Requirements Face-Off: Distribution vs. Concentration

The results may surprise you!

Here’s the news: if you’re in LSA—the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts—you are in a liberal arts college. So just what does that mean? Lots of times, when we hear a school described as a “liberal arts college,” we imagine some leafy little campus in the Midwest, or a classic east coast Ivy League institution. You may imagine a certain kind of curriculum… maybe a “core knowledge” kind of thing where everyone reads together Plato, Homer, Shakespeare, and other classics.

In LSA we provide you with a framework and set of principles to guide your liberal arts education. We start you off with broad brush strokes. The possibilities are almost limitless, but taken together, they add up to your successful completion of the three essential goals of a liberal arts education:

- to develop an understanding of the primary modes of inquiry and of the broad fields of knowledge
- to enhance essential intellectual capabilities for life-long learning, problem solving, adaptation, creation of new knowledge, and positive engagement with a diverse world
- to acquire in-depth, specialized knowledge in an academic field, hopefully one that you love, through a cohesive program of study.

At this point, you’re probably asking “Just what are these principles that are going to help me figure out what courses to take, and when? Given the daunting number of choices I have when I confront the LSA Course Guide, how do I explore different fields, experiment, and discover my intellectual passions—maybe even my calling? And how do I make sure that the choices I make will actually give me a first-rate liberal arts education?”

Okay, so we’ll tell you.
The first principle is **distribution** (definition: giving out, sharing). The distribution requirements are NOT just a bump in the road to your concentration and your real future! Please do not think that way! In fact, the College’s expectation – that is, the **requirement** that you distribute your course selections across different fields of knowledge—sits at the very heart and soul of a liberal arts education. Think of them… well, **reverently**.

They represent broad-mindedness. Well-roundedness. The ability to think in multiple ways, not just one or two. They are the evidence that you are a flexible learner, curious about the world, not just someone narrowly interested in one subject, or focused solely on employability after college. And that difference is the key to your success. A broad understanding of all topics will help you engage with others in future careers, academic programs and social settings.

You can see how we think of the liberal arts by the way we have configured the distribution requirements around three ways of knowing the world: the Humanities, the Social Sciences, and the Natural Sciences. The Humanities take us to eternal questions of meaning, value, emotion, and artistic expression. Quite literally, they encourage us to consider what it means to be human. Without a serious engagement with the Humanities, your education will be incomplete—as it will be without an equally serious exploration of the Natural Sciences, which offer fine-tuned methods for understanding the world around us. Hypothesis, theory, experiment, analysis, testing, problem-solving—an understanding of these things, and of the rich complexity of the universe of nature, are essential elements of an excellent liberal arts education. So too are the insights of the Social Sciences. Our world is governed by human systems—economies, social structures, political systems, modes of communication, understandings of individual psychologies. You cannot be a fully-rounded person without understanding something about how these systems work—and about how we come to understand them.

The second principle is **skills** (definition: ability to do something well). No, we’re not talking about vocational skills. We’re talking about intellectual skills that are central to your education and your success. No matter your interest, you have to be able to communicate effectively through writing (and thus we ask you to take both lower and upper level writing courses). You have to be able to call upon mathematical knowledge and to think and reason in the world of numbers (and so we feature a quantitative reasoning requirement). And a liberal arts education has, for a very long time, been defined by its demand that well-rounded students should speak more than a single language—Learning another language gives you a powerful lens through which to understand another’s culture, to appreciate differences among people, and to open the door to a cosmopolitan global world And so we ask you to achieve a certain level of proficiency, and we encourage you to continue exploring other languages and cultures.

The third principle is **concentration** (definition: focus of mind or resources). An excellent liberal arts education balances range and breadth with focus and depth. It asks students to understand a field of study thoroughly: to know a field’s most important questions, to understand how its evidence is sought and put to use, to practice the ways that it makes new discoveries of knowledge.
But consider this: concentration is not destiny. It does not define your future. It is only one part of a liberal arts education. It may not even be as important as distribution (though certainly this assertion runs against the grain of much of what you may have heard from family, fellow students, and media!). Don’t think of your concentration as the single pathway into your future. Think of the whole package of your liberal arts degree! Your concentration leaves the door to your future wide open!

The fourth principle is that of electives. (definition: permitting or involving a choice). Your choice, your flexibility. Electives are the icing on the cake that is your liberal arts education. Use them to make your exploration of the College’s riches even broader… or to emphasize personal priorities. You might experiment with global education, civic engagement, stronger language skills, more advanced research. You might explore an academic minor or take on a second concentration (although remember, quantity is not automatically superior to quality; two concentrations may not necessarily be better than one concentration and some well chosen elective explorations! Electives are about intellectual risk-taking—you name it… and you can do it.

So… distribution versus concentration? There’s no clear winner. But there’s no clear loser either. A significant part of your education—maybe more than you have been willing to admit—comes out of your experience with distribution. And the clear path that you want to see in a concentration? It might be just a tad overrated. Think of your concentration as being the thing you like studying the most, the field you want to study with passion and determination. But don’t think that it defines your post-graduation life. That will be shaped by the entirety of your education. Consider just a few successful LSA alumni and their respective concentrations:

- Director, Math & Science Design for Teach for America (Organizational Studies and Psychology)
- Cofounder, Groupon (History)
- U.S. Ambassador to the Court of St. James, U.K. (History)
- Top Chef (Sociology)
- Trader, Chicago Mercantile Exchange (Zoology)
- Film Producer, Next Wednesday Productions (English and History of Art)
- Neurosurgeon and Emmy-award winning chief medical correspondent at CNN (Biology)
- Wildfire Fighter, US Forest Service (Anthropology & Environment)
- Chairman, Dept. of Cardiovascular Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic (General Studies)
- Head, USAID (Economics)
- Assistant Director, FBI Cyber Division (English)
- Best-selling novelist with television show (History)
- Cook Book writer and memoirist (Sociology and AM in History of Art)
- Radiologist (English)
- Nobel Prize-winning Professor of Physics, CalTech (Physics)
- Pulitzer Prize winning health investigative journalist and MD, ProPublica, NYT (Psychology)
- Special Assistant to President Obama (English)
- MacArthur Foundation Fellow and Founder, AUROLAB, aimed at eradicating deafness in India and elsewhere (General Studies)
• Founder, Taproot Foundation, which matches business experts with nonprofits (*General Studies*)
• Founder, inMotion (nonprofit that provides free legal service for victims of domestic violence) (*English*)
• Biochemical Engineer, Genentech, Inc. (*Cellular & Molecular Biology & Mathematical Sciences*)
• Member, US House of Representatives (*Psychology*)
• Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, *New York Times* (*American Culture*)
• First Female Mayor of Cleveland (*History*)
• Executive Vice President for Marketing and Communications, Clear Channel Radio (*Political Science*)
• Co-Founder and Co-Owner, Zingerman’s Deli (*History*)
• Co-Founder and Co-Owner, Zingerman’s Deli (*Zoology*)

They don’t match up too predictably, do they? And we could go on and on. Time after time, successful LSA alumni point not only to a concentration as the key to their success, but also to the breadth of their liberal arts education and to the intellectual skills they developed in surveying that breadth. Own it and enjoy it!