

## ***Choosing Classes and Making Plans***

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We all know the typical advice given to students making academic plans. And while there is nothing to argue with — they are more or less valid considerations — this advice is as unassailable as it is uselessly vague. Some pieces of advice include:

- *Find out about the course or major in question (from an adviser, friend, or the internet).*
- *Make sure that every course you take fulfills a major or general education requirement.*
- *Take a wide variety of courses each term, take some just because they look fun.*
- *Be realistic about your aptitude and habits (no 8am Chem if you never rise before 9).*
- *Does the course/major lead to a career that interests you?*

An *integrative approach* is a more useful way of looking at planning for individual courses as well as majors and certificates. In order to get the most out of your courses you need to create professional and academic goals and reevaluate frequently as you move forward. The questions should be:

- *How am I building my education with these classes?*
- *How do my choices bolster my goals?*

You may respond: *I have goals; my goal is to complete the requirements and graduate in four years.* Graduation and the requirements you need to get there are *gauges* rather than goals. Having fulfilled all of your requirements, you can graduate, but following arbitrary rules was never the point of your education. The requirements are only proxies for the real experiences that we

hope you will have. In order to master the materials and methodologies, and to acquire the skills available in every course you take, you need to do more than check boxes. You need to go after them proactively.

What are the considerations that you should make when choosing classes? What are the skills and experience you are expected to gain in your classes? A good idea comes from the very specific language that employers use in job announcements. You would do well to learn them:

- *Clear writing*
- *Teamwork*
- *Mental flexibility*
- *Complex analysis*
- *Initiative*
- *Problem-solving*
- *Presentation and public speaking*
- *Attention to detail*
- *Organization*
- *Leadership*
- *Creativity*
- *Strategic planning*
- *Entrepreneurship*
- *Dedication to life-long learning*

There is a critique of higher education today that is quite damning: critics propose that between students and faculty there has developed a 'disengagement compact' in which faculty are willing to reduce the writing and reading requirements, and students will go along as long as they receive Bs. We have all heard of grade inflation; but this critique is much worse, and if true, much more dangerous to individual students. This critique describes a break-down of the shared responsibility for learning. Everyone knows of classes that are 'easy As'. You need to know that grades, even high grades, are no longer seen outside the university as a reliable proxy that can unequivocally represent a valuable educational experience. Taking 'easy' classes to boost grades is tantamount to turning your back on the significant resources and opportunities all around you on campus.

Why do students look for 'easy' classes? Is it out of laziness, or fear? (And, after having enrolled in classes, why do students obsess over figuring out 'what the professor wants'?) The scene has been repeated infinitely: a student comes to office hours, stays after lecture, or sends an email to ask, "*Can you tell me what you want* [on the writing assignment, midterm, or final research project]?" The issue should never be what *the professor wants*, but what the course or project requires, namely, research or analysis on the question at hand using the methodology covered in the lectures and readings. What seems blindingly obvious to the instructor is, more often than not, lost on most students. The actual academic work that is the central focus and objective of all classes takes a back seat to the acquisition of proxies – such as grades and degree

requirements – so that students have difficulty comprehending what academic work might be beyond *what the professor wants*.

Why are you taking a particular class? Because it fulfills a requirement? Because your friend took it and said it was easy? For personal interest? How about academic growth? The purpose of a liberal arts education is the development of the skills and methodologies of a range of disciplines and the cultivation of a deep ethical sense to use them as a just citizen. For example, practically every occupation imaginable will require you to have analytical or quantitative skills, if not both. Ironically, these are the two skills taught in classes that most undergraduates studiously avoid taking. Classes like ‘Physics for Poets’ might explore a discipline, but they rarely ask students to exert themselves, and seldom offer the opportunity to develop analytical or quantitative skills. An A in a *gut class* is like a scout who has earned a first aid merit badge without learning CPR. Understanding the fundamental skills that are developed in academic coursework is the first step in building the complex mental and intellectual competencies that are fundamental in professional life. You have a responsibility for your own learning; still, you are not entirely to blame. High stakes exams, the persistence of ‘weed out’ classes, and ever more costly tuition conspire to create perverse incentives to chase after *merit badges* without acquiring the *actual merit*.

There is a widely held misconception that college serves primarily to separate the wheat from the chaff, that those with natural capacities will ‘naturally’ rise to the fore. This misconception is held by many students themselves, and, as a result, students create a mental obstacle to their

own academic success and genuine acquisition of complex skills. This creates a counterproductive quest for merit badges. Critical and analytical thinking, strong writing, and creative problem-solving are all at the heart of academic work. You will master these skills *if and only if* you genuinely dedicate yourself to developing your academic potential. At the same time as acquiring a concrete skill set, the motivated student has the opportunity to examine important bodies of knowledge, sophisticated techniques of analysis, and profound works of imagination – all affording an increased familiarity and comfort with complexity.

Your classes are a means and an end: their value is found both intrinsically and in the skills they develop. When you have exercised your mind with the methodologies and modes of thinking in several different disciplines, your understanding and impressions will begin to cohere in ways that you could never have predicted. When you choose your classes with the intent to develop skills and to build on those you have taken and toward your goals, much of the fear that drives students to seek out easy classes dissipates. This can make the difference between motivation and indecision, clear goals and confusion, determination and ambivalence.

It is crucial to understand how the incentives to get high grades and to develop professionally may not be ideally aligned; that understanding can lead to a greater appreciation of the obstacles to a authentically liberal education and the opportunities afforded by intentionally seeking one. You need to develop an understanding of how your course choices and co-curricular activities work together to build a coherent and compelling package, one that moves toward a career. This includes all of your courses and not just those in your major. Few majors lead directly to

traditional careers; there are, in fact, few traditional careers left. The nature, structure, and activities of the workforce today are very different from that for which college graduates have been traditionally prepared. Employers are less interested in the specifics of your major and more concerned about whether you can obtain and apply new information in productive, creative ways, and can anticipate and address the emerging needs of their organizations. There is no prepackaged confection of major, breadth, or general education requirements that will automatically lead you to a particular career. College, therefore, is not something you attend and have happen to you; your holistic program of study is *something that you build*, piece by piece, course by course.

By the time you graduate you must be able to:

- *Communicate effectively*
- *Understand your organization's strategic goals and values*
- *Collaborate with people from different ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds*
- *Discern patterns in massive flows of data*
- *Discover, synthesize, and apply new information.*
- *Plan and manage complicated and competing tasks with little or no supervision*
- *Respond to unanticipated problems*
- *Identify alternate approaches to problem-solving*

By and large, a university is an academic institution and therefore not primarily organized to teach these specific skill-sets; then again, no other institution in American life comes close to teaching them as well. With some forethought and intentionality, these are the skills you will

acquire by proactively building your courses and co-curricular activities into a coherent and holistic program of study. The *merit badges* you collect will truly represent *merit earned*. Ultimately, your *buy-in* in the learning process will create an environment in which you will gradually develop complex critical, analytical, and problem-solving skills. Along the way you will also acquire the ethics, knowledge, and methods of the wide range of disciplines at the heart of your classes. Together, these are hard won skills that will propel you into a satisfying career.