



How to Be a High School Superstar: A Revolutionary Plan to Get into College by Standing Out (Without Burning Out)

Cal Newport

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How to Be a High School Superstar: A Revolutionary Plan to Get into College by Standing Out (Without Burning Out) Cal Newport Do Less, Live More, Get Accepted

What if getting into your reach schools didn't require four years of excessive A.P.-taking, overwhelming activity schedules, and constant stress?

In *How to Be a High School Superstar*, Cal Newport explores the world of relaxed superstars—students who scored spots at the nation's top colleges by leading uncluttered, low stress, and authentic lives. Drawing from extensive interviews and cutting-edge science, Newport explains the surprising truths behind these superstars' mixture of happiness and admissions success, including:

- Why doing *less* is the foundation for becoming *more* impressive.
- Why *demonstrating passion* is meaningless, but *being interesting* is crucial.
- Why accomplishments that are *hard to explain* are better than accomplishments that are *hard to do*.

These insights are accompanied by step-by-step instructions to help any student adopt the relaxed superstar lifestyle—proving that getting into college doesn't have to be a chore to survive, but instead can be the reward for living a genuinely interesting life.

How to Be a High School Superstar: A Revolutionary Plan to Get into College by Standing Out (Without Burning Out) Details

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From Reader Review How to Be a High School Superstar: A Revolutionary Plan to Get into College by Standing Out (Without Burning Out) for online ebook

Madison says

The purpose of Newport's *How to Be a High School Superstar* is to change the student's perspective on high school life and college admissions. Newport gives you useful advice concerning what college admissions are impressed by and enlightens the reader regarding certain myths about college requirements. He tells the readers steps to enjoying your high school years while getting accepted into your preferred college. For example, Newport says, "(1) Pack your schedule with free time. (2) Use this time to explore. (3) Master one serious interest. Don't waste time on unrelated activities. (4) Pursue accomplishments that are hard to explain, not hard to do."

The theme of this novel is quality over quantity. Newport reveals that doing a cluster of unrelated activities that you are not passionate about does not impress colleges and will not benefit you overall. He believes stressed students with no free time will not be rewarded for their demanding schedule. He advises readers to do find what they are passionate about and focus on that particular interest. For college admissions, the quality of their work in doing what they enjoy will far outweigh the quantity of multiple half-hearted activities.

The author's style of writing is an exposition. It is an exposition because he is establishing facts about a topic to bring clarity to his idea. An example of this style of writing is when Newport tells the story of a girl named Kara. She has a meeting with her guidance counselor, who tells her that her grades (B's) aren't good enough to get into Stanford. Then he tells us, "Kara did get in. In fact, Kara got into twenty of the twenty-one schools she applied to, including MIT, Caltech, Columbia, Cornell, Berkeley, John Hopkins, and, of course, Stanford—proving, to the surprise of her counselor, that those schools do occasionally accept students with B's." This style of writing is effective because using specific examples and facts help the readers become convinced by any idea.

I enjoyed this nonfiction book because it informed me on how to get into your preferred college, which I believe will affect my entire life. I admired how the book had examples of students who succeeded using this technique. I would not change anything about this novel. *How to Be a High School Superstar* is unlike anything I have ever read because it introduced an idea that I never considered.

Denise says

This is one of those books where you might roll your eyes at the title and walk away. I wouldn't have been interested- I mean, we get enough of this stuff with day-to-day life around here- but someone recommended it to my husband, who recommended it to me. It was actually a refreshing take on college admissions. The author's point is that straight-A, athletically successful, volunteering, high SAT-scoring, student body presidents- or that type of student- are now a dime a dozen- and rather boring to college admissions officers. However, students who eschew keeping up such a grind, but rather find their own interests and excel at them, will stand out to college admissions committees. The author explains how students can free up time by

dropping activities that don't mean much to them or to admissions officers, and gain time for pursuits that are interesting to them and also to colleges. My one fault with the book is that it still is focused on how to get into traditional top-notch schools, and doesn't acknowledge that getting into those schools is not every student's goal. I guess the assumption is that if you can get into top tier schools, you can get in anywhere.

Vinita Singh says

Very nice

Casey McCann says

Brilliant. A must-read for high school students and their parents.

For years, I have been aware that, in my capacity as advisor to many college-bound kids, my advice has run counter to the prevailing wisdom of many a high school guidance counselor. Eschewing the the goal of well-roundedness in favor of actual accomplishment, I have recommended that students quit high-investment, low-yield activities in favor of concentrating on developing their strengths.

This well-researched little book validates that approach and marries it to a comprehensive strategy for gaining admission to the most selective colleges and universities. Its holistic perspective aims to help the student become a happy, fulfilled, interesting human being who happens to be irresistible to college admissions officers. Best of all, it's packed with practical advice regarding study skills, time management, and attaining goals.

Kalvin Lam says

How to be a High School Superstar is one of Newport's best books, hands down. I feel like I say this about every one of his books, but this is actually one of the best. I had read through all of his books already except for this one, and now, with this one finished, I am officially done with them. This book is phenomenal – it's about more than succeeding in high school and college. In typical Newport-fashion, this book is more than what it seems to be – it's about life, it's about about living in a fulfilling manner, and it's about living an interesting life.

Though I've just recently finished high school and am now done with college applications, I wanted to read this book for fun – to give advice to other high school students and to understand Cal's insights. Right off the bat, this book hooked me. It's because while reading this guide, I learned that without even knowing it, I followed Cal's advice to a T. He informs students not to play the standard admissions game – that it's possible to be relaxed and still get into the college of your dreams. Doing more is not necessarily better – it's a message that I think would do well to ease the stress and tension in many hyper-competitive Bay Area high schools.

Cal explores the subculture of “relaxed superstars,” a group of people who are relaxed, yet succeed in the college system.

“Most relaxed superstars pay little attention to college admissions until application deadlines loom—the topic doesn’t dominate their lives the way it does for so many of their peers. They dismiss the belief that you should suffer through the hardest possible course schedules; instead, they build reasonable schedules that provide challenge but still leave plenty of free time. They abhor crowded lists of extracurricular activities; instead, they focus on a small number of genuinely interesting pursuits. Perhaps the most interesting trait is their happiness.”

The idea that happiness should be had in high school and not deferred to college is a foreign notion to many of my classmates. I mean I don’t blame them; the Bay Area can cultivate a cutthroat environment in its high schools. But at the end of the day, Cal’s concept that happiness is integral to these “relaxed superstars” is contradictory to what many students believe. But it’s what I believe as well. In fact, I became a “relaxed superstar” my senior year. I took an easy course load and built a reasonable schedule in which I had loads of free time to explore and to reflect on my life. It was awesome to be able to sit back and relax and enjoy other pursuits and pursue other opportunities as they arose. In the past, I’ve often fallen victim to the notion that “more is better” in terms of extracurricular activities and officer positions. In my junior year, this led me to take on more than I could handle, and I ended up overextending myself.

Cal’s main point is that what it takes to succeed in the college system is interestingness, and this interestingness cannot be planned or scheduled. This interestingness comes from exploration and reflection, and it comes in the form of trying out different activities and trying to do something different than what others have done. To Cal, the secret to admissions is to be a genuinely interesting person who does genuinely interesting things.

Even with all of this analysis, I love how Cal is still realistic – there’s a whole section about how grades and SAT are vital and that your scores should be within the upper ballpark of the school you’re looking at - only then can the HS superstar guide help you in your pursuit.

He also talks about what happened at a highly competitive high school (Gunn), where administrators tried to hold a college “meeting” to encourage less stress and less competition. What happened was that people left after the counselors explained that the students should be settling for less prestigious colleges. What Cal is offering is a chance to attain admission to high level colleges while maintaining a comfortable lifestyle.

Cal advises to participate in menial activities only for two reasons.

“I should hasten to mention that there are two exceptions to observe in applying this test. You should always feel free to keep an Activity Andy-friendly activity on your list if it meets one of the following two criteria. The first is if it’s something that requires only a small time investment on your part and that you joined for social reasons – say, to hang out with your friends or impress cute girls or boys. Without friends and flirting, high school wouldn’t be high school.”

I think it’s this human element of Cal that makes me love his books so much. The fact that he understands that as teens, we want to meet other people and get to know cute girls (heck yeah!). Cal is a true homie.

There are a few concepts that Cal discusses that I find particularly interesting. The first is the superstar effect. In short, this effect says that the top performers in any field will receive a disproportionately greater amount of rewards compared to performers who are near the top, but not at the top. The best example is in the case of valedictorians who have 4.0 unweighted GPA. The people who are a little bit beneath them (3.95-3.99GPA) receive much less of the rewards than the valedictorians receive. It’s interesting to note.

Another effect I found interesting was the complimentary accomplishments hypothesis which states that if you do one thing very well, the amount of awards you have will accumulate faster and faster. Furthermore, the failed-simulation effect hypothesis explains that doing the inexplicable is very impressive; for example, it seems much more impressive to publish a book or create a health curriculum vs. playing a rock band or becoming class president, even if the activities take similar amounts of work to accomplish. This is because the path to publishing a book or creating a health curriculum is less well understood, and thus more impressive to others.

The final thing I found interesting was Cal's observation regarding signaling theory. He ponders why the smartest students seem to never participate in class. He concludes that there is the existence of a "side channel," a channel that helps to distribute information to others that the smartest students are smart. What this means is that the smartest students already have a reputation for being smart, and thus do not need to prove their "smartness" in the classroom. Their reputation precedes them.

"When the researchers applied this new model to the classroom setting, they reasoned that the smarter the student, the higher change that her classmate will have heard about her brainpower indirectly through a side channel – perhaps hallway gossip or overheard conversations."

He continues his analysis by saying that medium-ability students have to signal their skill by answering lots of questions because they're not intelligent enough to rely on the side channel (AKA their reputation). They have a big fear that if they don't answer enough questions, they'll look like the low-ability students.

"The high-ability students, by contrast, are confident that the side channel will send positive information about their intelligence. That is, they assume their reputation precedes them into the classroom...Put another way, only a student who is truly confident about her skills can afford to avoid showing them off."

This is a great book, and I would strongly recommend it to all.

Ed says

I agree with the central thesis of the book: High school students are over-involved in uninteresting activities at which they are merely good, and thus they need to choose one or two genuine, innovative pursuits to bolster their college admissions chances. However, the road to the kind of achievement Newport promotes isn't available to most students for various reasons (socioeconomic status, personality preferences, etc.). Essentially, by following the map he lays out, talented, intelligent, and hardworking students will be able to keep being talented, intelligent and hardworking students, but at Yale instead of UConn. Obviously, there's a market for that kind of advice, and Newport has done well by himself to make use of it. Unfortunately, I don't think this is a work that has much usefulness for the majority of high school students.

Megan B says

I hear this flies in the face of conventional attitudes. I like unconventional. I loathe the rat race of overscheduling our children for practical and philosophical reasons anyway. I am very interested in giving this a read.

What on reviewer had to say: "The author's point is that straight-A, athletically successful, volunteering, high SAT-scoring, student body presidents- or that type of student- are now a dime a dozen- and rather boring to college admissions officers. However, students who eschew keeping up such a grind, but rather find their own interests and excel at them, will stand out to college admissions committees. The author explains how students can free up time by dropping activities that don't mean much to them or to admissions officers, and gain time for pursuits that are interesting to them and also to colleges. "

Someone else: "1. Doing less is the foundation for becoming more impressive, and scheduling free time is critical to success.

2. Demonstrating passion is meaningless, but being interesting is crucial.

3. Accomplishments that are hard to explain are better than accomplishments that are hard to do."

Brianna says

When I first saw this book, I was skeptical. After glancing through Countdown to College 21 To-Do Lists for High School Step-By-Step Strategies for 9th 10th 11th and 12th Graders by Valerie Pierce and seeing that I'd already missed most of the steps that I needed to take, I decided that the hyper-planning approach to getting into college was not going to work for me, and this book sat on my desk for a long time. On a whim, I picked it up a couple of days ago and was pleasantly surprised to find that this wasn't the traditional guidebook attempting to ensure you can tick all of the right boxes on your applications when it comes to what you've taken and what you've done. It wasn't a book written for parents, and it wasn't written for low-achieving students; it seemed designed for the exact kind of student that I am. (In fact, it was almost weirdly so. In the Q&A, there's a question that exactly describes me: whether someone who just finished their junior year can still benefit from the plan that he's proposing.)

I know that the word "refreshing" is overused, but it was honestly a relief to hear someone so smart and well-intentioned who seemed to actually care about the well-being of high school students talk about this subject. His writing just seemed so genuine and the advice was practical. This is the closest I've ever come to a calm, helpful, logical conversation about college with anyone, since my parents just scream at me to work harder and my disinterested school counselor just wants to write me a generic recommendation in the fall and move on with his life.

More than anything, it struck me how much Newport's claims are grounded in reality. As a student at a high school with an impressive math and science magnet program (and myself being in a less prestigious but still academically challenging communication arts program), I come into contact with smart kids and academic superstars (Intel and Siemens winners, etc.) *all the time* and I am all too familiar with the feeling that I could never achieve the tremendous success that they seem to be able to achieve. Moreover, I've noticed something on which Newport touches: that smart kids are *lazy*, man. I'm a hard-working Hufflepuff and I benefit from the erroneous connotation that the kids who work the hardest and get the best grades are the smartest, but I assure you that that assumption is indeed in error. The smartest kids are the ones who figure out how to do the least amount of effort on their schoolwork and then put that time to use for other things. Sometimes "other things" means worthy pursuits like making videos for the Smithsonian and sometimes it just means smoking pot, but it's easy to recognize that these kids are sharp. Real-world sharp.

It's always kind of pissed me off that these kids can work so little and still basically get the same good grades that I do, but, more than that, I'm always kind of disappointed that what are clearly the best and brightest minds don't seem to give a damn about world history or calculus, because I sincerely believe that this stuff is

important. I mean, you have to be in school for six hours a day. Why squander that time not trying to learn as much as you can? This education is free (to us...not to our parents, but still). The next level up isn't going to be, so you might as well absorb as much as you can now.

But I guess part of what sets those kids apart is that they're not willing to settle for anything less than the best. If they don't have respect for the teacher or they don't think the class is worth their time, they're going to make the best use of their time that I can. I don't always agree with those decisions, but hey, that's them.

And, all the same, I've always kind of wanted to be one of the smart kids, one of these superstars, so I'm not going to turn down any good advice on how.

I was incredibly impressed by Part One of this book. All of the advice on study habits, the ideal student workweek, joining communities; I think this stuff is gold and I plan to implement it all in the fall, when I'll be taking my relaxed senior year schedule.

My only critique of the book is that after Part One, it starts to lose focus and become repetitive. Both Parts Two and Three seemed to me like they could have been condensed and better tied in to Part One.

One of the things that I liked about the first section is that it was clear, direct, and practical, without any superfluous information; it was a plan ready to be implemented. After Part One, Newport wanders down a detour that makes the book a strange combination of unnecessary psychological research and case studies, a la Malcolm Gladwell, which only served to distract from the easy implementation of the book's messages.

When it comes to recommending this book, I'm a little bit undecided. If your parents are anything like mine, I can easily see them rejecting this approach without a second thought, and, as Newport points out, some students are just as dedicated to the overworked lifestyle that they've chosen. It's (relatively) easy for me to embrace this outlook not only because my chronic daily headaches have given me a punch-in-the-face kind of wake-up call about not stressing too much and taking my health seriously. It also helps that I'm a rising senior, meaning that it's socially acceptable for me to take a relaxed course load this year anyway. I don't know if junior year me would have been able to embrace this philosophy. In fact, with the way that CAP constricts your schedule, I highly doubt it. And besides, I'm proud of the fact that I made it through 4 AP's last year (though I may be less proud when scores come July 8th, ha).

The dilemma is that the relaxed superstar philosophy works best when you start at a young age, yet most young people aren't willing to drop their maxed-out lifestyle until senior year.

Here's what I say: I would recommend this to anyone in middle or high school. The sooner the better, but if you chafe at the demands the first time reading it, put it off. It's still worth doing for just senior year if that's all the risk you're willing to take. While I think high school is an ideal time for conducting the kind of exploration Newport describes, there will be time after high school too. As a good friend once told me, you have your entire life to get to where you want to be.

Emily says

This book presents an interesting, innovative, and highly attractive approach to the college admissions process. Newport suggests that the trick to beating the system is to invest one's time in one main special pursuit, mastering it and thereby distinguishing oneself from other applicants. Not only does this book

suggest undertaking an ambitious project that will appeal to colleges, but it also emphasizes the importance of this project over school. Students made successful through the "superstar" method abstain from taking time-consuming classes and getting involved in school clubs in order to have more time for their special extracurricular project.

While this book is an engaging read, I can't help but notice holes in the presentation of the author's main point. Throughout the book, we learn about the journeys of a number of "superstar" students, all of whom accomplish their goals of earning admissions to prestigious colleges. Not one student in this book falls short of complete success. But it is obvious to the reader that completely freeing one's schedule to make time (rule #1!) for a standout project may result in disastrous consequences. It is impossible for every high schooler who tries this method to end up with a brilliant project.

Furthermore, it seems as if the author is treating acceptance into one's dream school as the end of the road. How is it possible for Maneesh, who only goes to school until 11AM each day his entire senior year, to be just as prepared for his college career at Stanford alongside Elizabeth, who toiled over AP classes for four years? This is never addressed in the book.

Overall, this book is very well written and provides great insight into the general college admissions process.

Mayed says

I can honestly say that I would never pick up, or in this case download, a book that strictly discusses the milestone of success in a student's life towards college, as relevant as it is. I am simply incapable of taking things that are entitled to an extent of terminology that includes "Superstar" and "impressiveness" However, I didn't hear about Cal through his series of books, well, in fact it wasn't even through his own blog. I am a frequent visitor to Scott Young's blog, which in some sense runs differently from Cal's but what I sought in Scott's blog was only realized and tapped when I found his perspective on studying, and time-management so inevitably fresh; it's an intertwined image of everything in life, enhanced through partial edges and misunderstood cores. There was a mention of Cal's blog on Scott's, and from there I took the audacity to make a visit. To my discovery I had just found the perfect destination for any type of student, Cal Newport writes specifically on and about studying and the success it entails. What intrigued me though, was that his informative concepts were not meant to be exclusive; he adapts and adopts key points from dozens of researchers and authors, one of them being Malcolm Gladwell.

He simply outlines some tools that make things easier, and only a bit easier for anyone who is willing to thrive academically. It's, at some points throughout the book, a bit too unnecessary and instructional, that I myself gave up on it. But knowing the need I have for a more organized layout, I always got back to it. He does help, even if the whole book does inevitably seems naive, for the perspective he discovers makes quite the sense. Colleges, and particularly those high-reaching elite schools, do make rather mysterious decisions with their acceptances, and anyone of interest in any of these will most definitely agree, and what Cal does, starts with connecting the key points that drove the dozens of students he interviewed into being accepted, with one condition in mind, that they be relaxed or simply self-driven, which so happens to be in the title. I find it rather uncommon of students to actually make such philosophy out of their high school lives, especially at a public school such as mine, because for them it automatically means that they have to consume every bit of energy left which is mentally, academically and physically unhealthy.

In brief, he emphasizes on the idea of counting on perspiration rather than anything else, but he also keeps it within sense and reality.

Marie says

I was skeptical that someone could fill more than 200 pages explaining a concept that seemed fairly simple, but Newport packs in a lot of specific advice and examples with very little redundancy. I believe his plan is healthy and smart, but will not always lead to the amazing results in his examples. The good news (and this is something he doesn't play up very much because the book is marketed specifically to kids who have their hearts set on elite colleges) is that even if you "fail," you have probably achieved a more pleasant and meaningful 4 years of high school in the process than you would have otherwise.

There are two things I found ironic about the book. He warns that you shouldn't say "I'm going to do this internship because it will make me a 'relaxed superstar' and I will seem 'interesting' to colleges." The idea is you happen to see an internship in an area you're curious about so you try it and then things progress from there naturally, and being a desirable candidate is basically a side effect. But that's kind of like telling someone "You'll find romance once you stop looking for it and just live your life." If you're reading a how-to book about something, chances are you'll have a hard time turning off that voice in the back of your head. The book certainly has a do-this-and-you-will-succeed tone, but you can see in the examples that there is an element of luck too.

The other thing that struck me as ironic is that after having the kind of authentic learning experiences described in the book, I would think that maybe going to Harvard wouldn't seem quite so critical anymore. The strategies outlined in the book could be used to make the most out of any college environment and in the workplace post-college.

Lauren says

Personally, I think the "superstar" ideal isn't that realistic. It does not present itself in a way you can reach it through goal-setting and it is mostly based on chance. Sure, high school students who started a business and got a C in a class in freshman year got into great and famous colleges. That's because they started a business! A college is going to accept a student with a successful business with a C over a good student with straight A's. Not all students have the chance to start a business. Now, I disagree with the finding one thing to focus on strategy because I love to do many things and I wouldn't want to give any of them up. But some people may like the suggestions listed in this book. I believe you just have to see if it fits you. Obviously, it is not the lifestyle for me.

Jessica says

Revolutionary? Yes.

Doable? Ehh...

I agree that instead of dabbling in multiple random activities, a student should instead focus on deepening their expertise in a certain niche. Newport essentially puts forth this message and spends the rest of the book yammering on about students that have followed this method.

It's more of a "make it or break it" sort of thing; either say sayonara to the AP courses, perfect GPA, club

positions, excessive volunteer hours, summer programs, and whatever else Newport labels "prefab" to invest a heck ton of time into some obscure magnum opus, or fail on the project and wind up with a sparse application.

What concerns me is that the students Newport mentions have luck involved in their success. Not everyone has parents that can connect them with a professor next door, much less one willing to engage with a high schooler. Running a business isn't a mere you-get-out-what-you-put-in-whoop-dee-doo activity; not only does one need hard work, they will also have to watch factors that they may not have much control in.

Natik says

I'm giving this to my high school cousin to help cure her "87 clubs syndrome" and generally protect against a certain masochistic and narcissistic study culture that develops among high achieving kids. Also I feel "So Good They Can't Ignore You", while written for working adults, is very good for the same high school demographic.

The author Cal Newport has an amazing blog where all of this advice and more is available for free. It is good to give people nice, compact books though. They probably won't follow up on your "go read this blog" suggestion too closely.

What I feel this book is missing though, is an honest discussion if getting into Harvard is even a worthy goal (at least for undergrads who plan on much graduate school). You may be the top of your high school class, but at Harvard, you'd be average and blend into the crowd if you're not much of a self-advocate. Wouldn't it be better to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond? I guess the author is biased since he went to MIT and Dartmouth, and is now teaching at Georgetown.

Augustine says

Yeah of course, first of all the book title deserves the award of "Lamest title ever" BUT STOP! stop right there. A revolutionary plan? That's no joke. Really, just give it a try.

Having been stuck in china for so long, I could have never even envisioned high-schoolers accomplishing such amazing things, and this book sort of unraveled everything that seemed scary at first. University still seems pretty scary, but I guess not as much as before.

Well researched, well organized, and overall, very well written :)

Receiving good instructions and insight is one thing, while following them correctly is certainly another... While this book totally aced the former, what's left is up to myself...

Kind of changed my entire view on college admissions and "the real world".
THANK YOU CAL NEWPORT! You are a good person.
