



A Guide to Selecting High School Classes Wisely

The student's "program of study" has repeatedly topped the list of what matters to college admissions officers, according to an annual poll conducted by the Independent Educational Consultants Association. And what are admissions officers looking for? While some of the specifics depend on the selectivity of the school, colleges all across the spectrum say they are seeking students who challenge themselves rather than take the easy way out and that they'd rather see slightly lower grades in higher level courses than top grades in easier ones.

To be competitive at the nation's most selective schools, applicants are generally expected to have taken predominantly honors and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate courses. Their high school program should include math courses through Calculus, four years of laboratory science including Biology, Chemistry, and Physics, and four years of a single foreign language.

Depending on the level of selectivity, not all colleges have the same expectations of applicants, but they do all prefer students to have taken four years of math even if it's not required for graduation, and the more years of a single foreign language the applicant has, the better.

The University of South Carolina, just to use that school as an example, also wants students to have three years of laboratory science: Biology, Chemistry, and either Physics or an advanced course for which Biology or Chemistry were pre-requisites. Sometimes applicants run into problems when all they have after Bio and Chem are electives like Forensic Science or Oceanography. Some state schools including South Carolina and all the University of California schools also require that applicants have at least one year of coursework in the fine or performing arts.

Admissions officers know that even highly talented students find some subjects more challenging than others, and they appreciate the effort a student makes to persevere in a class that doesn't come easily. Such perseverance is considered evidence of "grit," one of the traits most closely predictive of academic and post-academic success.

Grades are looked at in context, and some colleges go so far as to recalculate the GPA themselves so that they can give greater weight to grades for higher track courses

even if the high school doesn't do so, and they can focus on core subjects if the GPA the high school provides includes grades for such non-core courses as Gym and Driver Ed.

Scheduling conflicts sometimes make it impossible for students to take all the courses they would like. A dilemma may arise when an individual who strongly desires a course in a non-core subject (like economics, psychology, music or art) learns that in order to take it, he or she must forego another course that might be deemed more impressive. In these instances, the student can explain the situation on the application, as can the counselor in the school letter. High school students should not pass up a course that really interests them, especially if it's in a discipline they might want to major in. Pursuing one's passions is almost always the wisest way to go.

Whatever level classes students are in at the beginning of high school, they should consider gradually increasing their challenges by moving to a higher track for one or two classes each year. Besides impressing the colleges, the more challenging classes often make school more stimulating and enjoyable for the student, who then frequently ends up earning the same grades in the higher track class as in the lower one, much to his or her own surprise.