



# The Impacts of School- Provided GPA, Class Rank, and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions

At Midsize and Large Universities in the Midwest

# District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Overview

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## Key Observations

**Although admissions officers vary in their consideration of GPA, contacts at all profiled postsecondary institutions report that differences in GPA scales and weighting do not negatively impact students' likelihood of admission.**

Profiled institutions follow three distinct grade point average (GPA) consideration approaches: *automatic*, *standardized*, and *comprehensive*.

- *Automatic*: At Institution A, Institution C, and Institution D, admissions officers automatically accept school-provided GPA (i.e., weighted and unweighted) if provided GPA is on a 4.0 scale.
- *Standardized*: At Institution B, Institution F, and Institution G, admissions officers recalculate a new, standardized GPA for every applicant. Admissions officers at Institution B and Institution G add their own weight for advanced courses (e.g., Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB)).
- *Comprehensive*: At Institution E, admissions officers consider grade trends and course rigor as stronger indicators of academic achievement than cumulative GPA.

**Contacts report eliminating class rank does not disadvantage students' likelihood of admissions at profiled institutions.** Contacts at most profiled institutions acknowledge the growing trend of high schools eliminating class rank. While contacts at Institution A, Institution B, Institution E, and Institution F report that admissions officers do consider class rank (when provided), they do not mandate that schools provide class rank. Contacts at all profiled institutions emphasize that eliminating class rank does not negatively impact applicants' likelihood of admissions.

**Contacts report establishing an advanced course limit does not disadvantage students' likelihood of admissions at profiled institutions.** Admissions officers at Institution A, Institution C, and Institution D prioritize final course grades, such as cumulative GPA, over course rigor. Therefore, admissions officers at these three profiled institutions do not review advanced courses as part of the admissions process. Contacts at Institution E, Institution B, Institution F, and Institution G note that admissions officers use their knowledge of an advanced course limit at a school to inform their understanding of the curriculum offerings students can choose from. Thus, limiting advanced courses does not negatively impact applicants in the admissions process at all profiled institutions.

**Clearly communicate any changes in grading techniques, class rank, and/or advanced course offerings to admissions officers.** Contacts at profiled institutions recommend that school administrators reach out directly to their regional admissions counselor and communicate policy changes in the school's secondary school report and/or school profile. By clearly explaining any new policy to admissions officers, school administrators ensure that they do not disadvantage their students in the admissions process.

## 2) School-Provided GPA

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### Impact on Admissions

#### Most Profiled Institutions Use GPA to Assess Applicant Academic Achievement as Part of the Admissions Process

All profiled institutions (except Institution E, which deemphasizes cumulative grade point average (GPA) and instead focuses on course rigor and grade trends) use GPA to evaluate applicants' academic achievement. Contacts at multiple profiled institutions explain that high school GPA is one of the strongest predictors of student success in college. For example, contacts at Institution D note that the institution recently studied outcomes data of enrolled students and found a strong, positive correlation between high school GPA and academic achievement in college.

#### Due to Institutions' Conversion and/or Recalculation of GPA, Differences in GPA Scales and Weighting Do Not Disadvantage Students in the Admissions Process

Admissions officers at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, Institution F, and Institution G all evaluate applicants' GPA on a 4.0 scale (i.e., through conversion or recalculation of GPA). Thus, contacts at these institutions report that using different GPA scales (e.g., 5.0, 11.0) does not negatively impact students' likelihood of admissions.

In addition, contacts at these six profiled institutions state that using different weighting systems (i.e., weighted or unweighted) does not disadvantage students in the admissions process. Some profiled institutions accept both weighted and unweighted GPAs on a 4.0 scale, while others recalculate to add their own weighting.

Below are the GPA consideration approaches at profiled institutions. For the purposes of this report, they are organized into three categories: automatic, standardized, and comprehensive.

- In an **automatic** review, admissions officers automatically accept school-provided GPA (i.e., weighted and unweighted) if it is on a 4.0 scale.
- In a **standardized** review, admissions officers recalculate a new, standardized GPA for every applicant. Often, admissions officers add their own weight for advanced courses (e.g., Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB)).
- In a **comprehensive** admissions review, admissions officers consider grade trends and strength of overall curriculum as stronger indicators of academic achievement than cumulative GPA. Admissions officers determine strength of overall curriculum by reviewing student transcripts.

- In this report, to **convert** GPA is to perform a purely mathematical calculation to change the numerical scale of school-provided GPA (e.g., 5.0, 11.0) to a 4.0 scale (see **page 7**).
- To **recalculate** GPA is to generate a new GPA based on selected courses (e.g., core courses) on the transcript. Admissions officers often assign their own weight to advanced courses (e.g., AP, IB).

## GPA Consideration Approaches at Profiled Institutions

### Automatic



**Used by** Institution A, Institution C, Institution D

#### GPA Conversion/Recalculation Process:

- **Profiled institutions accept any GPA on a 4.0 scale** (i.e., including both weighted and unweighted).
- If both weighted and unweighted GPA are provided, admissions officers at all three profiled institutions use the higher GPA.
- Admissions officers at Institution A cap all GPAs at 4.0 (i.e., any GPA higher than 4.0 is entered as 4.0).

#### Strategies to Process GPAs Not on a 4.0 Scale:

- Admissions officers at Institution A recalculate an unweighted GPA (i.e., accounting for all courses) on a 4.0 scale.
- Admissions officers at Institution D and Institution C convert to GPA on a 4.0 scale, but preserve school weighting/unweighting (e.g., if a school provides weighted GPA on a 5.0 scale, admissions officers convert to weighted GPA on a 4.0 scale).

### Standardized



**Used by** Institution B, Institution F, Institution G

#### GPA Conversion/Recalculation Process:

- **Profiled institutions recalculate all GPAs to a 4.0 scale.**
- Admissions officers at Institution B and Institution G add additional weight to advanced courses (e.g., AP, IB).

### Comprehensive



**Used by** Institution E

#### GPA Conversion/Recalculation Process:

- **Emphasizes rigor of courses and grade trends (e.g., core classes, non-core classes related to intended major) over cumulative GPA.**
- For example, if a student intends to study nursing but consistently received low grades in the sciences, admissions officers would consider that grade trend when evaluating preparedness for the nursing program.  
Admissions officers accept school-provided GPA. They convert GPAs to an unweighted 4.0 scale only for reporting purposes (i.e., creating profile of freshmen class, submitting admissions data for institution ranking purposes).

Admissions officers at both Institution C and Institution D (i.e., automatic GPA approach) use the following mathematical process to convert school-provided GPAs to a 4.0 scale.

### GPA Conversion Process at Institution C and Institution D

- 1 Student presents a **5.25** weighted GPA on a 5.0 scale from their high school transcript.
- 2 Admissions officers convert the weighted 5.25 GPA to a 4.0 scale (while still retaining weighting) by performing the following calculations:
  - $5.25 / 5 = 1.05$
  - $1.05 \times 4 = 4.2$
- 3 Admissions officers enter the new GPA, **4.2**, in the student information system. This information is also used for state and federal reporting.

In contrast, admissions officers at Institution B, Institution F, and Institution G (i.e., standardized GPA approach) recalculate a new, standardized GPA for every applicant.

### GPA Recalculation at Profiled Institutions with Standardized Approach

Institution	GPA Recalculation Process
Institution B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recalculates GPA by <b>only considering core courses</b> (i.e., English, science, social studies, math, foreign language).</li> <li>Adds additional weight to AP and IB courses.</li> </ul>
Institution G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recalculates GPA by <b>considering all courses</b>.</li> <li>Adds additional weight to honors, AP, IB, and Dual Enrollment courses in which a student has earned a "C" or higher.</li> <li>If the recalculated GPA is lower than school-provided GPA on a 4.0 scale, admissions officers use the school-provided GPA.</li> </ul>
Institution F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recalculates GPA by considering all courses.</li> <li><b>Does not add additional weight</b> to advanced courses.</li> </ul>

## Merit-Based Scholarships

### Most Profiled Institutions Consider GPA When Allocating Merit-Based Scholarships

Contacts at the majority of profiled institutions report that scholarship decision-makers consider GPA when allocating merit-based scholarships. Scholarship decision-makers at most profiled institutions also consider other criteria, such as standardized test scores (i.e., SAT, ACT).

#### Merit-Based Scholarship Considerations at Profiled Institutions

Institution	GPA	Standardized Test Scores (i.e., SAT, ACT)	Examples of Other Criteria (if Applicable)
Institution A	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Institution D	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Institution C	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Institution G	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Institution B	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Application essay</li> </ul>
Institution F	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic achievement</li> <li>• Special talents</li> <li>• Interests</li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> </ul>
Institution E		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grade in core courses</li> <li>• Grades in courses related to intended major</li> <li>• Class rank (if provided)</li> <li>• Strength of curriculum</li> <li>• Application essay</li> <li>• Recommendation</li> <li>• Evidence of leadership, service, awards</li> </ul>

### Using Different GPA Scales Does Not Negatively Impact Students' Likelihood of Receiving Merit-Based Scholarships

Contacts at Institution A, Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, Institution F, and Institution G state that scholarship decision-makers evaluate GPA on a 4.0 scale. Thus, contacts at these six profiled institutions report that variance in GPA scale (e.g., 5.0, 11.0) does not disadvantage students in the scholarship allocation process.

Regarding school-provided GPAs on a 4.0 scale that are higher than 4.0 (e.g., weighted GPA of 4.2 on a 4.0 scale), contacts at Institution C report that scholarship decision-makers cap GPA at 4.0. Similarly, at Institution A, scholarship decision-makers consider GPAs higher than 4.0 as 4.0.

Contacts at Institution E state that scholarship decision-makers do not prioritize GPA in their review of applicants.



## **Most Profiled Institutions Do Not Consider GPA in Need-Based Financial Aid Decisions**

Most profiled institutions do not consider applicant GPA when allocating need-based financial aid. For example, contacts at Institution B note that the financial aid office allocates need-based institutional aid based on eligibility determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)). Contacts at Institution G note that financial aid officers may consider GPA when assigning need-based financial aid only in the unique case of limited institutional aid.

### 3) Class Rank

#### Impact on Admissions

#### High Schools Are Increasingly Eliminating Class Rank

Contacts at most profiled institutions and college admissions officers across the U.S. acknowledge the significant decrease in the number of applicants who come from high schools that rank students.<sup>1</sup> The 2018 State of College Admission report, issued by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, found that 63 percent of admissions officers (of 172 admissions officers) cited class rank as having “limited” or “no” importance in the admissions process.<sup>2</sup> David Hawkins, Executive Director of Educational Content and Policy at the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, notes that class rank is not a direct measure of student achievement, given inconsistency in rigor and grading scales among different schools.<sup>3</sup> Thus, class rank is not a robust metric of student achievement.

Because class rank may drive students to take an overload of advanced courses to boost their GPAs, ranking students can cause student stress.<sup>4</sup> In response, some high school administrators have implemented alternatives to traditionally ranking students,<sup>5</sup> while other high school administrators have chosen to discontinue the practice of ranking students. Contacts at Institution B note that admissions officers anticipate even more high schools will choose to move away from class rank in the future.

#### Alternatives to Traditionally Ranking Students at High Schools Across the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

1

##### Release Limited Class Rank Information to Students

School administrators rank students internally and publicly release only the names of students ranked first and second at the end of senior year, to designate the valedictorian and salutatorian.

2

##### Withhold Class Rank from Students

School administrators release class rank only when students need this metric for scholarship applications. In these cases, school administrators send the information in a sealed envelope directly to university administrators.

3

##### Allow Multiple Students to Share Top Rank

All students who achieve a weighted GPA above 4.0 share the designation of valedictorian.

In response to the decreasing trend of schools providing class rank, contacts at Institution C report that administrators eliminated class rank from the admissions process in the last ten years. Contacts report that today, most students who apply to Institution C do not provide class rank.

1) Balingit, Moriah. “High Schools Are Doing Away with Class Rank. What Does That Mean For College Admissions?” The Washington Post, 2015. Accessed September 23, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/07/13/high-schools-are-doing-away-with-class-rank-what-does-that-mean-for-college-admissions/>.

2) “Class Rank, GPA, and Grading.” National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019. Accessed September 23, 2019. <https://www.nassp.org/policy-advocacy-center/nassp-position-statements/class-rank-gpa-and-grading/>; “2018 State of College Admission.” National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2018. Accessed September 25, 2019. [https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2018\\_soca/soca18.pdf](https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2018_soca/soca18.pdf).

3) Balingit, Moriah. “High Schools Are Doing Away with Class Rank. What Does That Mean For College Admissions?” The Washington Post, 2015. Accessed September 23, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2015/07/13/high-schools-are-doing-away-with-class-rank-what-does-that-mean-for-college-admissions/>.

4) Ibid.

5) Ibid.

6) Ibid.

## Eliminating Class Rank Does Not Disadvantage Students in the Admissions Process at Profiled Institutions

Contacts at Institution C and Institution D report that admissions officers do not consider class rank, even when provided. Contacts at Institution D additionally note that internal research on predictive factors of success at the university did not find class rank to be a significant factor.

Contacts at Institution A, Institution B, Institution E, Institution F, and Institution G report that admissions officers may note class rank, when provided. However, contacts at these five profiled institutions emphasize that admissions officers do not mandate or prioritize class rank during the admissions process.

Because profiled institutions either do not consider or deprioritize class rank as an indicator in admissions, contacts at all profiled institutions report that eliminating class rank does not negatively impact applicants' likelihood of admissions.

## Admissions Officers at Some Profiled Institutions May Use Class Rank to Gain Additional Context on Academic Achievement

Contacts at Institution A, Institution B, Institution E, Institution F, and Institution G present the below circumstances in which admissions officers may consider class rank, if provided, as an additional data point in the admissions process.

### Examples of Noting Class Rank at Profiled Institutions

#### Holistic Review for Borderline Students



- Contacts at Institution A and Institution G explain that admissions officers review borderline applicants more holistically (i.e., consider additional aspects of their application), which may include class rank (if provided) along with other factors such as course rigor and letters of recommendation.
- For example, contacts at Institution G explain that a student from one school with a 3.2 GPA could be the valedictorian, whereas a student from another school with the same GPA could be in the bottom 10 percent of their class. Class rank, in this instance, could offer valuable context for borderline students' academic achievement.

#### Contextualization of Academic Achievements Within School





- Contacts at Institution B and Institution E state that class rank can help admissions officers better understand students' academic achievement (i.e., how students compare with their peers) in their respective school environments.
- Contacts at Institution F report that admissions officers primarily review class rank when students are coming from schools that are not as well-known to the admissions team. In these circumstances, class rank informs admissions officers how a student compares with the rest of their class.

Eliminating Class Rank Does Not Disadvantage Students’ Likelihood of Receiving Scholarships at Most Profiled Institutions

Contacts at all profiled institutions emphasize that scholarship decision-makers do not prioritize class rank when allocating scholarships. Notably, contacts at Institution A and Institution E report that scholarship decision-makers may review class rank, when provided—but only as an additional data point to better understand students’ academic achievements.

Role of Class Rank in Scholarship Allocation Processes at Profiled Institutions

 Do Not Consider Class Rank	 May Consider Class Rank if Provided
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contacts at Institution B, Institution C, Institution D, Institution F, and Institution G report that scholarship decision-makers do not consider class rank.</li><li>• At Institution F, contacts note that one merit-based scholarship reviews applicants’ percentile rank. However, percentile rank is based on the university’s recalculated GPAs instead of class rank.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• At Institution A, eliminating class rank may, in rare instances, disadvantage students considered for some application-based scholarships. For these application-based scholarships, contacts report that scholarship decision-makers review students holistically (i.e., consider data points beyond GPA), which may include class rank.</li><li>• Contacts at Institution E state that because scholarship decision-makers do not mandate class rank, they do not use class rank as a determining factor for allocating scholarships. However, contacts note that reviewers may consider class rank if provided.</li></ul>

Institution C Eliminated Class Rank from Scholarship Consideration Process in 2018

Previously, scholarship decision-makers at Institution C used a 300-point index assigned to each student and gave equal weight to GPA, standardized test scores, and class rank. The institution awarded merit-based scholarships in different tiers based on students’ score on the index. As a response to high schools increasingly eliminating class rank, scholarship decision-makers decided to reconfigure the index to completely remove class rank from scholarship considerations. Today, scholarship decision-makers only consider GPA and standardized test scores, with greater weight assigned to GPA.

## 4) Advanced Coursework

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### Impact on Admissions

At all seven profiled institutions, admissions officers view AP and IB courses as equally rigorous.

#### Advanced Courses Impact Admissions Processes at Profiled Institutions That Assess Rigor of Curriculum

Admissions officers at Institution E, Institution B, Institution F, and Institution G evaluate the rigor of courses that students select within the context of their high school offerings. Because admissions officers at Institution B and Institution G add additional weight for advanced courses to recalculated GPAs, students who take advanced courses and perform well receive a higher recalculated GPA.

Contacts at multiple profiled institutions emphasize that AP and IB courses provide strong preparation for the rigor of college courses, particularly in students' intended field of study. For example, contacts at Institution E cite statewide research that reports that students who take two or more AP courses are more likely to enroll in college and less likely to need academic remediation.

#### Advanced Courses Do Not Impact Admissions Processes at Profiled Institutions that Prioritize GPA as the Primary Indicator of Student Achievement

Admissions officers at Institution A, Institution C, and Institution D prioritize final course grades, such as GPA, over course rigor. Therefore, admissions officers at these three profiled institutions do not review advanced courses as part of the admissions process.

At Institution C, contacts note that admissions officers do not know if schools limit advanced courses (i.e., typically do not review school profiles to that level of depth).

For example, contacts at Institution A and Institution C explain that if two students both achieved a 4.0 GPA, but one student took advanced courses and the other did not, admissions officers would consider the two students similarly (given identical overall grade trends and standardized test scores). In addition, contacts at Institution C note that admissions officers do not distinguish between students who take a few IB courses and those who complete the full IB diploma. Similarly, at Institution D, admissions officers do not consider advanced courses in their review of GPA and standardized test scores.

Only for borderline students do admissions officers at Institution A and Institution D conduct a holistic review and potentially consider the number of advanced courses as a measure of curriculum rigor for these students. However, contacts at Institution A report that if students take any AP and/or IB courses, they typically perform well enough to gain admission and therefore do not trigger holistic review.

### Advanced Course Limits

#### Advanced Course Limits Do Not Disadvantage Applicants in the Admissions Process at Profiled Institutions

Admissions officers evaluate applicants within the context of their schools' policies and the courses available to them. Thus, contacts at all profiled institutions report establishing a limit on the number of advanced courses students may take per year or over several years does not disadvantage applicants' likelihood of admission.

Contacts at all profiled institutions responded positively to school administrators' primary motivation behind limiting advanced courses: mitigating student stress. According to Pew Research Center, 70 percent of teenagers report anxiety and

depression as a “major problem” among their peers, a problem that cuts across gender, socio-economic, and racial lines.<sup>7</sup> The American Psychiatric Association reports that almost half of mental illness cases begin by age 14.<sup>8</sup> Contacts at multiple profiled institutions reference the rising number of students with mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, on their respective campuses.

Contacts at profiled institutions recommend several student course load considerations for high school administrators considering limiting advanced courses.

7) Horowitz Juliana Menasce; N Graf. “Most U.S. Teens See Anxiety and Depression as a Major Problem Among Their Peers.” Pew Research Center, 2019. Accessed September 25, 2019. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/>.

8) Snow, Kate, C McFadden. “Generation at Risk: America’s Youngest Facing Mental Health Crisis.” NBC News, 2017. Accessed September 25, 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/kids-health/generation-risk-america-s-youngest-facing-mental-health-crisis-n827836>.

## Recommendations for Student Course Load by Profiled Institutions

For more information on supporting students in advanced courses, review **pages 54-62** of EAB's study [Closing the College Access Gap](#).



### If implementing an advanced course limit, help students choose the most relevant advanced course load.

- Contacts at Institution E recommend that school administrators and teachers help students prioritize the most relevant courses based on students' goals (e.g., related to interests, intended major).
- For example, if a student is interested in pursuing the natural sciences (e.g., biology, physics) at Institution E, admissions officers would consider AP calculus, chemistry, and physics as stronger preparation for the major than AP history, English, and foreign language.



### If implementing an advanced course limit, consider reassessing the policy every few years to measure its outcomes.

- Contacts at Institution E suggest that school administrators reach out to alumni to explore the relationship between number of advanced courses taken in high school and academic achievement in college.
- In addition, school administrators should ensure that the advanced course limit leads to its intended impact of decreasing student stress.



### Encourage students to balance challenge (i.e., rigor of curriculum) and capacity to ensure sustained academic achievement.

- Contacts at Institution B and Institution G encourage students to take on a course load they can handle. For example, contacts at Institution B note that admissions officers view students who perform well in a few IB courses more favorably than students who perform poorly in the full IB curriculum.
- Contacts at Institution G recommend that students, families, and school counselors work closely together to determine an appropriately challenging yet sustainable course load.
- A report by the Harvard Graduate School of Education states that "simply taking large numbers of AP or IB courses per year is often not as valuable as sustained achievement in a limited number of areas."<sup>9</sup>



### Correct misconceptions on how advanced courses translate to college credit.

- Contacts at Institution C recommend school administrators clarify to students that AP credits do not allow students to completely skip introductory college courses and graduate in under four years. Institutions of higher education are moving away from automatically granting course promotion (to upper-level courses) based on AP scores.<sup>10</sup>



### Remind students and families that out-of-school factors are also important in the admissions process at some institutions.

- For example, contacts at Institution D emphasize the importance of balancing academic achievement with involvement in extracurriculars and community activities.

9) "Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good Through College Admissions." Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016. Accessed September 25, 2019. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>.

10) "Limiting the Number of AP Classes Students Can Take." Unlocking Time. Accessed September 25, 2019. <https://www.unlockingtime.org/time-strategies-for-schools/limit-the-number-of-ap-classes-students-can-take>.

## If Implementing an Advanced Course Limit, Avoid Allowing Exceptions to Improve Equity

For more information on advanced course limits, review EAB's related report [Implementing Advanced Course Limits to Combat Student Stress](#).

Students who adhere to the advanced course limit may experience disadvantages in the admissions process if peers from the same school are allowed to exceed the limit and take a more rigorous course load (i.e., earn a higher weighted GPA).<sup>11</sup> In addition, if school administrators allow exceptions to the advanced course limit, they may unintentionally introduce bias in access to AP and IB courses.

Research demonstrates that although overall AP and IB enrollment numbers have increased over time, black, Hispanic, and low-income students are consistently underrepresented in AP and IB courses (i.e., compared to their white, Asian, and middle-class peers).<sup>13</sup> In an analysis of 2012 data, the College Board reported that two-thirds to nearly three-quarters of black and Hispanic students who achieved PSAT scores that suggest their ability to be successful in AP science or math courses did not enroll in these programs.<sup>14</sup>

3x

Greater likelihood that middle- and high-income students enroll in an AP course, compared to their low-income peers.<sup>12</sup>

Research also shows a strong positive correlation between a comprehensive, rigorous course of study in high school and college success.<sup>15</sup> Thus, gaps in advanced course enrollment between black, Hispanic, and low-income students and their peers contribute to gaps in respective college-going rates.

By requiring all students to adhere to the advanced course limit, school administrators avoid potential disparities in granting exceptions to that limit (e.g., granting exceptions to students who traditionally enroll in AP and IB courses at a higher frequency). Thus, school administrators facilitate more equal access to AP and IB courses.

## No Profiled Institutions Recommend an Optimal Number of Advanced Courses

Contacts at Institution B and Institution C emphasize that the decision to limit advanced courses should be made by school administrators as they determine the appropriate course load for their students.

Contacts at Institution B state that a limit of five to six advanced courses would be consistent with the applicants that admissions officers review. Contacts report that the average student who applies to Institution B takes between two and five AP or IB courses.

Contacts at Institution F cite a 2013 study by the University of North Carolina (UNC)-Chapel Hill, which found that students who take a greater number of AP or IB courses do perform better (i.e., earn higher GPAs) in their first year at UNC—but this effect plateaus after five AP or IB courses.<sup>16</sup>

11) EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com).

12) Theokas, Christina, R Saaris. "Finding America's Missing AP and IB Students" (page 4). The Education Trust, 2013. Accessed September 30, 2019. [https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Missing\\_Students.pdf](https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Missing_Students.pdf).

13) Ibid.

14) Theokas, Christina, R Saaris. "Finding America's Missing AP and IB Students" (pages 6-7). The Education Trust, 2013. Accessed September 30, 2019. [https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Missing\\_Students.pdf](https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Missing_Students.pdf).

15) Adelman, Cliff. "Answers in the Toolbox: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment." U.S. Department of Education, 1999. Accessed September 30, 2019. <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/Toolbox/toolbox.html>.

16) Hardy, Susan. "More AP Classes May Not Be Better." University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2013. Accessed September 24, 2019. [http://endeavors.unc.edu/more\\_ap\\_classes\\_may\\_not\\_be\\_better](http://endeavors.unc.edu/more_ap_classes_may_not_be_better); "How Much is Enough?" Journal of College Admission, 2013. Accessed September 25, 2019. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1011884.pdf>.



## 5) Communicating Policy Changes

### Communication Channels

#### Inform Admissions Officers of Any Policy Changes to Avoid Disadvantaging Students in the Admissions Process

Contacts at multiple profiled institutions emphasize the importance of clearly communicating any changes in grading, class rank, and advanced course opportunities.

For additional insights from other midsize and large institutions of higher education, review EAB's related brief [The Impacts of School-Provided GPA and Advanced Course Limits on Admissions Decisions](#).

#### Channels of Communication of Policy Changes



Reach out directly (e.g., call, email) to regional admissions counselor.



Communicate changes in secondary school report.



Communicate changes in school profile (e.g., attached to the transcript).

When school administrators inform admissions officers of advanced course limits, admissions officers can better understand the opportunities available to a student and contextualize their academic achievement. This is especially important for institutions such as Institution B, Institution E, and Institution F that consider rigor of curriculum as part of their assessment of applicant academic achievement.

Contacts at Institution E raise an example of a student who takes advanced courses earlier on in high school and reaches the limit for advanced courses by their senior year. In this case, it would be helpful for admissions officers to know the context of an advanced course limit so that they do not assume that this student took a less challenging course load during their senior year by choice.

#### Provide Information on Available Curriculum in the School Profile, Especially to Institutions that Holistically Review Applicants

Contacts at Institution F strongly recommend that high school administrators clearly explain their available curriculum on the school profile. School administrators should communicate any limitations on advanced courses, measure of student achievement in courses, and average standardized test scores (i.e., SAT, ACT) for the school. In addition, contacts recommend providing information on the highest achieving group of students (e.g., top 10 percent), such as average standardized test scores and grade distribution. Contacts note that this level of detail in the school profile is most helpful if an institution (such as Institution F) uses a holistic review process.

## 6) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenges

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

- What role do GPAs and class rank have on admissions decisions at contact institutions?
- How do contact institutions consider varying methods that high schools use to weight GPAs for admissions decisions?
- Do high schools that eliminate class rank negatively impact students' chances of admission at contact institutions?
- Do contact institutions recalculate transcripts for high schools that use weighted GPAs? If so, how?
- To contacts' knowledge, how does class rank impact students' financial aid package at contact institutions?
  - How do financial aid decision makers at contact institutions take into consideration GPAs above 4.0?
- What recommendations do contact institutions have for high schools considering eliminating class rank?
- What role do advanced courses (i.e., AP, IB) have on admissions decisions at contact institutions?
- Do contact institutions view AP and IB equally? If not, please explain.
- Do contact institutions recommend an optimal number of AP/IB courses students should take?
- How do contact institutions take into consideration high schools that limit the number of AP/IB courses that students can take when reviewing applications?
- Do high schools that limit AP/IB course enrollment negatively impact students' chances of admission at contact institutions?
- What recommendations do contact institutions have for high schools considering limiting the number of AP/IB courses students can take?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com).
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (<http://nces.ed.gov/>).
- Undergraduate Admissions, Financial Aid, and Scholarships websites of profiled institutions.
- "2018 State of College Admission." National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2018. Accessed September 25, 2019. [https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2018\\_soca/soca18.pdf](https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2018_soca/soca18.pdf).
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- "Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good Through College Admissions." Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2016. Accessed September 25, 2019. <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/turning-the-tide-college-admissions>.

Research  
Parameters

The Forum interviewed admissions staff at midsize and large institutions of higher education in the Midwest.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Region	Approximate Undergraduate Enrollment	Undergraduate Acceptance Rate
Institution A	Midwest	16,000	50-75%
Institution B	Midwest	39,000	50-75%
Institution C	Midwest	6,000	> 75%
Institution D	Midwest	7,000	> 75%
Institution E	Midwest	31,000	50-75%
Institution F	Midwest	30,000	< 30%
Institution G	Midwest	18,000	> 75%