

A Balanced Course Load

Classes, Electives, College Prep -- and Enjoying It

"I visited my high school guidance counselor with my father at the end of my sophomore year, having just struggled through chemistry and determined not to take any more science. The guidance counselor did his best to change my mind "You know," he told me, "physics IS the basis of everything." This elated my father, a theoretical physicist, and only deepened my resolve. Had the guidance counselor told me that three to four years of challenging laboratory science courses are the basis for gaining admission to top colleges, I might have reconsidered." -Allison C., college graduate

The high school transcript is a critical piece of your child's college application file. Like a resume, the transcript tells admissions officials at a glance whether a student is well prepared for all the challenges of college. Particularly with highly selective schools, it's not necessarily enough for your child to be a math wiz and let her performance in English class lag behind. Colleges also like to see that your child has explored interests outside the core curriculum.

Covering the Basics

Most colleges look for a core curriculum of four or five academically challenging courses each high school semester, including four years of English and math; three to four years of laboratory science such as biology, chemistry and physics; three to four years of history or social studies; and two to four years of foreign language.

Colleges that specialize in technical fields or art and music may have different requirements, and some colleges will consider students who have challenged themselves to the best of their abilities without necessarily completing the core curriculum. You and your child can find more information on requirements at specific colleges with collegeboard.com's student tool, College Search, or with the College Board's [College Handbook](#).

Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic

Of course, math and science courses teach skills, such as balancing and managing a budget, that are important outside the classroom. And recent research indicates that students who complete algebra and geometry in high school are much more likely to go to college. So if your child is a math wiz she can sit back and relax, right?

Wrong. Courses in writing and literature are equally important to college admission and help equip students with the writing, reading comprehension, and research skills they will need in college.

The Arts: More Than Just a Pretty Face

Courses in the arts are important as well. Research shows that students who take courses in visual or performing arts perform better in school and on standardized tests. Some colleges require arts courses for admission; many others consider participation in the arts as an important indicator of the breadth and depth of a student's education.

Courses in the arts not only indicate to college admission officials that a student is well-rounded, they can also enrich a student's understanding of history, math, and science says Marybeth Kravets, a College Consultant at Deerfield High School in Deerfield, IL, and former President of the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

College Requirements

A student overcome by too many demands will not perform as well in any area. It is important not only that your child enroll in college-recommended courses but that those courses meet high academic requirements and teach the skills needed to succeed in college. You can find out if your child is learning what he or she needs to know by working with guidance counselors and teachers to find out what skills each course teaches. You can also find out how the school's standards compare with the best school and state standards for education.

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Keeping It in Perspective

It can begin to seem as if your child must be a super achiever in every subject to get into college. Colleges do look for competence in the core subjects and for students who have strengths in many areas, says Kravets. But she advises students to pursue a high school course selection that challenges but doesn't overwhelm them. "A student overcome by too many demands will not perform as well in any area," says Kravets.

Preparing your child for college can also seem overwhelming. But parents don't have to shoulder the burden themselves. Parents and students should meet early and often with high school guidance counselors to create a high school course plan and ensure your child is on the right track to college.

Sources:

The College Guide for Parents, Charles J. Shields, c. 1994 College Board

Preparing Your Child For College, A Resource Book for Parents, 1996-97 Edition, Department of Education