

All school, no work may be teens' new normal

BY ROBERT CHANNICK

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CHICAGO - The summer job, long an entry-level rite of passage into the working world for teenagers, is becoming obsolete.

Under pressure to bolster their college applications, more students are shunning the character-building, low-paying first job for extracurricular activities and year-round academics.

Out are summers spent perched on a lifeguard chair slathered in zinc oxide, schlepping clubs on fairways or stacking boxes in a warehouse. In are science classes, tutoring sessions or other resumeworthy pursuits, all aimed at giving students a leg up on the competition.

Emblematic of that trend is Magali Ortiz, 18, a recent graduate of Northside College Prep, who spent every summer vacation away from the elite, selective-enrollment Chicago public high school honing her powers of persuasion at a debate camp in Michigan.

'At my school there is sort of a culture of doing more academic things, as opposed to traditional jobs, during the summer,' said Ortiz, who is headed to Tufts University. 'It's a way to kind of advance in high school and prepare for college.' Ortiz, who lives in Chicago's Albany Park neighborhood, eschewed employment during the school year as well, focusing instead on Advanced Placement courses, the debate team and several STEM internships through the nonprofit After School Matters program.

All school and no work may be the new normal for teens.

A study released this month by the Brookings Institution found that only 1 in 3 age 16 to 19 are working or looking for a job, down sharply from 2000, when more than half of teens were in the labor force.

Reduced demand for lowwage work due to automation and globalization, minimumwage hikes and competition from older workers and immigrants all play into the trend, Brookings found. But the most dramatic shift for teens is the replacement of summer jobs with summer school.

in summer school and not seeking work, according to the study. In 2000, just 1 in 7 teens were exclusively summer school students.

Summer school offerings include everything from remedial to enrichment courses - a chance to catch up or get ahead in an increasingly competitive academic environment, Shambaugh said.

To be sure, not every teen has the resources to forgo a part-time job as a way to either help with household expenses or save money for higher education. But families of limited means also are prioritizing school over work.

Fewer teenagers work during the school year as well, with labor force participation dropping from nearly 50 percent in 2000 to about 34 percent last year, according to Brookings. While employment trends are subject to the ups and downs of the overall economy, the seemingly secular year-round drop among teens accounts for more than a third of the decline in the overall labor force participation rate since 2000, Shambaugh said.

Beyond vying for admission to a top college, Shambaugh said there is another reason for the increased focus on academics: High school is harder than it used to be.

Elayna Whiteman, 15, of Glencoe, Ill., a rising sophomore at New Trier High School, is partially bucking the trend by working as an attendant at Glencoe Beach this summer. But she said a part-time job during the school year is 'impossible,' given the academic demands at the nationally ranked high school.

The trend has families and economists alike questioning whether teenagers might be better prepared academically, but ill-equipped to handle the rigors of real-world employment without at least one seemingly meaningless early work experience.

While the Brookings study posits that increased attention to academics among teens may lead to a better outcome for society, Shambaugh said it remains an open question whether summer school tops summer work in the long run.

'We used to think summer everybody is out of school,' said Jay Shambaugh, a senior fellow in economic studies at Brookings who headed the research project. 'A lot more high school students are actually in school in the summer than they used to be.' Last year, nearly a third of teens were enrolled

'It's worth more research to figure out if you need to have spent a summer working a lousy job for low **wages** to have a good career later in life,' Shambaugh said.