Specifics for School Leaders Creating a Profile

This document provides a high-level overview of the 14 most critical components for counselors to include in a school profile.

Based on research by Dr. Tara Nicola, these components showcase schools' academic curriculum, grading systems, postsecondary outcomes, and community context. This document may serve not only as a guide, but as a rationale for what information is most helpful to admission officers in the reading process and how admission officers make meaning of the information that they are provided.

This document is still in a draft form. We welcome and courage your comments, suggestions, and thoughts on our anonymous feedback survey form here.

We intend to release a finalized version in Summer 2024.

Dr. Nicola's original research can be accessed at the cite below:

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HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION | MAKING CARING COMMON PROJECT

What should the High School Profile Include?
Specifics for School Leaders Creating a Profile

Written by Dr. Tara P. Nicola
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Based on a series of interviews with admission counselors from across the country, Dr. Tara Nicola identifies 14 critical components for schools to include in their school profiles. These components, Dr. Nicola's findings suggest, are essential for admission officers to gain a more robust understanding of the context students are applying from.

These 14 components fall into four discrete categories: academic curriculum, grading systems, postsecondary outcomes, and school community. ***Below, we share an excerpt from Dr. Nicola's research on the significance of each category and its corresponding components.*** *Dr. Nicola's research was originally published in the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education article. Sharing permissions of pages 707-709 have been granted to Making Caring Common for educational use by the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education. You can find the full article here and the citation and the bottom of this document.*

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1. Academic Curriculum

- ***a. Course listings***
- ***b. Graduation requirements***
- ***c. Curriculum overview***
- ***d. Institutional policies***

First and foremost, admission officers searched a profile for information about a school's academic curriculum. Indeed, Juliana, an experienced admission officer at a liberal arts college, shared how the profile offers an answer to two questions she asks when reviewing an application: "'What is the most rigorous coursework at this school?' and 'Have they been able to take advantage of the most rigorous coursework?'" Every admission officer noted that their ideal profile would list, if not every class, at least the most advanced courses offered at a school. In this way, students from less resourced schools that do not have many advanced courses available are not placed at a disadvantage for taking—what would appear to be—a less rigorous course load.

The course list is especially important when evaluating applicants interested in STEM majors, who are usually expected to have taken advanced science and math courses. As Jack, a Senior Associate Director, explained, failing to enroll in these courses if available could penalize

a student: I like to look for higher level offerings, specifically how many APs, like what are they, especially for a student applying to engineering. If they don't have Calculus, my first look is at the profile to see was it offered? If it was, then you should be taking it or else you're not doing engineering. If it wasn't, well then that's not your fault—I won't hold that against you."

Beyond just a list of courses, admission officers also valued a general overview of a school's curriculum. This usually takes this form of a high-level summary of the structure of the curriculum and general expectations about course progression for the typical student. The description can give application readers a sense of the popularity of AP and honors classes at a particular school.

A majority of admission officers also wanted profiles to highlight unique graduation requirements and curriculum quirks, including any part of the curriculum that distinguishes the school like a STEM-specific program. Anna, the Director of Admission at a small liberal arts college, recalled one instance when a profile was useful for evaluating an unclear transcript that listed an unusual course: "We were reading through an application and the student only has three years of English—that is so bizarre and would be a problem. But then when we looked at the profile, we're like, 'No, they require four years of English. So this class with some weird name that doesn't mean anything to us must be an English class.' In this case, the profile helped Anna determine that the applicant met the minimum academic requirements for admission."

Finally, admission officers looked to profiles for insight on academic policies, particularly those related to enrollment in advanced courses. Examples of such policies include whether there are limits on the number or type of advanced courses students can take, the grade in which students can enroll in these courses, and if students need to be nominated or receive approval prior to taking the advanced classes. "It's always really helpful to understand if there's any guidance, advice, or limits they put on AP classes," Olive, a Senior Associate Dean at a highly selective liberal arts college, shared. "Many schools, even if they have 20 AP classes, you can only take three a year or you can only take three total."

2. Grading Systems

- ***a. Grading policies***
- ***b. Class rank***
- ***c. GPA distribution***

In addition to the academic opportunities available in a high school, admission officers also wanted to know how high schools assess their students. Grading systems and policies vary enormously and therefore it is important for an admission officer evaluating a student's transcript to understand exactly how the grades were computed. Admission officers also depended on profiles to learn whether a school assigns class ranks and, if so, how they are determined.

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Because many schools are moving away from calculating rank (Clinedinst, 2019), admission officers value other types of information indicative of rank such as a distribution of student GPAs and/or distribution of student grades in specific classes. A chart listing the percentage of students falling within certain GPA quartiles or quintiles is valuable because it indicates how applicants perform relative to their classmates, as well as provides evidence of grade inflation—or lack thereof. Kyle, an Associate Director, recalled an independent school where he "never saw a GPA below a 92, they all had As" whereas at one lower-resourced public school in his territory he "would rarely see GPAs above 3.4 . . . so a 3.0 wouldn't be uncommon." In both of these cases, the GPA distribution charts on the schools' profiles allowed Kyle to better gauge what achieving an "A" meant in each of the school contexts.

Whereas GPA distributions offer a general indication of achievement, grade distributions for particular high school classes provide a more nuanced understanding of academic performance. "I like when they list what the junior year core courses are and how many kids earned an A in this and how many kids earned a B and how many kids earned a C . . . I can get a sense that they are one of the top performers," one experienced admission officer noted. Similarly, another shared, "If there is that student who gets a C in this one class, maybe that's a good grade, you know, in the context of that particular class and that particular teacher." This detailed breakdown can flag for admission staff particularly difficult classes so that students in those courses are not unnecessarily penalized if they appear to underperform.

3. Postsecondary Outcomes

a. College-going rate
b. College destinations
c. Standardized testing

The college-going culture of a school is a critical piece of information that admission officers also wanted profiles to convey. Admission professionals highlighted three data points that serve as indicators about that culture: the college-going rate, the college destinations of prior graduates, and the performance of students on standardized admission tests.

Many officers noted that the percentage of students progressing to four-and two-year colleges are essential numbers in a profile. Kyle explained how these numbers inform how he reads the rest of a student's application, as the figures are a direct byproduct of an institution's college-going culture. For Kyle, seeing that a high school sends few students to college, let alone to four-year colleges, indicates the types of college counseling supports likely available to an applicant from that school; furthermore, he noted that it is a reflection of the applicant's perseverance in being willing to go "against the norm by putting themselves in a position of success despite the odds being against them."

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Like a school's college-going rate, the typical postsecondary destinations of students from a high school are yet another indicator of a school's college-going culture that admission officers look for. However, some admission officers were hesitant about schools placing this information on a profile because it can be difficult to interpret. As Juliana explained, "Sometimes schools list just all of the acceptances and that's not as useful because one student could have gotten accepted to 50% of those schools." The half of admission officers who found college destinations of previous graduating seniors useful on a profile made clear they prefer to see where previous students have matriculated rather than have been accepted. But as Carlos, a highly experienced Senior Associate Director, described, even this information can still be misleading: "Just because you list four people [admitted or enrolled] at Columbia, for all I know two of those were recruited athletes and two were legacies."

Standardized testing information, particularly average SAT and ACT scores, was the third indicator of student postsecondary success, slightly less than half of admission officers (48%) reporting these numbers are essential on the profile. Testing data can provide additional context for students who, upon first glance, may appear to be weaker applicants: "Our average SAT is a 1300. If the student is at this school and has a 1240 . . . you may be below our average but you're above average within your environment," one officer stated. Even if an applicant performs below average relative to others in the applicant pool, this data can indicate the student is, in fact, a high achiever.

However, because this data is often available from other parts of the application or purchased directly from test providers, some admission officers did not think this information was absolutely necessary on a profile. Nevertheless, they generally articulated that given the value of this information, it is still worthwhile for counselors to include. For example, Jane, a Senior Assistant Director, shared how even though she has access to testing data through her institution, she prefers to also see it on a profile. "I'd rather go right to the profile [to see testing data], just because I think it is a little easier to read," she noted. "I don't have to flip back and forth between the profile, the School Report, and the application on Slate [online admission software] to get the whole picture of an applicant's school."

4. School Community

- ***a. Community overview***
- ***b. Neighborhood***
- ***c. Student demographics***
- ***d. Enrollment***

Finally, admission officers consistently mentioned seeking information about a school's community. This description often includes a paragraph noting different facets of the school such as its type (e.g., charter, comprehensive public school, etc.) and grade levels served. Admission

officers were particularly interested in school enrollment policies, including if there are entry criteria like completing an application for admission or participating in a lottery. In addition, a majority of admission officers explicitly discussed wanting to learn about the neighborhood surrounding a high school. “I like to know a little bit about the community of the school, the town or city that it's in—smaller, old town, you know, things of that nature,” Krista, a Senior Assistant Director, shared.

In addition, admission officers generally believed an overview of the school community should include basic quantitative measures about the school such as the number of students enrolled, the size of the senior class, and the graduation rate. Admission officers also valued demographic information about the student body. As Olive noted, these descriptive statistics provide a sense of the types of peers supporting a student’s learning, helping her “build up an idea of what the context of the school is like.” One particular data point of interest to admission officers was the racial and ethnic breakdown of the student body. Mona, an Assistant Director at a large university, shared that this data can be especially informative when considering particular applicants. “If only 3% of students at a school are African American and one of the only African American students from that school applied, I would want to know that” she stated.

Profile Aesthetics

How information in a profile is presented is just as important as what information it conveys. Over two-thirds of admission officers mentioned profiles should be designed for skimming. With only a few minutes dedicated to reviewing an entire application, officers are glancing at the profile rather than reading it cover to cover. “What I tell college counselors is to put [information] in bullet points or a graph,” Daniela, an Assistant Director, shared. “We’re limited in terms of time—we’re looking through so many applications,” she explained. Effectively displaying data in a profile is key: graphs and charts are ideal for highlighting quantitative information while incorporating different fonts and white space can draw attention to important text.”

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