

Overview of WCAS Distribution Requirements

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The Weinberg College distribution requirements provide an opportunity to begin to acquire the knowledge, breadth of interests, and intellectual flexibility that are the hallmark of a well-educated person. The goals of the distribution requirement system are met when a student's complement of distribution requirement courses adds up to a significant introduction to a wide range of topics, vocabulary, and methodology in an appropriately wide range of disciplines. Individual courses meeting distribution requirements in an area can be very broad introductions (as is usually the case in 100- and 200-level courses), or can illustrate the scope and methodology of an area or the range of problems that a discipline confronts by focusing on a limited number of topics (more characteristic of 300-level courses).

All Weinberg College students take two one-quarter courses in each of six major areas of intellectual inquiry within the arts and sciences. The six distribution areas, described in more detail below, are:

- Area I. Natural Sciences
- Area II. Formal Studies
- Area III. Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Area IV. Historical Studies
- Area V. Ethics and Values
- Area VI. Literature and Fine Arts

Courses in each area are listed at <http://www.wcas.northwestern.edu/advising/degree/distro/courses.html>.

Some "interdisciplinary studies" courses are approved for more than one area. A student taking such a course chooses in which eligible area to count it. Beginning in summer 2010, students can fulfill the two-unit requirement in an area with two Interdisciplinary Studies courses. This rule will apply retroactively to all students. (Prior to summer 2010, students could count at most one Interdisciplinary Studies course toward a distribution area; the second course had to be approved for that area only.)

Area I – Natural Sciences

This area introduces methods of inquiry and fundamental concepts in the natural sciences. Courses in this area consider the theoretical and empirical bases of generally applicable statements about the natural world. The properties and structures of atoms and molecules, the principles of cognition, the structure and resources of the earth--all are examples of scientific concerns that underlie issues of fundamental importance to modern society. Understanding the foundations of modern science--the problems that concern natural scientists and the methods they use to confront those problems--will enable students to make intelligent judgments about current issues and prepare them to understand those that cannot yet be anticipated.

Area II – Formal Studies

This area introduces concepts, methods, and the use of formal rules of inference. All courses in formal studies show how objects of thought and experience, and their relationships, can be analyzed in formal terms. They differ in the data studied. For example, mathematics and statistics courses focus on numbers, while linguistics courses focus on structures and patterns in natural languages. Familiarity with abstract languages or formal rules of inference, whether based on quantitative or symbolic methods, enhances students' ability to analyze and interpret masses of information intelligently, to perceive patterns, to derive sound conclusions from explicit assumptions, and to communicate their reasoning and conclusions to others clearly and effectively.

Area III – Social and Behavioral Sciences

The area of social and behavioral sciences introduces theories, methods, and empirical research findings focusing on human behavior and on its relation to social, cultural, economic, and political groups and institutions. Through courses in this area, students examine the evidence for generally applicable statements about individual and group behavior, as well as social actions, policies, and institutions. They learn how social and behavioral scientists form hypotheses, construct models, and test their validity, and about the results of their investigations, and they become able to make more reasoned judgments about complex problems of modern society.

Area IV – Historical Studies

The area of historical studies introduces the chronological development and historical relationships in cultural, social, political, economic, and military affairs in a broad temporal perspective. Courses in historical studies offer a wide choice of cultures and eras. Some deal with major national or continental civilizations, some focus on smaller geographic areas, and some look at cultures that transcend traditional geopolitical boundaries. Through learning about the past, students broaden their experiences, gain a deeper understanding of human behavior, and bring a more mature assessment to their own lives and the societies in which they live.

Area V – Ethics and Values

The area of ethics and values introduces students to the analysis of values, to ways of addressing ethical problems and choices, and to systems of thought or religion that affect value judgments. Given the centrality of moral and ethical values to human conduct, a deeper understanding of the bases of these judgments is critical. Courses in this area examine the foundations upon which such systems are constructed and the processes through which judgments are made. They examine ethical questions in different contexts (religious, biomedical, environmental, etc) and/or value systems, both secular and religious, that guide human behavior. Such courses may also address the dynamics of ethical change in a society (e.g., why the separation of races may be acceptable to one generation but problematic to another). Courses may be organized historically or analytically, but they must place problems in a context that has a widespread cultural impact.

Area VI – Literature and Fine Arts

Literature and fine arts courses help students understand how the attitudes, ideas, and values of individuals, groups, societies, or cultures are represented in their literature, arts, and other creative activities. This area includes surveys of broad areas, courses that focus on significant eras, and courses that focus on a significant writer or artist. Some involve the study of a specific literary or artistic genre, and others involve more analytical and abstract approaches to the arts. Studying literature and fine arts helps students to understand other cultures as well as their own.