



COMPONENTS of an UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE

To successfully complete an **undergraduate degree**, you will need to complete a series of specific requirements. It isn't enough to simply take the right amount of classes – what types of classes you successfully complete and when you take them can also matter. This resource will walk you through the components that make up a degree and the kinds of requirements you should expect from your program.

THE LANDSCAPE

This list offers a broad overview of the kind of graduation requirements you should expect from your undergraduate degree program. These concepts are explained in greater depth later in this resource. Generally speaking, you can expect your program to have the following types of requirements:

- **Credit Hours:** You must complete the minimum number of **credit hours** required by your program. Typically this is at least 60 credits for an associate degree and at least 120 credits for a bachelor's degree, but these will vary. Technical education programs may use **clock hours** instead.
- **General Education Core:** You must complete all the requirements of your program's **General Education** core curriculum. Typically, this curriculum includes specific requirements for communications, math, **social sciences**, **humanities** or arts, Earth sciences, and history.
- **Other Core Requirements:** You may be expected to fulfill additional core requirements related to the institution's values, like community service or religious studies. Additional core requirements can take the form of required courses, community activities, or special projects. Some institutions have these additional requirements, but many do not.
- **Major Requirements:** You must declare a **major** and complete the required courses for that particular "program of study." Typically, you can expect major requirements to make up between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of your courses.
- **Residency Requirement:** You must satisfy the **residency requirement** at your college, which in this case, doesn't have anything to do with citizenship or where you live. Colleges require students to take a certain portion of their courses at their school to complete a degree there. This requirement only impacts transfer students who have taken courses at more than one college.
- **GPA:** You must satisfy the minimum **grade point average (GPA)** requirements listed by your college or your specific program of study.
- **Final Requirements:** Some programs may require students to complete a **capstone project** in your final year or semester of study to demonstrate what you've learned. Other programs may have administrative tasks that you need to complete in the end, like an exit exam or intent-to-graduate form. As you approach your final year of coursework, talk with your program advisor to find out if there are any final graduation requirements.

KEY TERMS

Key terms in **blue** can be found in the *Navigating Forward Glossary* if you'd like more information.

KEY TERMS

Undergraduate degree programs can be taken after completing high school and include associate and bachelor's degrees.

LEARN MORE

For more information about GPA, see the *Navigating Forward* resource called **Understanding Grade Point Average and Reading a Transcript**.

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CREDIT HOURS

WHAT ARE CREDIT HOURS?

Credit hours, or credits, are building blocks that make up your degree. They are the unit used to measure each of your courses.

Some colleges may use different terms, but credit hours is the most common. Technical colleges often use clock hours instead. If your program refers to courses in “units,” “semester hours,” or some other measurement system, the basic principles still apply.

Credit hours will be used to measure your degree progress and if you have completed enough coursework to graduate.

When you look at a transcript or a degree map, you'll see your progress toward completing your degree is measured in credits. You will see how many credits you have left to complete overall, and within specific categories.

See **Sample Degree Map** at the end of this resource.

HOW DO CREDITS WORK?

Each credit hour generally corresponds to the amount of time you would spend in the class each week, or “contact hours.”

For example: A class that meets for 1.5 hrs twice per week (3 hours) = 3 credit hours

There are some exceptions to this rule. Courses that meet online instead of in class can still be worth credit hours. Also, some non-credit courses may require class time but aren't worth any credits. Learn more about those below.

Most courses are three credit hours, but this number can vary.

For example: Classes with a lab component may be assigned three credit hours, with an additional one hour for the required lab.

Most colleges advise students to plan for at least two hours of study time outside of class each week per credit.

For example: If you take three courses that are three credits each, you should expect at least 18 hours of work outside of class per week.

WHAT ARE NON-CREDIT COURSES?

When courses are non-credit, they will not count in your progress toward completing a degree. Here are some types of **non-credit courses** you may encounter:

Developmental courses are designed to strengthen a student's fundamental skills of reading, writing, and math to help prepare for college-level courses. In many programs, these learning support courses are not for credit, but they may still be required. Some programs allow students to “test out” of these courses by taking placement exams. If you are using financial aid to pay for developmental courses, talk with your **advisor** to find out if that may impact your eligibility for financial aid in the future.

A **Non-Degree Seeking (NDS)** student enrolls in courses to gain knowledge, not to pursue a degree. These students are not eligible for federal financial aid. Some programs allow you to enroll NDS and later convert to degree-seeking status. Colleges that are not **accredited** to offer degrees at your facility may begin enrolling students NDS until their accreditation is approved and then convert students to degree-seeking. NDS can also allow students to begin taking courses without previous transcripts if those are difficult to find. Some colleges do not allow converting from NDS to degree-seeking, so be sure to speak with your program in advance. Your transcript will state if you are “NDS” or “Non-degree-seeking.”

Non-Degree Programs: Some programs do not give students credit for college courses they are taking in prison. These students are not able to count the courses they take toward a degree. Schools may make the decision to offer non-credit college programs due to limitations in funding, barriers within the college institution, or other policies. Talk to your program **advisor** to understand if the courses you are taking are **credit-bearing** and the reasons for that decision.





A CLOSER LOOK AT GENERAL EDUCATION

WHAT IS “GEN ED”?

Most undergraduate degrees have a core curriculum of **General Education** or “Gen. Ed.” courses that each student is required to take in order to earn a degree.

The Gen. Ed. curriculum typically includes specific requirements for communications, math, **social sciences**, **humanities** or arts, Earth sciences, and history. Gen. Ed. helps students develop a range of skills in writing, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving. A General Education core offers many benefits to students, including opportunities to:

- Obtain a well-rounded education, encouraging exploration within a number of fields and subject areas.
- Develop fundamental knowledge and skills before enrolling in higher level courses down the road. This can be especially helpful for students who are returning to school for the first time in many years or those with prior negative academic experiences.
- Learn more about themselves and their interests, which may help students decide if they are pursuing the right degree program, or if they want to make a change.
- Develop a wider understanding of humanity, differing ideas, ethics, and values.

HOW DOES “GEN ED” WORK?

General Education courses are usually taken within a student’s first two years of college.

The structure of a Gen. Ed. curriculum is usually divided into categories, and each category has its own requirements. For some categories, like history, there might be several courses that students can take to satisfy the requirement. In other categories, like communications, there might be specific courses that all students are required to take.

Gen. Ed. typically accounts for about 40 credit hours – roughly $\frac{2}{3}$ of an associate degree and about $\frac{1}{4}$ of a bachelor’s degree. The remaining credits of the degree are typically devoted to **electives** and **major** courses.

See the chart **General Education Requirements** below for a sample curriculum.

SAMPLE: GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

This is one example of what a general education curriculum could look like:

Category	Credits Required	Requirements
Communication	9 credits	ENGL 1010 – Composition I ENGL 1020 – Composition II COMM 2025 – Speech
Humanities/Fine Arts	9 credits	Three humanities or fine arts courses One of them must be a literature course
Social/Behavioral Science	6 credits	Two social science courses
History	6 credits	Two history courses
Natural Sciences	8 credits	Two natural science courses
Mathematics	3 credits	One foundational math course
TOTAL	41 credits	





MAJORS AND MINORS

WHAT IS A MAJOR?

A **major** is a concentration of study that makes up part of your degree program and requires completion of specific courses. It is also typically the name of your specific degree.

For example: A student who earned a Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration was a Business Administration major.

In an associate degree program, your major may only make up about $\frac{1}{4}$ of your degree, but, while earning a bachelor's degree, your major requirements will typically make up at least half of your courses.

Completing a major generally requires taking specific courses and often requires taking more advanced coursework. At many colleges and universities, **course codes** will indicate when a course is more advanced, with 100-level courses (MATH 102) representing introductory or prerequisite courses. These courses are commonly referred to as **lower division courses**. Courses designated as 300-level or higher are often called **upper division courses** and are typically available to third year students or higher. Most majors will require students to take several upper division (300 and 400-level courses, like "MATH 430") in their area of study.

DID YOU KNOW...

Some employers who require a bachelor's degree might be more concerned about the fact that you earned a degree and not as concerned about the specific major or subject area of your degree.

The fact that you were able to put in the time and effort to earn a four-year degree is enough for some employers, even if you were studying something unrelated to the specific job.

When selecting a degree path or a major, you should still consider your personal interests and potential future careers. However, know that you aren't necessarily locked into a specific career path just because you got your degree in a specific field.

WHAT IS A PREREQUISITE?

A **prerequisite** is a course that must be taken before a student will be eligible to take another course.

For example: MATH 101 might be a required prerequisite that you must take before you can take MATH 102 or MATH 401.

Prerequisites are important because they impact the order in which you must take certain courses. This can be especially important in prison education programs, when only a few specific courses are offered at a time.

For example: If Biology II, which you need to graduate, is being offered this semester, but you haven't taken the prerequisite of Biology I yet, you may need to wait a whole year until Biology II is offered again. Talk to your advisor if you have questions about the timing of your prerequisites.

Some programs may also have **corequisites**. Corequisites must be taken at the same time as another course.

For example: Chemistry 101 may require that you also enroll in a chemistry lab course at the same time.

WHAT IS A MINOR?

A **minor** is an optional additional area of focus within a student's **degree plan**. Most minors require between 15-21 credit hours.

Instead of taking unrelated **electives**, if students select courses that satisfy the requirements of a minor, they can complete their degree with an added area of emphasis.

Some students select a minor because it may make them more marketable in their career, but adding a minor may require taking extra classes, which could add extra time and cost. Many prison education programs do not have the option to include a minor, but this may be an option if you transfer to a traditional campus.





GENERAL ELECTIVES

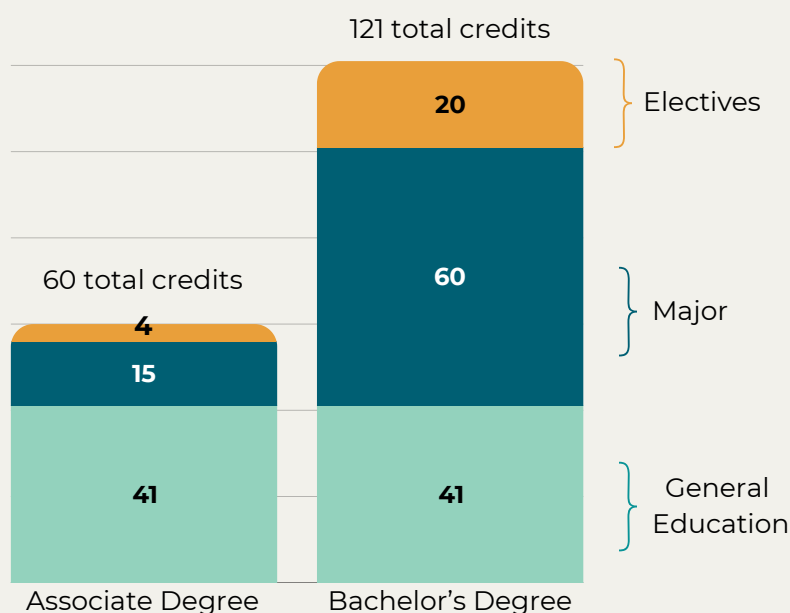
WHAT ARE ELECTIVES?

- Electives are essentially free spaces that a student can fill in with the classes of their choice, though the range of options might be much more limited within prison education programs than on a traditional campus.
- If you complete all your required **General Education** courses and your required **major** courses, in most cases, you would still not still not meet the total required credit hours to graduate. The remaining courses would be electives.
- Electives can be a useful tool to broaden the range of topics you study over the course of your program. If you plan on pursuing a degree in one field, but there is another field or topic you'd love to learn more about, electives give you the freedom to pursue knowledge in that area. Elective selection is also how some people will add a minor.
- If you want to add a second major, switch majors, or add a minor, you can use elective spaces to add the extra classes you will need to meet the extra degree requirements without adding extra time to school.
- If you are completing a major because that is the only option available to you at your facility, and you transfer to a different program later, electives are a way that you can still "count" those old courses towards the total credit hours required by the new program.

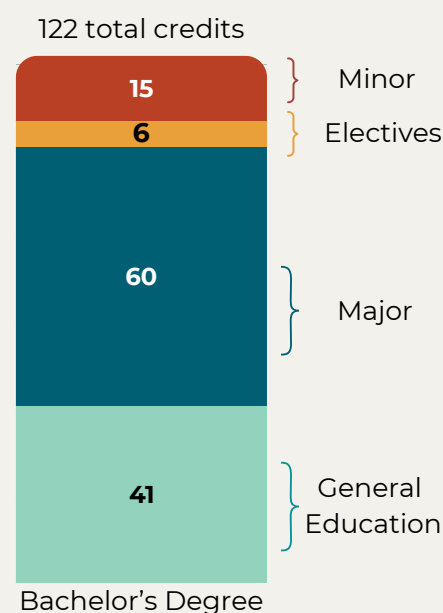
For example: If you take business courses now and later transfer to a history program, your business courses won't be part of your new degree, but you may be able to count them as electives.

HOW DO ELECTIVES FIT IN?

These examples illustrate how associate and bachelor's degrees are typically made up of electives, a major, and General Education courses.



This example shows how a minor can sometimes take the place of elective courses.





TRANSFERRING CREDITS

WILL MY OLD CREDIT HOURS FIT INTO MY NEW DEGREE MAP?

There are a few important ways that **transferring** to a new college or program can impact your degree progress. If you are transferring to a new program, each course you have taken in the past can face three possible outcomes at your new program:

1

The new program can accept it as a comparable course.

For example: “Communications 101” at your old school may be accepted as “Communications 1010” at your new school, and you won’t have to retake this core requirement.

2

The new program can accept it as elective credit. Electives will count toward your overall credit hour requirement, but they likely won’t count toward the requirements of your major or General Education core.

For example: “MATH 4030” at your previous school might count as three unnamed elective credits at your new school.

3

The new program may not accept credits from your old program.

This can happen for a number of reasons because there are many factors that impact transferability. See our resource on transferring to learn more about these factors.

IMPORTANT NOTE

If and how transfer credits are accepted is determined by the **receiving college**. If you want to know if your future college will accept previous credits you’ve earned, you’ll need to speak to someone at the future school.

LEARN MORE

For more information about how transferring works, see the *Navigating Forward* collection called **Navigating Transferring**.

IS THERE A MAXIMUM NUMBER OF CREDITS THAT I AM ALLOWED TO TRANSFER TO A NEW PROGRAM?

- Transfer policies will vary by specific college, so ask your program advisor if you have questions about your transfer credits. If you have questions about how your credits will transfer to a future program, you may need to contact the future college.
- Many programs have what is called a **residency requirement**, which requires a student to complete a certain portion of their credits at a given school in order to earn a degree there. A student who transfers very late into their degree progress may have to retake courses or take additional courses until they meet the residency requirement at their new school. Retaking courses in this way can have an impact on your ability to get financial aid, so talk to your advisor if you are planning to transfer.
- If you are forced to transfer programs late into your degree progress due to circumstances out of your control, like transferring facilities or navigating reentry, there may be ways to reduce the number of courses you have to retake. Make sure you talk with program coordinators from your previous program and the new, or receiving, college to see what options you have.

KEY TERMS

Though the terms look similar, the **residency requirement** is different from what colleges use to determine whether you are “in-state” or “out-of-state” for tuition. This “residency” refers to how many credits you have to take from your “home college” in order to graduate from there.





SAMPLE DEGREE MAP

If you have ever wondered why you had to take the courses you have, understanding your **degree map** might offer clarity. Use this sample degree map, which continues on the next page, to understand how the components of a college degree fit together. Keep in mind that degree maps will be very different depending on the type of degree and type of program. This example is a two-year, Associate of Science (A.S.) in Political Science degree.

This particular degree map is organized by semesters and assumes you will be taking 14-16 credit hours each **semester**. It gives a suggested order for your courses. Many students take fewer courses at a time and complete their degree at a slower pace. The requirements are the same regardless of the semester you complete them in.

Where this map directs you to “see catalog”, it is referring to the **course catalogue**, which can give you information about **prerequisites** and will list all the courses that can satisfy each requirement. If you don’t have access to a catalogue, ask your advisor or a professor if they can provide a digital or printed copy for you.

On this map, when a course is written in bold, students must take that specific course. When the course is written in regular text, there is a list of courses that will fit the requirement, and students typically get to choose. Factors like scheduling and the availability of courses may limit a student’s choices, especially for students in prison education programs.

When you are looking at your own degree map, you may see language, numbering, or symbols that you’re unsure about. If you have questions, try reviewing your school’s **course catalog** or asking an instructor or academic advisor for more information.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Degree maps are individualized for each school and each program. Your degree map may look different from this one! If you haven’t seen a degree map for your program, ask your advisor.

KEY TERMS

A **student ID** is an identification number given to each student when they are first admitted to a school.

Term is a period of time when classes are offered. It could be a semester or quarter and usually lasts for several weeks or months.

Name: _____

Student ID: _____

FIRST YEAR - FALL SEMESTER					NOTES
Course No. and Title	Credits	Term	Grade	Prerequisite	
ENGL 1010 English Composition I	3			Level 2 placement or concurrent enrollment in ENGL 1010 and ENGL 0815; Level 2 placement or concurrent enrollment in READ 0815	
POLS 1030 Intro to American Government	3			Level 2 placement in English and Reading	
MATH 1530 Intro to Statistics	3			Level 2 placement in Math or concurrent enrollment in MATH 0835	
Natural Science: (BIOL 1010 is recommended)	4			See catalog	
THEI 1010 First Year Orientation	1			For First-time Freshman Only	
TOTAL CREDIT HOURS	14				

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FIRST YEAR - SPRING SEMESTER					
Course No. and Title	Credits	Terms	Grade	Prerequisite	
ENGL 1020 English Composition II	3			ENGL 1010	
POLS 2025 State and Local Government	3			Level 2 Placement in English	
COMM 2025	3			ENGL 1010	
Natural Science: (BIOL 1020 is recommended)	4			See catalog	
History: (HIST 2310 is recommended)	3			See catalog	
TOTAL CREDIT HOURS	16				

SECOND YEAR - FALL SEMESTER					NOTES
Course No. and Title	Credits	Term	Grade	Prerequisite	
General Elective	3			See catalog	
Literature: (ENGL 2110 is recommended)	3			ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020	
Humanities: (PHIL 1030 is recommended)	3			See catalog	
History: (HIST 2320 is recommended)	3			See catalog	
Elective: (LEGL 2300 is recommended)	3			See catalog	
TOTAL CREDIT HOURS	15				

SECOND YEAR - SPRING SEMESTER					
Course No. and Title	Credits	Terms	Grade	Prerequisite	
ECON 2100 Principles of Macroeconomics	3			Level 2 Placement in English	
Foreign Language or General Elective	3			See catalog	
Elective: (HIST 2020 is recommended)	3			See catalog	
Social Science: (SOCI 1010 is recommended)	4			See catalog	
Humanities: (PHIL 2200 is recommended)	3			See catalog	
TOTAL CREDIT HOURS	16				