**NSHS School Council  
Research on Pros/Cons of Weighted GPA**

**May 7, 2019**

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**Scope:** NSHS School Council conducted research from reviewing published research articles from 1992 - 2016 on the internet as of April 2019, and reviewed articles from 2016-2019 on assessments done by other high schools nationally. It also includes 2019 phone and email interviews with college admission officers. This document summarizes the findings from these sources.

**Conclusions**

The team found that most of the published research was assessing if weighted or unweighted GPA had correlation to college success. The research findings also showed reference that many researches done in 1990s focused on how weighted GPA provided an alternative to measuring performance. It supported class rank and rewarded students taking high level courses.

Research in 2004 – 2016 focused on how weighted GPA had correlation to college success. Most research concluded that while a GPA has a correlation to college success, it was not clear that weighted GPA was a factor.

Research done in 2007 show most high schools use some version of a weighted GPA. In response to the various weighted GPA, college admissions developed their own calculations to provide for a method to assess students from various school fairly, making weighted GPA in high schools not a factor for college admission. The 2019 interviews from college admission officers and more current article from 2016 confirmed that college admissions do consistently recalculate GPAs to their own scale. College admissions want a good GPA, but don’t specify a number. College admissions also want to see rigor in the 4 year high school transcript – did student take courses to challenge themselves.

Finally, recent articles published in 2016 to current showed high schools assessing whether weighted GPA should be continued. High schools are assessing removing weighted GPA to encourage students to take courses of interest versus fear of lowering GPA and trend that weighted GPA is not a factor in college admissions.

Summary Presentation available. Contact NSHS School Council for any questions. <http://newtonsouthptso.org/school-info/school-council/>

**Research Articles**

# 2016 Do Colleges Look at Weighted or Unweighted GPAs? <https://www.albert.io/blog/do-colleges-look-at-weighted-or-unweighted-gpas/>

A strong transcript full of good grades in difficult classes is better than just a high GPA. Most schools recalculate GPA (vary in classes they select to weigh, and some do weigh).

In the great weighted GPA vs. unweighted GPA debate, the answer is to work hard and take challenging classes. Many colleges, all tiers take a holistic approach in evaluating applications.

Admissions officers also consider the differences between separate high school’s and their standards. That is, the performance of a student from school with a lot of funding from Connecticut can’t be directly compared to that of someone from a smaller school in rural Kentucky. Admissions officers will notice if you earned your 5.0 in notoriously easy class like AP Environmental Science or if you took a harder alternative like AP Calculus BC.

Yale Admissions:**“**Since each high school has different ways of measuring student grades, Yale does not have an average GPA calculated for accepted students. The admissions committee does not prefer weighted or unweighted GPAs, instead they prefer to see that students have challenged themselves with the strongest curriculum possible at their high school.”

USC Admissions: “There is no minimum requirement or absolute “cutoff” for grades, class rank or test scores. USC evaluates prospective students through an individualized, comprehensive review process that takes these, and many other factors, into account.”

Mount Holyoke Admissions: Mount Holyoke hardly mentions grade point averages at all on their [**admissions website**.](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/admission/firstyear/reg_decision) Instead, they seem to focus on each student’s personal talents and accomplishments when selecting their class.

Ole’ Miss Admissions**: The University of Mississippi seems to consider GPAs on the unweighted scale.**

**Palo Alto commit to Weighted-GPA in 2016**<https://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2016/11/02/palo-alto-school-district-to-report-weighted-gpa-for-current-seniors>

Currently Palo Alto district high school calculate weighted GPA for honor courses.

“Many of the parents and students who filled the standing-room-only meeting urged the reporting of weighted GPAs as a way to honor students' hard work in more rigorous classes and to help them secure both scholarships and college admission. This viewpoint was echoed in online petitions launched in the last week that have collectively gathered more than 1,000 signatures.”

Students and parents from both high schools argued that reporting weighted GPAs is a straightforward, administrative action unconnected to academic stress.

"This is not a conversation about stress. This is a conversation about reporting what my actions were in high school," said Paly senior Maya Katz, who brought the grade-reporting issue to the board several weeks ago after realizing her weighted GPA would qualify her for a $36,000 merit scholarship at the University of Oregon. "If you want to talk about stress, if you want to talk about rigor in different classes ... that's a completely different conversation."

Moving forward, the district must seek data to understand student performance in class offerings, choices among non-weighted electives, and measures of student health to confirm that we are reinforcing our values with our policies. We must provide every student with the opportunities and supports to take on challenges and pursue interests.

**Wilton HS Non-Weighted GPA in 2016**

[**https://goodmorningwilton.com/bd-of-ed-pushes-vote-on-weighted-grades-policy-to-march-31-survey/**](https://goodmorningwilton.com/bd-of-ed-pushes-vote-on-weighted-grades-policy-to-march-31-survey/)

**Johns Hopkins, Dartmouth** and **NYU**. They reported that they look carefully at the profile of each applicant’s high school; that high school grades in college prep courses are a key factor in their admission decisions; and that overall, most felt Wilton students are not disadvantaged by an unweighted system.

While he urged the board to retain the existing non-weighted grading system, he also acknowledged the need to ensure consistency of grading practices across a course taught by different teachers and across all courses, to review the grading scale and to ensure appropriate support for students and parents during the college admission process.

**2019 Class Rank, GPA, and Grading**<https://www.nassp.org/policy-advocacy-center/nassp-position-statements/class-rank-gpa-and-grading/>

National Association for College Admission Counseling states that research indicates that up to 50% of schools no longer report class rank.

The current use of student grade point average to calculate class rank has limited value in admissions to college because it can only show how a student compares with others at a particular school.

Colleges and universities have responded by developing their own systems of ranking students and calculating projected class ranks. In addition, a number of universities recalculate student grade point averages by either adding or removing weighting to college-level courses or calculating a grade point average based solely on core academic courses.

**2004 Advantages and Disadvantages of Weighted Grading**<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538704.pdf>

From a study conducted in 2000 by Gail C. Downs, it was found that more than half of the nation's high schools use some form of a weighted grading system.

Advantages:

1. More students take rigorous courses.

2. More challenging courses can be offered.

3. It increases a student's GPA.

4. Higher class rankings for those who take more demanding courses.

5. Students are more competitive with peers from other schools with weighted grading for first-choice and more elite college acceptance.

6. Better chance for students to receive more in scholarship monies.

7. More likelihood for students to have higher self-esteem

Disadvantages:

1. Lack of consistency from school to school as to what courses are weighted and how much they are weighted.

2. Not all courses, even honors and AP, are equally demanding.

3. It may send a message to those who are taking regular courses, that their work is not as highly valued as weighted classes, which may lower self-esteem and attempts to strive for high grades.

4. College admissions offices tend to look at the overall GPA and not if the grades had been weighted.

5. If a student is afraid of getting a low grade in a more rigorous course, he/she may opt to take a less demanding course in order to earn a higher grade.

6. Tracking of students could become more common.

7. Students at the lower academic end of the spectrum would not have equal opportunities to take a more engaging academic program.

8. Litigation by parents may occur if they believe the system is hindering their child(ren) from equal access to the curriculum.

9. Smaller schools have fewer opportunities to offer a wide array of weighted and nonweighted courses.

10. Fine arts courses may not be taken because it is possible that a non-weighted grade will lower a student's GPA.

**2017 What If Weighted GPAs Are Meaningless?**<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/12/04/competitive-high-school-asks-are-weighted-gpas-doing-any-good>

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), in its new [Statement of Principles of Good Practice](https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/advocacy-and-ethics/statement-of-principles-of-good-practice/2017_spgp_final.pdf), says that the key issue is transparency so that colleges can evaluate what a transcript and GPA mean.

David Hawkins, executive director for educational content and policy at NACAC, said via email that when the association has studied the issue, it has found no advantage for students at high schools that weight.

And some universities make clear in their own reporting that they immediately remove the weights. When the University of California, Berkeley, reports on the average GPA of applicants, it quotes the unweighted (3.67) even if many of those applicants no doubt think they have a 4.43 or some higher figure.

**2007 Class Rank, GPA, and Valedictorians: How High Schools Rank Students**

David M. Lang, Cal State/Sacramento. *American Secondary Education,* Vol. 35, No. 2 (Spring 2007) pp. 36 – 48.

This study assessed procedures “used in a sample of 232 of the largest school districts in the US”

80% respondents used “some type of additional weight to [A] and/or

honors courses in order to determine Class Rank

13% unweighted

5% use a “dual system of Class Rank where both a weighted version

and unweighted version are considered.”

2.3% (five districts) do not compute Class Rank at all

Percent plan admissions criteria to state universities have made ClassRank more important than ever before

Although states “without policies forbidding affirmative action [may] continue using it in admissions and [this] may slow the proliferation of Percent Plans.”

Colleges and universities still rely on GPA and Class Rank in makingadmissions decisions

Some schools are “trying to de-emphasize these factors by removing Weighted grades and, at times, the Valedictory award.”

Parents have sued high school boards over “right to be sole Valedictorian

**2018 Estimating High School GPA Weighting Parameters With a Graded Response Model.** John Hansen, Harvard Graduate School of Education and Philip Sadler and Gerhard Sonnert, Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. 2018 by the National Council on Measurement in Education.

If the sole purpose of awarding bonus grade points for advanced course participation is to equate grades from standard and advanced high school courses, the results of this study indicate that widely used policies award excess points for advance courses.

Despite the high stakes attached to GPA, weighting policies vary considerably across states and high schools.

The correct methodological approach to estimating how GPAs should be weighted by course type is an unresolved question.

It is important to determine if ones defines GPA as an absolute measure of curricular knowledge, or as a measure of academic performance relative to local standards.

High school grades play a powerful role in education: they motivate the students to study, provide feedback to them about their academic performance and inform college admission committees about students' high school performance.

Despite inconsistencies in grading practices across courses, teachers, and schools, grades tend to predict college success as well as - if not better than - standardized test scores do.

In recent years (around year 2018), many colleges have placed greater emphasis on high school grades in the college admission process.

Study site many studies including Atkinson and Geiser (2009) concluded that researchers generally agree that academic success in high school course work is the best predictor of college success. This consensus among scholars is reflected among college admission professionals, who have ranked high school grades in college preparatory courses as the top factor in college admission decisions for decades (Clinedinst, Koranteng, & Nicola, 2016). Yet, there is no consensus about how several years of high school grades across a heterogeneous set of courses should be aggregated into a single number.

Research in 1990s focused on how weighted GPA can provide an alternative to calculating and measuring performance in high school courses.

Research in 2004 – 2007 focused on whether weighted GPA had correlation to college success.

**1992 Weighted Grades: Solution or Problem.** C. Daniel Raisch. American Secondary Education, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1992), pp. 22-24. Published by Dwight Schar College of Education, Ashland University.

Most students and parents support the position of weighting especially those students who are in the top percentiles of their class.

If weighting grades would give them more accurate information, then the admissions people would support weighted grades. However, the author found through conversations with area high school counselors that respected admissions personnel are more concerned about accurate, consistent reporting than whether a school uses weighted grades to compute grade point averages

Some schools and colleges have discontinued to use them as a means of ranking students in high school or admitting students to college.

Yet, according to Robinson and Craver in 1989 research study, most high schools, (88.1%), use GPA and or RIC data for responses to college admissions and nearly 56 percent of the schools use weighted grades in those computations.

Which classes do we weigh? It could be extremely frustrating for students and parents to know that taking every weighted course in school and receiving all A's in those and all other courses might not allow the student a chance at being number one in the class.

If we are going to continue to weight grades, it is imperative that it be done using a process that encourages students to do more, not less.

**2007 Weighting for Recognition: Accounting for Advanced Placement and Honors when Calculating High School Grade Point Average.** Sadler, Philip M; Tai, Robert H, National Association of Secondary School Principals. NASSP Bulletin; Mar 2007; 91, 1; Social Science Premium Collection pg. 5. Accounting for Advanced Placement and Honors Courses when Calculating High School Grade Point Average”. National Association of Secondary School Principals. NASSP Bulletin; Mar 2007; 91, 1; Social Science Premium Collection pp. 5-32.

Goal of report was to investigate validity of weighted GPA scores based on subsequent performance in college. Used science courses only in the research.

Majority of high schools (Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006) in the US modify or weight their GPA.

Vickers, 2000 research, many state colleges have ‘automatic acceptance’ based on GPA. There has been a growth in preference from 52% in 1971 to 68% in 1989 by directors of admissions at 4-year-colleges for weighted GPAs.

Colleges want students who will do well and students who take more advanced coursework in high school tend to perform better in introductory college courses.

Study supports weighted GPA for science courses. No evidence to support or regute weighting of non-science AP or honor courses.

**Feedback from College Admissions – Lists recommended by Kathy Sabett – various tiers for NSHS applicants**

* **Brown:**  Julianne Fenn: [julianne\_fenn@brown.edu](mailto:julianne_fenn@brown.edu); 401-863-2378. No response.
* **Colby:**  Nikki Jacobson:  [nicole.jacobson@colby.edu](mailto:nicole.jacobson@colby.edu); 207-859-4819 Email response.

We will accept academic information in whichever way the school decides to send it. As you may imagine, we see a wide array of grading scales, curricular offerings, and GPA weights in the applications we receive. In our review process, we seek to understand each student's performance within the context of their school's academic offerings and grading system, and we are ultimately looking for students who are opting into rigorous curriculum and excelling in those courses, regardless of whether their GPA is weighted or unweighted.

* **UMass Amherst:** Jules Bannister: [jbannister@umass.edu](mailto:jbannister@umass.edu); 413-577-1346.

Phone Interview. UMass Amherst weights and recalculates all GPAs no matter what school they come from, so that we can consider students on an equal playing field. The process by which we weight and recalculate GPAs is to follow the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education admissions standards. Essentially, what we do is we take all the core classes plus one academic elective per year, and then add weight for honors, AP, or college-level (dual enrollment) classes. Non-academic classes such as gym and health do not count. Honors classes receive a 0.5 boost to the GPA, and AP or college-level classes receive a full 1 point (this is equivalent to 5 points on a 100-point scale for an honors class or 10 points on a 100-point scale for an AP or college-level class). Because we use this system, it doesn't matter to us whether a school weights or doesn't weight their own GPAs, because we are automatically going to weight and recalculate the GPA to our own standards anyway.

* **University of Michigan:**  Kyle Small: [ksmall@umich.edu](mailto:ksmall@umich.edu); 734-764-1378. Email response.

We recalculate all GPA's using an unweighted 4.0 scale therefore it doesn't matter what scales high schools use when calculating a GPA. We will relcalcuate either way and put everyone on a level playing field. We look at each student as a whole package, a combination of talents, interests, passions, and skills. In this way, we can look beyond grades and test scores to recruit the most dynamic group of students possible. A wide variety of backgrounds, intellectual passions, and interests make up the typical applicant. What they share is a drive to pursue academic excellence in a challenging and rewarding academic environment.

* **UC Santa Barbara:** Cuca Acosta: [refugia.acosta@sa.ucsb.edu](mailto:refugia.acosta@sa.ucsb.edu); 805-893-2307   
    
  Phone interview on Feb 1, 2019. Cuca stated that all UC universities calculate their own GPA regardless of the high school transcript. They will weight an honors or AP class in their calculation. However, GPA is still only one factor in the admission process. They note from meeting high school students that many have a pre-conceived idea of a particular GPA that admissions is looking for, but that is not true.
* **Clark University:**  Natasha Kothari: [nkothari@clarku.edu](mailto:nkothari@clarku.edu); 508-793-7431 Phone interview on February 4, 2019.

Clark University has a holistic approach in review student applications. No one GPA will mean admission. Admission is looking for the rigor of the course work and what grades the student received. Looking to see what story the course work and grades are telling them – did student continually challenge him/herself; did he/she slack off, did they pick up a subject of interest over the 4 years. Clarks may recalculate at student’s GPA depending on what scale the High School uses, so they have a fair comparison internally.

* Merrimack College:  Christine Carroll: [carrollc@merrimack.edu](mailto:carrollc@merrimack.edu); 978-837-5314 Phone interview on Feb 25th, 2019.

Merrimack we look at a weighted GPA, but we do re calculate. This means we do not take the GPA as is off the transcript. We have a re calculation we do that helps put all schools on a similar scale and weighting so we can evaluate students fairly compared to each other. We also remove classes such as gym, health, stress management, culinary, etc so the GPA we use shows weighted core classes and academically based electives. One of the benefits for students with weighted GPA is it encourages them to challenge themselves with more difficult courses. Students may be less inclined to take a more difficult class they might not be as strong in if they aren't getting any extra weighting on their GPA. The strength in the course schedule is also looked at with college admission as is GPA. A student with a very high GPA without very changeling classes might not be as competitive as a student who challenged them self. Especially for majors such as engineering and nursing.