



The Gold Standard

College Admissions Officers Know the Worth of a GPA From OES

By Rob Brisk, Head of the Upper School

While parents acknowledge the outstanding quality of an OES education, from time to time some have asked me if students are at a disadvantage in college admission because “A’s” may be harder to earn here at OES than at many of the local public and parochial schools. Do students who get higher grades in less rigorous programs impress college admissions officers with their loftier grade point averages? College admissions officers across the country in small and large, public and private institutions answer the question more compellingly than we can.

Admissions officers are quite clear in their concern about meaningless high grades given in many schools. As George Mills, vice-president of enrollment at University of Puget Sound recently told us,

“One should keep in mind that schools, like countries, issue a currency. The transcript is the expression of this currency. Schools that devalue their currency by inflating grades are less likely to be viewed in a positive light by admissions officers.”

Some parents believe, however, that college admissions offices have little idea whether an individual school’s standards are inflated or rigorous. Yet we know that colleges make these distinctions with accuracy. Here is what Joan Lippman, associate dean of admissions at Stanford University says about how she looks at grade point averages:

“We are aware of schools where grade inflation runs rampant and schools where the highest GPA in any given year will be a 3.75, not a 4.00. We read sensitively with this kind of information to understand the context of the student who is applying.”

Being able to make these distinctions is important to colleges because, as George Mills says,

“Admissions officers don’t want to admit a student who has developed an inflated grade point ‘façade’ that is not a real indication of the academic ability of the student.”

So how do colleges regard students from rigorous independent schools? They use a completely different lens, according to Virginia Harrison, associate dean of admissions at Bates College:

“When applicants come from small, rigorous private schools where most students will attend selective colleges, we read with a completely different mindset from when we read an application from large urban public schools. It is apples and oranges.”

Even within the independent school world, admissions officers are able to make distinctions between schools based on the quality of the

high school’s curriculum, college counseling staff, and profile. A profile is the document that each school sends to every college explaining the school’s depth of offering, grading system and many other particulars. OES’s program, students, and college counseling staff, led by Cynthia Doran, are held in high regard by colleges. James Sumner, vice-president of enrollment for Grinnell College, says that he, like other admissions officers, is well acquainted with OES:

“Your recommendations are insightful, helpful and trusted because of your history of reliability and accuracy. The OES counseling staff does a very good job of not only keeping our admissions staff informed about the school, but also does an outstanding job of helping them to understand the whole student.”

Some parents worry that although our students may have a distinct advantage at colleges who take the time to examine all the information, our students may suffer in larger institutions where the staff might not

have the time to come to know OES. Parents share with us the concern that larger institutions are “numbers driven.” They fear that a lower GPA is a great obstacle.

Here, too, college admissions officers from large and public colleges give a different picture. The University of Washington, for instance, has put OES on its “permanent grade point adjustment list,” adding points to every OES transcript as a matter of routine.

The University of Oregon also understands what we do and who we are. Jim Buch, associate vice-president for student academic affairs at the University of Oregon, told us:

“Our admissions committee has a deep appreciation for the OES curriculum and knows that the faculty have not succumbed to grade inflation . . . we know OES provides excellent preparation for university-level study.”

Ultimately, we believe, and our belief is affirmed, that our students are well served by clearly articulated and high standards. We believe, though, that the education our students get cannot be measured by any simple number. The OES advantage is not found in the credibility of our grades, but rather in the intellectual engagement, the academic passions and the ability of our students to make a positive change for good in this world. We believe that that is what Jim Buch of The University of Oregon was getting at when he said,

“Cervantes was right – the proof is in the pudding; OES graduates do very well, becoming not only excellent scholars, but also strong leaders.” ■

“When applicants come from small, rigorous private schools... we read with a completely different mindset from when we read an application from large urban public schools.”