Guide to Secondary School Credentials in the Application Process

Produced by the Association of Chief Admission Officers of Public Universities

September 2014
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation at public universities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school transcripts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school profiles</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters of recommendation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standardized test scores</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary actions</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extenuating circumstances</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About ACAOPU</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At a time of significant reform in the United States K-12 system, much focus is being placed on the evaluation of students to judge knowledge and skill attainment. With secondary school subject area proficiency evolving, with new assessments for outcomes such as the Common Core State Standards coming on the horizon, this report is needed to build communication between secondary schools and universities around application review. Admissions and school counseling are complex and ever changing professions and, as such, the evaluation of applicants to our institutions is changing.

K-12 evaluation and assessment is changing, and the evaluation of applications by the public colleges and universities is evolving as well. These K-12 changes continue to impact the important role of application review in the college admissions process. These changes mean different pathways to creating an educational record for a student beyond the traditional secondary school course and may include proficiency-based grading, experiential learning or dual enrollment.

The institutions represented in the Association of Chief Admission Officers of Public Universities (ACAOPU) organization know the importance of partnering with our school counselor colleagues to exchange information important in the application review process. Collaboration and transparency with school counselors in order to make the most informed admissions decisions for students is central to this partnership. Our holistic approach to admission review requires admissions offices to understand the full high school record of a student and the context in which the student attends school. Throughout our facilitation of the admissions process, we are advocating for students such that students can have the opportunities that they seek. The relationship in this process is important as a way to share information between student, college or university and school counselor.

This report seems timely with the adoption by many states of the Common Core standards, which has renewed the debate about student evaluation. In addition, schools are moving rapidly toward the adoption of proficiency-based evaluation which will turn upside down evaluation as we know it, introducing additional complexity.

This report will introduce a theme of standardization or best practice to help as a guide for local districts or independent secondary schools in the United States as well as American schools abroad. We recognize that these recommendations have limitations when working with our applicants and schools internationally. The report is designed to suggest ways that universities and school counselors can work together to provide helpful information in the admissions process and information from the secondary school can help to complete the puzzle and tell the story of a student’s record. The authors of this report feel that the time is now to provide some direction to secondary schools to help inform their decisions about representing a student’s academic records. The goal of a student’s academic record is to not only provide the most helpful information to colleges and universities to use in the evaluation for admission but also to lay the groundwork to build an academic plan for
students upon enrollment. Student success is paramount and is the goal of the admissions process at the nation’s public land grant universities. The reality is that this process is competitive at our universities and the academic credentials are an essential part of that process. Our member institutions are committed to transparency about the criteria used in the admissions review process and providing information to prospective students and parents about prior year admissions decisions, statistics on grade point averages, middle 50% of standardized test scores, or percent of students admitted.

This report is filled with suggestions of best practices that help fulfill the need for accurate and complete high school credentials and how to organize and present them to our universities. It is meant to be an aide and a guide for secondary schools as they work with their students, parents, school boards and communities.
Making the case for evaluation at public universities

Several factors compel this report to be produced for our school counselor colleagues. First, public universities account for the majority of undergraduate student enrollment. Approximately 75% of all students enrolled as undergraduates are public university students. Secondly, our institutions are committed to making the best admissions decisions for the applicants that comprise the 13.7 million students enrolled at our institutions. At a time when public university enrollments are high and admission is increasingly competitive, the commitment to treating applicants consistently continues to be a priority. Finally, as our institutions have seen significant growth in the number of applications, our institutions are seeing increased diversity in educational credentials and would like to offer advice and direction.

The evaluation process at public universities

In an effort to make the best admissions decision possible for students while considering our institution’s priorities, many factors are taken into consideration during our review. While quantitative factors (rigor of high school curriculum, grades in those courses and standardized test scores) are measurable across all high schools, there are other factors that may weigh into an admissions decision at our institutions. These factors could include, academic major selected, residency, race/ethnicity, special talents, first generation college student, and disciplinary record. Each school may weigh each of these in a different manner based on institutional priorities and institutional strategic plans.

Questions often arise about how grade point averages and class rank information are used in the review process. In a recent survey of ACAOPU institutions, there was no standard way that institutions use this information. The majority of institutions will convert the high school GPA provided to a common GPA scale (e.g., if school gives a GPA of 100, convert to 4.0). The next most common practice is to use the GPA the high school provides exactly with no conversion or recalculation of high school grade point average (and in some cases, estimate a rank from the grade point average provided). Other institutions will calculate their own institutional GPA from course grades, level, credits, etc. (e.g., calculate a weighted grade for each course, such as 5.0 for an A in an AP History class, and calculate a weighted GPA by dividing the total grade points of all courses by the total credits taken). Still other schools will not use the GPA, but rather focus on the courses and letter grades earned.
SUGGESTED BEST PRACTICES
The transcript is the road map to help us understand a student’s readiness for university-level study. It is used to evaluate students in the context of their high school. The flow of the transcript is important so that we can easily and accurately discern courses, grades earned and the level of rigor. The form of the transcript is also salient, given the nature of electronic storage and review of application credentials. Consistency in transcripts helps students to put their best foot forward in representing their secondary school academic record. Consistency also assists with efficiency and allows institutions to make more expeditious decisions in order to notify students of a decision.

**Recommendations for the transcript format**

The academic record can be best represented in a one page 8.5 x 11 format. The student’s full name, date of birth and secondary school name, the secondary school CEEB code, and the transcript date on the top of the transcript ensures for easy identification and matching with the application.

The academic record is best represented chronologically (rather than grouping by academic disciplines), beginning with 9th grade and ending with 12th grade. Often 12th grade courses are in process with no grades at the point of application of a student. Listing courses in progress is helpful in the evaluation process and serves as a validation from the school of the senior year curriculum. Additionally, listing clearly defined grades earned in courses completed provides clarity about a student’s record.

Semester and final grades (or 1st and 2nd semester or trimester grades) are sufficient in the evaluation process. The listing of each quarter and exam results are not necessary for our institutions to make a fair and accurate assessment.

Courses from all sources should be listed, including courses taken during the summer, dual enrollment courses (including a description about where the course(s) was taught), and repeated courses. If a student has attended multiple high schools, courses taken at a prior school should be included and noted as such.

ACAOPU institutions recognize that the transcript format is often driven by local system or statewide requirements or student information systems. Some universities may require, for example, results of state testing that is not represented in our suggested transcript format. Our institutions, therefore, will work with transcripts as they come to us as part of the application process.
A sample transcript includes a number of the desired features. Suggestions include:

- Grading scale
- Secondary school CEEB code
- Date of high school graduation (anticipated graduation date prior to graduation and then actual graduation date for final transcript.) The transcript should explicitly state estimated or anticipated if graduation has not actually occurred.
- Grade point average at the conclusion of each academic year. Cumulative grade point average for the work represented on the transcript
- Actual or estimated class rank through junior year (if provided)
- Clear course designations (course names that reflect course content and course level)
- Courses completed in 7th and 8th grades that fulfill high school courses (examples include the 1st year of a foreign language, Algebra 1)

**Transcript types**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sixth semester</th>
<th>A transcript that includes all grades and courses for grades 9-11.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seventh semester/ Mid-semester</td>
<td>A transcript that includes all grades and courses for grades 9-11 plus the courses and grades for the first semester of 12th grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final transcript</td>
<td>A transcript that includes all grades and courses for grades 9-12 and shows date of graduation and diploma awarded.</td>
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</table>
## ACAOPU High School
### Secondary School Transcript Record

**Student name:** Student, Sarah  
445 E. Broad St.  
Collegetown, NY 10012  

**Student Home Address:** Student, Sarah  
(555) 295-2000  
123 E. Main St.  
Collegetown, NY 10012

**Parent or Guardian**  
Parent ID: John Student  
Sex: F  
Date of birth: 3/8/1996  
Anticipated graduation: Y/N

**School Counselor**  
Counselor: CEEB  
Entry: 9/7/10  
Withdrawal: 6/15/14  
Graduation: 6/15/14

### Academic History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 9</th>
<th>Year 2010-11</th>
<th>Final Grade</th>
<th>Credits</th>
<th>Grade 10</th>
<th>Year 2011-12</th>
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<th>Credits</th>
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<tr>
<td>PE Grade 9</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>PE Grade 10</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>English 2 Honors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish 2 Honors</td>
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<td>Spanish 3 Honors</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Woods 1</td>
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**Credits Earned:** 34  
**GPA:** 3.76

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<tr>
<th>Grade 11</th>
<th>Year 2012-13</th>
<th>Final Grade</th>
<th>Credits</th>
<th>Grade 12</th>
<th>Year 2013-14</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chem 1</td>
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**Credits Earned:** 34  
**GPA:** 3.82

**Notes:**

### Decile rank:

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<th>Cumulative Grade</th>
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<td>All Subjects</td>
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**Counselor signature:**  
Date:  

Grading scale:  
- A: 4.0  
- A+: 3.77  
- A: 3.67  
- B+: 3.33  
- B: 3.0  
- B+: 2.67  
- C+: 2.33  
- C: 2.0  
- C+: 1.67  
- D+: 1.33  
- D: 1.0  
- D+: 0.67  
- F: 0

**GPA:**

<table>
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<th>GPA</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>A</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>D+</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Year GPA: 3.68  
Year GPA: 3.82  
Year GPA: 3.68

9
Self-reported transcripts

Select ACAOPU institutions require students to create a self-reported transcript in the application process, rather than sending the document from the secondary school at the time of application. While universities may vary somewhat in how we expect students to self-report their course subject, course title, year/term, grade, and course type as well as the grade point average/rank/grading system will be requested and students are encouraged to provide this information exactly as it appears on their transcript. Because of the rise in self-reported transcripts, it is a best practice for school counselors to provide each student a copy of their transcript at the conclusion of junior year, when grades are final, to aid in completing the application.

Information about which institutions require self-reported transcripts and the specifics about how to complete these self-reported transcripts can be found on each institution’s admissions website.

Grading Scales

The grading scale is the legend for understanding a student’s achievement and knowledge acquisition within the context of their school. While most colleges and universities grade on a 4.0 unweighted scale, secondary schools have a wide variety of grading scales, and most ACAOPU institutions will see more than 10 different grading scales within their applicant pools each year. It is important to provide an accurate review of a student’s record and while each school will create their individual grading scale, it is imperative to provide an explanation of that grading scale. A notation of if the individual course grade is weighted as well as if the GPA is weighted provides greater clarity.

Below are several recommendations about creating and presenting a grading scale:

- **Recommended**: 4.0 weighted gpa (with 5.0 being highest; .5 weight for Honors and 1 weight for AP/IB) with all courses included
- Include a statement that describes the grading scale including the value of each letter or number grade and the level of a passing grade
- Explanation of which courses are included in the gpa calculation
- Explanation of weighting and a statement on what on what point value is your gpa is based
- Include highest gpa earned in the class
- List all courses attempted and grades, even if a courses is repeated and the original grade is not included in the gpa calculation

Our institutions are equipped to work with the grading scales that secondary schools provide. Clear explanations provide the greatest benefit to students in the interpretation of the grading scale.
Contents

The school profile creates the descriptive context for a student’s academic record. It helps us understand course offerings, competitiveness of the student achievement, and the college and university plans for graduates. It is the school’s opportunity to tell us more about the school’s story. Links from the secondary school webpage to the profile is helpful for application readers (preferably a link on the school’s home page).

Our universities use the school profile heavily in the application review process to learn about the most recent graduating class, the context for the grades (such as grade distributions), a course listing and information about the post-secondary plans of graduates. It is useful if the profile shows a graph of frequency of GPA earned to help schools understand relative position in the class, when no rank is available.

Essential elements of the high school profile include:

- School name, address, phone number (including school or college counseling office) and school website address
- Name(s) and contact information for school counselors
- Description of the community and school population (this is especially helpful for applicants that are outside the feeder area)
- Future plans for graduates (percentage attending four-year institutions, two-year institutions, other, or military)
- Grading scale and explanation (weighted vs unweighted; what is included in gpa calculation)
- Grading policies that clearly explain course repeat policies and a statement about if courses taken are not listed on the transcript for any reason
- Statement about class rank (school policy about providing rank)
- Grade point average distribution as of the end of junior year
- Listing of courses offered by discipline (including notation of Honors/AP/IB) and notation if school does not offer AP/IB courses or limits the number students can complete
- Explanation of course rigor (understanding of course levels)
- Test score (ACT or SAT) ranges for graduating class
- Graduation requirements (number of units; course requirements)
- Information about personalized learning plans and the role they play in a student’s secondary school experience
- Listing of college acceptances of the prior class (not essential and could be omitted if space is limited)
Profiles in the digital age

Many ACAOPU institutions receive documents electronically from services such as Naviance or scan any paper documents received in the mail into a document management system. Because these documents are stored as a pdf, here are a few tips for structuring the profile for the best format electronically:

• Document size should be 8.5x11 without additional flaps or fold overs
• Use white or light colored paper with limited graphics
• The use of watermarks or other background images may make a scanned image difficult to read
• Two page (front and back)
• When sending a paper profile with a transcript, use a fastener other than a staple as it has to be removed for scanning
A letter of recommendation provides an insight into an applicant that goes beyond the transcript or information provided elsewhere in the application. These letters of recommendation are often two types: a recommendation from a school or college counselor and a teacher recommendation. University websites typically list the requirement in the explanation of the application process. It is important to note that not every ACAOPU institution requires letters of recommendations as part of the application process (and in some cases are strongly discouraged.) It is important to check the requirement before sending letters of recommendation on behalf of an applicant.

**Suggested guidelines for letters of recommendation**

- Use the letter of recommendation to tell us information that does not appear on the transcript. This information may include how the student’s achievement compares with the student’s peers, explanation for trends in grades if there are inconsistencies, or information about the student’s character, citizenship and engagement in the learning process.
- Avoid restating information already in the application such as a student’s grades, courses taken, or a list of extracurricular activities.
- The letter of recommendation is a great place to describe unique features of the curriculum or circumstances with the applicant’s particular graduating class (such as scheduling conflicts that limited opportunities for a student, lack of availability of certain courses, a change in competitiveness or size of the class that might impact the context of a student’s application) that may not be obvious.
- A letter of recommendation often validates information that we read elsewhere in the application or provides an explanation about gaps or irregularities in the student’s experience. A letter of recommendation is also the place to provide insight into any personal or family dynamics that had an impact on a student’s educational record. Sharing insights into a student’s personality and engagement with the school community is helpful in our evaluation.
- Use the school profile rather than the letter of recommendation to describe the characteristics of the community or the competitiveness of the high school. We often see letters that use a full paragraph describing the context of the school and its student achievement; such information should be captured in the school profile.
- Provide perspective about particularly difficult teachers or courses in which all students consistently perform at a lower level with some explanation about context.
Teacher recommendations are at their best when they provide us insight into a student’s engagement in a particular course or subject. The teacher recommendation should provide an honest assessment of a student’s performance and intellectual promise. Information that is most helpful includes a commentary on how a student has performed over the course of the year, how the student engages in their learning, any notable achievements, as well as assessment of a student’s aptitude and potential for the subject area.

There is no page limit to a letter of recommendation. It is suggested that if information can be shared in one page, that length is often sufficient. A letter of recommendation beyond two pages is highly unusual.
Standardized test scores continue to be an important part of the review process at ACAOPU member institutions. Evidence demonstrates that, along with high school record, curriculum, recommendations and personal qualities, standardized test scores do provide strong prediction of success at our institutions.

Suggested guidelines for standardized testing

- Send test score results directly from testing agency. Our institutions are not able to use scores sent on the secondary school transcript or those that are provided by the student.
- Send all scores as part of the application process.
- Use the free score reports (at the time of registration for the test or through fee waivers) whenever possible.
- Encourage students and parents to avoid paying additional money to expedite scores to us. Students will want to ensure that they understand, however, if a deadline for an institution is an application deadline (the application must be submitted online or received by the deadline) or a completion deadline (all parts of the application as well as the supporting credentials must be submitted or received by the deadline).
- Sending all their testing results to us does not disadvantage students in the application process. Schools differ, however, in how we use multiple scores. Some institutions will “super score” meaning that the best test score from any section of the test will be used, regardless of date. Some institutions will take the best scores from a single test date.

Note: Some institutions are accepting self-reported test scores to make the admissions decision or will use test scores from a secondary school transcript. Often institutions that use self-reported test scores will require official score reports at the time of enrollment. Please check with the institution’s website for the most updated policies around standardized test score submission.
It is important for secondary schools and universities to work together to provide appropriate information about a student’s disciplinary record. A disciplinary action typically refers to a student's action that results in either a suspension or dismissal from a secondary school or university or a conviction of a misdemeanor, felony or other crime. Disciplinary issues range from character, academic integrity to matters of safety. Most universities admit students who have prior disciplinary infractions, however, in some circumstances, students cannot be admitted with a prior disciplinary history. It is most critical that the institution has information to address situations where a student may be a danger to themselves and others. An approach that is open and honest allows universities to make the best decision for their own institutional community.

Our institutions use a wide range of approaches in working with students who have prior disciplinary actions. Some universities do not ask any questions about prior disciplinary action on their application. Most institutions ask a question around criminal convictions and school disciplinary records. Our intuitions believe that full disclosure by the student about any disciplinary issue is the best course of action.

**Recommendation for sharing disciplinary actions**

- Students are required to share disciplinary infractions after applying, including after admission up to the point of enrollment. Failure to do so may result in a revocation of admission.
- If the school has a policy that the school can disclose disciplinary information, then school counselors are encouraged to address these issues in the letter of recommendation and provide an assessment of the student’s character as a result of this incident. It is also helpful for the counselor to share the school’s disciplinary policies (such as zero tolerance or one strike, etc.)
- If the school policy precludes the counselor from disclosing disciplinary information, then the counselor should state the school or district policy and encourage the student to disclose if the application process requires that disclosure by the student.
- A student is encouraged to answer any discipline questions on the application completely and thoroughly, including information about the infraction, the dates, the outcome and lessons learned. Information that is missing in the explanation could slow the review of the application while additional information is gathered.
- Telephone calls are encouraged to discuss any specifics that may not appear as part of the application.
The application for admission is the place to share any additional circumstances that provide insight or explanation of a student’s educational history or personal circumstances. Examples include an explanation of any interruption of the educational record, extended illness of the student or immediate family, or frequent changes of schools. This information often is shared in an essay or in the additional information section of the application. School counselors are also encouraged to address any of these extenuating circumstances in a letter of recommendation if required by the school.

Our institutions encourage students with diagnosed learning differences to include this information as part of the application. This information often can provide context for academic achievement, as well as begin the process if any waiver of requirements (most often is the foreign language requirement for admission) is necessary.
The Association of Chief Admission Officers of Public Universities includes representatives from more than 70 major flagship and land grant universities in the United States. The primary member from each institution is the chief admissions officer, with some institutions opting to have one additional member – usually the chief enrollment officer or a senior associate director of admissions.

The institutions represented in ACAOPU have a number of characteristics in common that lead to rich discussion and sharing among our members. The institutions represented are:

- State-supported;
- Large (usually 20,000+);
- Research-intensive;
- Have NCAA Division I athletics, usually in Bowl Championship Series member conferences;
- In most states, the main campuses of multi-campus systems; and
- In most cases, recruit and enroll a national and international student body.

**Secondary School Credential Committee**

Nathan Fuerst, Director of Admissions  
University of Connecticut

Mildred Johnson, Associate Vice Provost for Enrollment Management and  
Director of Undergraduate Admissions  
Virginia Tech

Paul Johnson, Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Management  
Rutgers University

Stacey Kostell, Assistant Provost for Enrollment Management  
University of Illinois

Ann Larson, Director of Admission  
Miami University

Beth Wiser, Director of Admissions  
University of Vermont

Questions or comments about this report should be directed to Beth Wiser, Director of Admissions, University of Vermont at beth.wiser@uvm.edu or James Cotter, ACAOPU President, Michigan State University at Cotterj@msu.edu.