

Maximizing Your College Experience: The Case for Taking Five Classes

Howard Wang 26'

Introduction:

It might seem unusual for me to suggest that everyone should take five classes each semester. I understand that my argument may have come across as scattered and perhaps even confusing at times, so I've decided to take a moment to gather my thoughts and clearly present why I believe this is beneficial.

As with any advice, I don't expect you to follow mine blindly. Instead, I encourage you to evaluate my reasoning and see how it unfolds as your semester progresses. You can then decide if what I say makes sense in your own experience.

I also find it ironic that, despite our school encouraging liberal and open thought, my ideas are often dismissed as radical and impractical. However, I hope to provide a balanced perspective that might resonate with some of you.

This discussion will be divided into three sections: 1) Why you should take five classes and why Swarthmore discourages it, 2) How you can successfully manage five classes, and 3) My personal experiences, supported by real course examples.

Why:

Why does the school discourage taking five classes? This is more of a suspicion on my part, as I don't fully understand why departments often encourage students to stick to four or fewer classes. I suspect it might be because if more students started taking additional classes, the school would need to hire more professors, which would increase their costs.

Why is it beneficial to take five classes?

1. **Fulfillment of Distribution Requirements:** Taking five classes allows you to get through distribution requirements more quickly, freeing up future semesters for more specialized or elective courses.
2. **Exploration of Interests:** It provides a greater opportunity to explore different subjects and discover new interests.
3. **Engagement with the Community:** Taking more classes can enhance your connection with the academic community, exposing you to diverse perspectives and ideas.

Our brains are incredibly adaptable, but once we settle into a routine, we become resistant to change. Those who consistently take four classes may believe that's the ideal path, simply because it's comfortable. However, it's worth challenging this mindset. I do want to note that my perspective is based on my own experience of consistently taking five or more classes at Swarthmore.

Common Misconceptions:

1. **"I could spend more time improving in the classes I've chosen rather than taking an extra class."**

My response is twofold. First, the law of diminishing returns applies to studying as well. You might reach an "A" in a class by investing around 67 hours, but any further improvement requires exponentially more effort with minimal gain. Second, if you genuinely enjoy your classes, an additional class won't detract from your ability to focus on the others. Instead, distractions like social media or parties are more likely to pull you away from your studies.

2. **"If I spend all my time studying, I won't be socializing, and I'll just be a nerd."**

I strongly disagree with this notion. Personally, I run 45-50 miles each week, work as a photographer for The Phoenix, and maintain active relationships with friends both at Swarthmore and back home. Studies show that students who excel academically are often more socially engaged. A strong sense of belonging within the academic community not only boosts academic success but also enhances social interactions. This suggests that excelling in academics and being socially active can reinforce each other, leading to a more balanced and fulfilling college experience(Xerri 2018)

How:

Now, let's discuss how to incorporate five classes into your schedule effectively.

I believe that making smart choices is far more important than simply working hard. Taking five classes doesn't have to be overwhelming.

I categorize classes into four categories:

1. **Difficult Class:** Often a weed-out course requiring significant effort, even for the top 20-5% of students. These classes typically demand 10 or more hours per week to grasp the material. Examples: Organic Chemistry, Linear Algebra.

2. **Moderate Class:** Typically required courses that include midterms and graded homework. These are usually introductory courses that require about 5 hours per week to manage the material. Examples: Multivariable Calculus, CS 21, Statistics 21.
3. **Easy Class:** Often a course taken to fulfill institutional requirements. Homework is usually graded on completion, and exams might include reflections and bonus points. These classes generally take about 3 hours per week.
4. **Fun Class:** A course that you take for personal enjoyment, such as a painting or music class. These classes are usually less demanding and can be a leisurely experience.

I believe that taking a combination like 1+2+3+3+4 or 1+2+2+4+4 is much easier than taking 1+1+2+2 or 1+2+2+2. The right combination allows you to explore your interests without becoming overwhelmed by the workload.

My Personal Experience:

Let me share my experiences from my first and last semesters, as they provide relevant examples.

First Semester:

Schedule:

- Math 28: Linear Algebra
- Chem 10: General Chemistry
- Stats 21: Statistical Methods II
- Linguistics 40: Semantics
- Art 3: Painting I

This was a 1+1+2+3+4 combination. While not the easiest, it was manageable. I devoted most of my study time to Linear Algebra and Chemistry, which were time-consuming but not impossible. I spent minimal time outside of class on Semantics, and Painting was a source of joy for me.

Spring 2024:

Schedule:

- Chem 21: Organic Chemistry
- Math 43: Differential Equations

- Engineering 12: Linear Systems
- Physics 4L: E&M
- Psychology 131
- Audit: Psych 31 (Social Psychology)
- Audit: Engineering 91

This semester was more demanding, with a 1+1+2+3+3+4+4 combo. Organic Chemistry required a lot of time, but I was able to manage it by dedicating around 10 hours per week. Despite the workload, I participated in the track team, ran a trail marathon in April, and still found time for leisurely activities like calligraphy and photography every week.

I'm not writing this to boast about productivity. In reality, I spend hours streaming online, and I usually avoid schoolwork on Friday afternoons and all day Saturday. My point is that taking five classes is not only possible but can be beneficial for your college career. No matter what classes you choose, I hope you enjoy them and make the most of your education.

Reference:

Xerri, M. J., Radford, K., & Shacklock, K. (2018). Student engagement in academic activities: A social support perspective. *Higher Education*, 75, 589–605.