



I Want to Know More

A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative schools.

How Do Colleges View Proficiency-Based Transcripts?

College Admissions?

Rates of college participation among 18–24 year-olds have increased steadily during the past 25 years. As the **National Center for Education Statistics** reports, “Total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased 31 percent from 13.2 million in 2000 to 17.3 million in 2014. By 2025, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 19.8 million students.” Every one of those millions of admissions decisions requires clear communication about students’ academic and other accomplishments among secondary schools, postsecondary institutions, students, and (in most cases) students’ families.

College Admission Defined

Throughout this brief, we use “college admission” to refer to the process of admission to a wide range of two- and four-year degree-granting institutions. Much of what we discuss here also applies to post-secondary certification programs, branches of the military, internships, and employment opportunities that require easily interpreted high school transcripts.

For many students and their families, the stakes around college admission loom exceedingly large. As the goal of college nears, anxieties about the process rise. In states adopting proficiency-based systems, high school guidance staff members have reported hearing from parents concerned about the effects of resulting changes. Proficiency-based approaches mean that letter grades, grade-point averages, class rank, and traditional coursework are no longer viewed as the only information considered in the college admission process. This raises legitimate worries: will standards-based transcripts jeopardize students’ access not only to college, but also financial aid, special programs, advanced coursework, and other facets of the college experience?

Not at all, say a wide range of college admission professionals. If documented thoughtfully, proficiency-based education offers college admission staff members the opportunity to learn more about students to support their admission and success following enrollment. Moreover, proficiency-based systems that incorporate personalized learning environments and multiple flexible pathways toward graduation help ensure more equitable preparation for and access to higher education, especially first generation college-goers, students of color, and others historically underrepresented at postsecondary educational institutions.

This Leadership in Action brief highlights research aimed at supporting schools to document students' proficiency to reflect their achievements accurately and help them reach their postsecondary goals, including:

- Insights from college admission staff members about the college admission process
- Best practices for schools that have or will adopt proficiency-based approaches to construct transcripts, school profiles, and other key documents
- Reflections on the connections between proficiency-based learning and postsecondary success

The College Admission Process: Myths and Realities

Before looking at the proficiency-based model itself, it's worth considering aspects of the college admission process. Much of the well-intentioned information offered to students and families suggests a formula for successful college admission. Students are advised to pursue specific courses of study and extracurricular activities. They are told to take Advanced Placement and other challenging coursework as offered at their schools, and to strive for a high grade point average (GPA) and class rank.

But it's a myth that there is only one path to college admission. Colleges have established their admissions offices to evaluate a broad range of applicants. Students from public, independent, and parochial schools mix with homeschoolers and international students. Many students come to undergraduate life with work, military, and other life experience. All colleges have established systems to evaluate data from many different sorts of students. Admissions staff members already know how to understand and compare varied forms of transcripts. The primary task of secondary schools is to present what the student has learned and accomplished during school in the most clear and helpful way possible.

It's also worth remembering that your school is neither the first nor only to commit to a proficiency-based system. Many schools in Maine and New Hampshire have already made the switch to transcripts that eliminate letter grades. Vermont and other states are in the process of making this transition, and many other schools elsewhere document student achievement similarly. This may be new to your local context but won't be new to college admission staff. Quoted in the *Burlington Free Press*, Michael Stefanowicz, director of admission at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont, noted an increase in proficiency-based transcripts. "The reality is that we've had transcripts that look different all along. We've always been able to make a good admissions decision regardless of the format."

What about Highly Selective Colleges?

In 2016, the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) and the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC) gathered college admissions leaders from highly selective New England institutions of higher education to elicit their observations on the function of proficiency-based high school transcripts on the admissions process. The resulting New England Journal of Higher Education report, ***How Selective Colleges and Universities Evaluate Proficiency-Based High School Transcripts: Insights for Students and Schools***, states, "Overwhelmingly, these admissions leaders indicate that students with proficiency-based transcripts will not be disadvantaged in the highly selective admissions process. Moreover, according to some admissions leaders, features of the proficiency-based transcript model shared with the group provide important information for institutions seeking not just high-performing academics, but engaged, lifelong learners."

What Do Colleges Want?

The job of college admissions officers is to be able to compare students to one another and make judgments. While each college has slightly different lists of criteria, almost all assess prospective students through their academic performance, the level of rigor of the course of study, test scores, communication skills as indicated by essays and interviews, and

extracurricular activities.

Schools are responsible for providing two documents to assist in this process: **transcripts** of students' academic performance and **school profiles** that offer information about students' school contexts. Each of these elements of college applications must be adapted when a school shifts to a proficiency-based approach. Done right, these changes can offer more insight into students than is possible with more traditional versions.

Transcript

Proficiency-based transcripts differ significantly from traditional transcript that present snapshots of student achievement as measured by seat time and letter grades. By the very nature of a proficiency-based system, students' learning experiences are expressed through varying levels of attainment as measured against standards. As well, learning experiences can vary widely. In a single year, a student can learn through traditional courses, AP or honors courses, college courses accessed through dual enrollment, internships, and independent studies. However novel these variations may appear to parents and others new to proficiency-based systems, admissions officers have most likely seen such transcripts before.

Because the information in proficiency-based transcripts reflects added dimensions to and details about student achievement, they must be designed thoughtfully. In a 2013 [Great Schools Partnership webinar](#) on competency-based grading and college admission, Jamie Marcus, then Director of Admission, University of Maine at Farmington, suggested that transcripts must “meet colleges where they are.” That means that good transcripts offer information that is clearly and quickly understood. “You need the comparative factor,” said Marcus.

While each school's transcript may differ in details, all must contain certain essential elements presented for easy interpretation to facilitate admissions decisions. These include:

- School location and contact information
- Student personal information
- Academic summary: GPA, Latin Honors designation, SAT and/or ACT scores, state testing data, and academic awards and achievements
- A full list of learning experiences aligned with proficiency level, duration of the experience, and type: standard or honors course, dual-enrollment college course, independent study, internship, or other experience—it's very useful to provide a key that explains these types
- Grading system information
- Graduation requirements
- Graduation standards that indicate habits of work (often called cross-curricular or transferrable standards)
- Graduation standards performance summary (student's proficiency level in the full range of subject areas)

High school guidance staff members often ask about how to handle GPAs. GPAs remain valuable, and are easily calculated using earned proficiency levels described a four-point scale. Because proficiency-based assessment measures achievement in a specific course or learning experience and also of the aligned standards, high schools need to clarify what their students' GPA represents.

Class rank is another matter. It may be more difficult and less desirable to calculate given the wide variation among student learning experiences. Class rank is also a comparison measurement against other students while proficiency is a comparison to standards—not students. Many schools adopting proficiency-based systems have followed the college model and shifted to using the Latin honors designations of cum laude, magna cum laude, and summa cum laude to indicate the group

of peers who have similar standards-based GPAs. Latin honors groups students in similar performance bands, thereby recognizing exemplary performance without relying on class rank, which can be arbitrary and error-prone. Contrary to popular perceptions, class rank is not a helpful criteria for most students, as it advantages only those at the very top. Moreover, admission officers report that class rank is not provided by every school and is not required for admissions.

How well does all of this work in practice? The aforementioned NEBHE/NESSC report offers positive feedback. “Proficiency-based transcripts often...capture students’ mastery of habits of work and cross-curricular knowledge and skills. A sample transcript shared with admissions leaders, for instance, captured cross-curricular skills described as ‘clear and effective communicator,’ ‘self-directed and lifelong learner,’ and ‘creative and practical problem solver’—all skills that are in high and increasing demand from both employers and higher education institutions. By capturing habits of work on the transcript, the proficiency-based model provides increasingly relevant information regarding a student’s ability to succeed in today’s world.”

School Profile

College and university applications are accompanied by a school profile that conveys important descriptive information about the school’s academic program and student population. College admissions staff members consider school profiles essential to the admissions process because these provide the necessary context to interpret and understand the academic accomplishments of individual students. A carefully constructed transcript is made much more powerful and meaningful by an equally informative school profile. A school profile is a critical tool for admission officers, especially when they are considering students from schools with which they’re not familiar.

A well-designed school profile includes the following elements:

- Description of the school and its community
- Student demographic information with subgroup distributions
- Approach to pedagogy, learning standards, and curricular rigor
- Approach to proficiency-based learning
- Description of the grading system
- Graduation rates, college-going rates, college persistence rates
- College and universities where graduates have matriculated or been accepted in the past three to five years
- Percentages of students who have been accepted to and who have matriculated into two- and four-year collegiate programs in the past three to five years
- The ways habits of work are assessed and graded

Proficiency-Based Approach Gets the Job Done

In a powerful demonstration of support, 68 New England colleges and universities ranging from community colleges to the Ivies have offered unequivocal statements that make it clear that students with proficiency-based records of learning will not be disadvantaged in any way during the college admissions process. A scan of **this list**—or a deeper dive into each institution of higher education’s letter of support—offers reassurance to those who might be worried about the impacts of change.

Proficiency-based transcripts and school profiles demonstrate students’ individualized pathways toward achievement. They can, along with other admissions materials, offer a rich sense of how students are doing as responsible, involved citizens. “A lot of college admissions officers look at students holistically, and I believe that these transcripts are the best I’ve seen in holistic terms,” noted University of Maine at Farmington’s former Director

of Admission Jamie Marcus. These insights correspond with emerging convictions among college admissions officers that character needs to matter more in the college admission process. In 2015, Making Caring Common, a project of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, released an influential report, *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions*, that argues that the college admissions process needs to value the whole student, not just the aspect of achievement that fit with the parameters of a traditional transcript. Because proficiency-based transcripts capture more of the whole student and their range of interests and experiences, they help put a bit more heart and soul into the college admissions process.

Additional Resources:

[Exemplar High School Transcript](#)

[Exemplar High School Profile](#)