Questions to Ask when Choosing Courses

First, thinking about my learning this term in a broad frame, what do I want to know or to learn? What would I welcome the chance to explore or to understand more fully? Then, with respect to particular courses . . .

Why am I taking this particular course?

- What interests me about the particular topic and/or about the instructor’s approach to or relation to the topic?
- How might I use this course to serve my hopes and intentions for my learning and development?
  - Can it acquaint me with a new topic area? And/or can it deepen and expand my knowledge in an area with which I am already familiar?
  - Does it fulfill a requirement, or is it an elective course?
  - Is it part of a sequence in my planned concentration or course series?
  - If it is a required course in which I don’t already have particular interest, how might I find a way to discover something about the topic or approach that does interest me?
  - What do I hope or expect to learn through my efforts in this course?
  - What capacities do I hope to develop in myself through my participation in this course?

What does the title of the course signal to me?

- Is there something in the title that caught my attention or interest?
- If yes, what? If no, what else was it that drew me to this particular course?

What are the aims and emphases of the course?

- What are the questions the course attempts to address? (Note: The aims, emphases, and approaches of a course can often be anticipated from the title of the course, the description in the course catalogue, the syllabus, the reading list, an outline of the assignments, the first lecture, and examination questions from previous years.)
- What interests me about the questions this course is designed to address?
- What can I tell about how the course will approach the topic (i.e., not just what content will be covered, but from what perspective or angle or with what approach)?

How will I be expected to participate and perform in this course?

- Lectures: What do they offer?
- Discussions/Sections: What is their purpose?
- Readings: What is their purpose? How might I approach them?
- Fieldtrips: What is their purpose? How might I approach them?
- Problem Sets: What is their purpose? How frequently are they due?
- Labs: What is their purpose? How frequently are they held?
- Studios: What is their purpose? What do they offer? How might I approach them?
- Papers, projects, and presentations: What is their purpose? How are they spaced over the term?
- Exams: In-class? Take-home? How are they spaced over the term? (Copies of submitted final examinations for some Harvard courses are available on the web at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~exams/.)

What resources and opportunities are available for the course?

- Instructor, teaching fellow(s) – office hours or by appointment? Study networks? Old exams? Online resources? Student-organized study-groups? Peer tutoring?
- How might I develop at least one working connection with an instructor or teaching fellow?

What balance am I striking among different course sizes, formats, and modes of performance?

- What’s my term’s balance of large, mid-size, and small courses?
- What’s the balance of problem sets, papers, projects, presentations, and exams?

Timewise and schedulewise, how does this course work for me this term?

- How much time will the course ask of me (for classes, labs, reading, problem sets, papers, field trips, etc.)?
- What does a schedule of my classes, sections, labs, due dates, and exam dates tell me about the shape and pace of my workload – week by week, during crunch times, and over the term as a whole?

You are welcome to discuss your course selection, your experience of your courses, and any other aspect of your life and learning with an academic counselor at Harvard University’s Bureau of Study Counsel.

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