

## Concentrations

Going to college is about making choices, and at Harvard students have to make some hard ones. No student may graduate who has not fulfilled the requirements of one of our 41 fields of concentration (a few students design "special concentrations" around particular interests of their own creation). The various concentrations form a dazzling range of pursuits, from well-recognized disciplines like Physics, Music, or Government to more exotic fields such as Folklore and Mythology, or Environmental Science and Public Policy. Some students form joint concentrations between related fields, such as Computer Science and Mathematics, a combination particularly appropriate for students interested, as I happen to be, in foundational or theoretical issues in computer science. But joint concentrations are not meant as an escape hatch for students simply unable to make up their minds between unrelated alternatives; there are no joint concentrators in Biology and Music, though there are Biology concentrators who pursue their musical interests, both curricularly and extracurricularly, at a very high level.

Students too often approach their concentration choice either as a commitment to a particular vocational future, or as a statement of personal identity. It is neither. Harvard students enter professional schools having concentrated in fields of every kind. Premedical requirements in particular can be satisfied by taking a relatively small number of courses in the sciences while concentrating in some other area entirely. For careers in business or law, the specific curricular expectations are even less demanding; Harvard has advisers experienced and well-trained in guiding students towards seeing that any necessary bases are covered.

Conversely, a decision to concentrate in Music rather than Biology, when a student loves both subjects, is not a commitment to be a professional musician, nor a declaration of personal musicianship to the exclusion of other personalities. One ought to like a subject in order to concentrate in it, but one need not like it to the exclusion of all other intellectual loves.

Time and again we have seen that students are best off when they are studying things they love. While declaring a concentration at the end of the freshman year sometimes causes students to choose concentrations in the absence of much knowledge about them, it is usually not hard to change concentrations during the sophomore year and sometimes even during the junior year. And students should make these changes when they feel right: one goes to college to learn, and sometimes what one learns is that mathematics or history or economics is not what one thought it was in high school, and that it is really a good deal more (or a good deal less) attractive than had been thought.

There is a good deal of current debate, among both faculty and students, about the rigidity of Harvard's curricular requirements. Many concentrations require 16 courses for an honors degree, though some, such as Mathematics and Philosophy, demand only 12 or 13, even for honors. Sixteen-course concentrations enable students to achieve some truly remarkable senior thesis projects, as sophisticated as many Masters' theses. But is widely argued (and personally, I believe the argument) that 16-course concentration, combined

with 8 Core requirements and requirements for writing and foreign language courses, use up too much of the 32 courses needed for graduation, leaving students too few options for electives (either one-course excursions or a suite of 3 or 4 courses in a particular area) or for capitalizing on interests discovered only late in a student's college career. The faculty is committed to working towards a reduction in overall requirements, though how long and what form such a rollback might take cannot be predicted.

Requirements for a non-honors concentration are 12 courses for most fields, making these attractive options for students changing their concentrations late. Though most students earn honors degrees, there should be no stigma attached to a non-honors degree if the student has gotten out of it what she or he wanted. I often point out that the important thing is what one learns, not what Latin phrase is or is not on the diploma; and that in terms of immediate postgraduate planning, no employer or graduate school can know what honors will be earned, since those are not determined until a few days before graduation. Indeed, many employers seem to have only the slightest interest in the academic record itself, though of course they may have a good deal of interest in a student's knowledgeability and sophistication, qualities that may be enhanced by a well-chosen course of study.

Another way to create some flexibility is to take courses beyond the standard four per term. Naturally this must be done carefully, in consultation with one's academic adviser and with scrutiny of the past academic record, the workload in the proposed set of courses, and the nature of any planned extracurricular involvements. But there is no extra charge for extra courses, and more than one person has pointed out that at one fine institution in New Haven students have to take five courses during half of their terms.

In the end, the right concentration for a student is the one that enables that student to get the most out of Harvard, and there is no simple formula for determining what that is. While we as advisers do our best to help students make that decision, a good deal of chance and fortune are tied up in these choices, and the concentration choice may be by no means the most important choice one can make. A head of a major corporation told me that his undergraduate concentration had been enjoyable, but completely irrelevant to his rapid rise in the business world after graduating from Harvard. He had been offered his first job by a recruiter who was making blind calls to captains of athletic teams; apparently the company's belief was that anyone who could graduate from Harvard while sustaining the leadership of a varsity team was a promising candidate. Not a reason to go out for a team, of course --- any more than a desire for a business career is the right reason to concentrate in Economics!