

College Admissions: High School Classes Colleges Look For

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Your state's graduation requirements and what colleges value in a high schooler's course load may vary in important ways. Make sure you understand what colleges want to see. Hint: art classes are good.

Summer is the time when most students find out if they will be able to take the courses that they requested for next year. And parents are often left wondering what a student really needs to be competitive in college admissions. How many years of a lab science or language are really necessary? What is the right balance of honors and AP courses? And do electives really matter? The truth is that state high school graduation requirements, and what top colleges want to see, are often two different things. Making the right choices now can affect your college acceptances later. So, here are a few things students should know in order to create a strong profile.

2 Years of Anything is Not Enough

While a state may only require 2 years of a lab science, history or a language—colleges want to see more. Competitive colleges either require or strongly recommend at least 3 years of the SAME language in high school (not counting middle school), 3 years of a lab science (biology, physics, chemistry) and 3 years of history (U.S., World, European, Western Civ., etc.). Many colleges will not consider environmental science, earth science or other sciences as a “lab” science—even if your high school does.

At the most elite universities in the country, top candidates will have 4 years of history, science and a language, in addition to the standard 4 years of math and English. Too many electives replacing these core courses can weaken how course rigor is perceived by an admissions committee-- or discount a candidate altogether.

AP and Honors Within Reason

While it is true that colleges like to see students challenge themselves and take a rigorous course load, you don't need to be in all honors or AP courses—even for the nation's top colleges. The general rule of thumb is that if you can get a B+ or higher without struggling, then you should probably be in an honors or AP class. However, competitive colleges still want to see A's. So, it doesn't behoove you to take an abundance of honors and AP classes if your grades end up being all B's. For most students, it's best to take higher level courses in your areas of strength and regular courses in subject areas that you find more challenging.

Many times, individual teachers in several subject areas will end up recommending a student for an honors or AP class without seeing the whole picture. The result is that the combination of 4 or 5 high level courses ends up tanking a student's GPA and leaves the student exhausted and stressed. I recommend that strong students start out with one or two honors course in 9th grade, see how well they do, and then add one more high level course per year, if they feel that they can handle it.

Electives

Colleges base most of the academic portion of their decision on your 5 core courses each year (science, math, English, history, language). And while they don't want to see you take basket weaving, your elective courses are really secondary and don't usually go into the GPA that many top colleges calculate for candidates. So, don't spend hours debating whether sociology or psychology will look better as an elective. Take what interests you and what will allow you to focus your study time on your 5 core courses. Colleges love to see students take art, music and theatre. So, if you enjoy those pursuits, by all means take them as electives. Most of all, colleges want to see students exhibit a passion for an academic area or an extra-curricular interest.

Picking courses can be stressful and confusing, but focus on your 5 core courses each year, select a balance of honors/AP and regular courses if you can handle them, and take electives that demonstrate your personal interests and passions. In the end, that will provide you with the strongest profile when it is time to apply for college.