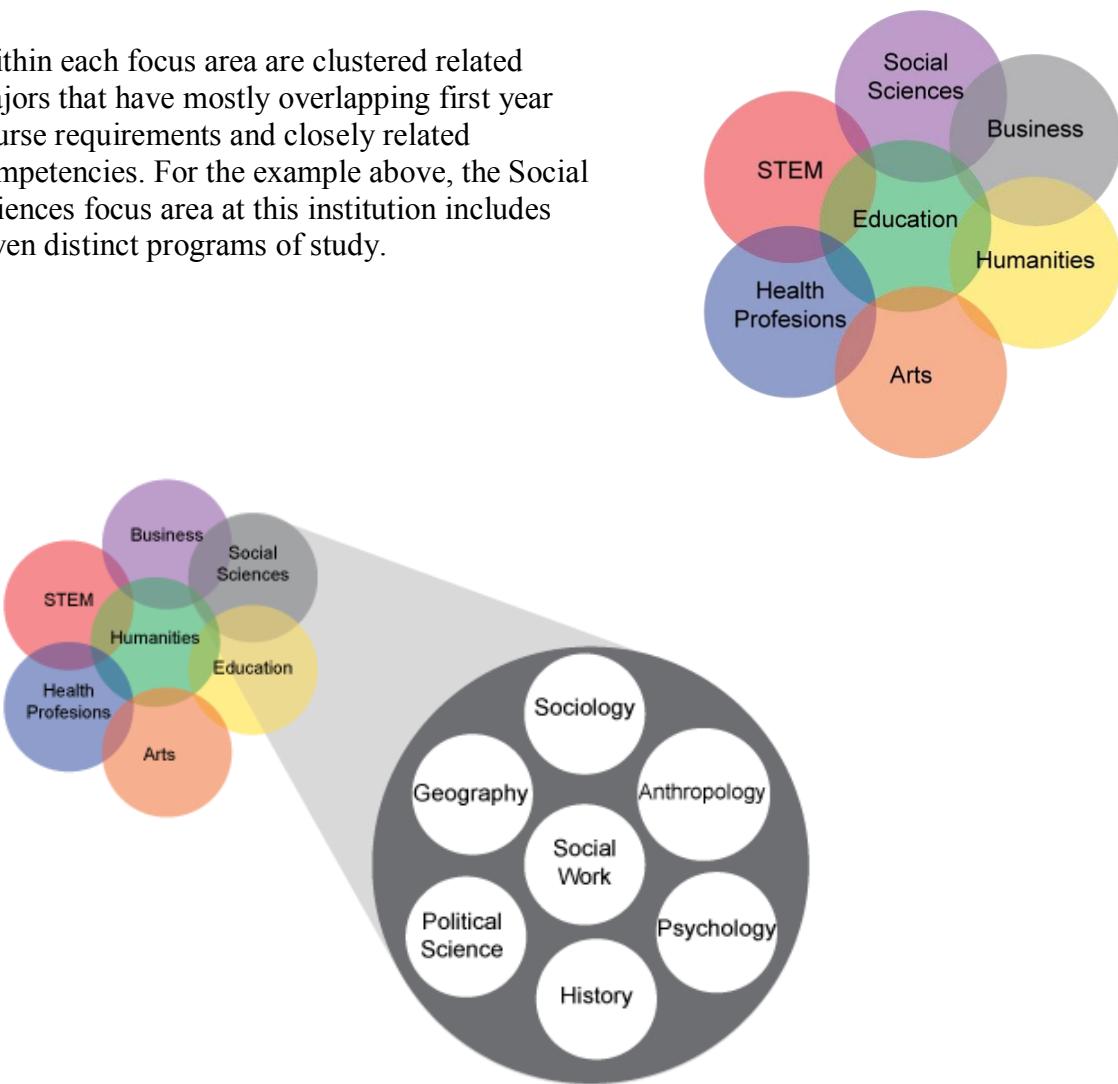


# What are Academic Focus Areas?

Academic Focus Areas are related majors that are grouped together because they share a foundation of common course requirements and recommendations. At most institutions, every program of study will fit into one of a limited number (five to seven, generally) of Academic Focus Areas. The illustration below provides an example of how programs of study might be grouped into Academic Focus Areas at an institution.

Within each focus area are clustered related majors that have mostly overlapping first year course requirements and closely related competencies. For the example above, the Social Sciences focus area at this institution includes seven distinct programs of study.



In this example, the institution has clustered Anthropology, Geography, History, Political Science, Psychology, Social Work, Sociology together in a Social Sciences focus area because these majors share most courses in common across their first year. This focus area would sit

alongside other focus areas at the institution with similar clusters of programs. Similarly, other majors would be aligned with other focus areas. All programs of study or majors at an institution should be mapped into an Academic Focus Area. The table below provides a partial example of how this might be arranged for five focus areas:

Academic Focus Area	Program of Study/Major	Academic Focus Area	Program of Study/Major
Social Sciences	Anthropology	Business	Accounting
	Geography		Finance
	History		General Business
	Political Science		Management
	Psychology		Marketing
	Sociology		Art History
STEM	Social Work	Humanities	English
	Biology		Modern Languages
	Chemistry		Philosophy
	Computer Science		Theatre
	Mathematics		Nursing
	Neuroscience		Kinesiology
	Physics	Health Professions	Health Informatics

### Focus Areas and the Core Curriculum

The requirements and recommendations for courses will typically be similar within a focus area for Areas A – E of the USG Core Curriculum, and there may also be overlap in some of the program-specific requirements (Area F). Because of this, students matriculating without a clear idea of a specific major or program of study can be directed to take courses in an Academic Focus Area in their first semester that are likely to count toward graduation, even as they are refining their ideas about their majors.

Students who enter college with a specific program of study or major in mind will automatically be mapped onto a pathway appropriate to both the specific major and the associated program of study. Students who enter college without a clear choice of program will be helped to identify the Academic Focus Area most closely aligned with their broad interests, and to explore potential programs of study or majors in the Academic Focus Area within their first two semesters of enrollment. Placing students in Academic Focus Areas will also help to identify related majors in the event that students wish to switch majors.

*Focus areas will replace undecided as an option for students.* Students who are undecided about their program of study will need to meet with their advisor to make an informed decision about an academic path that begins with an Academic Focus Area and supports their goals, skills and



interests. As a result of this conversation, students may select a degree program directly or may be guided into an academic focus area if they remain uncertain as to a specific area of study. By eliminating undecided as an option for students who enroll in classes, the University System is taking a concrete step to ensure that every student has an opportunity to become informed of their options at the institution they have chosen to attend and how those options connect with their purpose for pursuing a college degree.

### **Focus Areas and the Momentum Year**

A key component of the Momentum Year is that students should enter college making a purposeful choice of an academic focus area or a program of study. Many students select a major at the point of application or during the process of registering for courses and proceed through their academic program on the path toward that degree. Other students may enter college undecided as to the program that they wish to pursue or unaware of what the options may be. For both types of students, and those in between, the initial choice of a major is often made from a position of limited information about the nature of the field, the expectations of the program, or the connections with student aptitudes, interests and skills.

The consequences for students of entering and having made a program choice that does not align with their interests and abilities may be numerous major changes, lost credits, discouragement, or stopping out. In the University System of Georgia, students who graduate typically earn almost 20 credits above those required for a degree, adding nearly a year's worth of course-taking into the transcripts of students who succeed. Academic focus areas help to minimize the likelihood of excess credit by ensuring that within a focus area most courses a student is advised to take in their first year will apply across all related programs.

Focus areas further help students as they advance on their path in their chosen area to refine and recalibrate their academic goals so that they make an informed final choice of a degree program that connects with their interests, skills, and goals. Students who identify a degree program upon application are automatically in the focus area in which their program falls. This allows them to fully understand their choice and provides opportunities to explore more deeply both their own program and those that are closely aligned.

Focus areas can allow institutions to group students into affinity groups in order to provide targeted curricular and co-curricular opportunities, help support more tailored advising, and can be used to reinforce students' purpose and sense of belonging to the institution and their program. First Year Experience courses, core math or English courses, or other academic experiences can be tailored to support career and academic development for students in particular focus areas. Students in the same focus area can form learning communities with aligned schedules, creating small groups of students with similar interests in several classes together, amplifying the sense of belonging, helping to create connections with other students and faculty.

# Academic Focus Areas

## Frequently Asked Questions

*Q: Do students have to select both a focus area and a program of study at admission?*

A: Students may choose a program of study at the point of application or during the enrollment process. Students identifying a specific program of study will also be identified as members of the associated focus area for their program. Other students who are unsure of their choice or are unclear about their options, and for some programs for which direct entry is discouraged by the program itself, will identify a focus area that aligns with their interests.

*Q: Must Undeclared students choose a focus area when they apply for admissions?*

A: This is an institutional decision, but students who self-identify as undeclared (undecided) should have sufficient information about their focus area choice in order to be certain that they are making a “close fit” selection. For some focus areas, the connection between both discipline and career may be self-evident, but for other areas (such as Arts and Humanities or Social Sciences) students, especially students from first-generation households, may need more information about the field before making a selection. Students must identify a program of study or focus area prior to registering for classes for their first term, since their program map is determined by the academic focus area they identify.

*Q: What counts as a Focus Area Course? Are these only Area F courses?*

Students should take three courses in their focus area in their first year. Courses within the focus area should first and foremost count towards most, if not all, all degree programs in the same focus area. More than this, however, they should provide a student with the opportunity to understand the academic setting and expectations of the discipline. These may be courses in Area F, but also may be any course within Core Areas A - E, and need not be directly tied to a program. This may be especially the case for programs that do not offer courses at the freshman and sophomore level; and for these programs careful coordination of the courses that provide the best sense of academic context and co-curricular activities that support student understanding of the field and the program should be developed.

*Q: Students in Focus Areas are not eligible for financial aid?*

A: Federal financial aid rules indicate that students must be enrolled in a program of study leading to a degree, but they do not need to have a declared major. U.S. Department of Education staff suggest that undeclared students be reported as being in General Studies (CIP code 24.0102) until they declare a major. Thus students who select a focus area are eligible for federal financial aid under the same terms as other students. For further details, see [here](#).

*Q: Do focus areas require specialized or customized program maps?*

A: No. Focus areas are collections of closely related programs of study. As such, the first term (and often, first year) program maps for all programs of study in a focus area should be very similar. For students who are unclear as to their program, the advisement process should identify a “best fit” map from the aggregated programs of study in the focus area for the student to follow for their first term, with subsequent advising focused on assessing and refining the program choice.

*Q: Does a focus area transfer with a student?*

A: Students who transfer to a USG institution enter by declaring or major (or, if appropriate, a focus area). If the student is not changing programs as well as schools, it is possible, but not guaranteed, that the focus area will be the same at both the old and new institution. Regardless, there is no expectation that the student's previous focus area will persist at the new institution, and it is more meaningful for the student to be aligned into the new institution's academic focus areas, since this alignment drives curricular, co-curricular, advising and career counseling communications and offerings.

*Q: What about students who really don't know what they want to study?*

A: There may be some students who, even after completing an interest inventory or survey and discussions with advisors are unable to identify a focus area or to choose between two equally appealing areas. For these students, institutions may (at their discretion) consider an "exploratory" focus area that supports students in refining their program choice. Exploratory students should be supported intensively both by career and student success services to ensure that they are able to make a program choice as quickly as possible and are able to be successful in their coursework.

*Q: Shouldn't students be encouraged to explore in college? Isn't a prescriptive process contrary to the mission of the university?*

A: Focus areas encourage exploration, but provide structure to this exploration that ensures it is intentional, aligned with the student's interests, and culminates in a credential. They leverage the substantial experience and capacity of the institution to help students see the path forward to their goals, and understand the options and alternatives available to them along the way.