



College Counseling

Robin S. Groelle, M.A. – www.collegecounseling.com
rgroelle@collegecounseling.com 941-932-1216

Making Your 4-Year Plan

One of the first—and most important—steps of planning for college is course selection. Your high school academic record is likely to be the first credential that college admissions offices will review. The strength of that record in comparison to others in the applicant pool will provide an important contextual framework for your chances of admission. For example, the harder it is to get into a college, the more important your course selections become. Colleges that are less selective tend to be more forgiving of choices that might not reflect as positively on your application. Here are some tips as you put together your 4-year academic plan:

1. When in doubt, err on the side of rigor. The degree to which you expose yourself to rigor or challenge in the high school classroom speaks volumes with regard to the likelihood that you can perform well in college level courses. As a result, *admission officers are watching to see how you use the curriculum available to you to “step up” each year.* Each year of high school should reflect advancement through progressively rigorous coursework in each discipline.

2. Know your capacity to do the work. In contemplating rigor in course options, it is easy to get drawn into the presumptive logic that taking the highest level will be most impressive to colleges. While there is some truth in that assessment, you need to be able to function at a high level in the course. Barely passing an inordinately “hard” course produces the double whammy of a low grade in that course and the ripple effect of lower grades in other courses as you spend a disproportionate amount of time making it through the hard course. The bottom line: While it is important to stretch yourself, don’t over-reach in taking courses for the purpose of impressing admission officers.

3. Breadth matters. In other words, keep your bases covered. In each year of high school, you should take courses in the five core discipline areas: math, science, social science, foreign language and communication arts (a.k.a. English). Do this regardless of your career interests. Why? Admission officers, especially at selective colleges, want to see that you have developed skills of critical thinking and analysis across disciplines. Having such an experience gives them greater confidence that you will be able to handle distribution requirements and cross-disciplinary courses you are likely to encounter in college.

4. Substitute value for value. It is not uncommon for students entering the Junior or Senior year to rationalize course selections (e.g. “I don’t like Spanish...” “I want to double up in sciences...”). *Generally speaking, dropping a course in one discipline for a course in another is acceptable if you are substituting value for value.* For example, dropping an Honors or AP French in order to take AP Chemistry or Biochemistry Honors is acceptable. On the other hand, dropping it for a survey course in Economics or Psychology would be a bad move within the context of competition at selective institutions.

If you think you want to take courses that relate to your possible major in college, keep in mind that the first order of business in high school is to focus on breadth and depth of curricular development. If your schedule allows you to take courses related to your career interest *in addition* to the core group of five go for it. Otherwise, wait until college to start your major.

5. Don’t settle for “good enough.” It is common for students to chart their progress through high school by working only to the level of their graduation requirements or to the course “requirements” posted by colleges. The problem is that selective colleges want to see what you will do when you have seemingly satisfied your “requirements”—when you don’t think you have to do anything. Be careful, then, not to settle for the minimum or that which is good enough. If you want to increase your range of options as a college applicant, push past that which is good enough to that which will make you a better candidate.

A common question from students regarding course selections sounds like this: “Is it better for me to take an easier course where I know I can get an “A” or should I take a harder course where I’ll probably get a lower grade?” Of course, it’s best to take the hard course and get the “A. However, in addition consider the following:

- **Choose courses that make sense to you.** The courses you choose in each discipline should provide a new level of challenge and opportunity for growth.
- **Do as well as you can in these courses**—good enough is never enough.
- **Select colleges that will value you for what you have to offer.**