

Getting a Fair Shot?

Three findings from a study of university officials' views on the use of standards-based grading in admissions decisions

BY THOMAS M. BUCKMILLER AND RANDAL E. PETERS/*School Administrator*, February 2018



Tom Buckmiller, associate professor at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, studied how university admissions officers were reacting to nontraditional student grade transcripts.

As more education leaders consider implementing a standards-based approach to assessment and grading, they are bumping up against a formidable barrier — parents worried about how college admissions officers will size up their sons' and daughters' applications to selective institutions.

Many parents, particularly those of higher-achieving students, assume the drastic change in grade reporting will harm their children's chances of gaining admission. Students accustomed to traditional grading formats harbor a similar fear of being disadvantaged in their candidacies for postsecondary admissions.

A high school administrator with whom we have worked acknowledged this real concern, but he pointed out its fallacy. "I don't fault students for that. But they're so consumed with a 3.85 [GPA] as opposed to a 3.75, they don't care *how* they get it. I tell them all the time, 'You will get into college, but that's not why we're here. We're here to make sure you get *through*

college,” said Nathan Wear, principal of 450-student Solon High School in central Iowa.

The purpose of our recent qualitative study was to determine whether students who attended high schools using standards-based grading are likely to receive fair and equitable consideration in the university admissions process. Further, we examined the extent to which university admissions personnel understood standards-based grading, as well as the nature of any challenges that high school grades and transcripts based on standards might pose to admissions decisions.

Based on our in-depth qualitative interviews with admissions officials at two large state universities, one midsized state university and one midsized private university, all situated in the Midwest, we found three significant themes relating to standards-based grading and admissions.

» **No. 1: Letter grades and transcripts based on standards are acceptable, if not preferable, in the eyes of admissions offices, but with some caveats.**

When standards-based grading principles were more fully explained, university admissions directors expressed general approval. They shared their frustrations with rampant grade inflation, inaccurate portrayals of student performance, the regular need for remediation once students were enrolled and widely varying grading systems from one school district to the next, often associated with traditional grading practices.

One admissions director remarked in disbelief, saying, “I’ve seen kids graduate from good high schools who are illiterate — I mean, they are *illiterate* — and yet they are high school graduates.”

Some agreement existed among the admissions officials that information communicated through grades and transcripts that is more precise and accurate, that separates and addresses personal traits such as work ethic and attendance, is a truer reflection of students’ performance relative to an academic standard.

University officials in our study stated almost unequivocally that students from schools awarding grades that reflect clear learning targets and separate reporting of behavioral and academic indicators would not receive unfair evaluation for admission.

The separation of academic and personal behavior grades, a key component of most

standards grading, was seen as beneficial to the admissions process. Final transcripts submitted in June, a couple of months before students matriculate, would be especially helpful to staff responsible for incoming students. Said one counselor: “It’s just more information — more so for borderline students probably than the students who are auto admits.”

K-12 educators should help families understand this form of grading is better preparation for college than traditional grading. “I think it’s telling parents that this is a better way for students to become responsible,” said one admissions counselor.

Once they understood standards-based grading more fully, university admissions officials were receptive. The one caveat was that letter grades brought greater efficiency to admissions operations work and were still preferable for that reason. This is not an obstacle for most high schools that have adopted standards-based (or standards-referenced) grading principles, as most schools ultimately convert the standards-based marks to traditional letter grades on report cards and transcripts.

Within this context, under the current admissions system at the four universities in the study, transcripts from districts with standards-based grading would not be affected in any way. If students’ grades, in the form of GPAs, and other required indicators met minimum requirements, they would continue to be admitted as in traditional systems.

» **No. 2: Universities receive profiles from schools with alternative grading/reporting systems and use strategies to ensure equitable consideration of applicants.**

Nontraditional grading on transcripts is not new in college admissions. Admissions personnel at the four universities we studied provided multiple examples of such cases and described strategies used to ensure equity of access. One pointed to applicants who had been home-schooled — “an example of a student who’s not always going to have a GPA, but they’ve carefully narrated the content and the progress of the student. ... [S]tandardized test scores will probably get weighed a little more heavily.”

We asked admissions offices about the impact they will experience as more student applications come from schools using standards-based practices. One respondent admitted, “Unless we prepare for it and know what we’re getting into, it will tax our current resources” and put pressure on the existing system. They’re already seeing the trend of schools eliminating class rank.

“We’re at the point where about 25 percent of students who graduate do not have a class rank. Clearly, we’ve had to deal with the issue. ... If you have one or two schools that launch this, are we going to change for that? Probably not,” said one university admissions official. “But when ... 20-25 percent of schools are doing [standards-based grading without letter grades] then, yes, we’ve got to come up with a new formula.”

To help with their decisions, admissions personnel said they would contact high school counselors if they had questions about a student’s readiness or a school’s specific grading and reporting practices. As such, it would be prudent for schools transitioning to standards-based grades to raise the awareness of their counseling staffs because it’s the latter who will serve as conduits of information.

» **No. 3: The need for efficiency in the admissions process has forced personnel to place an inordinate trust in grades and standardized test scores.**

The issue of admissions personnel advocating for the reporting of letter grades, even in systems employing standards-based grading principles, is a matter of limited campus resources and the demand for efficiency. Admissions directors said their relatively small staffs are charged with reviewing and making admissions recommendations from many thousands of applicants each year.

Noting the heavy weight of doing more with less, one admissions official said, “The worst thing we can do is admit them when they don’t have the skills to be successful. It’s on our shoulders when they’re ... dropping out and walking away with debt.” Another official noted, “We suspect grades are inflated and standardized tests are biased.” When asked about the best way to report grades, one admissions director responded, “I think most of us would be interested in knowing that you have removed the variables that inflate grades.” Thus, recognizing the importance of providing accurate grades that reflect both academic achievement and behavior (work ethic, attendance, perseverance), reported separately, becomes a critical responsibility of secondary school educators.

Finally, one admissions official brought up the distinction between the practices of large/mid-sized universities — which we studied — and those at smaller private liberal arts colleges, who tend to be more responsive to changes in grading and reporting systems.

Ultimately, leaders in both K-12 and higher education have a responsibility for leading their respective organizations in ways that advance the preparation of college- and career-ready learners, in spite of entrenched attitudes and other barriers. Improvements in grading systems that more accurately communicate student achievement are needed, and K-12 leaders should not wait for those in higher education to change.

University admissions officials are willing to adapt to defensible educational practices that will yield more precise information. In doing so, they stand ready to set a higher bar of postsecondary *completion* instead of just *admission*.

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