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Travel

Heads Up | Precollege Programs

In Summer, Hitting the Books, Not Just the Beach

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WHEN Jeremy Grant of Roslyn, N.Y., was 16, he decided not to return for another summer of sleep-away camp, opting instead for a precollege program at U.C.L.A. In the mornings he took courses in SAT prep and public speaking; in the afternoons he hopped on a van to the beach, a museum, or a TV game show.

“It was the best summer of my life,” recalled Mr. Grant, now a sophomore at the [University of Pennsylvania](#). “It boosted my confidence to learn that I could get along on my own.”

At winter fairs in high schools around the country, precollege summer programs are now being pitched to teens and parents, many of whom see these “taste-of-college-life” programs as a vital part of the college planning process. Recession or not, interest in these programs, which can run as high as \$7,800 for six weeks (excluding airfare), is intense, with many programs fully booked by early spring.

When it started offering precollege programs in 1986, Summer Discovery, which organized Mr. Grant’s trip, sent just 170 students to U.C.L.A. Last year, the [Long Island](#)-based company had programs at 10 universities (three overseas), with more than 2,000 high school students participating.

Another company, Summer Study Programs of Melville, N.Y., sent 150 students to [Penn State](#) University when it began a precollege program there in 1992; this past year 600 attended the program, which includes college courses taught by accredited professors, Kaplan SAT prep classes and organized leisure activities. The company also has added programs in [Paris](#) and [Boulder](#), Colo. Precollege programs let students choose classes that, in some cases, give them college credits — and dress up a college admissions application. Students stay in dorms, use college gyms and dining halls. Perhaps best of all, to hear teens tell it, they live and travel without parents or camp counselors lording it over them.

“We let 15- and 16-year-olds operate more like young adults,” said Bob Musiker, executive director of Summer Discovery (888-878-6637; www.summerfun.com), adding that the responsibilities involved in a precollege program (picking courses, doing laundry) and the diverse mix of participants in the programs (like a “mini-[United Nations](#)”) widen students’ horizons.

“This is college but college on training wheels,” said Jason Lubar, executive director of American Collegiate Adventures (800-509-7867; www.acasummer.com) of [Chicago](#), which offers a precollege program at the [University of Wisconsin](#) in [Madison](#) that starts at \$2,795 for two weeks and goes up to \$6,795 for six weeks. While students may choose courses taught by university professors and mingle

with college students on a big campus in a colorful college town, there is still a higher level of supervision to ensure safety.

Precollege programs also benefit the university at a time when the college is open for summer session but when facilities are underutilized, said David Black, academic program manager at the University of Wisconsin. “These programs showcase [Wisconsin](#) as a first-class university,” he said. He added that they may also generate admissions applications from out-of-staters.

Language and cultural immersion is another theme of summer programs. Summer Study Programs (800-666-2556; www.summerstudy.com) offers programs of three weeks (\$5,195) or five weeks (\$7,195) at the Sorbonne in Paris, with housing in an all-suites hotel near the university. Summer Discovery has a four-week program in [Spain](#) (\$7,299) that includes stays at hotels in [Madrid](#) and [Barcelona](#) and on a college campus in [Valencia](#).

One of the newest trends in teen study programs is community service. Many high schools now have a community service requirement for graduation, and having spent a summer helping others may differentiate a college applicant or provide a fertile subject for an admissions essay. Rein Teen Tours of Wayne, N.J. (800-831-1313; www.reincommunityservice.com), which has offered teen tours for 23 years, created a community service division last year to meet a growing desire for helping others while on summer break.

“Kids who have done teen tours really want a unique experience where they give back,” said Norman Rein, the company’s owner. Rein’s four-week Project [California](#) program (\$5,899) is based at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Participants earn 80 hours of community service by working with children or animals, the environment, or at a food bank each morning. In the afternoon, they take elective classes that include photography, cooking, [golf](#), tennis, [surfing](#) or SAT prep. Weekend excursions are to Hollywood studios and a water park in [Palm Springs](#).

Another program offered by the company, called Project [Hawaii](#), teaches participants about what Mr. Rein calls the “nonexotic side” of life in Hawaii. By day, students staff a day camp for underprivileged kids or work at an animal sanctuary located in a rain forest. By night, they have immersion activities in Hawaiian culture. Weekends are for fun and travel, Mr. Rein added; participants learn to [snorkel](#) in [Maui](#) and surf in Honolulu. The cost of this four-week program is \$6,299.

Students seeking still more exotic locales can find programs in South and [Central America](#), South Pacific islands and Southeast Asia. Rustic Pathways (800-321-4353; www.rusticpathways.com) of Willoughby, [Ohio](#), for instance, caters to the adventuresome — and the socially conscious. In one new 24-day program, students work at an orphanage for children of a displaced ethnic minority in a hill tribe village in northern [Thailand](#), near the border of [Myanmar](#). On another program, participants bring one change of clothes and with \$50 buy three weeks’ worth of clothing at local markets before doing community service work in three hill tribe villages in Thailand.

“This is not your typical tour-bus-type trip where you take some pictures and get back on board,” said Jamie Spates, a director of the program, which costs \$2,995 plus \$85 for internal airfare. He explained that students sleep in a bamboo hut and take bucket showers. The program’s motto: “Come with nothing, go home rich.”

Visions Service Adventures (800-813-9283; www.visionserviceadventures.com) of [Newport](#), Pa., operates three domestic service programs in addition to those around the globe. Domestic programs are three or four weeks long and range in price from \$3,200 to \$4,400. One work and residence program is in Turkey Creek, a neighborhood in Gulfport, Miss., that was settled by emancipated African-American slaves and which still is recovering from [Hurricane Katrina](#). Another program offers interchange with spiritual leaders and naturalists on Plains Indian reservations in [Montana](#). A third is in [Alaska](#), where

participants recently built a teen center in an Athabaskan village.

“A lot of listening happens because we minimize iPods and cellphones,” said Joanne Pinaire, a Visions program director.

A “get your hands dirty” philosophy is embraced by Global Works of Boulder, Colo. (800-784-6362; www.globalworkstravel.com). Their summer work and travel projects have included renovating a school in [Costa Rica](#), building nurses’ stations in [Fiji](#) and helping with a reforestation project in [Ecuador](#). “When you travel the world, you’re introduced to different areas like marine biology or politics,” said Fritz Moriarty, a Global Works director. “Kids come back passionate about something for the first time in their lives.”