



# Standards-Based Grading and College Admissions

# District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Overview

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## Key Observations

**Contacts at profiled institutions report standards-based grading systems do not impact a student's standing in the admissions process.** This is because admissions staff evaluate all applicants on equal grounds by converting grades to GPAs. To facilitate a smooth application review process, contacts recommend that high schools using standards-based grading convert grades to 4.0 GPA scales before sending transcripts. If high schools do not make this conversion, admissions staff will make the changes themselves, using information from sending high schools, often shared via school profiles. Contacts at **Institution C** suggest school profiles should clearly explain the school's grading system, as well as provide grade trend data so admissions staff can determine where a student fits in comparison to their peers.

**While use of standards-based grading does not impact admissions decisions at profiled institutions, contacts acknowledge several pros and cons associated with the grading system.** For example, contacts at **Institution C** suggest standards-based grading gives teachers more control over how they measure a student's progress in the class. In contrast, contacts also report the grading system, when it is not converted to a traditional GPA scale, may increase the margin for error while reviewing college applications due to potential misinterpretations of the non-traditional scale. However, schools that convert the grades themselves do not face this issue.

**Admissions staff at all profiled institutions prioritize a student's academic record when reviewing applications.** In addition to overall GPA, contacts report they consider grade trends while reviewing applications in an effort to measure a student's work ethic. Contacts report any grading system, even standards-based grading, typically will demonstrate these trends. Beyond the academic record, admissions staff consider standardized test scores and extracurricular activities.

**Like admissions decisions, standards-based grading does not affect scholarship allocation at profiled institutions.** GPA factors significantly into scholarship allocation at profiled institutions, but admissions staff convert non-traditional grades to 4.0 GPA scale before making scholarship decisions. Admissions staff at profiled institutions also consider several other factors beyond GPA when making scholarship recommendations. For example, contacts at **Institution B** take a holistic approach to scholarship allocation that also considers test scores and extracurricular activities. In the case of competitive scholarships, all applicants, regardless of grading scale, must participate in interviews.

## 2) Perceptions of Standards-Based Grading

### Impact, Merits, and Concerns

#### Standards-Based Grading Does Not Impact Admissions Decisions at Profiled Institutions

Admissions professionals at profiled institutions do not consider students who attend schools that use standards-based grading to be at an advantage or disadvantage in the application process.

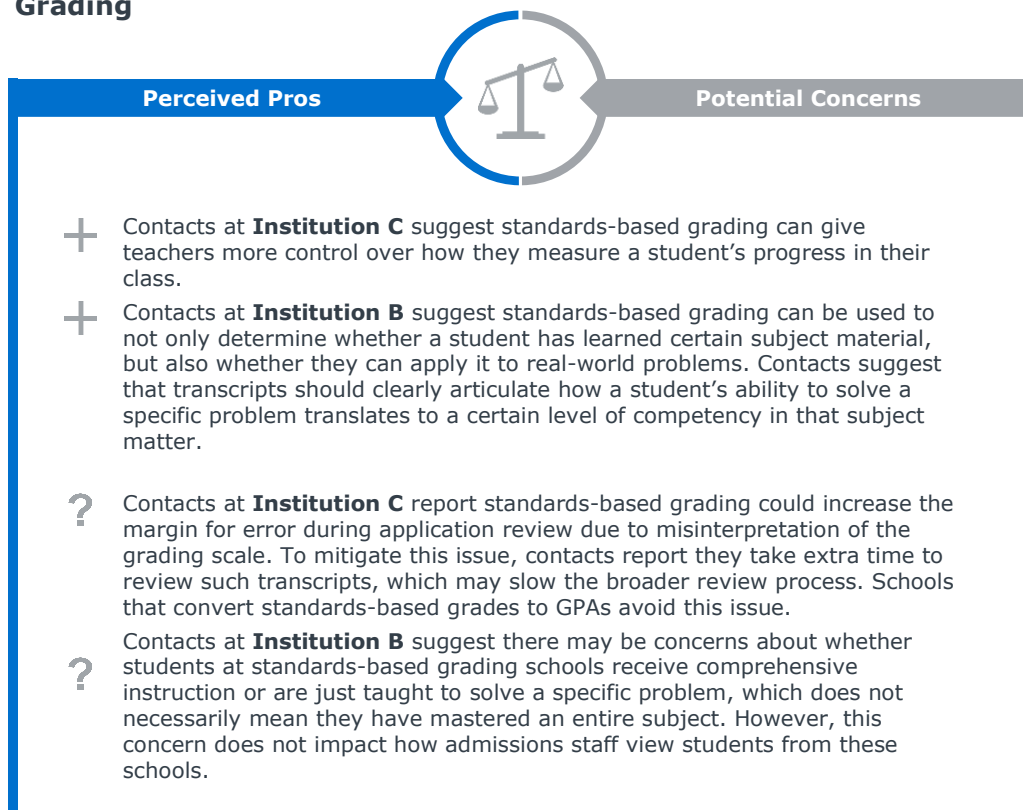
Contacts at **Institution C** believe schools should choose whichever grading system works best to demonstrate subject mastery for their students. Regardless of the grading system used, though, contacts suggest schools need to ensure that teachers appropriately evaluate that students learn the required material. Contacts at **Institution A** report the grading system a school uses is not as important as whether students complete core requirements and demonstrate mastery.

Meanwhile, contacts at **Institution B** suggest the merit of any grading system depends on student outcomes. In particular, contacts suggest high schools using standards-based grading can help to validate the grading system by achieving a high graduation rate, with its students attending strong institutions after graduating.

#### Contacts Recognize Potential Pros and Cons of Standards-Based Grading

While use of standards-based grading does not influence admissions decisions at profiled institutions, contacts acknowledge both perceived benefits (e.g., flexibility) and potential concerns (e.g., complexity) associated with the grading system.

#### Perceived Benefits of and Potential Concerns with Standards-Based Grading



## Current Grading Systems Face Standardization Issues

Both traditional and non-traditional grading systems suffer from standardization issues.

Contacts at **Institution A** report current practices may not ensure consistency in grading among similar courses across schools (e.g., a lower grade in one school may be as valuable as a higher grade in another school depending on the rigor of the course). Additionally, standardization issues can occur among different teachers within the same school. For example, some teachers focus on content knowledge, while others focus on the cultivation of skills when determining student grades.<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging that some students are not strong test takers, contacts at Institution A report they use standardized test scores to try to level out these differences.

1) Thomas M. Buckmiller and Peters, Randal E., "Getting a Fair Shot," *School Administrator*, February 2018, <http://my.aasa.org/AASA/Resources/SAMag/2018/Feb18/Buckmiller.aspx>.

# 3) Evaluating Applications

## Admissions Criteria

### Academics Outweigh Other Admissions Criteria

Admissions professionals at all profiled institutions prioritize a student’s academic record (e.g., GPA, type of courses completed) when reviewing their application. However, contacts also factor criteria beyond academic outcomes into admissions decisions, including standardized test scores (i.e., SAT, ACT) and extracurricular activities.

### Prioritizing Admissions Criteria at Profiled Institutions



#### Academic Record

- Overall GPA
- Individual course grades
- Types of courses taken (e.g., core requirements, AP credit, dual enrollment credit)

#### Standardized Test Scores

- SAT
- ACT

#### Extracurricular Activities

- Club participation
- Volunteer experiences
- Leadership experiences

#### Academic record in practice:

- Contacts at **Institution C** report grades in individual courses outweigh overall GPA in their admissions process.
- Admissions counselors at **Institution B** consider whether the courses a student takes in high school align with their intended major.

#### Test scores in practice:

- **Institution A** uses a student’s super score when making admissions decisions. In the case of the SAT, this means admissions professionals create the best possible score for a student who has taken the SAT multiple times by combining the best scores of each section.
- Contacts at **Institution B** check test scores to see if they match up with a student’s grades. However, noting that some students who perform well academically may not be strong test-takers, contacts favor a student’s academic record over their test scores.

#### Extracurriculars in practice:

- While extracurricular activities may not overcome a weak transcript, contacts at **Institution B** suggest that an applicant’s listed extracurricular activities can help admissions professionals determine whether an applicant would integrate well with the campus community and expand their network.
- Similarly, **Institution A**, where about 94 percent of students participate in at least one campus activity, allows students to submit a resume of their previous experiences. Contacts report this helps them determine whether an applicant would be a good fit on campus.

Contacts also accept and review additional application materials beyond transcripts, test scores, and extracurricular experiences. These include writing samples and letters of recommendation. Contacts at **Institution A** report these materials should convey information that is not already included in a transcript, and should seek to give admissions professionals a sense of a student’s character or work ethic.

## Regardless of Grading System, Admissions Staff Look for Mastery of Content and Improvement over Time

When making admissions decisions, contacts consider a student's grade trends throughout their high school career in an effort to evaluate a student's work ethic. For example, admissions staff may determine a student is a hard worker if they can see improvements in grades over time. This process also can help admissions staff account for students who did not initially adjust well to high school. Contacts note they can observe grade improvements under both standards-based grading systems and traditional grading scales.

Additionally, contacts at **Institution B** report admissions staff use grading scales to see if a student is meeting, exceeding, or not achieving expectations. Contacts suggest any grading system, even standards-based grading, typically will show admissions staff how well a student understands a specific subject.

### Adjusting Processes to Standards-Based Grading

## Traditional Grading Scales Account for Most Applications at Profiled Institutions

Contacts report the overwhelming majority of applications they review list student grades and academic performance on traditional grading systems (i.e., 4.0 GPA, "A" through "F" letter grades, 0 to 100 scale).

Contacts at **Institution C** and **Institution A** suggest these grading systems are the easiest for admissions professionals to review because schools have used them for a long time, and admission staff can read through them more efficiently. That said, contacts report all grading scales, even traditional systems, can require some level of interpretation. For example, admissions staff at **Institution B** often see GPA systems that exceed the 4.0 scale.

## Admissions Staff Convert Standards-Based Grades to Traditional GPA Scale

While contacts suggest traditional grading scales are easiest to review, admissions professionals are trained and accustomed to reviewing applications that use non-traditional systems.

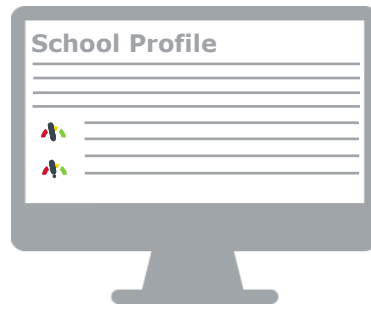
Admissions staff at profiled institutions convert all non-traditional grading scales (e.g., standards-based grading) on transcripts to traditional 4.0 GPA scales when reviewing applications. To make these conversions, admissions personnel rely on information and guidance from the sending high schools.

At **Institution C** and **Institution A**, admissions staff first look for a detailed school profile that clearly explains how a high school's teachers evaluate their students. In addition to explanations of the grading system, contacts at Institution C suggest high school administrators should provide grade trend data so admissions staff can contextualize a student's performance. Contacts report this information helps admissions staff gain a greater sense of clarity about student performance under the grading system.

If a school profile does not provide enough information, admissions staff at profiled institutions search through a school's website for more information or contact staff at the high school for guidance in putting a non-traditional grading system in a more traditional perspective.



## Components of an Effective School Profile



### Key Components



Definition of  
Grading System



Overall Grade  
Trends



Graduation  
Rates



Types of Courses  
Offered

## Potential Scholarship Implications

### Standards-Based Grading Does Not Impact Scholarship Allocation at Profiled Institutions

Contacts at **Institution C** recognize that some students and families may be concerned that standards-based grading could affect scholarship allocation. Like admissions decisions, however, contacts at profiled institutions report standards-based grading does not impact scholarship allocation, mostly because admissions staff convert the grades to 4.0 GPA scales.

Further, admissions staff at profiled institutions take a holistic approach to strategic scholarship allocation that incorporates more than academic outcomes. Institution C contacts report that a high GPA and/or SAT score is not enough to guarantee a scholarship, given the large number of eligible applicants (i.e., anyone who applies by the scholarship deadline). As a result, an admissions committee at Institution C considers unique experiences and extracurricular activities when making recommendations for scholarship awards – in addition to an applicant's grades and test scores. Admissions staff at **Institution B** similarly make scholarship decisions based on not just GPA, but also test scores and extracurricular activities. In the case of competitive scholarships, all applicants also must participate in an interview.

## Interpreting Standards-Based Grading Systems

### High Schools Should Convert Standards-Based Grades to Traditional Grading Scales

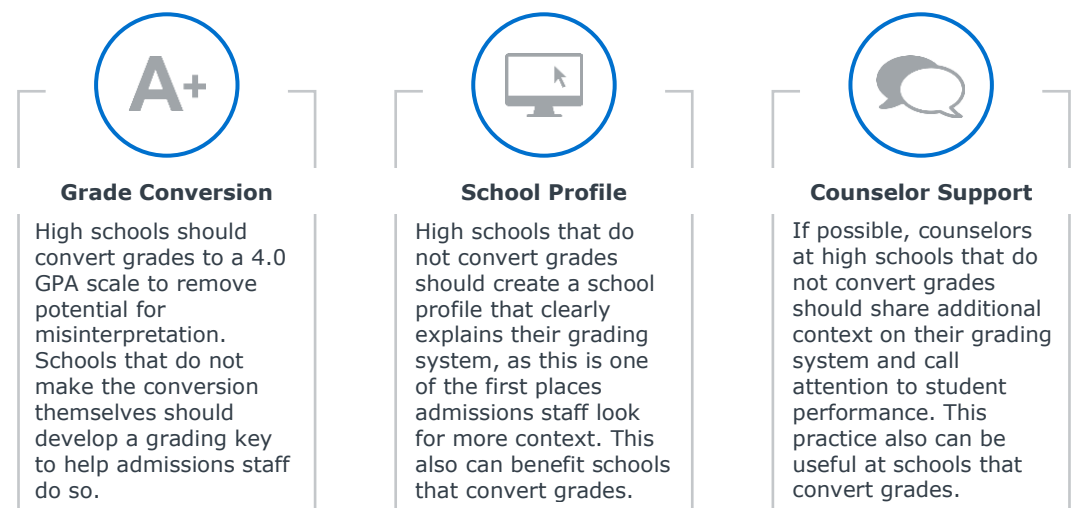
Contacts suggest the best thing high schools can do to remove any concern of confusion and to facilitate a smoother application review process for colleges and universities is to convert standards-based grades to a traditional GPA scale prior to sending transcripts. Contacts report this conversion eliminates the potential for misinterpretation and ensures all students are evaluated on equal grounds.

If high schools do not make the conversion themselves, contacts recommend that high schools provide as much additional information on their grading system and student performance as possible.

For example, contacts at **Institution C** recommend that high schools clearly define their grading system in their school profiles. Additionally, contacts suggest counselors, if possible, should notify colleges and universities about their school's non-traditional grading system and draw special attention to students who receive high marks to explain they are among the top possible grades under the system. Contacts suggest this can help admissions staff consider pieces of a transcript they might have overlooked otherwise. Contacts at Institution C recognize that counselors, particularly those at larger schools, may not have the time to do this for every student. However, they suggest the more detail a counselor provides, the easier it is for admissions staff to review applications.

Contacts at **Institution A** also recommend that high schools that do not convert their grades to a traditional scale should provide grading keys to help admissions staff make the conversion themselves. Additionally, contacts suggest that schools using non-traditional grading systems could send secondary school reports that provide more background on a student and the schools that is not already included in the school profile. Contacts report this additional information helps to put a student's performance into context of the school's grading process and trends.

### Strategies to Facilitate a Smoother Application Review Process



## 4) Research Methodology

### Project Challenge

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- Which factors do college admissions staff rely on when evaluating applicants?
- How do college admissions professionals adjust to non-traditional grading approaches from sending high schools?
  - What specific differences exist in the applicant evaluation process for students with traditionally-derived grades and those with standards-based grades?
- How do college admissions professionals perceive standards-based grading?
  - What merits, if any, do contacts associate with standards-based grading?
  - What concerns do college admissions professionals hold regarding standards-based grading? How, if it all, do these concerns differ from their concerns regarding traditional grading?
- Do college admissions professionals believe that applicants who attend school districts with standards-based grading are at a disadvantage in the admissions process? At an advantage?
- What impact on scholarship allocations, if any, do college admissions professionals associate with standards-based grading?
- How can districts with standards-based grading ensure that the grading system does not impact college admissions professionals' evaluations of their students?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries ([eab.com](http://eab.com))
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (<http://chronicle.com>)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>)
- Buckmiller, Thomas M. and Randal E. Peters. "Getting a Fair Shot." *School Administrator*, 2018, <http://my.aasa.org/AASA/Resources/SAMag/2018/Feb18/Buckmiller.aspx>.

### Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed directors of admissions, associate directors of admissions, and admissions counselors.

#### A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Approximate Institutional Enrollment (Undergraduate/Total)	Classification
Institution A	Midwest	4,500 / 5,000	Master's Colleges & Universities: Larger Programs
Institution B	Midwest	1,000 / 1,000	Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus
Institution C	Midwest	30,800 / 40,800	Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity