

A Plan to Kill High School Transcripts ... and Transform College Admissions

THE [insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/10/top-private-high-schools-start-campaign-kill-traditional-transcripts-and-change](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/10/top-private-high-schools-start-campaign-kill-traditional-transcripts-and-change)

What if traditional high school transcripts -- lists of courses taken, grades earned and so forth -- didn't exist?

That's the ambition of a new education reform movement, which wants to rebuild how high schools record the abilities of students -- and in turn to change the way colleges evaluate applicants. Sounds like quite a task. But the idea is from a group with considerable clout and money: more than 100 private schools around the country, including such elite institutions as the Dalton School and the Spence School in New York City, plus such big guns as the Cranbrook Schools in Michigan, the Phillips Academy in Massachusetts and Miss Porter's School in Connecticut.

The organizers of the effort believe all kinds of high schools and colleges are ready for change, but they argue that it will take the establishment to lead this particular revolution. Organizers believe that if more than 100 such elite private schools embrace a new transcript, they will attract supporters in higher ed who will embrace the approach for fear of losing top applicants (both in terms of their academics and ability to pay). And then the plan could spread -- over perhaps a decade -- to public high schools as well. Along the way, the group hopes to use the ideas of competency-based education -- in which demonstration of mastery matters and seat time does not -- to change the way high schoolers are taught.

Earned Credits:

- 1 Analytical and Creative Thinking**
 - b. Detect bias, and distinguish between reliable and unsound information
 - e. Analyze and create ideas and knowledge
- 2 Complex Communication— Oral and Written**
 - a. Understand and express ideas in two or more languages
 - c. Listen attentively
 - d. Speak effectively
- 3 Leadership and Teamwork:**
 - a. Initiate new ideas
 - b. Lead through influence
 - c. Build trust, resolve conflicts, and provide support for others
 - d. Facilitate group discussions, forge consensus, and negotiate outcomes
 - f. Enlist help
 - g. Coordinate tasks, manage groups, and delegate responsibilities
 - h. Implement decisions and meet goals
 - i. Share the credit
- 4 Digital and Quantitative Literacy:**
 - a. Understand, use, and apply digital technologies
 - c. Use multimedia resources to communicate ideas effectively in a variety of forms
 - d. Master and use higher-level mathematics
 - e. Understand traditional and emerging topics in math, science, and technology, environmental sciences, robotics, fractals, cellular automata, nanotechnology, and biotechnology
- 5 Global Perspective**
 - b. Understand non-western history, politics, religion and culture
 - e. Develop social and intellectual skills to navigate effectively across cultures
 - h. Leverage social and cultural differences to create new ideas and achieve success
- 6 Adaptability, Initiative, and Risk-Taking**
 - a. Develop flexibility, agility, and adaptability
- 7 Integrity and Ethical Decision-Making**
 - a. Sustain an empathetic and compassionate outlook
 - b. Foster integrity, honesty, fairness and respect
 - c. Exhibit moral courage in confronting unjust situations
 - d. Act responsibly, with the interests and well-being of the larger community in mind
 - e. Develop a fundamental understanding of emerging ethical issues and dilemmas regarding new media and technologies
- 8 Habits of Mind**
 - b. Creativity
 - e. Persistence
- 9**
 - b. Bring a sense of courage to unfamiliar situations
 - d. Work effectively in a climate of ambiguity and changing priorities
 - g. Develop entrepreneurial literacy

The group is called the [Mastery Transcript Consortium](#), and the product it hopes to create is the mastery transcript. It would not include courses or grades, but levels of proficiency in various areas. Instead of saying a student earned a certain grade in Spanish 2, the mastery transcript might say the student can understand and express ideas in some number of languages. And there could be different levels of mastery. Instead of a grade in algebra or

geometry, the mastery transcript would indicate whether a student can understand and use various kinds of concepts. The document above is a model for what a list of credits might look like, but officials stressed this could change considerably.

Further, the model envisions that each credit earned would be backed up by examples of student work, so an admissions officer could see lab reports, essays and so forth.

In some ways, the project sounds like the ["digital locker" the Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success](#) is promoting as an option for college applicants -- one that could start well before someone is ready to apply to college. And the mastery project organizers have been in touch with coalition leaders. But the difference with mastery is that there is no additional digital requirement to build something -- this would be the natural result of going through high school.

The Edward E. Ford Foundation on Tuesday announced a \$2 million grant to support the effort, and the initial schools involved have pledged to raise money to match that grant.

Patricia Russell has taken a yearlong leave from her position as a dean at Phillips Academy to help get the effort moving toward pilots with a small group of high schools and colleges. Among the requirements to participate: no grades and no standardization. She said each high school would be required to come up with its own system for evaluating student knowledge and skills. "It has to vary from school to school," she said, and the idea is to move away from identifying students by some number representing their achievement.

Mastery in this context is closely related to the competency idea much discussed these days in higher education. A student could earn mastery after completing a program of study with a teacher or simply by showing mastery gained independently. "What the mastery transcript does is completely disentangle seat time and course credits," she said.

Public high schools should be part of the process, Russell said, and they are already being consulted. But she said private schools, with their ability to operate free from politicians who might interfere, are best suited to get this process off the ground. She also said the great respect of top colleges for the graduates of these schools means the process will be taken seriously.

"The distinct reason why this project is being founded by a group of independent schools is that we are more nimble and have had disproportionate access to highly selective higher education."

But she said "absolutely this can scale" and the long-term goal is to have this approach do away with traditional high school grades and transcripts.

The original idea for the project came from Scott Looney, head of school of the Hawken School, a private institution in Cleveland. In an interview, he said that he wanted to experiment with a transcript of the sort the consortium is designing. When he spoke to contacts in the college admissions world, they said that if his school acted alone, they would hate the idea, as they would need to figure out how to read the new transcript and how to compare applicants using it with those at schools with more traditional transcripts. So he asked them how they would feel if he got 25 other schools to join in the effort, and they liked the idea. (The model above comes from the initial efforts at Hawken.)

Looney said he realized then that he couldn't act alone.

He also said he wants all students -- including those at public schools -- to have the options being created. One possibility, he said, is that if public schools lag a bit in producing these new mastery transcripts, teachers at his school (and others) could review portfolios of their work and certify their masteries. "Why do you have to attend Hawken to have Hawken certify you?" he asked.

Once the new mastery transcript takes hold, he said, colleges will value it over traditional materials they currently

receive.

Looney said that, initially, he expected the use of the mastery transcript might encourage colleges to pay more attention to standardized-test scores. Admissions officers "may default to measures that they know," he said.

But once they get comfortable with the new transcript, Looney predicted, they will find it superior to any information they currently get from test scores. In some cases, state legislation would be needed to allow public universities to alter admissions standards, but he said he thought that could happen in time.

Eventually, he said, many of the elements that make up rankings methodologies could be challenged as well. The transcript is designed to avoid not only grades but class rank (part of the *U.S. News & World Report* methodology). If more colleges drop standardized-test requirements, something happening already, that could undercut another part of the rankings methodology.

Much work remains to be done, he said, describing the process as taking up to 10 years, and longer in states where laws would need to change to permit high schools to report student achievement in new ways. In some cases, schools might use both approaches. But Looney said that when top colleges embrace this idea, which he predicted they would in time, the current system would be replaced. Already, he said, the organization has been having discussions with college admissions leaders and presidents anxious for change.

He pledged one thing amid the pilots and work ahead: "We will design this intentionally to make it impossible to distill a student into a single number."

Reactions and Questions

Several admissions experts, reached late Tuesday, said they were just learning about the concept and needed to study it.

Michael Reilly, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, said via email that he saw both potential and challenges in the idea, about which he said he needs to learn more.

"My initial read is that this would be a good set of information to augment a traditional transcript but, by itself, could harm students seeking to attend institutions that are mandated to evaluate admissions, at least in part, on completion of a core set of courses and the performance (grades) in those courses," he said. "It is not unlike the challenge of higher education institutions looking to develop outcome or competency transcripts. Until these are common currency, students would be negatively impacted when they seek to transfer to more traditional institutions if that is the only document they present. Promising, but I'd like to hear how it would be transitioned into the existing processes."