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## Making the Call **Inside Admissions Offices**

University decision makers understand the use of standards-based grades but admit they'll need to be better prepared

**BY PAUL RIEDE**/*School Administrator, February 2018*



**Paul Seegert, director of admissions at the University of Washington in Seattle, says student applicants with standards-based grade reports require extra attention from his staff when making admissions decisions.**

are engulfed by volumes of applications whose numbers are increasing perennially.

The growing movement toward standards-based grading in high schools could end up being a boon for college admissions offices by providing deeper information about applicants, many admissions officials say. But others — particularly at large public universities — are leery about the extra time and attention the resulting applications could require.

The admissions officials agree that the work will require collaboration among high schools and colleges to ensure that transcripts rooted in standards-based grading are readily accessible and meaningful to admissions readers, who

“College admissions directors and their teams are reading many, many thousands of files and need to go through applications and understand what they mean, so that means whatever system is used has to be easily retrievable and understandable,” says Jerome Lucido, a former admissions director at the University of North Carolina who is now executive director of the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice at the University of Southern California.

### **A Competitive Picture**

Standards-based grading systems, which focus on evaluating mastery of specific standards within a subject area rather than awarding a single letter grade, appear to be on a slow but steady rise in America's high schools. That could be a challenge to admissions officials, who will have to adjust to an applicant review system that, at least at first, could be more complex and time-consuming than the current one.

"I think our hope is that when high schools are presenting their students to us that those documents are efficient because we do have a lot of applications to read," says Stuart Schmill, dean of admissions at MIT, which received 20,247 applications for 1,102 places in this year's freshman class.

Paul Seegert, director of admissions at the University of Washington, which fielded nearly 45,000 applications for this year's freshman class and enrolled 6,774, is more emphatic about the challenges standards-based grading could create.

He says course grades, along with curriculum rigor, are the most important elements of a student's application. The vast majority of the applications his office receives contain grades that can be easily scaled into the 1 through 4, GPA-like evaluation system the office uses. The few that don't contain such grades are handled by a single senior staffer who takes extra time to evaluate them.

"If we received a significant influx, we would either have to hire more people or we would have to find a way to streamline the process," Seegert says, "and I can tell you, nobody's going to give us more money to hire more people."

### **A Reassuring Note**

Seegert says he does not believe students currently applying under a standards-based grading system are at a disadvantage in the admissions process, although he has no hard data on that. MIT's Schmill and Seth Allen, dean of admissions and financial aid at Pomona College near Los Angeles, agree.

"As long as the admissions staff are well-trained and understand what they're looking at, it's very easy to accommodate in our process," Allen says. "While the output we see might look different from traditional 100-point or A-B-C-D grades, it's still giving us some pretty good information about the students."

Adds Schmill: "I would very much want to reassure any parents or students that this won't hurt their chances at getting into college."

He points out that this is hardly the first time high schools have tweaked their evaluation systems. Many schools no longer use class rank, and some don't calculate grade-point averages or even provide letter grades.

"We have applications from all over the country and all over the world, so we see all kinds of transcripts," he says. "It's not something that would throw us."

## Meaningful Measures

Allen says fewer than 30 percent of the applicants to Pomona, a small, highly selective liberal arts college, provide a class rank, which he calls “a pretty superficial measure.” At Pomona, he says, even standardized tests like the SAT aren’t all that helpful in selecting students because most of the school’s applicants have similarly high scores.

Schmill, who joined the MIT staff a year after graduating from the university in 1986, says MIT does pay significant attention to standardized test scores, as well as teacher recommendations. “We do find that the tests are predictive of students’ performance here, as one part of many things,” he says. “Test scores and grades together are even more helpful.”

But, as Allen points out, even a student’s course grades can be misleading. Some teachers may grade on a curve, making it unclear how much a student has learned. “It’s not entirely certain with traditional grades that a student has necessarily mastered the subject or mastered the subject deeply,” he says.

That’s where some admissions officers say the move to standards-based grading could help them find the students who best fit their institutions. The colleges may get not only more information about applicants but more applicants who have high-level analytical skills because high schools will be focusing on those measures.

“Oftentimes you get what you measure, and if you’re just measuring content-area knowledge that’s what you’ll get,” Schmill says. “But if you’re measuring skills that are enduring and predictive, the hope is that that’s what we’ll get.”

Lucido, whose organization at USC analyzes enrollment practices and policies with the goal of improving student access and success, says the standards-based movement has the potential to enable admissions officers to evaluate students on a deeper level.

“It might be even a more efficient way than we currently have to assess elements of a student’s character, whether it’s moral character or performance character,” he says. “Is the student conscientious? Is the student someone who commits to civic responsibility? Is it someone who engages in school activities and leadership roles, is it someone who brings different kinds of students together in conversation and in learning? Is it someone who’s not just comfortable with but learns from different cultures? If there are ways to get that in a really readable form, wow, we want to know about this.”

Allen, who has worked at Pomona since 2011 after stints in admissions at Grinnell, Dickinson and Johns Hopkins, suggests that by reducing the emphasis on letter grades, GPAs and the like, the standards-based grading movement is a way not only for colleges to better evaluate students, but for those students to gain a healthier attitude about learning.



**Seth Allen (standing), dean of admissions and financial aid at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif., believes standards-based grades could help his staff better assess applicants’ high-level analytical skills.**

PHOTO © BY JEFFREY HING, POMONA COLLEGE, CLAREMONT, CA.

“I hope this might put more balance back into education, where our 17-year-olds are not feeling like they’re on the verge of a heart attack because they’re worrying about doing well in school and getting into the right college and having the life they want to lead and feeling all that pressure as a 15-, 16-, 17-year-old,” he says. “This feels like one more thing that educators are really trying to think through on how to put sanity back into the learning process.”

Seegert sees the value in such reform. But with his office receiving nearly five times as many applications as the 9,000 Allen received last year at Pomona, he has significant concerns about capacity.

“We’re all for innovation in teaching and what goes into how students are taught and how they are assessed,” he says, “but we really would prefer that schools then take those assessments and translate them into something that universities can use on a large scale, like grades.”



**Jerome Lucido, of the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice at University of Southern California, says admissions staffs will get better at evaluating candidates with nontraditional high school grades as they see more of those applicants.**

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## A Tipping Point

The officials say it will be vital for high schools and admissions officials to communicate more on these issues as the movement continues to grow — and for admissions offices to delve deeply into the changes with the people who review the applications.

“I think the tipping point is coming,” Allen says, “and, either right in advance of that tipping point or at that tipping point, I think there will need to be some pretty significant training in admission offices for the readers to truly understand what they’re looking at.”

The fact that college admissions offices will have to make some adjustments should not deter high schools from pursuing meaningful reforms in the way they teach and evaluate students, he says.

Even so, there will likely be hiccups along the way. Lucido says there may be “a bit of irony” in the early stages. If some of the applications aren’t as clear and accessible as college admissions officials would like them to be, there may be a tendency to fall back into the safety net of standardized test scores — which isn’t something the proponents of standards-based grading want to see.

Seegert agrees, suggesting that SAT and ACT scores already play a bigger role in assessing applications without traditional grades because they may be the only hard numerical data in the application.

Lucido, who also serves as associate dean of strategic enrollment services for USC’s school of education, says colleges will grow more confident with the movement as they accept more students with standards-based applications into their institutions and analyze how they perform

there.

“For some period of time, we still need to find a way to validate our admissions decisions and make sure we are choosing students who are well-prepared,” he says. “But I don’t think in any way, shape or form should it be discouraged because of what folks believe college admissions people want to see.”

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