



Fit Education Consulting LLC High School Course Selection

Guiding Principles

Is it better to get a B in an honors course or an A in a regular course?

- It is better to get an A in an honors course. Someone is going to, why not you?
- If you can get an 80%/B- or higher, you should be in an honors course. So, if you are currently in regular English with a 96%, but you would get an 87% in honors English, it is preferable for you to bump up to honors.
- If you are going to get 76%/C or lower in an honors course, you should bump down a level. So, if you are currently in Honors Geometry with a 72%, you may want to consider dropping down to regular Algebra II next year.
- The tricky part is the C+ range. As a general rule, I say that you should challenge yourself in the honors track if the course is related to something that you think you may want to study in college. For example, if you plan on being a nursing major, sticking with the honors science track will make your transcript more impressive.

What types of courses do students who are admitted to the most selective colleges take?

- Almost all students who are admitted to highly selective colleges¹ have at least one year of calculus in high school. If you are not on track to complete one year of calculus by the end of your senior year, consider a summer course to advance in math.
- Most students who are admitted to pursue a STEM major at highly selective colleges have completed two years of calculus in high school.
- Students who are admitted to the most selective colleges are often in honors courses distinct from their area of interest. That is, students admitted to CalTech for engineering also take AP courses in English and history.
- As a general rule, take four years of all five major subjects (English, math, history, science, and foreign language).
- Most highly selective colleges have a foreign language requirement. As such, try to advance as high as you can in a single foreign language during high school.

Homework ≠ Rigor

- No student should be doing more than 2 hours of homework, 6 days per week on average. Homework should not be a second (or third or fourth) shift for adolescents.
- When I observe teaching in schools, one of the easiest ways for me to spot lazy or bad teaching is by the amount of homework. Giving a lot of homework often deceives students and parents into thinking a course is intellectually rigorous, but it often results in just a superficial slog through material.
 - A great teacher who I have observed taught AP English Literature. When he was a young, insecure teacher, he assigned over 20 novels over the course of the year. Every class was about

¹ Approximately the US News and World Report Top 50 National Universities, Top 40 National Liberal Arts Colleges, and Top 5 Regional Universities



recapping the plot, which he called “discussion,” and drilling a list of literary devices. At an AP teacher’s convention, a senior teacher asked him what the deal was with the volume of texts. He did some reflection and revamped his class and the students only read 10 novels the following year. His class now had substantial discussions about meaning, author intent, historical context, and the impact of the literature. This meant that the teacher had to spend more time crafting thoughtful lesson plans to deeply engage the students’ thinking and to help them to read more intentionally. Homework was cut in half, and AP scores went up.

- Three thoughtfully chosen math problems are better than the entire review page in the text book.
- Homework glut is particularly epidemic at certain private schools and in wealthy public schools.
- There are plenty of internet resources on the benefits of low homework, be an advocate for eliminating the second shift!

Making smart choices with electives

- Elective courses can be some of the most pleasurable parts of the day for students. At many high schools, the problem is too many great electives and not enough time.
- Understand that electives that sound like college majors, including sociology, accounting, or child development are usually only a cursory introduction to the subject.
 - A college accounting professor once said to me that the most rigorous high school accounting class he had ever found covered only the material from the first two weeks of his intro course. He said it would have been preferable for his students to have taken an elective like statistics or computer science in preparation.
- However, electives like this can provide a student with an introduction to a subject to see if they like it. This is particularly true of semester or trimester type courses.
- For almost any major, some computer science and coding background is helpful.
- Take only an AP elective, if it has a reputation for lower work load. I have seen many students try to register for 5 or 6 AP classes and then become quickly swamped and have to withdraw from a course. An A in an elective courses raises fewer red flags than a Withdraw from AP Chemistry.
- If your five main courses are rigorous, you can use your electives for fun. There is nothing wrong with an honors student taking a home economics class if he is really interested in cooking. Orchestra, band, painting, or drama can be great experiences.