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Those pesky General Education requirements: How to make them work for you

By Elizabeth LaScala



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Graduating seniors deciding which college to attend or juniors considering which colleges to apply to should look carefully at a college's general education requirements. These are courses that everyone, regardless of their major, must take in order to complete their degree. They will usually represent one-quarter to one-third of the total credits required.

Some of the GE requirements will be courses you want to take, but others may not capture your interest. At most schools, the GE classes will consist of a semester or two of English composition, aka Expository Writing or Writing Seminar, and courses in the humanities, fine arts and performing arts, a social science, history course, foreign language, mathematics and science. Sound familiar? Yep, it's a lot like high school but college level. Sometimes there will be a community service requirement or a life fitness course requirement, often pass-fail. If you are looking at Jesuit or other religiously affiliated colleges you will likely see requirements in subjects such as philosophy and religion, although they may have titles like "Meditative Arts" and "Faith in Modern Society."

Colleges have GE requirements because their leadership and faculty want to see their students engage in a broader-based liberal arts education, whether the students see value in it or not. However, the more required GE courses a student must take in addition to required classes for their major, the fewer the electives available. Designing your class schedule also becomes more challenging, especially in the early grade levels. If

you have a choice between a school that has few GE requirements and one that asks you to take 12 credits in subjects of little interest to you or courses where you have considerable difficulty with in high school, the choice could affect the time it takes to earn the degree as well as college GPA.

Different schools address GE requirements differently. Some, such as Amherst, Brown, Hampshire and Smith have few or no GE requirements. You might have only one or two required courses, and then enjoy free rein to choose whatever classes you want, as long as you complete the prerequisites. The upside: you have the freedom to choose, as long as you have some idea what you might like to study. The downside: you are navigating your college education without the structure GE requirements can provide, and some students are more successful at this than others.

Here are three questions to ask yourself so you make better choices:

Can you place out of the introductory courses?

Some colleges will grant course credit based on a "4" or "5" on an Advanced Placement test. Others will ask students to sit for their own examination. Some schools may give credit for the intro course, but ask students to take an advanced course in the same subject instead.

How much variety is there to choose from in each subject area?

Do you need to take calculus to fulfill the math requirement? If you are glad to leave math behind in high school some schools offer courses that are less quantitative, for example: the environmental and scientific issues behind an oil spill.

Can you apply a course used to fulfill a General Education Requirement towards a major or minor?

Some schools let you "double dip" courses towards fulfilling requirements as well as completing a major or minor. That required calculus course could be used to fill the calculus requirement for premed.

Students should ask these often pesky GE requirements questions and learn how to work them to their

advantage. And as in all phases of the college admission process, realistic self-appraisal combined with good research are factors important to success.

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