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Opinion: What do you do?
By Satvika Ananth
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As school begins and strangers become friends in new classrooms with new teachers and new courses, a common icebreaker is used to, you know, break the ice.

The teacher separates the class into small groups and each person is asked to share his or her favorite food and color, and one activity each person participates in. The third question, a seemingly innocuous inquiry, causes many students anxiety.

This year, when I was subject to these questions, I was overwhelmed. What activities am I a part of? I am in Girl Scouts and some clubs, but what do I say for the one activity that I want to be identified with? I was struck by the fact that, without this crucial answer, I would remain a floater, undefined in my classes and to myself for the remainder of the school year.

Most middle and high schools provide numerous groups and teams for students to be a part of. These range from team sports like baseball to organizations such as the newspaper and yearbook, to small groups such as the philosophy or critical theory clubs.

The common thread: They all involve interacting with others in a group effort. Even if there is no final goal, being a part of an activity allows students to become involved in a larger group with a common interest.

Such a group provides not just a shared sense of purpose, but also a sense of belonging. In a large high school like mine, with almost 3,000 students, belonging to a group is crucial.

Some adults complain that when they meet new people, the first question is "What do you do?" – as if their careers define their personality and existence. This is also true at the school level.

Students are separated quickly into the groups they belong to, in order to create a semi-structured social fabric for the school. Why wouldn't the cheerleaders all sit together at lunch? They spend every Thursday and Friday night in each others' company at football games. Same for the debate team – they spend almost every weekend together at tournaments and are a tightly knit group as a result.

Belonging to a particular group gives a student a sense of identity. That's especially useful on the first day of school.

Besides that, it provides a strong support group that students can turn to. Often a coach or instructor is more sought out than parents, since kids are so frequently around them.

According to the **Future of Children study by Princeton University and the Brookings Institution**, almost 40 percent of a student's time is spent in leisure activities. Kids spend more

time with friends and in extracurricular activities than they spend with their own parents. Seven hours of that time will be spent at school, hopefully building a lifelong identity and personality.

If students are able to identify themselves with a particular group, they will be less likely to wander into less beneficial activities.

Team sports are often the most well-known extracurricular activities. In high school, students have an entire class period dedicated to the sport, along with before- or after-school practice. The competitive atmosphere may lead to some pressure, but young athletes have older models to look up to, as well as a supportive group of friends.

Competitive academic groups, such as Model United Nations and Academic Decathlon, also create a supportive team atmosphere, even when the members occasionally compete against each other. It allows students who are more academically inclined to be in their element, if only for an hour each day. Students can forge an identity that reflects their passions in an environment that fosters this growth.

Joining a group is an investment that will be repaid tenfold in the long-lasting friendships and, of course, will provide a ready answer to the inevitable question: "What do you do?"

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