who are applying to college, in large part, even when I was applying to undergrad back in 2004, there was a lot of enroll in the hardest classes you can, do as well as you can, pass your AP tests, do well on the SAT. Then join as many clubs and activities as you can and try to rise up to the executive level of those clubs and activities. Be the president, make an impact, all that kind of stuff. There was this idea that colleges are looking for these well-rounded applicants. Admissions committees are obviously pretty smart people and they notice trends.

If we have two students, let's say one student from Seattle, one student from New York, and then a bunch of other students who are just academically super high achievers. They have really high grades, really high test scores, and they've all done similar things. They joined all the clubs that their school offered and the sports team and whatnot, and they were president and vice president, etc. When it comes time to college admissions decisions, it's really hard for the committee members to differentiate among applicants. If one student has a 4.0 and a 1,500 and the other student has the same thing and joined all these activities, how do I actually differentiate among this pool of super talented applicants?

Especially the higher up the school in terms of selectivity, the more top candidates they get. That was the long-winded way, Lynn, of saying, no, it's not really a wise approach because what really carries the day currently when it comes to extracurricular activities is making sure to hone in on one, maybe two areas that you really love and **[audio skips]** and pushing all of the other activities that you may participate at a surface level at the side. That's the general landscape of extracurriculars today.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Can you talk about, if you're not supposed to be well-rounded, can you talk about what you should be doing?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah, absolutely. Colleges aren't looking, like we said, for a collection of well-rounded students. They're looking for a student body that's collectively well-rounded. They're looking to admit a specialist in this area. They're looking to admit someone who is top in the niche that they've developed and so on. Then the question comes up and parents find, what is that activity? I think you mentioned it in your introduction. What's that, I call it the magic bullet activity? What is the one thing that, if I do X, that will impress admissions committees? Is it playing piano? Is it this? Is it that? Is it this club, that club? It doesn't matter. The specific area doesn't matter. What matters is the level of that you've been able to achieve and the level of impact, really, that you've been able to make through that activity.

You can have two students, for instance, two of whom are really good at playing a certain instrument, let's say. One student just joins the school orchestra and they do that pretty well. They practice, and they achieve a certain level, and that's **[audio skips]**. But then there's another student who maybe does the same thing and then they realize a need in their community, and they maybe start—or they lead a music class at a local school that doesn't have a music program. Or a school that can't afford instruments, so they start a fundraiser and they buy instruments for that school and they teach that. Or they start a youth orchestra and they do little traveling things. Then they take their program and maybe raise investment money and do this for other schools in the area. A few years back, college admissions committees formalized this approach.

I think the Harvard Graduate School of Education published this report called Turning the Tide, which got a lot of attention. They even explicitly said, we're not looking for students who are doing everything. We want to admit students who are having authentic experiences with diversity and making community impact. It's not just, which niche am I developing my specialty in, but what am I actually doing with that to make my community a better place? The more niche you go, the more specialized you go, the less competition you have in that niche. The goal is to integrate various interests you have and make a deep community impact in such a way where you become the “Michael Jordan” of that thing. We can talk a little bit more about how that happens, because I think when parents hear that, it's like, how is my kid going to be Michael Jordan?

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Before we do that, because that's great and I love that, when you were talking I was thinking about one of my own kids, my daughter who was a soccer player. She was a pretty good soccer player. She was on a club team, but there's a million of those. She was so into soccer. She ended up becoming a ref for the club soccer. Actually, it wasn't even for the club. Well, it was for club soccer but also for the rec league **[audio skips]** San Diego, which showed really leadership because you're having to deal with all these crazy parents who are yelling at you **[audio skips]**. Then she also became, a couple seasons, a coach for one of these little kid rec soccer teams, little girls **[audio skips]**. They were adorable. I just felt that was a good way to illustrate, wow, she's really into soccer but she's doing it in different ways. It wasn't that, oh, she's a superstar soccer player, and I see people pin their hopes on, oh, we're going to get a soccer scholarship or something like that.

People are typically very unrealistic about your child’s ability. And she did play in college, varsity, but it was a division three and it wasn't like we weren’t—we had no interest, really, in her even pursuing a soccer scholarship. I just thought that was a nice way that she illustrated her soccer interests. Also, she was very big on arts and crafts, which she still is, and she's always drawing and painting and all sorts of things. As a little kid, she would create little things like keyrings and stuff that she'd sell to people. She was very entrepreneurial. Then she ended up volunteering at assisted living places and nursing homes to create photo books for the residents there. That was before everything went digital. It was boards for those places. That illustrated, she's into arts and crafts and she's giving back to the community, creating these things for others. I just thought that was a good example.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Those are really nice examples, and because they not only demonstrate leadership but also initiative. I think as parents and teachers and counselors, I often hear this kind of thing, where leadership can only be demonstrated through a leadership position and I disagree with that because the goal isn't to say, I became president and therefore, I'm a leader. It's demonstrating leadership, and you can demonstrate leadership in your family. You can demonstrate leadership in your neighborhood. You can demonstrate leadership in your city or your state and so on. The same thing with initiative. The two things that you described, your daughter didn't have to do. Then with the latter, especially with the, I think the portrait book you were saying, that didn't exist before. Whereas a rec soccer league existed.

Of course, if it didn't and someone started a rec soccer league **[audio skips]** story, but that didn't exist before, so it required your daughter to be creative and to take initiative. There's one thing that we have to I think highlight here. Parents listening to this may misunderstand, like, it's not about necessarily becoming president. My son or daughter has to create something. That's not necessarily true, either. It's like figuring out, what am I actually interested in and how can I takes this to the next level? If I'm doing something already, it's like, okay, I really enjoy this, and I'm really interested in this cause. Is there a way for me to marry those things? Maybe I do the portrait thing. Once I do that, I ask myself, do I enjoy it? Yes or no? What about that activity did I enjoy? That’ll take me to the next step. When you stack these steps one on top of another over time, you'll have a senior who’s applying to college who has this very impressive extracurricular profile.

Rather than thinking way ahead of time, this is the thing that I have to get to, I think a lot of times people say, I like soccer, but no parent or teacher will really ask them, what about soccer do you like? Is it about winning? Is it about teaching others? Is it about the athletics? Is it about bringing people together? Because those four different answers would actually lead you to do a different next step. If it's about being the best, you would put maybe all of your time into practice, practice, practice. If it's about building community, then it's something—like your daughter, bringing little girls together and coaching them, and that's really meaningful to her. Think about not only what you like, but why you like it, and that’ll actually start to bring you down the right path of becoming really strong in that niche.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

You were talking about a little while ago becoming the Michael Jordan of whatever. Could you talk about that? That sounds intriguing.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. I think in every field, I'm a big basketball fan, so I used the Michael Jordan analogy, but the number one player or artist or writer or whatever, tends to get a disproportionate level of accolades and awe and all that kind of stuff. If you don’t mind, I'll carry the basketball analogy a little bit further. If you ask people, in the late ‘80s to the late ‘90s, who was the number-one player in basketball? Almost everyone will say Michael Jordan. If I say, who’s the number-two best player of that era? Everyone will freeze and there might be some bias and, I don't know. I think it's Charles Barkley or Clyde Drexler or Hakeem Olajuwon or all these different players who were very good at that time, but then everyone clearly knows Michael Jordan.

This idea really came, I think the best writing I've ever seen on this topic is Cal Newport, who’s a professor but also, blogs a lot of college admissions **[audio skips]**. There's a book called *How to be a High School Superstar* where he talks about this. I think he uses Luciana Pavarotti, the opera singer, as an example, how he earned so much more and had so much more fame than the number-two singer at that time, even though talent-wise, they're probably really close. You said something really interesting, which is sometimes people, whether it's because they're overestimating their son or daughter’s ability in something, or because they're not really privy to all of the opportunities out there, will try to get competitive in a really, really competitive area. Becoming the best soccer player in California, for example, is really, really, really difficult.

Or becoming the number-one student in Southern California academically is really, really, really difficult. But then perhaps, if you have two interests and you're able to somehow integrate them, that's not a very crowded niche. You can actually develop a specialty in that niche. Like so many other things I'm saying, the goal now is not to figure out what is the most obscure thing and do that because a parent might say, not many people play badminton. I think my son should join—it's not about getting to the most obscure thing, but thinking about what you like, why you like it. Are there areas that you merge? If you integrate these things and you develop a niche, and if you pursue that niche over time, then you can become the “Michael Jordan” of that space.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Can you give me an example, then, of combining maybe two different things? That's interesting.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. There's a student now we're supporting **[audio skips]**. I won't say what region she's from to not out her in any way. She loves art and she loves drawing for herself, but I think the thing that she really loves about art is teaching little kids and helping them develop a passion for art. She also has a big passion for people who are going through healthcare crises and wants to be a shining light or bringing joy to folks who are otherwise in a really bad place. She had this really nice idea of designing art kits for young children with cancer. She's actually working right now, and she's a rising sophomore. She still has time, and I'm very excited about what this ends up becoming, but she's looking to partner with local hospitals to distribute these art kits to students in their oncology department.

She's putting together actual drawings and it has all these different colors and teaching them how to use color to depict certain emotions and to **[audio skips]** and all this kind of stuff. I'm not an artist, so if I'm doing a disservice to the project, I apologize. Then the question is, once that happens, she's partnering with another local organization who may have more clout or more connections, and then working with those hospitals to do that. I suspect the next steps will be doing that on a more regional level, perhaps maybe even start an organization down the line where you do this with cancer departments all over the state or all over the country and things like that.

At some point, she’ll be able to leverage other interested high school students’ time who want to get community service hours and so on to really make a much bigger impact. She could have stopped and said, I already teach art to local kids in my community. I'll stop there, and maybe I can volunteer in a hospital. She's like, no. I have these two interests that are seemingly disparate, but I think there's a way I could integrate these and make this huge impact down the line and maybe get funding for it and so on.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Cool. Would she be creating these art kits and then distributing them to hospitals? Or she would be teaching kids who are in the hospitals?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

She could do both. Right now, focusing on distributing those kinds of things, where maybe she makes guests appearances and does the art projects together. I think both of those, of course, would be worthwhile pursuits. That's the beauty of developing a specialty and pursing it. It's what you make of it. Maybe she wants to go there and take an easel and all that kind of stuff and teach kids how to paint in person. I think right now her goal is really to make a larger impact. To “scale” eventually, that she's going to want to do something that doesn't require her time in the present. I think distribution right now is **[audio skips]**.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Cool. Can you give me another example of combining two different things that make you more unique? **[audio skips]** your passions, right?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. I know a student who’s really into cars, like automobile engineering and stuff like that, and really into teaching. They also love teaching people about automobile engineering and all that kind of stuff, so they started a YouTube channel to show people what their interest is. It’ll start from there and they're looking to partner up with local professors and do research in that field. That's the thing, and that's a little bit on the earlier side of things. This is combining passion for teaching and engineering. We know other students who have done a lot of fundraisers, avid runners who are also scientists who have started charities that have raised tens of thousands of dollars for a specific heart condition or something like that. There are so many examples. I'm trying to think off the top of my head about what our students are doing. There are so many ways to pursue it. The automobile engineer can teach. They can pursue their own. They can do research. They can get an internship over the summer and figure out, what else can I do to make the impact I want to make? **[audio skips]**.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay, cool. One thing that I think parents and kids are concerned about is, where do you find the time to do all this extracurricular when you're supposed to be keeping your grades up and you have other responsibilities?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. That's a great question. Achieving the level of depth that we're talking about does require time. Parents and students who really go down this route of developing a specialty, they really have to come to terms with how precious their time is and cutting off anything that's really extraneous. What do students do who aspire to attend top colleges? They'll enroll in every single AP course maybe their school offers, which is tons of hours of homework. They'll spend one hour a week here, two hours a week here, three hours a week here in all these various clubs. Then at the end of the day, they don’t really have much time left. Unfortunately, like we talked about earlier, Lynn, none of these activities in and of themselves will differentiate the applicant in any way.

The goal is actually to figure out, what are the activities that I'm doing? What do I really, really love and what am I very interested in? And what am I doing just because I think I should be doing? Any time you hear in your mind, I think I should do this, or I'm doing it because Jason did it or Sally did it or something like that, that's an activity that's ripe for cutting out. Because time is at a premium, you have to free up time. Otherwise, you're not going to be able to develop that niche. When students free up time, I think parents get really uncomfortable. I have four extra hours in the week. I'm noticing all of his peers pursuing X, Y, and Z. I feel like he should join these activities also.

The goal is to actually take a step back, like, it's okay to have time, even if your kid is a little bit bored. I think boredom oftentimes sparks creativity, too. If you actually focus on maybe two activities and say, we're going to drop the rest, you actually are able to develop a specialty much, much faster and to do it at a deeper level. That's something that is going to be a struggle at first, I think, for most **[audio skips]**, being okay with free time to do that and maybe not taking all five AP classes that all their peers are taking, but they can maybe **[audio skips]** and they're not taking those extracurricular activities to a level that none of their peers are.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Interesting. Are there some extracurriculars that just aren't impressive? You were referring to some of the clubs. You're just a member of a club, like, who really cares? What do you think?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. A great way to think about it is, any low-threshold activity is going to be less impressive than a high-threshold activity or achievement. What I mean by threshold is, if it's easy to join and it's easy to explain, then it's not that impressive. If I told you I was president of the French club, what does that require? It's very easy to replicate. I go to the French club. I say, I'd like to join the French club. Presumably after two years or something like that, after the first year, you can be the secretary. Maybe after the second year, you can be president. You're president of the French club. It's not like it took some **[audio skips]** creativity or drive that's so much more than what their peers are doing.

If I told you that there is a student who started a statewide network of art kit distribution to cancer centers, explain that. Work backwards and put together those steps. You may be able to, but at various points you're going to stop and you're going to think, I don't know, what's the next step? How do they do that? If the piece sticks together in your mind, not impressive, but if it's harder to explain and think through, that becomes more impressive. Again, think about—let's take the typical student who wants to go for well-rounded. Science quiz bowl, model UN, decathlon, track team, five AP courses. All very easy things to explain.

You go to your school counselor, you say, I want to sign up for these classes, all the clubs. Very easy to explain track team. You go to the tryouts and usually, in track there are so many events that you can participate in that you can join the track team **[audio skips]**. None of those stick out on paper. If I'm an admissions committee member at a top school and I say, tell me again about Aisha and you say, she's the one who did this, this, this, but then nothing sticks out. But you say, Aisha, the statewide cancer network for art kits and stuff like that, that's a very easy It factor and makes her memorable. If you can have that thing that very clearly differentiates you from your competition, then **[audio skips]**.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Cool. My son’s best friend growing up, he really liked to write and read. You just sit there and you do that. What would schools think about that? Or how would you portray that? Because he was a very creative kid. He actually got into a really good school, but he wasn't big on doing things with other people, necessarily.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

And that's perfectly fine. I think I would ask a student like that, what type of writing do you enjoy doing? Why they like to write. Who’s their audience? That kind of thing because maybe there's a student who is just a really great poet or something like that. At their local university, there's a professor of English that they eventually link up with, and maybe they edit a poetry book together or they get published in various journals and win awards for that. Then there might be someone who wants to reach—has ideas that they think are unpopular or controversial or that they just want to share.

Maybe they start blogging about it and they figure out a way to guest blog on another prominent writer’s website or something like that. At the end of it all, maybe they cowrite some articles together and stuff like that. Then if I come to senior year and I say, hey, I was actually able to join a project with this well-known writer, that's really hard to explain because if I'm any old high school student, I may not be able to link up with that person. It really goes back to what about a certain activity you like and how can you leverage that? Really, writing poetry **[audio skips]**, those can be solitary activities. It's not like you have to interact with a ton of people to make those happen.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

What about using blogs and YouTube channels or Pinterest or things like that? Is that something that you're seeing more of?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Absolutely. We have to see everything. Whether it's Facebook or Pinterest or a blog or whatever, these are all tools and they're tools to get your message out. That's all they are. Sometimes a parent will tell me, he's really into this activity. He even has a YouTube channel around it. It's like, okay, but starting a YouTube channel in and of its own is a very straightforward thing. We can all start a YouTube account in five minutes, record a video, and put it up there. It's the magic of the Internet. The question is what they did with the YouTube channel. Did they have a certain amount of following? Do they have, I don't know, 10,000 subscribers and a lot of influence, and did they start a business with that?

Were they discovered by a local media outlet or someone who’s big in a certain field through their YouTube channel? Again, it's all about impact and influence and all that kind of stuff, because if I start a blog, I forget the stat, but I think most blogs on the Internet are basically not read by anybody. Then there's a small subset of blogs **[audio skips]** that are read by a lot of people. The question is, what's the right tool for doing what you want to do? If it's something like graphic design, maybe a website or Pinterest may be more beneficial than someone who wants to write about their ideas and so on.

For me, for instance, I like to write more necessarily than creating videos, and I don’t use Pinterest. I don’t use Twitter. I basically don’t **[audio skips]** Facebook. I see my blog as a tool to send my message around college and med school admissions **[audio skips]**. Again, in and of itself, starting a YouTube channel, not impressive, but what is it for? The student who is going to be starting the art kits for all the cancer departments may not use any social media or a blog or anything like that, but they use email to reach out to people and do in-person meetings and that kind of thing. You have to really see, what's my goal and what's the best way to get there?

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay. If anybody has any questions who are on this, please, you can type them into the question box. If you've got a question, now is the time to ask it. I also wanted to ask you, Shirag, about the kind of schools where this kind of extracurricular effort is important. Clearly, if you want to get into some elite school, doing something like one of the—the girl that is one of your clients right now, developing these art kits that she hopes will be spread by hospitals to cancer patients is impressive. But for your typical school, or even for your state school, could you talk about how important these are for different kinds of schools?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. I think a good parallel is grades. The harder the school to get into, the higher your grades have to be. The more elite the school is, the more specialty and impact you have to make. The better the specialty you have to develop, the bigger the impact you want to make. Let's say you're looking to get into a top-10 school. You need really high grades, really high test scores, and your extracurricular niche, and you have to develop a specialty. If you're looking to go to the number 100 ranked school, and of course, I'm using rank just to make a point, but then you're not going to maybe need that. Maybe the well-roundedness approach will be enough for you. It all depends.

With college admissions, it's all about increasing likelihood of getting into a certain school. If you're looking to get into a really top school, then doing this work on top of high grades and **[audio skips]** increase the likelihood that you get into those schools. For some schools, you don’t need to necessarily develop that level of expertise. But as competition gets higher, every single year, we're seeing record numbers of applications at top schools, whether you're an Ivy League school or a prominent state school. Like the UC system, we're seeing record numbers. It's getting harder and harder because these schools, it's not like they're growing. They have a certain geographic footprint.

They have certain class sizes and stuff like that, but as it gets more competitive, this idea of differentiation becomes more and more powerful because there is just more noise, and it's just easier to apply. With common app, UC applications, you can just click schools and you can recycle essays and all this kind of stuff. The question is, the grades and SAT scores and all that don’t differentiate, so what is it essay-wise and extracurricular-wise? Can you write? That helps them see a student on paper that's different than every other student that they're seeing on paper. That's really the key. The more competitive, the more you have to differentiate and so on.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay. I would think also, state universities, it seems to me that primarily, they're interested in your grades and test scores. The vast majority of them. They can't delve too much into—they're not holistic. But maybe the top student—

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah, that's the thing.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Like a Michigan or a Berkeley or **[audio skips]** University of Montana or Iowa or South Carolina. Do they really care that much about extracurriculars?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah, and that's exactly the point. I think it's true for public schools and private schools, really. The more selective they are, the more this matters. If we're looking at UC-Berkeley, UCLA, Virginia, Michigan State, UNC-Chapel Hill, these kinds of schools, they're going to treat the admissions process like the top 25 schools that they are, versus—I don't want to call out certain schools, but a state school that's less selective isn't going to require that, necessarily, of their prospective applicants. But same thing with private schools. If it's a smaller, lesser-known private school that's less competitive and you have great grades, that may be enough, especially if you take the well-rounded approach. It really depends on what the student’s goals are, too, but that's a weird thing to say for me, too, because I don’t want students to pursue things just for the sake of college admissions. This is where that authentic piece comes in. If we're talking about what will serve your admissions success the most, it really depends on the school and how you should use your time and that sort of thing.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay. I've got a question from someone. Can you speak to how some admission offices “grade” or formally rank their review of a student’s extracurricular experiences?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. Different admissions committees may have variations on this, of course, but really, the way a lot of admissions committees look at this is, they have different categories and they rank students within those categories. There might be academics. There might be extracurriculars. There might be personal factors and all this kind of stuff. It may be academics. They may even have a formula of unweighted GPA, number of AP tests, standardized tests and so on, and they may rank that student on a scale of one to 10, or one to five. Of course, like I said, every school may be a little bit different. In terms of extracurriculars, what would they look for? They may look for level of leadership, level of commitment, how many years they've done something, level of initiative, level of impact.

Again, this is of course to some degree subjective, but they may say, of our applicant pool this year, this student is at the top of the list, so they're an eight or a nine, versus someone who’s sort of middle of the pack, and that's a five. Personal factors might be what we learned from their essays, recommenders and stuff like that. They'll get a ranking there. Then at some point, there might be, if we're ranking them one to nine, let's say, let's say someone has a twenty-seven. They're just amazing. They have a nine in each certification. The school may say, anyone who has a 24 and up is an automatic acceptance. Then anyone who’s a 22 to 23 overall is a probably, but not a guarantee, something like that, and on from there.

Extracurriculars can actually be a hugely important thing. Again, the more selective the school, this is going to change a little bit, but you need great grades and great test scores to be considered very seriously. Extracurriculars push you over the edge. If someone has poor grades, it's not like if they developed this niche, that's somehow help them get into Harvard or Stanford or whatever it is. Again, grades also by themselves aren't enough because we have so many students these days who have perfect or near-perfect scores, so these things like personal factors and extracurriculars are the stuff that contribute to pushing them over that edge.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Here's a question. Please advise. A student has spent the majority of his free time playing golf in hopes of playing for college. At this point, his scores are not good enough to play for any division. I guess what she's saying is, what can you do with a kid who’s interested in golf but isn't going to be competing on the college level?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

The way I'm understanding it is, very interested in golf. Spends a lot of time playing golf, but they're not at the level where they're going to get a scholarship at a D-1 school or something like that. I guess the question is also asking, what should they do to increase their odds of admission given that interest? That's **[audio skips]**. Of course, again, grades, test scores, those are always important. Those are the foundation of the college application. That's the price of consideration, almost. The question then is, your son or daughter is playing a lot of golf and really loves golf. Again, let's go back to the questions of, what is it about golf that they love? If we're seeing, they can continue playing. Don’t get us wrong. I don’t want parents to walk away from this thinking, if my kid is not going to be excellent in something, they shouldn't do it because sometimes, some of our students know, I'm not a track star but I love track.

I'm going to do that, but I'm going to drop the other stuff that I'm only kind of interested in and pursue track and this other thing I'm doing **[audio skips]**. The question is, in addition to playing golf, what can your son or daughter do? I guess the question is, what is something that they're interested in, in addition to golf? Or what aspect of golf are they interested in? Maybe it's talking golf, so they start a podcast related to golf, and that's the first step. Or it's they love teaching people about how to choose golf clubs. They start a blog around that and see what happens from there. Or work at a golf store and, I don't know, revise the sales process for a golf store. There are so many ways to take this. Without knowing a student, it's hard for me to say, the next step should be X. I guess my encouragement always is to figure out what about that they like and keep taking progressive steps.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay, sounds good. When should you start doing it? Ideally, it would be freshman year in high school, but what if you are late to the game? What can you do?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah, the earlier the better, of course. That's the ideal scenario. You start in the 9th grade or 10th grade or whenever it is, but really, at the time when you learn this information, or you internalize this way of thinking, that's when you start it. You can only really make a level of impact with the amount of time that you have left. One way to accelerate this process, then, is to find a mentor. Someone who’s already operating at a high level in the space that you'd like to work in, whether that's through music or science or whatever. It would be one thing, for instance, to set up a lab. It's another thing to get an internship at a university over the summer and publish your research paper, and that's a very worthwhile and impactful way to spend maybe three months. Identifying mentors is a great way. If you want to start a little fundraiser or something, maybe you talk to a local business owner in your family or in your community or otherwise and ask them to coach you through something. Mentors are important. Even whether your child’s starting in 9th grade or 11th grade or anything like that, I think mentors **[audio skips]**.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay. Finding them. I think kids aren't really good at network. A lot of kids don’t seem to be good at networking. I know one place would be LinkedIn. Also, try to check out your parents’ contacts. I think LinkedIn is a wonderful resource for students, and I think also some people blow off kids, but I think others would be impressed that somebody has taken the initiative as a high school kid to reach out.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

For sure. That's a great point. I think most people like to talk and give advice about things they're very knowledgeable about. I'm as guilty as anyone. If you ask me to go ahead and speak with your parents about all of your work, I'm happy to do it because I like sharing and talking about things I know. I think that's true for so many of us. If there's something we're passionate about, we're happy to share that. Most students will contact and just write a genuine, a reach-out email, whether through LinkedIn or otherwise, to a local professional and say, hey, I'm such-and-such. I'm really interested in this work that you're doing. Can I even take you out to coffee or **[audio skips]** or come to you? Make it really convenient for them. Make it a low-commitment kind of thing. Or even jump on the phone. Even if they live in another state or something like that, it's totally fine.

Yeah, I think many people like to talk and give advice and all that kind of stuff and be—you're absolutely right that folks will be impressed with the few students who do that network thing. I want to caution parents. There’s something you said, Lynn, that really intrigued me. Most students aren't good at X, or most students don’t do Y. The ones who develop really unique extracurricular profiles go beyond what the average student is doing. Rather than think, but high schoolers don’t really do that, okay, that's a surefire way to stay average, to just go with the flow and not push yourself, do what everyone else is doing. But if you want to stand out, you have to do standout things, and reaching out to a professional on LinkedIn when 99% of high school students aren't, that's a standout thing.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Yeah. That's a great point. I've got another question. It seems that getting to be an Eagle Scout is a very respected achievement. Do you think that it is truly only at more conservative institutions? Or do you think that this is universally respected? I know you will say it matters what their final project was, and I agree, but aside from that, I am curious how an Eagle Scout is viewed. Interesting question.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. Great question. There are a few things. One is the level of—again, I'm not an expert on Eagle Scouts. We have some students who are working at it, but we have students who get to the highest level and they collect all their badges and they have all of these achievements. The higher level you get to, the more impressive it is. Whatever your project was, that also matters. The level of impact, the level of creativity and initiative. Again, this goes back to the idea of, it's not the specific activity that matters. It's not like Eagle Scout in and of itself is more impressive than getting to a high level in another activity. It's what you did through that. Is being an Eagle Scout and getting to high levels and making an impactful project, is that impressive? Yes, it is, but so is getting to a high level and making an impact in another activity. In terms of, is it only seen as a positive at conservative schools? I've never heard that. We have students who get into, I guess, what you would consider very bustling schools who had a really strong Eagle Scout background. I don’t see that as an issue.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay, great. One other thing I wanted to ask you about is just what about kids who can't have all these extracurriculars? They've got to work. How do you position that? I have to work to help support the family. Is there any advice for that?

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. College admissions committees always talk about how they practice holistic admissions. Holistic admissions means every student is evaluated with regard to their background, their context, their opportunities, and so on. If a student has to work, they have to work, and that's perfectly fine. But then again, there are ways to demonstrate initiative in your work. Maybe you can take on responsibilities that are beyond what a student their age would be able to take on. Or they impress their manager or their boss so much that they're able to rise up the ranks or have responsibilities that most of the others don’t. There are so many ways to make an impact. I wouldn't feel limited by stuff that you have to do because that's going to come into play for sure when it comes to admissions decisions.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay. I think I've run out of questions to ask you. I don't know if there's anything else that we didn't cover that you feel like you want to mention.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

No. I think, at least from my perspective, it was a pretty dense conversation. We covered a lot and I think there’s much information to let marinate. What I would encourage parents to do is to be open to these ideas. I think sometimes families will intellectually understand the importance of freeing up time and going deep in fewer things, but it's very easy to walk away from this presentation and then be like, yeah, I get it but then feel this anxiety about wanting to join a million clubs and activities and filling up all the time because their peers are doing it. Try to feel comfortable with the discomfort. Encourage your student to do what they're authentically interested in, and over time, I think you can see excellent results that’ll differentiate them from the crowd.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

That's great advice. I also think also it can increase anxiety when you see the common app and it’ll have all these lines for a bunch of extracurriculars and how much time, and you're like, this is a long list. If your kid only is doing two really good, but then there's all this blank space, I could see why some people would freak out about that. They really shouldn't.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

You're right. Quality always trumps quantity. It's not a race to fill up 15 activities. We have students who have 12 activities, we have students who have six activities, and both of them we can help get into really elite schools. Sometimes the activities sections are so short. You only get 150 characters to complete each entry, so you can't really say how much you covered or what you did to achieve that thing. However, there are many places to talk more about what you did. In the additional comments section, you can say, here's what I actually did through this activity. Or maybe in a school-specific supplemental essay, there's a great opportunity for you to describe in detail what you did and how that reflects your character, your values, your qualities, etc. Again, it's not about filling all of those activities. In fact, if you force it, schools will know. If you just write things for the sake of writing them, schools are, again, they're very smart about this kind of stuff and they don’t want to see you force entries for the sake of filling **[audio skips]**.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Okay, cool. Thank you, Shirag, for the wonderful advice you gave. I want to mention again Shirag’s website is shemmassianconsulting.com. He helps students from around the country. He happens to be in San Diego where I am. If you would love his set of blogs, if you would love his great resource guide on writing college essays, it's 91 pages, then you just can go to his website and you can get it. I want to thank you again for some fantastic advice. I think you're going to help a lot of people who are listening to this and I wish you luck in the college admissions season this year.

**Shirag Shemmassian:**

Yeah. My pleasure, and thank you, Lynn, for inviting me. It's always nice to chat with you and I appreciate the opportunity to share some advice with your **[audio skips]**.

**Lynn O’Shaughnessy:**

Yeah. You were great. I want to thank you. I've learned things. I'm excited that we get to share this with others. I hope everyone has a great day. Thanks. Bye.