

Top-Ten Suggestions for Making the Most of Your College Electives

By Joseph B. Cuseo, Ph.D.

Elective courses give you the academic freedom to take personal control over your coursework. Exercise this freedom responsibly by making strategic selection of electives that allow you to make the most of your college experience and college degree.

You can make strategic use of your electives to:

1. **Complete a minor or build an area of concentration.** Electives can be used to pursue a field of personal interest that complements and strengthens your major.
2. **Help you choose a career path.** Just as you can use electives to test your interest in a college major, you can use them to test your interest in a career. For instance, you could enroll in:
 - career planning or career development courses; and
 - courses that include internships or service-learning experiences in a field you're considering as a possible career (e.g., health, education, or business).
3. **Strengthen your skills in areas that may appeal to future employers.** For instance, courses in foreign language, leadership development, and persuasive communication can develop skills attractive to current employers.
4. **Develop practical life skills.** Courses in managing personal finances, marriage and family, or child development can help you manage your money and your family relationships.
5. **Seek balance in your life and develop yourself as a whole person.** You can use your electives intentionally to cover all key dimensions of self-development. Electives may be used to promote your emotional development (e.g., stress management), social development (e.g., social psychology), intellectual development (e.g., critical thinking), and spiritual development (e.g., world religions).
6. **Make connections between different academic disciplines (subject areas).** *Interdisciplinary* courses are courses designed specifically to integrate two or more academic disciplines. For instance, psychobiology is an interdisciplinary course that integrates the fields of psychology (focusing on the mind) and biology (focusing on the body), enabling you to see how the mind influences the body and vice versa.

Making connections across subjects and seeing how they can be combined to create a more complete understanding of personal or societal issues can be a stimulating mental experience. Furthermore, the presence of interdisciplinary courses on your college transcript may be attractive to future employers because “real world” work responsibilities and challenges cannot be handled through the lens of a single major; they require the ability to integrate skills acquired from different fields of study.
7. **Help you develop broader perspectives on the human condition and the surrounding world.** You can intentionally take electives that progressively widen your world perspectives, such courses that take a societal perspective (sociology), a national perspective (political science), an international perspective (world geography), a global perspective (ecology), and a cosmological perspective (astronomy).
8. **Appreciate different cultural viewpoints and enhance your ability to communicate with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.** You could take electives that focus on cultural differences across nations (e.g., international relations) or courses related to cultural differences within America (e.g., race and ethnicity).

9. **Stretch yourself beyond your customary learning style to experience different ways of learning and acquire new skills.** You'll find courses in the college curriculum you've never taken before (or even knew existed) that supply you with knowledge and skills you've never had a previous opportunity to acquire or develop. These courses will stretch your mind, allow you to explore new ideas and expand your skill set in a way that's consistent with a key characteristic of successful people—a "growth mindset."
10. **Learn something you were always curious about.** If you've always wondered how members of the other sex think and feel, you could take a course on the psychology of men and women. Or, if you've heard about a particular professor who teaches a course that students find especially interesting, take that course and find out why it's so interesting.

The previous material has been excerpted from Cuseo, et al. (2016). *Thriving in College & Beyond: Research-Based Strategies for Academic Success and Personal Development* (4th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.