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What is the value of swimming in relation to academics?

By Michael Chasson, President Sun Devil Aquatics & Former Collegiate Coach (ASU, Harvard, and Stanford)

As we start a new season, I thought this was a good time to talk about the value of swimming in getting the best college education possible. The perspective I bring to this topic is varied and covers more years than I care to admit. In my own education, I attended a high school where 44 students in my class were accepted to Stanford, I spent two years at a top public university (UCLA), and I graduated from Stanford, an outstanding private university. Professionally, I have coached age group swimmers for 39 years, and also coached and taught high school. I was fortunate to have coached at two of the best academic institutions in the world at Stanford and Harvard. In addition, some of my former assistant coaches are now head coaches at a variety of top academic schools, and they have given me further insight into how swimming is important in achieving admission to the school of your choice.

If there is one thing I learned from 12 combined years of coaching at Harvard and Stanford, it is that good grades alone don't matter in the college admissions process. At Harvard, the admissions office assigned an individual to me that I communicated with on a regular basis about admissions for prospective swimmers. At Stanford, I wrote a report that analyzed every swimming prospect we were recruiting. We would then meet with the Director of Admissions to discuss our recruits and what made them valuable to the university beyond their swimming ability. At both schools, admission decisions are made by committee. Each applicant is considered individually; however, a large number are eliminated quickly because they don't bring anything special to the school. Once the admissions office thought a student had the grades and test scores to do the school work, then other factors – such as being a dedicated swimmer – decided who got accepted.

At every school where admissions are competitive, whether it is public or private, you need to separate yourself from the crowd. There is a popular misconception that, "If I put all my energy into school at the expense of everything else, I will get better grades and have a better chance to get into the school of my dreams." Certainly, better grades will help any student get into college, but there are thousands of students with great grades. Stanford and Harvard each have 20,000 or more applicants for approximately 1500 slots. Every year I coached at Stanford and Harvard, students with perfect GPA's and test scores were rejected for admission.

I specifically remember one year at Harvard when there were more than 2000 applicants who had perfect SAT scores and a 4.0 GPA but didn't get accepted. Harvard only accepted 200-300 students that were admitted because of academics alone – and even those 200-300 students had something unique to offer academically beyond grades and test scores, such as starting their own business, or a national award in a particular academic area. The rest of the accepted applicants had very good grades and test

scores, but moved ahead of those with perfect scores/grades because they had another serious activity on their application, such as athletics or music performance.

Admission officers love swimmers who can show that their participation in the sport was part of a larger process of self-development and self-improvement. A swimmer will do well by showing the admissions office how swimming has enhanced their ability to set goals, manage their time, juggle priorities, make commitments and sacrifices, and develop a strong work ethic.

If you are serious about attending a top academic school, please keep these things in mind as you enter middle school and beyond. These are opinions based on my experiences as a coach and a student.

1. Everyone needs one activity that they are 100% committed to, outside of school. There are thousands of applicants that only have their grades and test scores, that won't get accepted to their top school choices. Swimming at a club like Sun Devil Aquatics is one of those activities.
2. Top schools want applicants who challenge themselves in school and other activities. Taking easier classes to get better grades, or eliminating time consuming activities to marginally improve your grades, does not send the best message to admissions. At the same time, having a list of activities where there is little commitment also will not enhance an application. Club swimming provides an activity that offers the types of attributes that are valued by college admissions.
3. The most important skills a student develops in elementary and middle school are work ethic, time management, and goal setting. These are all things that, when combined with what is learned with a top swimming team, develop a top college candidate. A student's grades in 6th grade are not deciding their college future. Grades and another primary activity in high school will help determine your college future.
4. It doesn't matter if you're the best swimmer on SDA, the state of Arizona, or the United States, or somewhere in middle, the approach to grades and admissions doesn't change. A dedicated swimmer who is a great student will have the most opportunities to go to the university of their choice.
5. Attending a private high school or charter school may help the average student who is not as motivated and needs more structure, more than it will help a top student who is already taking the hardest classes that are offered. If you are a hard-working student who challenges yourself at a strong high school, you will be a successful college applicant.
6. One or two grades of C in middle school is not going to derail a college career, if the student is learning to study and manage their time, and is making every effort to be successful. If a student gets poor grades because they can't get the work done in a reasonable time, and they have given their best effort, time put into swimming may have to be examined.

Serious club swimming can be an integral part of getting accepted to your preferred college. My experience has shown me that the time and energy spent in the swimming pool can go far

beyond doing a best time at a swim meet. Many people who have been great students, but had little interest in athletics, have a hard time understanding how something besides grades and test scores can be an important factor in a child's college future. I hope you will give these thoughts consideration.