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THE ROLE OF HIGH SCHOOL RANK IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS:
AN ADMISSION COUNSELOR'S CHANGE OF MIND ON THE VALUE OF
RANKING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

A Thesis Presented

by

Jennifer Morgan Phillips

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

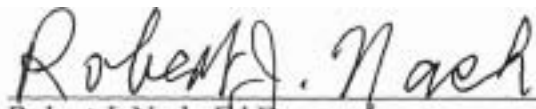
The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

May, 2008


Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education, specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies.

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ABSTRACT

Each year, admissions officers throughout the United States commit many intense months to reviewing applications to their college/university. According to the College Board, there are established key elements considered in admissions decisions, including grades in college prep courses, standardized test scores, overall academic performance, and class rank. Approximately half of high schools in the U.S. provide class rank, yet it has maintained importance as the number four factor for over a decade, trumping other factors such as extracurricular accomplishments, teacher recommendations, and interviews.

A student's rank-in-class can be used to determine their relative achievement within his or her school, to compare them to the entire applicant pool at a college or university, and to rate students for scholarship selection, along with selections for countless other accolades and financial awards. Rank is calculated across a wide span of methods using grade point averages (GPAs) that sometimes account for course rigor, and sometimes do not. So that colleges/universities might evaluate rigor and competitiveness of each applicant based on the school's institutional priorities, I contend that colleges/universities should recalculate GPAs as provided from the high school, giving weight to what they value as an institution.

Over the past year, I have dramatically shifted my belief in the way rank ought to be used. Earlier in my admissions career, I believed rank was accurate and useful. Now that I have taken significant time to consider the role of rank from the perspective of a school counselor, I realize that it is not the beacon of precision. It has become increasingly clear to me that it is the job of colleges/universities to rank high school students; it is not the job of high schools. During months spent speaking with current and former school counselors, and my own motivation to become a school counselor, I realized that it does not ultimately benefit high schools to provide colleges with rank and it does not benefit colleges to use a precise rank that is born out of one specific context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am appreciative to many people for supporting me as I pursued my master's and spent many months talking about rank at home, work, and in my graduate course work. It is as if everywhere I had the opportunity to talk about rank, I did so. My serious writing began in Robert Nash's writing workshop course, 'Scholarly Personal Narrative.' I owe moments of great inspiration to Robert, our co-teacher, Peg Single-Boyle, and the wonderful classmates who offered feedback, support, and fresh ideas for me to consider. The most valuable reward my classmates offered was in affirming that this subject is interesting and meaningful even to those outside of the narrow field of college admissions.

I have always had the support and interest of my colleagues at the University of Vermont and I am grateful for their willingness to listen and let me philosophize.

For their support, I wish to specifically acknowledge Ingrid Fleisher for her mentorship, Tom Gibson for his inspiration, Janet Adams-Wall for her wisdom, Vanessa Barwick for her thoughtful review of my writing, and Robert Nash for being an advisor who inspired me to accomplish more than I thought was possible.

Although they were not actively involved with my writing, I am compelled to thank my parents, Michael and Regina Phillips, for providing me with a foundation that encouraged me to value the pursuit of education throughout my life. I realize they made sacrifices that allowed me to have every opportunity to pursue my studies in Vermont.

Finally, I owe Tom Higgins much gratitude for keeping me well nourished and lovingly supported as I wrote.

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CHAPTER 1: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO RANK

1.1. A personal & scholarly narrative

On a recent week of travel for work, I visited ten high schools in central New Hampshire. One of those visits was to Bow High School, a public school that is following the trend of eliminating class rank as a way of rating their students. I spoke with one personable student named Zach. After he inquired about the qualities needed to be considered for the Honors College at my university, I replied by asking whether he knew his class ranking. It was at this point Zach shared with me that, as of this year, his school was no longer using precise rank in class. Starting this year, Bow is reporting student rank in deciles¹. On one hand, this is a small change that will group students without exacerbating minute differences among them. However, this change does not come without potential pitfalls. Based on information provided to him at the end of his junior year, Zach knows that he is in the top 3% of his class. In the new system, he will be identified to colleges as being somewhere in the top 10%. In terms of being admitted, this difference is insignificant for my university, but in terms of admission to our selective Honors College, the change in reporting style is potentially harmful. On average, students invited to join our Honors College tend to fall in the top 5-6% of their class. When Zach's rank is entered as somewhere in the top 10% instead of precisely the top 3%, that could very well mean Zach is overlooked.

In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.²

--Henry David Thoreau, "Economy"

To write a personal narrative is to look deeply within ourselves for the meaning that just might, when done well, resonate with other lives; maybe even inspire them in some significant ways...To write a creative personal narrative in a professional school so that it enlarges, rather than undermines, the conventional canons of scholarship is, in my opinion, to transform the academy and the world.³

--Robert J. Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing*

The vignette above is just one of the problems with ranking practices across the country today. Many colleges find high school rank is helpful information in the admissions process while many high schools are doing away with practices of sharing rank for reasons ranging from unhealthy competition, school board policy, and parental

pressure, to misleading distinctions among students in small classes. There are also others who believe that it is not the responsibility of the high school to rank students, rather it is the role of the colleges to differentiate among applicants to their institution. My goal here is to share the philosophical framework I have developed regarding class ranking practices in the college admissions process and how it is that I have come upon this position. In part, I have come to think deeply about ranking due to my daily work in college admissions, but this topic also struck a deep chord in me nearly a year ago at a professional development conference on another college campus.

I will be using the methodology of Scholarly Personal Narrative⁴ (SPN) writing to tell my story. The SPN model can be viewed with two complimentary lenses: it is a style of writing that challenges most conventional practices for writing and research, and it opens up venues for scholarly writing that validate the experience of the writer. I have chosen SPN for both of these qualities. For some graduate students, selecting a thesis topic stems out of interest in investigating and evaluating something, but for most, it also includes exploring a passion stirring topic as a necessity. Why should one commit hours of writing and researching on a topic that does not inspire them? Why then, should we not be encouraged to take hold of the passion so that we might share our lived experiences?

I have found the value in SPN for my writing is grounded in the importance it gives to infusing wisdom garnered through experience as a primary source of information further supporting the story I wish to tell. Robert Nash explains the importance of personal narrative for educators as follows: “It is in the mutual exchange of stories that

professionals and scholars are able to meet clients and students where they actually live their lives. It is in the mutual sharing of our personal stories, particularly in the willingness of professionals to listen to the stories of others, that we make the deepest connections with those we are serving.”⁵ The topic of rank is one that holds both professional and personal meaning to me; therefore, SPN will allow me to infuse relevant personal experiences, while also considering the wisdom of those who have theorized about education and written on similar topics. As such, scholarly references and insight from longstanding professionals in the admissions and college counseling fields will serve to support the claims made based on my experience.

The purpose of my writing was born out of my desire to expand and deepen the dialogue with admissions and school counseling professionals about ranking, and its important personal, professional, and scholarly implications. My conversations about rank began with admissions and school counselors and it is only fitting that this story be told in a way that it might, in some small way, contribute to their perspectives. It is not a solution to this perplexing issue for me to go with the theory that works for right now (where rank makes it easier to evaluate applicants). Rather, I’d like to settle my nagging need to vet this issue by outlining the foundation of my beliefs based on ‘best practices.’ I hope to get to the root of the question, what might a general best practice in class ranking be for the college admissions process?

1.2. Implications of Rank

*Admissions is more art than science, whether the task is placing one student or building a diverse class.*⁶

--Susan Dominus, *The New York Times Magazine*

*I think that rank in class is of exceedingly dubious value.*⁷
--Michael K. McKeon, Dean of Admissions

Although the implications of class rank reporting style are many, a few have such importance that they ought to be thought of seriously. The presentation of rank can impact an admissions decision at many colleges and it can make the difference as to whether a student is admitted to a specific major (first choice or second choice) or a certain university. In addition, class ranking can be a factor in determination of scholarship and financial aid awards and honors college selection. I expect it is obvious how important both scholarships and other accolades can be to students, families, and high schools. Much controversy can and does arise when lack of specific rank information leads to scholarship and accolade selection by colleges that appears to be inconsistent in a given community.

Every time I open a brown application file, I first turn to the high school information and see where the student is ranked in his or her class. This one piece of information provides me with an instant snap shot of what the admissions outcome is likely to be. People often say that admissions can be a bit of a mystery to those on the outside and the reliance on rank is probably one of the most basic aspects for my university that I believe the public doesn't understand. Without fail, parents, counselors and students alike believe intensely that their school is stronger and more competitive than any other school. They always want to know whether we will be taking the strength of their school into consideration in review (particularly when the applicant is in the bottom of the class). One day recently I responded to a parent by saying, 'You might be

surprised, but most people believe their school is more difficult than others,' and to my great amusement she replied by saying, our school *really is* more challenging than others. From an admissions stand point, we do recognize that there can be differences in rigor and college preparation at different high schools, but rank is still always calculated (whether actual or estimated), in the context of one's own high school. There are some exceptions, but in the vast majority of applications, the student's rank within their school, is a primary factor that my institution uses to assess how competitive a student is in our entire applicant pool.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

2.1. Researching rank, what we know

*Though there are few certainties in college admission, the factors that admission officers use to evaluate applications has remained remarkably consistent over the past 15 years.*⁸
--National Association for College Admission Counseling, *State of College Admission 2006*

Before I get to the important business of illuminating my thought development on this issue, we ought to consider the existing research and literature on rank in the admissions world. The most substantial research is that of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). NACAC, “founded in 1937, is an organization of more than 10,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education.”⁹ The core of NACAC’s mission, as outlined on their web site, is a commitment “to maintaining high standards that foster ethical and social responsibility among those involved”¹⁰ in the process of serving students in the transition to post secondary education. As the preeminent professional organization, the research done by NACAC tends to provide insight into admissions issues without seeking to surround it by hype. I tend to think NACAC approaches research from a comprehensive, positive, student-success oriented approach, as compared to other admissions-related research groups that focus on a specific population seeking to make headlines. NACAC’s biggest bias is probably to present college admissions in a positive manner, but their work tends to be quantitative assessments expressing what admissions practices are (objectively), rather than what they should be.

In addition to NACAC, another source of specific research on rank recently released in January, 2008 is by the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African Studies at UCLA.¹¹ This report, entitled 'Gaming the System,' is intended to focus on the under-representation of African American students at the University of California (UC). While the report focuses on the treatment of blacks in the specific UC system, the relevance to people of all races is obvious. What this research does that separates it from most literature on class rank, is look specifically at the admissions practices of UC schools and the precise role high school rank plays in the outcome of decisions. I will reference this study later on to support my discussion of how rank could be used best.

Of course there are other writers and researchers who focus on what admissions should or could be doing differently to promote access, improve transparency, eliminate preference, and a host of other sensational items. Often without reading too far beyond the subtitle, it is obvious that many books on admissions are usually bringing a best-selling agenda. As part of my research, I have loaded my desk up with books titled: *Fair Game? The Use of Standardized Tests in Higher Education*, *A is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting into the Ivy League and Other Top Colleges*, *The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges -- and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates*, and *The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College*. While these books serve varying purposes, their research and writing tends to study the general practices of admissions in a qualitative manner, while putting forth a picture of what is wrong with admissions, along with broad suggestions for change. None of these books look at admissions factors from a base level specific

enough to talk about how rank is used at colleges with moderate to high admit rates (schools that admit over 50% of their applicants).

Most recently, books on college admissions are both promoting equity and access, or they are focused on the practices of highly elite institutions that by no means speak to the factors at play in admissions decisions for most colleges and universities in the United States. I am not suggesting that special interest literature is lacking in quality, relevance, or value, but I do believe they don't effectively speak to the base level issues involved in making the majority of admissions decisions today. One might argue they are simply different kinds of research, and that they are. NACAC is in a position to look at the mundane aspects of researching admissions and while they may not catch headlines, they offer a service to the admissions profession that is extraordinarily valuable.

2.2. The State of Admissions 2006

The greatest contribution to research on rank seems to be in NACAC's *State of College Admission 2006* report.¹² While NACAC also produces other robust research publications, including the *Journal of College Admissions* (quarterly), the aforementioned report is one of only a few sources I have found with relevant information on rank. We know rank is a part of the college admissions process, particularly as you have an admission counselor writing about it, but what do we really know? We know that high school grades in a college prep curriculum, standardized test scores (usually the ACT or SAT), and overall grades have been the top three factors in college admission for the past fifteen years, and we also know that rank is consistently fourth on that list.

Much of NACAC's research on rank is attributed to a survey of Admission Trends conducted with input from colleges nationwide. From 1993-2005, rank has garnered a standing of being fourth in factors in admission, despite a decline in importance. In 1993, rank was assessed with 46% of colleges indicating it as being of 'considerable importance.' In the most recent survey of 2005, rank has declined to 31%, but it has maintained its level of importance as fourth for that duration of time. The others factors of grades in college prep courses, standardized test scores, and overall grades were rated in importance as 73.9%, 59.3% and 53.7%, respectively. Some of the other elements of the admissions process considered to be important include the essay (23.3%), recommendations (16.7-17.1%), interview (8.6%), race/ethnicity (2.3%) and alumni relations (2.1%), to name a few. In comparison, it is evident that rank is significant as a factor in admissions decisions, despite its decline over the years.

The research does not seem to indicate whether ranking should be used in admissions, but rather shows the importance placed on rank in decision making, along with indicating trends among private and public high schools in their ranking practices. Given the established review processes and formulas colleges have in place, it would be extreme and perhaps inappropriate for NACAC to suggest that colleges at large should abandon their time tested prediction models for success on individual campuses, whether in favor or opposition of rank. However, NACAC presents questions that serve to frame the discussion such as: "What types of schools use class rank?" and, "Does class rank help or hurt students in college admission?" What their research shows is that private schools are significantly less likely to rank students than public schools. In general,

private schools have statistically smaller enrollment, making it challenging to present meaningful distinctions among students, but NACAC also tells us that there is a “provocative, though not conclusive, suggestion that not having class rank is correlated with a higher percentage of graduates attending four-year colleges.”

From this stand point, we might want to consider whether public school students are being disserved in the admissions process, as an issue of access. Above all, we must consider what rank is actually representing. Is it possible to accurately encapsulate the performance of a student and the quality of his or her curriculum with class standing serving as the measurement? Is it accurate to compare students in a small class, at a private school, when most of them have achieved a high level (or when most of them achieved at a low level)? Is it fair to use rank in comparing students from large, public schools where the distinctions of performance are more extreme from the top to the bottom of the class? Moreover, what value is there in comparing students based on the rank they have from vastly different high schools? As the Bunche Report suggests, fairness in admissions evaluations is possible only when we “consider students within their own educational contexts.”¹³ I will explore these and other issues as a means to evaluate my experience with ranking and whether it is a good practice. Now let’s begin my journey from high school and college student to admissions counselor and now graduate student.

CHAPTER 3: GROWING UP WITH EDUCATION

3.1. Being a ‘faculty brat’

My story begins with background on my life and how I came to be interested in working in education. I will spend some time explaining how my interest in admissions developed, why I have a vested interest in the field of school counseling, and a story about what sparked my passion for discussing rank. I’ll share my experiences over the past year to illuminate the intensity of this topic and its relevance in my life. All of these stories culminate in the development of a theory on ranking which, I believe, is palatable from varied perspectives.

I began my sophomore year of high school at a new school, in a new state. My family moved from New Hampshire to Pennsylvania the summer after ninth grade when my dad took a new private school teaching position. At that point in my life, college was still far enough away to be mystifying. I was not thinking much about where I would want to go to college or what career I might pursue, rather I was just trying to handle the daily pressures of high school.

In that first year at a new school, I was introduced to our college counselor. Although he left after my sophomore year, his mantra has stayed with me for a long time. In a deep, southern drawl, my college counselor would remind students to keep track of their accomplishments by saying, “Put it on your college application” (for the full effect, re-read statement in quotes with a deep southern accent). While he simply meant to remind students to keep track of their involvement and awards, for some reason this statement has become part of the regular lingo in my family. We now have a way of

responding with this phrase, perhaps with a hint of sarcasm, when one of us has accomplished something.

Now, over ten years later, I find myself wondering how my relationships in high school with my college counselors may have impacted my thoughts about my current profession in college admissions. It has brought me to think about how students are advised on the college search and application process, and my future interest in becoming a college counselor.

I didn't grow up with one particular talent or skill that I thought I would pursue in college and later as my vocation. I was average in most academic subjects as compared to many of my peers who spent their whole lives, from kindergarten through twelfth grade in this private school. I always hoped I would be naturally good at something, and that it would somehow become clear to me that I could make that thing my career. I remember being told, you should do something you love, and I remember thinking that is easier said than done. How can you plan your future based on doing what you love, when you are not yet sure where your vocational strengths and passions lie? While I was certainly privileged to attend a private high school, growing up as a 'faculty brat' doesn't compare to the perceived privilege of my classmates who drove to school in brand new, luxury sixteenth birthday presents.

If we had stayed in New Hampshire, I might have been at the top of my class and with much certainty I can say that I would have been a three sport varsity athlete. Moving to Pennsylvania is where I discovered that I wasn't as much of an all star. My new school only had one of my three sports and academics were set to a much higher

standard. It is for these reasons that I began to feel like a small fish in a big pond. I discovered that the traditional college prep curriculum was manageable but hardly enjoyable. My favorite class in high school was philosophy, but that was considered an elective. Essentially, I realized that I was not in the highest level classes and my strengths and interests (in things like philosophy) were not tapped in the core curriculum. All this had me worried that I was never going to be good enough at anything to find a job I could love. On top of that, I had no idea how to go about the college search. After all, how do you look for a college when you're not sure what you want to study or what you want to do for work?

As for my college experience, I can trace my memory back far enough to acknowledge the role my advisor from the philosophy department had on my vocational development. In my junior year, we had a conversation about my future goals and he encouraged me to take a personality inventory through the college's career center. It was that test that highlighted counseling as a field that suited my personality well. Over the following year I paid more attention to college admissions, and through a series of small steps, I have now happily found my way into the field of college admissions. I think of it as a bit accidental in the sense that one does not study 'Admissions' in college; there is no pre-professional track for this field. College admissions counseling is a career path that you do not necessarily prepare for academically; rather, life experience contributes to establishing a match for the vocation.

3.2. Becoming an expert in admissions

*You will see the world differently when you are working with individual students within the context of one high school and what happens to them during those four years.*¹⁴

--Janet E. Adams-Wall, Director of College Counseling

My upbringing, on three private school campuses may have lead me to a particular skill set that is, in part, an understanding of working in the field of education. It also gave me the insight to see the many jobs one might pursue in education and validated those as meaningful and practical. In retrospect, the notion I spoke of earlier (that I did not have a particular skill I could pursue for work) was driven, not because it didn't exist, but because it simply had not come to fruition. I now see that admissions work is part of a very particular talent that I am pleased to have developed.

I believe that doing well with one's life work has much to do with finding a talent and sharpening it to the point that you become an expert in your field. Deepening my understanding on the scope of issues in admissions is integral to truly establishing myself successfully in this field. Although there are too many burning issues to count, there are some that affect me more than others. As referenced earlier, there is one issue that has perplexed me over the past seven years in admissions and has spurred such interest that I am compelled to pursue it in great depth here. This is the issue of class ranking in high schools and its subsequent representation to college admissions offices and use in the college admissions process.

As this topic is central to the field, it carries great value to me as an admission professional. But I must add that to be an expert with some level of specialization, it is important for me to establish a frame work for my philosophical beliefs on class ranking.

You may be wondering why the idea of class ranking is of such interest, and it is partly due to the controversy surrounding this subject. Just recently, a discussion about rank at the national level spurred reactions from a variety of school counselors and admissions professionals across the country. I realize the concern about rank extends far beyond the confines of me and my university.¹⁵ Every year, more and more high schools are moving to policies of not ranking which means every year, admissions offices must react to the new policies of high schools. Some high schools simply state on their profile they do not rank, while others explain that given the selective nature of their school and the fractional differences separating students, they choose not to rank. Even others list D.N.R., which always makes me laugh. Of course, they mean that to say, ‘Do Not Rank’ as opposed to ‘Do Not Reecessitate.’ Furthermore, rank becomes a topic of discussion for me almost every day given the discussions I have with parents and students about the chances of being accepted to my university.

3.3. Gravitas

Because rank is part of our evaluation process, it is very difficult to reconcile the fact that we will always identify class position for our applicants whether it is given precisely, vaguely, or not at all, from high schools. One thing I have come to realize is that assigning a rank to students based on the context of their high school, may not be the best practice. Just in our local area, schools are dropping rank in succession and it’s becoming alarmingly clear that a review system that relies on the information provided by high schools is essentially reactive and potentially flawed.

In addition to further enhancing my *gravitas* in this field, I am also thinking about my future. The word *gravitas* is a Latin noun that conveys a sense of substance or depth of personality and can be defined as a “certain reserved dignity, propriety and good taste in behavior and speech.”¹⁶ I believe that bringing such depth to my work is something I see as essential to establishing an expertise. While I am currently very satisfied with my work in admissions, when I look to the future I see myself on the other side of the desk, as a college or school counselor. (For the purpose of this paper, I will be referring hereafter to guidance, college, or school counselors as school counselors, while acknowledging that their positions and primary job responsibilities can vary tremendously among schools.)

I view my future as having many possibilities. While it is possible that I will decide that staying in admissions is right for me, my inclination at this time is that I would be more satisfied with work empowering students in the college application process. Ironically, the admissions counselor is in the powerful position of making decisions, and the school counselor is often in a position of responding to the outcome. However, I see the position of school counselor as empowering in that it supports young people as they make decisions about their future. I think my experience working and studying in higher education would be a valuable resource for students considering college as a next step. Ultimately, thoughts about my career path have lead me to ponder what I think about class ranking now, and what I might think about it one day as a school counselor.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTING...RANK

4.1. Defining rank

Any admissions or school counselors knows what rank is, but I believe it is worthwhile to take a moment to propose my working definition so that we can delve into the topic from the same starting point. For its role as an industry leader, I have chosen the definition given by one of the most dominating companies in United States higher education, the College Board, as provided on its web site:

What is class ranking? It's essentially a mathematical summary of a student's academic record as compared with other students in his or her class. It usually takes into account both the degree of difficulty of the courses a student is taking (Advanced Placement, honors, college-preparatory, or regular courses) and the grade he or she earns in those courses. The compilation of courses and grades is converted to an overall grade point average (GPA), and the higher the GPA, the higher the student's class ranking.¹⁷

In virtually all cases, rank is a mathematical summary of some sort. However, the way *rank is calculated* and *presented* can vary tremendously. The College Board noted in the above definition that rank computations usually take into account course difficulty and course grade. While course grades are an essential factor in all rankings, the degree of difficulty is the element that most often causes trouble as it has multiple components. In the next two sections, I'll discuss the problems associated with calculating ranks and the way they are presented to colleges.

4.2. Calculating rank

It is not unusual for schools to compute only an unweighted ranking which means they are considering all courses to be of equal rigor or that they simply do not wish to make a distinction among courses. Some school counselors would go so far as to say that

they will only provide unweighted rankings and it the responsibility of the colleges to determine what courses are more pertinent and more demanding than others. Opponents of that would say that the high schools know the ins and outs of their courses and are in a better position to rate course difficulty than people less familiar with the school. As I will explain later, my stance on rank calculations has changed significantly over the past year.

Outside of the issue of weighted or unweighted GPA's used in rankings, there are many different ways for any given high school to rate courses as there is no universal standard among high schools. The variance among rank calculation methods has lead me to believe that consistency and fairness to students would be best served when colleges use rank information to compare students at the same school, as opposed to comparing students from different schools. Unfortunately, the reality in many admissions offices is that rank in class is used to both compare students within one high school and to compare students amongst the entire applicant pool.

4.3. Sharing rank in college admissions

I called friends at some highly selective colleges one year and asked for a favor: could they tell me what rank they estimated for our kids who applied there? In virtually every case, they estimated low for kids in the top 10% to 20% and high for kids who were below the top third or half of the class.¹⁸

--Scott White, Director of Guidance

In terms of the way rank is presented, admissions professionals ought to consider the areas that can be problematic and often controversial. It should be mentioned first that in the current practice of providing class ranking on transcripts for college

admissions, rankings are presented in very different manners. Lack of consistency is one of the only consistent elements. One example of rank presentation, seen on transcripts and school reports (both submitted with college applications), is when schools show a weighted rank and an unweighted rank. This method provides the more comprehensive picture of a student to colleges, as it shows their achievement compared to other members of their class from two angles.

Problems arise in presentation of rank when schools process transcripts differently, especially in some schools where rank is shared only upon student request. In cases where ranks are only provided by the student's choice, colleges will see ranks for some applicants and not for others. At Masconomet Regional High School in Topsfield, MA, this very situation is in place. On a visit there recently I discussed it with a school counselor while walking down a busy hallway during class changeover. She said that the school policy is to always report exact rank for students in the top ten percent of the class, noting the value of being in the top part of the class can impact scholarships and entry to selective programs. She also explained that students in the rest of the class who choose not to share their exact rank with colleges, tend to be viewed by admissions officers as being higher in the class than they actually are. And, in her position of supporting her students, she allows colleges to follow through with decisions based on faulty assumptions. Is this bad practice? Is it ethical? Perhaps she believes that if a student is capable of succeeding at that college, it may not matter what their exact class standing is in high school. But, for colleges who have thousands of candidates to evaluate, are we fair to all if we make decisions for some that are not grounded in accuracy?

A unique suggestion was made in an April 2007 article by Barry Schwartz, professor of psychology at Swarthmore College, who put forth a theory of college admissions that looks toward a new kind of accuracy. In more of a ‘let the chips fall where they may’ mindset, Schwartz explained that the fundamental issue of extreme competition in college admissions is that the “competition...is almost completely pointless.” He goes on to say that, “Students trying to get into the best colleges, and colleges trying to admit the best students, are both on a fool’s errand. They are assuming a level of precision of assessment that is unattainable.”¹⁹ If it really is impossible to be precise 100 percent of the time, which I believe is the case in admissions, perhaps we should consider Schwartz’s recommendation for reforming college admission which relies on more of a random type of accuracy.

Schwartz suggests that “When selective institutions get the students’ applications, the schools can scrutinize them using the same high standards they currently use and decide which of the applicants is good enough to be admitted. Then the names of all the ‘good enough’ students could be placed in a metaphorical hat, with the ‘winners’ drawn at random for admission.”²⁰ While colleges in the United States may find it nearly impossible to stand behind that kind of admissions practice, it is a unique solution that does make one wonder if our extreme push for precision in rankings is worth the time and energy it takes. And does this precision help us make *better* decisions?

Assuming we will not move to random selection in the near future, given the risks associated with comprising a prudent admissions reputation, let’s consider more issues with the way rank is presented to colleges. In most cases where a rank is provided by a

high school, it is based on just one school and the purpose is to allow colleges to gauge student performance from within that context. I have seen rankings at schools with 12 students in a class and schools with 1200 students in class. One example where exact rank may be lacking context is in the case of Florida public schools where their rank has been reported from across an entire county or school system. What I have come to realize in comparing ranks at different sized high schools is that they do not necessarily indicate potential for future success.

In a senior class of 12 highly motivated students, isn't it possible that all 12 might be qualified for admission based on their individual credentials? I wonder...what do colleges lose in the class of 12 students when they put them in order 1 through 12? At my university, 97% of admitted students are in the top 50% of their high school class.²¹ Does this mean that after we rank 12 students based on their GPA that we will only admit four or five of them because the others simply fall too low? It seems to me that is a flawed practice. On a larger scale, when there are over 1,000 students ranked from across multiple high schools, and large numbers of students with low achievement, I would think a class standing in the top 25% might not indicate very much as it is simply a comparison within the specific context of your school and community. It seems desirable more for colleges to compare their applicants amongst each other rather than only from within their school.

A final issue in terms of ranking presentation is the common practice of indicating a student's class standing by decile, quartile, or quintile groupings. (For two examples of class standing as seen in decile and quintile breakdowns, please consult Appendices C

and D.) In a class of 100 students, decile breakdowns can be positive for the student who is 10th in the class because both the student who is 10th and the student who is 1st will be in the top 10%. However, this may not be beneficial to the students who are numbers 1 or 2 where their place at the very top of the class is not recognized as such. Furthermore, the differences can be more pronounced in quartile rankings²² where the class is broken down into four parts, each comprised of 25% of the class. In one example, a student who is 20th and a student who is 2nd, are both represented to colleges as being in the same, top 25%. Another misrepresentation can exist for students in the middle of the class where someone in position 49 is viewed by colleges as falling in the 25-50% category, while the student only two places lower is in the category of 50-75%, a potentially damaging and significant difference in college admissions when the majority of admitted students are in the top half of their class.

For the past twenty-two years, Janet Adams-Wall has been the Director of College Counseling at a small private school in Massachusetts. She weighs in on the topic of quintile rankings as follow: “Quintiles are sometimes interesting to people, but only until you get to the student whose GPA is one-one hundredths lower and then is in the middle quintile instead of the second and more valued quintile.”²³ Janet’s school has less than 100 students in each graduating class who are virtually all, capable, college-bound students. The difference among class standing in schools of this size and stature are often miniscule and therefore poor representations of actual comparisons among students. In general, it is fair to say that one major issue with rank as a misrepresentation

of student performance is the major differences in standing even when there are only minor differences among GPA's.

4.4. High schools abandoning rank

The College Board tells us that, “Class rank was once a major component in admissions decisions. But according to a recent report by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) over half of all high schools no longer report student rankings.”²⁴ They go on to say, “Most small, private and/or competitive high schools have done away with it because they feel it penalizes many excellent students who are squeezed out of the top 10 percent of the class and then overlooked by elite schools.” While it would be nearly impossible to generalize about the value colleges across the country place on rank, we know that there are many who find this information helpful. And, we also know there are some schools that use rank as a central component to their review process. From a simplistic standpoint, it seems that most high schools that choose not to rank their students are doing so because they believe it does not serve their students well. On the other side, college admissions officers have to balance the role of serving applicants *and* application review at their institution well. That does not mean admissions has a harder job, but it is different. Because we know that application review, in whatever form it takes, will move forward regardless of how the education landscape shifts, I believe we would serve ourselves best in admissions to place less reliance on the class ranking information provided by the high school.

CHAPTER 5: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DESK

5.1. Continuity of thought

Since I began thinking about my view of rank from two perspectives, that of admissions professional and school counselor, I knew immediately that my personal philosophy must be compatible with both possible vocations. While there is nothing inherently wrong with adjusting beliefs based on one's life experiences and situation, it is a personal choice for me to place value on continuity of beliefs²⁵. In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey discusses the value of a kind of education that teaches students within the context of real life experiences. Dewey believed that the future must be considered at every stage of the educational process and summed this idea up with the word 'continuity'. His general theory about experience within education is the idea that experiences should be preparation for the rest of one's life. In the same sense, I see my philosophy on rank related now as needing to be preparation for a holistic view on the subject later in my career.

Continuity is important to me because I value consistency in personal philosophy so as not to change my beliefs to suit changing surroundings. Though sometimes it can be appropriate to consider changing one's view when new information has become available or when a new experience has occurred, I do not like the idea of altering a view point purely based on convenience or personal gain. It would be easy enough as an admission professional to hold a position which values rank and wants high schools to provide exact class standing information. However, that would be useless for 49% of the applicants applying to my university whose schools do not provide rank.²⁶ In addition to

my university, the number of students submitting class rank in applications to many colleges is dropping despite the value many colleges still place on receiving the information.²⁷

When I think about lack of continuity in personal beliefs, I tend to recall the sphere of politics. In the 2004 political campaign, and as we are already seeing in the 2008 campaign, there exists a theme of criticizing candidates for president for being ‘flip-floppers.’²⁸ These accusations were made about candidates who held a viewpoint at one point in their political career, and subsequently appeared to have changed their beliefs. In a simple Google search with the words: “John Kerry Flip Flop,” there are multiple web pages with headings such as: Kerry’s Top Ten Flip-Flops, The Waffles of John Kerry, and Kerry is a Flip-Flopper. Most of these web sites outline positions taken by Kerry or statements he made that appear to contradict his voting record. While changing beliefs is not wrong in itself, it is the idea of adjusting beliefs for personal or political gain that seems unsavory. In a recent interview on National Public Radio, historian Robert Dallek discussed the challenges senators face in presidential campaigns and succinctly addressed the issue of changing beliefs, “When you are changing your mind, it looks like opportunism.”²⁹ After all, how can you trust someone who changes closely held values with any regularity, or when the change appears to be provoked by a motivation other than personal growth (i.e. professional or political gain)? I fully acknowledge the value of flexibility and the benefits in personal growth, but it is the idea of continuity put forth by Dewey that lays the groundwork for steady, thoughtfully-constructed theories.

Dewey also struck another chord with me when he discussed education as preparation for the future. Writing about rank is preparation for my possible future as a school counselor. However, Dewey's words brought me firmly back to the present as he emphasized that the ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself.³⁰ After all, I would be a fool to think only of the future when rank is very much a part of my current work. Establishing my philosophy on the issue of rank is relevant and must be considered for the value it has in the present just as much as the value it will have in the future. What I have found is that the responsibilities of school counseling and admissions overlap, generally working toward the goals of supporting and evaluating students, but seems irresponsible to use the most convenient philosophy as opposed to the most comprehensive and operationally sustainable over the long run.

5.2. Nagging need

Although it is true that we can learn a great deal in class from reading published personal essays, autobiographies, memoirs, and other like-minded prose, SPN writing begins with a nagging need on the writer's part to tell some kind of truth.³¹
--Robert Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing*

Education should not be competitive, but college admission is.³²
--Tom Gibson, former Director of Guidance

It is precisely because of a nagging need that I am writing at this moment. After taking a series of graduate courses in pursuit of a master's in education, I was motivated to start thinking about what interests me enough to support a meaningful thesis. Thinking back to January 10, 2007, I recall a blustery winter day with intense wind on the Rutland, Vermont campus of the College of St. Joseph. Each year, the Consortium of Vermont Colleges hosts a day in January for professional development where admissions and

school counseling professionals from across the state, come together on a college campus to discuss issues that affect both professions. As it turns out, the first session I attended this day would come to initiate a significant discussion about rank that can be described as pivotal in my thought development.

In the first break out session, I attended a panel on class ranking with two presenters; Cathy Diamond from the University of Vermont Admissions Office, and then Essex High School Guidance Director, Tom Gibson. Sitting next to a colleague who works closely with Vermont high schools, I had been warned that Tom is outspoken on this subject. I knew going into it that Tom is staunchly opposed to high school rank in class and weighting grades. I remember wondering how someone with so much experience could be so wrong about the value of rank and weighting GPA's. Looking back on it now, I realize that the forceful passion he brings to the discussion may be intimidating at times, but there are benefits to his stance that I did not expect to discover over the following months.

Sitting here now, I am mildly amused when I recall that what struck me most about the panel was Tom's handouts. This early January meeting was on the heels of a semester I had just spent in a graduate class learning the practice of what Robert Nash calls, 'moral conversation'.³³ Moral conversation is a thoughtful practice of discussing meaningful and often personal subjects, with a foundation of respect for the person you enter into dialogue with. In moral conversation, I listen, ask questions, and try to see the world from another's point of view, rather than attacking their beliefs without consideration for why they believe what they do. Moral conversation is not about

lessening the convictions you hold, but it is about respecting other points of view and acknowledging they are just as meaningful to that person as your own beliefs are to you. Moral conversation is relevant to the way we live and work with other people. In the discussion about rank, it is relevant given the natural tension that can arise between school and admissions counselors on this topic. The primary goal of a school counselor is to do whatever is best for the high school student and the admissions counselor's goal is to admit the most qualified applicants. These essential job functions naturally have the ability to raise tension and stir emotions.

As I sat in the classroom observing the panel, I read over Tom's handout, the Champlain Valley Guidance Directors Position Statement on Class Rank³⁴, and found myself compelled to disagree with many of the statements. Evidence of my dismay still exists in the notes I wrote along the margins. The document outlines fourteen positions about ranking that appear to be subscribed to by this group and I wondered...can you be a guidance counselor in the Champlain Valley if you disagree with any of these points? After spending months practicing moral conversation, I felt personally attacked by the second section that begins, "Reason dictates that..." as I questioned just who's reason and why is that reason the only right reason? Number four on the list was "Reason dictates that no matter what the level of aptitude, teaching, or achievement, class rank requires 50% of all students in a school to be in the bottom-half of their class." My first reaction to this statement was to think that, from a practical (and perhaps cynical) standpoint, some students *are* better students than others, and what is wrong with acknowledging that? In fact, it is my job to assess who is better than others and having

rank can make that assessment easier. I now realize that I felt indignant and personally offended because my work over the past seven years is made easier with rank. I cannot say my work is of higher precision with exact rank, but it is a part of application review and receiving that information simplifies the process on my end.

Many months later, I began to see that the foundation of the Guidance Directors Position Statement is to set them up to be in a position to advocate for student success. It is not about extremes of reporting exact rank or no rank at all, the question is, how can admissions and school counseling professionals work together to describe students in a way that leads to consistent, fair, and good admissions decisions? Between school counselors and admissions there are not necessarily any secrets to unveil, it is about opening the dialogue to do our jobs well. School counselors spend their days working to support students. At the core of a counselor's work is the goal to make decisions at the high school level that will benefit the most number of students and aid counselors in helping students keep doors open for their future. Admissions counselors, by nature, react to decisions made by high schools as a regular part of their work, such as what information is provided on a given applicant.

I see now that it must make a school counselor's job immeasurably more difficult when they must persuade colleges to look beyond numbers for students outside of the top of the class. Even though every stake holder from a particular school believes their school is more rigorous and has more high achieving students than the next school, the root of the position statement seems to be that there is little or no value in pitting their students against one another, within the high school, when vying for college acceptance.

When I first realized rank provoked in me a nagging need to write, I thought it would be enough to figure out whether I thought using weighted or unweighted grade point averages³⁵ in rank calculations would level the playing field. I thought that by reacting to Tom's position statement from the admissions view point I would then be able to apply my theory to the ranking system in the application review process at my university. I now see that I was affected by the position statement to the extent that I realized I would need to evaluate my philosophical frame work in entirety. I started to ponder how I might be able to switch sides of the desk, to school counseling, and be able to sleep at night knowing that every year, as long as my school ranked students precisely, that half of my students would always be in the bottom half of the class. This would mean that for half of all the recommendations I might sit down to write, I would have to account for their class standing, naturally starting from a disadvantaged point. While for some students, a low class standing might be fair as an accurate portrayal of their ability and effort, but the practice of ranking all students would add challenges for a school counselor who is simply trying to be an advocate. As a school counselor, I could not think of any reason why I would want to share with precision, that damning numerical information with colleges.

My initial disagreement with Tom was sparked as a reaction to defend admissions work and perhaps compete with his stated views, but also because I was at the beginning of my journey on rank theory and had not yet successfully established a philosophy of my own. My stance at that time was reactionary. What I see now is that I believe the system I work in that relies on ranks being provided by high schools is also reactionary and, I

think, flawed. Just as I have benefitted from developing a rank theory that can be proactively applied to admissions and school counseling, I believe that colleges, including my university, would benefit from taking a similar non-reactionary stance. Rather than relying on high schools to apply weighting to courses and GPA's and hoping high schools will share rank information, colleges would be better served to establish a system that uses information provided by high schools and calculates their own internal ranking.

CHAPTER 6: A BETTER PRACTICE

6.1. A philosophy I can live with

*With growing concern over grade inflation, lack of class rank information, and variance in high school transcripts, about half of all colleges “recalculate” high school GPAs to standardize comparisons of applicant grades.*³⁶

--NACAC State of College Admission 2006

*The most important piece for us is that we are still provided with some kind of context of a student’s performance because sometimes even a class rank doesn’t give us a complete picture.*³⁷

--Catherine Diamond, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions

*As you have yourself determined due to its inconsistency rank is of no statistical validity.*³⁸

--Michael K. McKeon, Dean of Admissions

*In a society rife with class- and race-based inequalities, ranking is an inherently unfair practice that favors the economically and racially privileged.*³⁹

--Research Report from the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African Studies at UCLA

In my first year in admissions, I remember guidance counselors asking me if my college recalculated GPA’s. At that time, I did not see what value there was in doing so. I assumed that it would always be preferable for students and colleges to consider a student within the context of their school and the GPA provided by the school. I actually thought that the GPA might lose meaning if it were taken out of context. Ironically, I am now beginning to think a GPA has more meaning when it *is* taken out of context! Nearly seven years later, I now see some of the benefits of recalculating a GPA.

A 2003 article in the College Journal, a publication of the Wall Street Journal, Anne Marie Chaker explained, “To try to cut through this hodgepodge, colleges around the country are coming up with their own formulas to recalculate each applicant’s GPA.”⁴⁰ It is obvious that the struggles colleges face to interpret rank and GPA

information has been going on for years and is perhaps becoming more relevant as Chaker noted, “many high schools are abandoning the practice of ranking students; in a recent study, over half of high schools said they no longer do so.”

As it is unlikely that high schools will ever follow one single methodology for determining and sharing class rank and we know that colleges receive applications from thousands of high schools each year, it seems that colleges have a choice to make. They can either review applications based on what the high school provides in terms of rank and GPA, adjusting their system to what is presented, or they can review by recalculating GPA's based on a weighting system that mirrors the needs of their institution. Many colleges have already undertaken the practice of recalculating GPAs, including well known colleges such as: Providence College, University of Michigan, Emory University, the University of California system, and Johns Hopkins University, among others.

What I have come to believe is that colleges would be best served to establish ranking practices that are based on grades and courses as evaluated by the relative importance in admissions and to the statistical and historical outcomes at their college or university. In the simplest form, I would support a system where colleges recalculate an applicant's GPA on a 4.0 scale with weighting based on the values of that institution. I advocate for a 4.0 scale because it is historically one of the most universal and accepted GPA scales. Recalculating high school GPA can serve many purposes. The most important change it would bring to my university is to frame review of academic performance in light of the skills, curriculum, and rigor so that applicants may be compared across our entire applicant pool. I view GPA recalculation as the first step of

working towards a leveled point of comparison. As the Bunche Report explains, “California’s K-12 system is not a level playing field and students should not be comparatively evaluated as if everyone receives the same opportunities to inflate their GPAs or SAT scores.”⁴¹ As one part of a multi-step evaluation of any review process, I believe GPA recalculation simplifies the process for comparable review of multiple transcripts. However, successive steps must be taken to level the playing field by weaving in other methods of evaluation to compliment this academic rating. As noted in the Bunche report, we cannot assume that course rigor, achievement, and opportunity are grounded in student ability; we must recognize and account for the many, varied life circumstances of our applicants.

Recalculating high school performance on a 4.0 scale would also allow colleges to compute a recalculated average GPA based on core classes that would be simple to convey to the public. One of the most popular questions asked of admissions representatives at college fairs is what GPA is needed to be admitted. In our current practice, it is nearly impossible to generalize about GPA’s from the vast number of manners in which they are presented. Even if the prospective students and families did not know the specific GPA recalculation method, using this new system would make it far easier (and more transparent) for my university to communicate what an average GPA is for admitted students. Instead of responding to families that it is difficult to generalize about GPA, I would be able to say that our policy is to recalculate a weighted GPA based on the five core subject areas, giving weight to honors and AP courses. While this would

still have an element of the unknown, it would be accurate and simple to communicate. I also believe it would increase the transparency of the admissions process.

In my preferred system, admissions offices would have a procedure in place to process high school transcripts according to their priorities. For example, a college would have a system in place that identifies courses that are relevant to the level and type of selectivity in their review and entrance requirements. Colleges would then determine whether they wanted to give extra weighting to advanced courses (such as honors or AP) and whether they wanted the GPA and subsequent ranking to be based on all courses, only college prep courses, or any combination of courses they believe are valuable. Instead of the high school weighting an AP course by a certain amount, the college could use its own methodology. For example, the high school might rank all AP courses with an extra weight, and a college might determine that AP Art does not hold enough value to be granted extra weighting. On the other hand, an Art School might give AP Art double the value of other classes because it is more relevant to their curriculum.

Essentially, when an applicant's transcript arrives in the admissions office, the GPA would be recalibrated in the institutions' system and all applicants would receive an academic ranking in the applicant pool based on the same rubric. It is important to note that I do not believe this academic ranking, which is based on a recalculated GPA, could ever be the only factor in admissions decisions. Rather, it might be used as one element of a multi-faceted review process that also takes into consideration a host of other factors, including: life circumstances/challenges, extracurricular achievements, ability to contribute to the community, and other factors as relevant to individual institutions.

6.2. Challenges to my framework

College admissions offices recalculating GPAs (and using them to compare students from different schools) is not the pinnacle of accuracy (for a thousand reasons), but it is better than comparing students from different schools based on their high school class ranks.⁴²
--Tom Gibson, former Director of Guidance

By using their own guidelines for evaluating course weight, colleges would be less reactionary to ever changing policy at the high school level, but there would be more room for the appearance of inconsistency in decisions from the public's perspective. It goes without saying that parents, school counselors, and students want fair and consistent decisions from any given college at their high school. I wonder what their reaction might be to inconsistencies within their school group? Would their reaction be stronger if they thought it appeared inconsistent at their state flagship university, to whom their hard earned money goes in the form of taxes? It might be the makings of a flashy newspaper article that would stir emotions of tax payers. Ultimately, the question colleges need to answer is whether it is acceptable to risk the appearance of consistency if the university can defend the decision as right for them.

In the small state of Vermont⁴³, we see huge numbers of seniors from local high schools applying to the University of Vermont. On average, approximately 7,000 high school seniors graduate from Vermont high schools each year. This number draws a striking contrast when compared to our neighbor states of Massachusetts and New York who graduated 61,994 and 161,732 students, respectively, in the 2005-2006 school year.⁴⁴ Until recently, many of the schools in our area provided an exact rank in class and for many of those schools; the rank was not weighted for course rigor. Regardless of weighted or unweighted GPA's, it seems the university and the public have always been

keenly aware of acceptances falling in a consistent manner for a given class due to the small size of our state. For example, in a class of 300 students, my institution would always try to admit in order so that we would not take number 140 if we hadn't taken everyone who was ranked higher than that.

In the new system of recalculating GPAs that I recommended, the school's ranking order would be less likely to affect our decisions. In the case where GPAs are recalculated, we might not consider a student's standing as presented by the high school because we would be working from our own internal system. Therefore, we would be perfectly within reason to admit number 150 and not number 140 if we felt that the student considered by the high school as 150 had a more rigorous or more desirable curriculum, performance, or life experiences. In some ways this system would add to the mystery of the admissions process for families, but in other ways it would allow them to step back and accept our decision based on the priorities we assign to curriculum choices.

In Vermont, particularly in Chittenden County, change in rank presentations has started affecting my work this year. The Champlain Valley Guidance Directors 'Position Statement on Class Rank,' includes their proposed alternative system to exact ranking. In this new system they are turning to what they call a 'standards based approach' where students who reach pre-determined GPA levels are given the Latin distinction of 'Cum Laude,' 'Magna Cum Laude,' or 'Summa Cum Laude.'⁴⁵ (See Appendix B for GPA ranges of Latin Distinctions for Champlain Valley Union High School.) The Champlain Valley Guidance Directors believe this is one good way to report student achievement, along with clear indicators of course levels on the transcripts. Interestingly, if a

university were to adopt a GPA recalculation and internal ranking method, this system would be somewhat irrelevant because we would not rely on high school labels.

Fortunately or unfortunately, my current work relies on some sort of ranking information as being provided by high schools. In the case of local high schools, Burlington High School switched to the Latin system for seniors last year, South Burlington High School is starting with seniors this year and Champlain Valley Union High School (CVU) and Essex High School are going to the Latin system with the class of 2009. Burlington High School “made the change to reduce competition among students and do away with what some say is a false distinction—selecting one student as the best in the class when the next-best is a statistical hair away.”⁴⁶

While a *Burlington Free Press* article from June 2007 gave due consideration to how the change would impact students at the top of the class, they did little to speak to students who would not fall in the three Latin groupings. At CVU, the new system would provide context for the GPA’s of approximately 71 students in their class⁴⁷ who would meet the GPA requirements for the Latin distinction. I wondered what that means for the rest of the over 200 students in the class. Essentially, they will fall into the fourth grouping who can be identified as falling below the third Latin tier, but are anywhere from that point to the bottom of the class. A major strength of the Latin groupings as compared to ranking, according to Tom Gibson, is that “*all* students *could* receive honors, but not all students could be in the top half of the class.”⁴⁸

CHAPTER 7: LIFE IS NOT FAIR, BUT IS COLLEGE ADMISSIONS?

7.1. The shifting landscape of college admissions

As I have already acknowledged, I believe ranking simplifies my current work and in some ways makes it easier, but my strong convictions to support fairness in application review standards have me wondering whether different interpretations and presentations of rank lead to fair outcomes. With the level of mystery that surrounds college admissions process, students and parents navigate the process with heightened anxiety each year. The shifting landscape of college and high school policies serves to keep those on the outside perennially in the dark. I liken the college admissions process to that of buying a new home or a new car. These are all things that most families do a few times in their life and each time, the intricacies of the process may have changed just enough that you do not have the solid grasp on it as you did after the first time.

Because parents and students do not work with the college admissions process with much regularity, it can often mean that colleges and high schools determine policy that is not impacted by families. However, I believe both admissions and school counselors generally have good intentions in the way policy changes are shaped. Since I began working in admissions, I have always felt compelled to make decisions that are fair, or as fair as possible. The philosopher in me questions whether a fairness ideal even exists? Is the college admissions process fair? In some ways I believe that as long as admissions officers approach decision making with good intentions, which may be the best we can hope for. Fairness is important for justifying decisions, in admitting the best

students from each high school and following through with our due diligence to gather all the information we can to make a sound decision.

The care we must bring to making good decisions is at the root of any discussion about rank. I recognize that college admissions decisions can impact the life course for a young person and I take that seriously. Would you want your rank to be arbitrarily assigned for the purpose of making a decision? I also realize that admitting students is about more than their rank. We always need to take into account a student's background and life experiences to consider the match with our institution.

7.2. What do students think?

It seems that high school students desire to have college applications reviewed for who they are not who they are compared to their classmates. In my research at CVU⁴⁹, I heard from students who thought it was not fair that you could be ranked at the top of the class earning A's while taking the lowest level courses if someone earning A's and B's in all honors or AP courses was ranked lower. One student said, "Class rank does not show who you are as a person. Some people spend their life doing school work and nothing else while others are involved...and have less time to spend on their work." I sensed that students would rather be looked at individually, for what they have done and who they are, without the comparisons. The point is that students perceive ranking as compromising the view of who they are as a whole person and it gets to the core of why this can be so controversial.

Most people, though to varying degrees, spend their lives seeking meaning and defining who they are, so that much angst can arise from feeling that you are not being assessed fairly. One student responded by saying that he does not “see the need to compare students to each other,” and another said, “I like to know that colleges have seen my grade trends and my classes in relation to my grades.” Another CVU student who was quoted in a September 2007 article in the *Williston Observer* acknowledged that despite his school’s move away from precise class rank, students will still be represented to colleges by their GPA and Latin distinction. He explained, “It seems that more high schools are moving towards the Latin system and colleges seem to be prepared for that, and colleges will still see my GPA.”⁵⁰

Unfortunately, I do not think students realize that when college admissions officers are reviewing applications, there have to be comparisons made among students. Sometimes comparisons are made among students from the same school and sometimes they are from different schools, but some level of comparison is inevitable unless you have an open admissions policy.

7.3. Reconciling Work with Philosophy

I review first year applications for up to seven months each year. The review process at my institution places significant value on assigning rank in class to all applicants. In fact, students are sorted by a mathematical formula that relies on rank as an essential factor. Approximately half of the over 21,000 applications come with precise class standing from the high school. For the other half, we do our best to determine where it appears the student falls in their class and enter what we call an

‘estimated rank.’ Estimated ranks range in precision based on what is provided by the high school. In many cases, schools provide clear breakdowns by GPA ranges and it is easy to see what part of the class the student falls in. In other cases, where a school does not calculate a GPA and/or does not provide any information about GPA distribution, the rank we assign to a student is based on ‘professional judgment.’ In our system, a fairly high importance is placed on the class standing of an applicant, whether provided by the high school or estimated by our admissions staff.

While it currently serves to make my job easier when I have a student’s rank, it is literally because I have a number to enter into our sorting system. It does not mean review happens automatically or that decisions are automated, but it does provide me with a context in which to start review. At the foundation of the issue I take with this system is that ranks are entered based on the context of the school the student attends, but that students are then pitted against the entire applicant pool for comparison. I doubt we would find it as palatable to take sports teams ranked within their conference and division and then rank them across the country based on their ranking from a different division. What happens in that scenario when one division is much stronger than another (which is usually the case)? Should you still compare the top teams from the stronger division as having equal standing with top teams from a weaker division?

As I write, I must consider how I approach my work. I have conflicting views because I have allegiances to my work as a paid and happy employee, who is employed to get a certain job done. This is a job that I value tremendously and I have every desire to respect my institution and the policies in place. At the same time, I must weigh my

work with my philosophical framework. Over the years in college admissions, and especially over the past year, the professional development I have experienced has affected my beliefs. While I still find value in receiving precise rank information given the context and ease it brings, I have begun to question whether rank, however precise, is actually telling me anything worthwhile to begin with. And if it is, can it be used to compare students from different schools?

Someone asked me how I hope to apply my rank philosophy to my current work and I am honestly not sure. I do not expect for an entire system of processing applications and review to change based on this one proposal. I certainly do not expect it to change quickly, if at all. I did not choose this topic because I wanted to invoke change, but rather to explore the issue at greater depth than I am usually able. I have seen and heard many good ideas promoted as ways to improve upon internal admissions processes. It is my belief that they are too often casually tossed around and undertaken without regard to research, forethought and care for longevity. It is therefore important to consider changes from many angles and in light of the varied implications. I do not make light of presenting this theory as it challenges the current institutional framework.

What I do find of great value is the twofold perspective it allows me to bring to the table. The first is in discussions on the subject of how we use rank and how processing might be altered (improved) in the future. The second valuable perspective is the one I bring to application review. I find my approach does not take rank at face value as much as it once did. I still look to rank as one indicator of student performance, but I feel more controlled with my reliance on it. I feel more justified in assessing a candidate

with more emphasis on what their academic performance and context is showing rather than what their rank is telling me.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

*The polemics about whether ranking is good or bad are really beside the point. All other things being equal, I do believe that the use of ranking should be limited to the degree that students are not harmed. The final decision should be based on whether all students benefit the most from the system that is decided upon.*⁵¹

--Scott White, Director of Guidance

*Because we value learning as a school, we are more interested in students demonstrating commitment to learning through their conscientious approach to completing homework and being engaged in classroom discussions...Every college is going to have a middle and bottom of their class academically and I have always contended that having students who truly want to be part of your college and who are interested in learning and being involved will be much happier and help create a more wholesome college experience for others.*⁵²

--Janet E. Adams-Wall, Director of College Counseling

I believe it is okay to make judgments about one applicant being better than another, but have come to realize at precisely what stage of the admissions process in which I believe this distinction should be made. Rather than expecting high schools to provide information that places value on courses they feel are more or less challenging and assigning a class ranking accordingly, I believe it is more appropriate for colleges to make distinctions among applicants based on what they value. I suspect this recommendation is in some ways idealistic, but also appealing from the perspective of many admissions and school counselors.

It is clear to me that no matter what practices are used, selective colleges will never get away from evaluating, rating, and making judgments about applicants. Even though college admission is about many things, it is ultimately rooted in application review and the often challenging decisions that accompany the process. In reviewing candidates, they will be rated and ranked according to some, often varied, method of

evaluation by colleges to which they apply. While students seem to acknowledge that they are being evaluated, they tend to prefer being evaluated on the basis of their GPA in the courses they have elected to take, as opposed to being ranked in any way that compares them directly to their peers.

It makes me wonder if these are the same high school students (and parents) who look to U.S. News and World Report to evaluate colleges based on their rankings. I wonder if these high school students consider that ranking is a part of life. It happens in many capacities from job interviews, to sports teams, to just the act of being a consumer, to friends and relationships. Perhaps it is the personal and emotional value intertwined with the public sharing of high school rank in class information paired with the stress of numerically capturing the ultimate culminating evaluation of four years of work. One student responded during my visit to CVU by saying, “I feel that class rank is the most arbitrary information on the transcript. It tells you nothing about the student, and it makes me feel like there are 35 people that are better than me.”⁵³

Despite student preference to be looked at for *who* they are, not *who* they are compared to their peers, ranking happens throughout life and, at times, is unavoidable. Anyone who has every applied for a job, played on a sports team (or cheered for a team) or developed a credit score, has been ranked. Even the most nonchalant Google Search elicits results that are ranked in terms of paid advertisements and relevant results. Yet, there is much controversy around how ranking should be used in regard to college admissions. I have grown and adjusted my own reaction on this subject tremendously over the past year. Admittedly, I thought the above named common types of ranking

were good comparisons to high school rankings. (For example, we rank our job applicants, why not prepare high school students for their future and rank them now?) What I now realize is that the inherent flaws built into ranking structures should be kept out of high schools. There is simply too much riding on the distinctions made among high school student performance for rank to be seen as a measure with an acceptable level of precision in college admissions.

In October of 2007, I spent two weeks visiting high schools in the central New Hampshire and the greater Boston area. I found in many conversations with school counselors that the issue of rank was often extremely relevant and the nagging need I bring to this subject is similarly felt strongly by others. I also gathered information through many informal conversations that clearly indicated how many perspectives there are on this subject. Also this fall, I found that when I had cause to mention that I am writing a thesis, this naturally brings forth the question as to what my topic is, and brought about many wonderful conversations. In a recent chat, I explained to an engineer that to those outside of admissions, this topic might seem obscure or lacking widespread interest. But, I went on to explain that for people who work in the fields of admissions and school counseling, this topic is current, interesting, controversial, and extremely relevant to evaluations of student performance.

I am a significantly closer to solidifying my own philosophical view point on rankings because of my research and time spent writing and discussing rank. Ultimately, the system I have recommended follows the lead from Tom Gibson's belief that is best to let colleges decide for themselves what they value. Given the variance among colleges, it

seems fitting to allow them to assess the relative importance of grades and courses for their individual institution. High schools have little to gain from weighting course levels and calculating ranks. While I tend to think that ranking students without considering the rigor of their courses is unfair, it is a fairly common practice. I also know that if I were in a position to advocate for high school student access in college admissions as a school counselor, I would not want to assign precise ranks to my students whether based on a weighted or unweighted grade point average. I realize that I would not want to get caught up in small distinctions among ranks, nor would I want to have a student's future pre-determined because of this single, flawed factor. I would want to advocate for the student writing a brilliant letter of recommendation that does not need to start on the defense accounting for why the student's rank is not reflective of their wonderful accomplishments.

While some ranking systems might be useful, and some might be more valid than others, I believe ranking high school students is ultimately an imperfect process. I believe that when colleges compare rankings from multiple high schools amongst their entire applicant pool, they are working in an extremely flawed system. While there are countless factors in the admissions process that make one student different from another, by having colleges determine ranking based on recalculated GPA's, I believe we would be serving our students and our institutions better. Ranking is one task that should be left in the hands of colleges so that they might determine the value of high school performance and place emphasis on what is most relevant to succeeding within that institution's culture and curriculum.

End Notes

¹ High schools use a variety of methods to report class rank, often by grouping students in GPA bands. The most common breakdowns used are deciles, quintiles, and quartiles. In each of these, students are grouped into 10, 5, or 4 groups, respectively, and each section represents a GPA range. For example, if a school uses deciles and reports student rank as being 1/10 or 5/10, it allows admissions officers to gauge where the student falls in relation to their peers without the precision of exact class rank. In most cases, when you are told a student falls in a certain grouping, you would estimate their ranking in the middle of that grouping. A student who is 1/10 would be considered 95%ile and a student who is 5/10 would be considered in the 55%ile. For examples of how decile and quintile groupings are reported on a high school profile, please see Appendices C and D.

² Bickman, Martin, ed. *Uncommon Learning: Thoreau on Education*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999. This quote was taken from the essay, "Economy," 31-32. It was originally written by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, but I have chosen to reference this collection of writing as it is a compilation focused around the theme of education, offering a broad connection to this education-themed paper.

³ Nash, Robert J. *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2004.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Dominus, Susan, "The College Issue." As seen in *The New York Times Magazine*, September 30, 2007. This epigraph was taken from a chapter heading for the named article, not from the text of the article itself. I found the entire article especially relevant for those who wish to read more on the intricacies of the college admissions process as profiled by particular student experiences.

⁷ This quote is taken from conversations that took place on the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) e-list in November, 2007. NACAC's web site, www.nacacnet.org, provides this explanation for what the e-list is: "The e-list is an email chat service provided as a forum for professional discourse on topics related to the college admission process. This e-list is intended for NACAC members

and related professionals directly involved in college admission counseling at the secondary and postsecondary levels of education.” Michael K. McKeon is the Dean of Admissions at Seattle University in Washington.

⁸ . The “State of College Admission 2006” report, along with its ‘Executive Summary,’ can be found on the NACAC web site. It is a comprehensive, multi-chapter review of several aspects of college admissions from 1993-2005. The contents of Chapter 4, Factors in the Admission Process, are most relevant to rank. Not only is this information provided in the form of research, rather than commentary, it is the only in depth look at rank on a national scale of its kind.

⁹ See the National Association for College Admission Counseling web site:

<http://www.nacacnet.org/MemberPortal/AboutNACAC/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Robin Nicole Johnson, Cynthia Mosqueda, Ana-Christina Ramón, & Darnell M. Hunt. “Gaming the System: Inflation, privilege, and the under-representation of African American students at the University of California.” Bunche Research Report, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 2008. As seen online at http://www.bunche.ucla.edu/publications/Bunche_Research_Report_January%202008.pdf.

¹² NACAC web site, *op.cit.*

¹³ Bunche Research Report, p. 50, *op.cit.*

¹⁴ This quote is taken from informal conversations with Janet E. Adams-Wall from October-December 2007. Janet is the Director of College Counseling at The Governor’s Academy in northeastern Massachusetts. She has been at Governor’s for 22 years, prior to that she spent 10 years as the Director of Guidance at a large public school in Maine.

¹⁵ NACAC e-list, *op.cit.*

¹⁶ See the *New World Dictionary of American English*, Third College Edition. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.

¹⁷ See the College Board Web Site: <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/rank>

¹⁸ NACAC e-list, *op.cit.* This quote is taken from Scott White, the Director of Guidance at Montclair High School in Montclair, New Jersey, for the past 16 years. He was previously the Director of College Guidance at Montclair Kimberley Academy.

¹⁹ Schwartz, Barry. "Getting In: Reforming College Admission." As seen in the *San Jose Mercury News*, April 8, 2007. A similar version of this article was printed in the Chronicle in 2005 and can be located at <http://chronicle.com> under the Admissions & Student Aid section, Volume 51, Issue 25, B20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ University of Vermont, Facts & Figures Brochure, 2007

²² See Appendix E for an example of quartile breakdown in a high school profile.

²³ Conversations with Janet E. Adams-Wall, *op.cit.*

²⁴ College Board Web Site, *op.cit.*

²⁵ Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938, 47.

²⁶ University of Vermont, Facts & Figures Brochure, *op.cit.*

²⁷ NACAC e-list, *op.cit.* This reference is taken from Joan K. Rynearson, a Certified Educational Planner from Bainbridge Island, Washington, from comments she made in November, 2007 on the e-list. She was referencing data from the 'Wintergreen Orchard House Hyper Handbook' which has college profiles with data on percentages of schools receiving precise rank and data on how important schools consider that information.

²⁸ For examples of what appears in a Google search, visit www.google.com, and enter the words: John Kerry Flip Flopper. The list that appears and explanations behind the accusations are clear in the articles. It seems that Kerry had shifted personal/political values and did not convince people that his motivation was genuine.

²⁹ As heard on National Public Radio, February 19, 2008 in a Morning Edition interview with historian Robert Dallek. The audio recording can be accessed at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=19157788>.

³⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, *op.cit.*, 49

³¹ Nash, *Liberating Scholarly Writing, op.cit.*, 55.

³² This quote from Tom Gibson is taken from a series of informal conversations with him. Tom was the Director of Guidance at Essex High School, in Essex, Vermont from 1994 until his retirement in 2007. Prior to that, he held a number of school counseling positions in the Burlington, VT area. He has taught several courses on school counseling at the University of Vermont, and has presented at numerous professional conferences.

³³ Nash, Robert J. *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001, 172-179. This book is an excellent reference for more reading on moral conversation.

³⁴ See Appendix A for the Champlain Valley Guidance Directors, *Position Statement on Class Rank*.

³⁵ A weighted grade point average (GPA) takes into consideration the difficulty of courses taken and typically provides increased weight in the GPA calculation for courses that are considered more rigorous than the average (Honors or AP courses are often weighted). An unweighted GPA gives all courses equal weight in the GPA calculation.

³⁶ NACAC *State of College Admission 2006, op.cit.*

³⁷ Gill, Rachel. "Champlain Valley Union High School Class Rank is No More." As seen in the Williston Observer, September 20, 2007. Catherine Diamond is a Senior Assistant Director of Admissions at the University of Vermont.

³⁸ NACAC e-list, *op.cit.*

³⁹ Bunche Research Report, 50, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ Chaker, Anne Marie. "Why Good Grades May Not Matter." As seen in the *Wall Street Journal Online* at: <http://www.collegejournal.com/aidadmissions/newstrends/20030807-chaker.html?refresh=on>

⁴¹ Bunche Research Report, 24, *op.cit.*

⁴² Conversations with Tom Gibson, *op.cit.*

⁴³ For data on Vermont school population figures, I consulted the Vermont Department of Education web site at <http://education.vermont.gov/>.

⁴⁴ For information on high school graduates from Massachusetts and New York, I consulted their department of education web sites.

⁴⁵ I found the *Burlington Free Press Editorial*, “More Recognition for Graduating Class,” (June 12, 2007) was particularly helpful in describing the Latin system. The following explanation was given: “Under Latin honors, used by most colleges and universities, a school bestows recognition such as summa cum laude, magna cum laude and cum laude to top students...cum laude is Latin for “with praise,” or roughly, “with distinction.” Summa cum laude, then, is “with highest distinction,” and magna cum laude is “with great distinction.”

⁴⁶ Walsh, Molly. “Burlington High Drops Valedictorian Tradition.” As seen in the *Burlington Free Press*, June 11, 2007.

⁴⁷ See Appendix B for the Champlain Valley Union High School power point presentation, “Class Rank: A discussion and an alternative” for CVU statistics.

⁴⁸ Conversations with Tom Gibson, *op.cit.*

⁴⁹ In May of 2007, I visited an English class at CVU where juniors completed a questionnaire on rank. I compiled this information to get a snap shot of the student perception and experience relating to rank. It was not a scientific study, rather an opportunity to gain insight into the candid response from students experiencing rank first-hand.

⁵⁰ Gill, “Why Good Grades May Not Matter,” *op.cit.*

⁵¹ NACAC e-list, *op.cit.*

⁵² Conversations with Janet E. Adams-Wall, *op.cit.*

⁵³ This quote is taken from questionnaires completed in my May 2007 visit to CVU. The student quoted here was actually ranked approximately number 35 out of approximately 330, indicating pressure on students at the top of the class draws reactions that are indicative of the emotional impact of ranking.

APPENDIX

A. Champlain Valley Guidance Directors, Position Statement on Class Rank

This document outlines the core beliefs shared by the Directors of Guidance at public schools in the Champlain Valley (in Chittenden County, VT). This position statement was used largely as a comprehensive statement in opposition of ranking high school students. Over the past two years, the high schools involved with this have been successively dropping the practice of precise rank and moving towards use of Latin Honors, as seen in Appendix B.

Champlain Valley Guidance Directors Position Statement on Class Rank (DRAFT)

As we examine the issue of high school rank-in-class, we wish to begin by articulating the foundational beliefs, logic, and research that direct our thinking on this issue.

We believe that:

1. Education is an endeavor in which the ultimate goal is success by *all* students. Good schools strive to bring all students to, or above, pre-determined and appropriate standards of competency.
2. School policy and practice should not be designed to compare students to one-another in ways that create “winners” and “losers”. Education should not be a competitive win-lose game.

Reason dictates that:

3. Class rank is a “zero sum” game in which every student who moves up in rank requires at least one other student move down. Instead of competing against a pre-determined standard of learning (e.g. standards-based assessment), class rank requires students to compete *against one another* for rewards that are artificially limited, by design.
4. No matter what the level of aptitude, teaching, or achievement, class rank requires 50% of all students in a school to be in the bottom-half of their class. One out of every four must be in the bottom quarter of his/her class – even if all of the students are brilliant, all of the teachers are masterful, and all of the learning is of the highest quality!
5. Class ranks of students *within* a school provide no valid, comparable measure of the achievement or potential of students among *different* schools.

Research indicates that:

6. Student achievement in secondary education is the best single predictor of success in post-secondary education.
7. The better the aptitude and achievement of a student's graduating class in a school, the more deleterious are the effects of class rank on the vast majority of students in that school – especially with regard to admission to competitive colleges and universities.
8. Significant and important differences in students' class rank often result from insignificant and unimportant differences in students' grade-point-averages.

Therefore, we conclude that:

9. Rank-in-class, in and of itself, is inherently unfair to students, is counter-productive to the goals of education, and that it condemns great numbers of students to educational "failure".
10. Rank-in-class is a fictitious and misleading measure of student achievement when used to compare students among different high schools, and it is an unreliable predictor of future educational success at competitive colleges and universities.
11. There are better ways to report student achievement - ways that are fairer to students, better serve the goals and ideals of secondary education, more accurately and appropriately represent students' secondary school successes, and – therefore - more reliably predict students' success in higher education.

And, we recommend that:

12. Within schools, and for the purposes of college admission, alternate indicators of student achievement should replace the use of class rank. A system of *Cum Laude* (e.g., above 3.5 GPA on a 4.3 scale), *Magna Cum Laude* (e.g., above 3.8), and *Summa Cum Laude* (e.g., above 4.1) is both standards-based and non-comparative, yet it clearly indicates and honors high levels of student achievement. The relative strength of a student's graduating class is indicated by the varying number of students in each *cum laude* category, without unfairly penalizing students for being in a higher-achieving class.
13. The *cum laude* categories should also replace *valedictory* and *salutatory* designations (based on highest and second-highest class rank), since students at the highest level of academic achievement often differ by very slight and statistically insignificant grade-point-averages. The highest levels of academic achievement are better honored with the *summa cum laude* designation.
14. Since the rigor of a student's high school curriculum is also a primary factor in predicting college success, high schools should clearly distinguish the school's higher level courses in the school profile, and (better still) on student transcripts. By printing such courses in bold type, or by placing an asterisk before the titles of such courses (for example), college admissions offices can more-easily and accurately judge the rigor of a student's overall high school curriculum.

B. Champlain Valley Union High School Power Point Presentation

This presentation was used by the Guidance Department at Champlain Valley Union (CVU) High School as part of their effort to educate constituents on the move from precise ranking to the Latin Honors System. As you can see, it describes the problems with their ranking system, explains the Latin System, and references the College Board and NACAC to support claims made.

Alternatives to Class Rank

The Latin System of Student Recognition

The Context

- To allow students to measure themselves against an objective standard
- To recognize more students for academic excellence
- To make sure that students are seen in the best possible light in the college admissions process

Drawbacks to the Current System of Class Rank

- Creates system of “winners” and “losers”
- Rank varies according to strength of a particular class
- Disadvantages to high performing students in the college admissions process
- Unhealthy competition among students

The Latin System of Recognition

- Summa Cum Laude
 - 4.1 GPA & above (top 1-2% of class)
- Magna Cum Laude
 - 3.8 GPA & above (top 5-8% of class)
- Cum Laude
 - 3.5 GPA & above (top 20% of class)

An Example from CVU 2004-06

	2006	2005	20064
Summa cum Laude	2	1	0
Magna	28	34	17
Cum	41	53	42

Another CVU Example

	2006	2005	2004
Top Decile	3.79 and above	3.82 and above	3.73 and above
Second Decile	3.54 and above	3.64 and above	3.52 and above

National Data

- According to National Association of College Admissions Counselors survey:
 - 40% of American high schools have discontinued rank
 - 85% of private schools do not rank
 - 15% of public schools do not rank

What the “experts” say:

The College Board:

- “If your school doesn’t employ ranking, your students are at no real disadvantage. With the tremendous fluctuation in curricula and grading standards at different schools, admission officers have increasingly begun to discount the accuracy and importance of class rank as a factor in evaluating students.
- Some competitive high schools have given up on ranking because they feel that it penalizes lots of excellent students who are squeezed out of the top 10% of the class – and therefore overlooked by some top schools – but who will nevertheless do very well in college.”

And more

NACAC: “... Over the past 15 years, colleges have been assigning a declining level of importance to class rank.... Admissions officers report that even in larger graduating classes, the difference in academic qualifications of the student who finished at the top of the class may be virtually indistinguishable to the student who finished 20th or 30th. Accordingly, admissions officers rate class rank as a distant fourth factor behind the strength of curriculum/grades in college prep courses, the standardized admission tests, and the overall GPA.”

C. Fox Lane High School, Bedford, New York: 2007 School Profile Excerpt

High school profiles almost always accompany a transcript as part of a college application. High schools typically use the profile as the primary place where they state their policy on ranking, as well as providing other statistical and historical information about their school. In this example, Fox Lane High School states that “The Board of Education has abolished published Class Rank,” but still provide a chart that groups students into ten GPA ranges. This type of decile breakdown allows admissions officers to quantify the standing of an applicant based on where their GPA falls within a group.

Academic Performance

Average SAT Scores 2005 - 06		
Score	Critical Reading	Math
750 – 800	.....18	.....4
700 – 749	.....11	.....28
650 – 699	.....24	.....29
600 – 649	.....46	.....39
550 – 599	.....42	.....44
500 – 549	.....33	.....33
450 – 499	.....27	.....27
400 – 449	.....27	.....26
350 – 399	.....22	.....19
300 – 349	.....9	.....8
Below	.....3	.....5
Fox Lane Mean	.....546	.....550
National Mean	.....503	.....518
NYS Mean	.....493	.....510

Decile Range of GPA Class of 2007	
1st	99.55 - 92.10
2nd	92.09 - 89.93
3rd	89.92 - 87.10
4th	87.09 - 84.41
5th	84.40 - 81.00
6th	80.99 - 78.95
7th	78.94 - 76.30
8th	76.29 - 72.26
9th	72.25 - 69.38
10th.....	69.37 - 61.54

GRADES ARE UNWEIGHTED

HONORS 2002 – 2006	
National Merit Commendations	64
National Merit Semi-Finalists	7
National Merit Finalists	10
National Merit Winners	6

Grading Policy

Grades earned are on a 0 – 100 basis. Four quarterly grades and a final exam are added together and divided by 5 to determine a final average. The transcript shows final grades, Regents examination grades and credits earned. The passing grade is 65.

Class Rank Policy

The Board of Education has abolished published Class Rank. All final grades up to the beginning of senior year are averaged to determine GPA. Grades are unweighted.

D. The Harvey School, Katonah, New York, 2006-2007 School Profile Excerpt

High school profiles almost always accompany a transcript as part of a college application. Schools typically use the profile as the primary place where they state their policy on ranking, as well as providing other statistical and historical information about their school. In this example, the Harvey School acknowledges that by providing a GPA breakdown, they are essentially still ranking, simply without extreme precision. In quintile distribution, students GPAs are divided into five groupings so that an admissions officer can ascertain approximately where the student's accomplishments place them in relation to their peers.

CLASS RANKING

Students at The Harvey School are ranked by quintile. In order to help you evaluate our students, we are providing a scale that represents the cumulative grade point average of students from this year's senior class in the various quintiles, as of September 2006.

1st Quintile	3.5 – 4.2
2nd Quintile	3.1 – 3.49
3rd Quintile	2.7 – 3.0
4th Quintile	2.3 – 2.69
5th Quintile	1.7 – 2.29

E. Darrow School, New Lebanon, New York, 2006-2007 School Profile Excerpt

High school profiles almost always accompany a transcript as part of a college application. Schools typically use the profile as the primary place where they state their policy on ranking, as well as providing other statistical and historical information about their school. In this example, the Darrow School divides their student's GPAs into only four categories to provide college admissions officers some sense of the distribution of grade point averages, but also states that "Class rank is not reported." It seems class rank is reported, though not precisely.

Grading System

Grade point averages are unweighted and are not computed on a cumulative basis. Class rank is not reported. Darrow uses the following letter grades:

A+ = 97-100 A = 93-96 A- = 90-92
B+ = 87-89 B = 83-86 B- = 80-82
C+ = 77-79 C = 73-76 C- = 70-72
D+ = 67-69 D = 63-66
F = below 60

Typically, about 7% of senior grades are A's, 44% are B's, 42% are C's, and 7% are D's. The average grade typically falls between a B- and a C+. Beginning with students who entered Darrow in 2002, grades from other schools are attached to our transcript.

**Class of 2005-2006
Averages by Quartile**

Quartile	Grade	Mean SAT I
1	3.89	1130
2	3.55	1133
3	2.98	1001
4	2.07	969