

THE FACTS ABOUT GPA & CLASS RANK

The truth: GPA and especially class rank are not all that important. Don't believe me? I have proof:

NACAC annual "State of College Admissions" report has shown a steady and consistent decrease in the importance of GPA and especially class rank over the past decade or more:

- 2008: class rank was not listed as a factor considered by the most competitive institutions (such as Harvard, Yale, etc).
- 2010: report had only 16% of college admissions counselors list class rank as a significant factor in admissions decisions, and those were largely due to laws such as Texas' Top 10% law.

I know why you don't believe me. You've been told for years that those numbers matter. When we adults were going through the process, those numbers did matter. However, the world has changed, and public education is notoriously bad at keeping up with those changes. So why aren't class rank and GPA very important?

First of all, whatever importance they may have does not yet exist in 9th/10th grade. 10th graders have all of 1.5 years...3 semesters...of classes. That's not even half of what you will have once you are applying for college. 9th graders have 1 semester...not even a full credit in most classes. It's just like early in a six weeks, when every grade has huge importance...but the further you get into the six weeks, and the more grades you have, the less important each of those grades is in the big picture. Your GPA, and the resulting class rank, are the same. GPA and class rank mean very little at this stage. However, even if you were in 11th or 12th grade, it still wouldn't be that important. Why?

There's this thing called grade inflation. In PISD, it takes a certain level of work to get an A in, say, Algebra 2. Just down the road in Dallas ISD, in an Algebra 2 class that looks the same on paper, it takes a different level of work to get an A. That's not a knock on DISD; they deal with things PISD will likely never have to. However, in the end, the fact is it's easier to get an A some places than others, even in theoretically identical classes. The result is that someone who is in the top 10% in one school might not even be in the top half in another. Add to that the current trend across the country of doing away with class rank (only 46% of high schools still do class rank), and there is simply no way to use class rank for comparison. Colleges know this, and it has all but eliminated class rank as an important factor.

As far as GPA, there is no standardization across the country. Some districts weigh honors and AP classes on something greater than a 4 point scale, while others don't. Still others have eliminated GPA and have moved to a letter grade system that directly mimics most universities. In order to deal with these discrepancies, most universities do what's called grade equalization, recalculating everyone's GPA on a standard 4 point scale and looking at what they actually consider important. Which is?

Those same NACAC reports I mentioned earlier have consistently listed grades in individual courses, strength of a student's curriculum, and scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT as the most important quantitative factors. However, most applicants are very similar in all of those areas, so colleges look for students who stand out from the crowd. Admissions counselors consistently list essays and activities as the two primary ways applicants are separated. When colleges and universities are evaluating applicants, they aren't concerned with who was successful in high school. They are looking for students who will likely be successful at their institution. They don't want to invest time and resources into students who will just drop out, or who will change their majors every semester. NACAC reports have consistently listed self-discipline, work ethic, the ability to self-evaluate and find creative solutions, and the ability to work together as the traits that predict a

successful college student. Those are also the same skills employers repeatedly list as desired traits in a workforce. Admissions counselors know that those are skills practiced every day in an activity such as music. However, one year of music doesn't mean much to an admissions counselor. The 2008 NACAC report stated that admissions counselors are interested in the depth of activity, not breadth. In other words, they are looking for evidence of passion and commitment to one or two activities rather than a full resume of short-lived involvement in lots of activities. The 2008 NACAC report said that students who have been in music for at least three years in high school are automatically placed in this "stand out" category when all else is equal.

I'm talking to you about this today because you're getting transcripts, and I noticed years ago that people always freaked out on this day. Inevitably, someone would always express concern that Orchestra is hurting their GPA and/or class rank, so let's have a reality check of how that isn't true:

- The College Board (administrator of the SAT) identifies the arts as one of six areas students should study to succeed in college. The other five areas consist of courses required of all students.
- A study on the medical school admission rates of various undergraduate degrees found that music majors had the highest admission percentage of any degree at 66%. In contrast, only 44% of biochemistry majors were admitted. [Kush example]

More and more, research using functional MRI is finding direct links between the study of music and increased brain activity in ways that improve cognitive ability in all other subjects, and colleges know this. They know that studying music has given you those skills that predict success in college and in the new interconnected world economy.

And here's the proof that it isn't hurting you to be in Orchestra:

- The Valedictorian and Salutatorian at all three Plano senior highs is more often than not from one of the music programs; people who have been in all four years, and it obviously hasn't hurt them. [Carmen example]
- Private student examples

Please don't misunderstand me: grades are important. However, if you focus on learning and work hard, your grades will take care of themselves. Being in Orchestra does not hurt you. If anything it helps. And ultimately, your GPA and class rank aren't what matters. If you love doing something, and it is a benefit to you as a person, then you shouldn't let anything other than your passion for that thing be a part of the decision. High school is not about preparing for your future career; you have plenty of time in college for that. High school is about developing the most well-rounded you possible, and part of a well-rounded you is both working hard at doing your best in your academics AND doing things that you enjoy and that you are passionate about.