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## So Many Grading Scales. What's An Admissions Director to Do?

Colleges Look for Ways to Standardize Applicants' GPAs

By Valerie Strauss  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Admissions director Richard Martinez faces a mishmash of grading systems every time he sits down to review freshman applications at Ohio's College of Wooster.

He sees transcripts with grade-point averages based on a scale where an A is worth 4 points and others where an A is 4.3 points or 7 -- or more -- depending on the supposed difficulty of a course. One high school has five grading scales.

"We have found that it is incredibly difficult to find out what a GPA really means," said Martinez, a former high school teacher. "That's one reason that we travel to high schools to learn the differences in what an A means at each. We have to know."

Grades have long been contentious in education because they are so subjective. Grading scales vary widely among K-12 school systems -- and often within schools -- making it increasingly difficult to accurately compare grades.

Science teacher Terry Shales grades students based on tests and quizzes, daily class work and projects, with a little homework thrown in. But the teachers on both sides of his classroom at Lakeridge High School in Lake Oswego, Ore., have their own systems.

The inconsistency bedevils college and university admissions directors, so much that many are focused on efforts to make grading less subjective in school systems across the country. They also are working to find better ways to level the field when considering GPAs. Admissions officers rarely take a GPA on its face value, and many recalculate the averages to make them more comparable.

Many factors go into giving a grade: A student's academic progress, homework or class work may be examined. Then there's the question of whether teachers should grade on a curve. And, researchers say, admissions directors cannot forget about the unintentional biases inherent in grading.

For example, papers that are neat are evaluated more positively, and teachers sometimes inflate the grade of a paper that is read immediately after a poor one, said Thomas Guskey, a University of Kentucky education professor who studies student assessment.

"Grades don't always prove much," said Mercedes Gosnell, a senior at Dr. Phillips High School in Orlando. Good grades "basically just say that you do your work, pay attention in class and aren't a nuisance to the teacher."

Several states have looked at the correlation between students' grades and their performance on state

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assessments, finding it "modest at best," Guskey said. Some school districts, including Montgomery County's, are experimenting with systems that try to take the subjectivity out of grading by setting standard criteria for all teachers.

Good models, Guskey said, can be found in Canada, where each province requires every teacher to use the same criteria based on the same curricula.

At Jasper Place High School in Edmonton, Alberta -- and in every other high school in the province -- students are evaluated by one standard. Each report card has a grade for academic achievement (sometimes as a letter grade, sometimes a percentage) and shows how a student is faring against province academic benchmarks. There are also grades for areas such as homework, class participation and attendance.

That way, Guskey said, colleges can tell whether someone got an A because they are naturally gifted or worked hard for it.

"Our grades are based on whether students met the requirements of the curriculum, so we have removed that fudge factor," said Norman Mathew, assistant principal at Jasper Place High. "It's probably fairer to the student. It gives a more accurate representation of what they really know."

At the University of Missouri at Columbia, admissions officers take all the GPAs from the approximately 11,000 applications they receive each year and recalculate them to compute a "core GPA," said Chuck May, associate director of admissions.

The university does not give extra credit to honors or Advanced Placement classes, which can be an advantage because they are considered tougher courses, leading to a "weighted" grade-point average.

Missouri, with its mission to serve the state, wants none of that, May said. The reason is that many rural high schools don't offer AP courses and, he said, "we want to make sure we are giving equal treatment to students who don't have the same advantages as students in urban areas."

Plenty of universities do the same as Missouri, May said. But often it is the most selective colleges that attract applicants with multiple AP scores that make the headlines.

The history of a high school also helps with admissions decisions, the College of Wooster's Martinez said.

The college, which gets about 2,500 applications for 530 spots each year, maintains information about every student that has passed through in the past 10 years. If a student with a 3.3 GPA at one high school has done well at the college, officials figure that applicants with similar profiles from the same school will do well, too.

Still, Martinez said he believes the Canadian grading system could work well in the United States. And he said he'll continue traveling to at least 100 schools a year to learn about their programs.

"Oftentimes college reps are pictured as a car or truck salesman to sell a college. I go not just to inform the students but to get to know the counselors and get to know the school," he said.

Meanwhile, he said, Wooster continues to consider how to deal with the grading issue.

"We're trying to figure out a way to level this all out to make a level playing field," Martinez said. "I'm not sure there is a perfect way to do this."

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