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Rank in Class and College Admission

Questions:

- **What is the impact of not having class rank on admission to college?**
- **How many schools no longer use class rank?**
- **Does the lack of class rank reduce stress among students and help them make better course selections?**

In a Nutshell

Traditionally class rankings have been used by high schools to determine valedictorians and salutatorians. These rankings have also been used by colleges to make admission decisions and for awarding scholarships. While there is no direct link between college rank and college admission, there is evidence that not using class rank can reduce stress for students and lessen the risks of taking rigorous and challenging courses in high school. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), over half of high schools no longer use class rankings (CollegeBoard inspiring minds, *Class rank and college admissions*) and fewer than 20% of colleges and universities say it is important for admission decisions.

Summary of Findings:

The move away from using class rankings began when small private high schools, where there were rigorous academic programs and their students were high achievers, concluded that the top 10 class rankings excluded many of their outstanding pupils (CollegeBoard inspiring minds, *Admissions decisions: What counts*; NASSP, 2010). Other small, then large public high schools followed suit. According to the literature, eliminating class rank lessens hyper-competition and stress at a crucial time in high school students' lives and encourages the college to view the whole person rather than use class rank against a student (Ferkenhoff, 2006; Finder, 2005; Expert Admissions, 2010; Weber, 2010). National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) reports that, in 1993, more than half of the colleges considered class rank highly important. However, by 2008, less than 20% stated it was important (Weber, 2010).

College Admissions

Each college has its own admission standards, yet the literature is clear about where they tend to place an emphasis:

- The most significant factor is the number of AP, IB and other demanding courses the student has taken. Colleges are interested if the students grew academically and took challenging, not fluff, courses.
- Grade point average from grades 9-11;
- Completion of core academic courses;
- The essay where a student describes how he/she challenged him/herself, original projects, test scores (SAT, ACT, AP), personal and professional goals;
- Participation in extracurricular activities;
- Leadership skills and abilities;
- Demonstrated involvement in the applicant's chosen major field of study;
- Exhibited interest in the college through conversations, interviews and/or visitations;
- Recommendations from school personnel and those knowledgeable about the applicant.

(CollegeBoard inspiring minds, *Admissions decisions: What counts*; CollegeBoard inspiring minds, *Class rank and college admissions*; Collegedata, *What matters most to colleges*; Wolf, 2009).

Advantages of Use of Class Rank

There are some identified advantages to the use of class rank. They include:

- High schools are able to make straightforward determinations of who will be valedictorian and salutatorian
- High schools do not need to submit as much background information about the school and its programs to the colleges
- College admissions officers have an easier time determining who should be accepted and to whom and how much scholarship monies should be awarded.
- Less emphasis on standardized test scores such as SAT and ACT.

(CollegeBoard inspiring minds, *Class rank and college admissions*; Expert Admissions, 2010; Wolf, 2009).

Disadvantages of Use of Class Rank

There are also some identified disadvantages to reliance on class rank for college admission.

- High schools must establish new ways to determine valedictorian and salutatorians
- High schools need to design and submit a complete profile to each college that provide information about: GPAs, range and median of GPAs, activities, curriculum, ACT and SAT scores, results of AP grade distribution of class, writing/project samples
- College admissions officers and their staff need to be aware of the high school and the rigor of its programs
- Some colleges take the total applicant pool and recalculate their GPAs, then add their own weighting system for AP and college prep courses. Other colleges look at scattergrams or bargraphs from each high school and determine where those students most likely would rank. Some colleges use unweighted classes for admissions and weighted ones for scholarships.
- In some schools, especially small ones, the use of class rank may push out students who are excellent
- Rankings can be a detriment to strong students getting into the college of their choice
- There is less “cut-throat” competition and stress for a high class rank position and students are all encouraged to do their best and take challenging courses. There is less risk in taking rigorous courses.

(CollegeBoard inspiring minds, *Class rank and college admissions*; Expert Admissions, 2010; Ferkenhoff, 2006; Finder, 2005; NASSP, 2010; Rozacky, 2010; Weber, 2010; Wolf, 2009).

States that Use Class Ranking for College Admission

In order for colleges to have a more diverse student population, three states have mandated class ranking.

- *Texas* – Under House Bill 588 passed in 1997 the top 10% of students from each high school are granted automatic admission into a state-funded college. Although students must be accepted into a state college, they may not get into the college of their first choice. Due to the high number of applicants, as of 2009, up to 75% of incoming freshman may be from the top 10% of their class. One of the problems has been that many outstanding in-state students

were not accepted or wait listed and fewer out-of-state residents could be accepted. Many high schools in Texas have stopped ranking students after the mandated top 10%.

- *Florida*-In 2000, the One Florida Initiative was passed and included the Talented 20. The top 20% of high school seniors can be admitted to one of the 11 state universities. They might not get into their first choice, however, once a college has accepted them, the Talented 20 legislation has met its obligation.
- *California*-High school students that are in the top 4% can be automatically admitted to one of the universities in the state's UC system.

(James, 2007; NASSP, 2010; Rozacky, 2010; Stahl, 2009; University of California. 2010)

Summary

There is no direct link established between the use of class rank and college admission. Most colleges and universities use a broad set of indicators to make admission decisions. When high schools no longer use class rank it reduces stress on students and lessens the risk of taking challenging and rigorous classes. The most recent data from the National Association for College Admission Counseling reports that more than half of districts no longer use class rank and fewer than 20% of colleges believe it is important in admission decisions.

Online Resources:

- CollegeBoard inspiring minds. (n.d.). Admissions decisions: What counts. Retrieved online <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/decisions>

This article provides a list of what college admissions officers are looking for when determining who will get accepted to their college or university.

- CollegeBoard inspiring minds. (n.d.). Class rank and college admissions. Retrieved online <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/guidance/applications/rank>

A highly informative piece that describes what information needs to be included in a high school student's college recommendation letter and reasons why class rank is and is not used by colleges.

- Collegedata. (n.d.). What matters most to colleges. Retrieved online https://www.collegedata.com/cs/content/content_getinarticle_tmpl.html?articleId=10045

This article outlines factors that are most and moderately important when applying to college.

- Expert Admissions. (2010, June 18). Recruitment, retention, and the disappearing class rank. Retrieved online http://expertadmissions.com/news_detail.php?NewsArticleID=5

The criteria for which some colleges look for admissions outside of class rank are described in this article.

- Ferkenhoff, E. (2006). How schools are pulling rank. Retrieved online <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1212168,00.html>

This article describes reasons why some school districts in Illinois dropped class rankings.

- Finder, A. (2005, March 5). Schools avoid class ranking, vexing colleges. Retrieved online <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/05/education/05rank.html>

Responses from several college admissions officers regarding the pros and cons of providing class rankings are provided in this piece.

- James, J. (2007, March 18). Jeb Bush on One Florida. Retrieved online http://www.sptimes.com/2007/03/18/Business/Jeb_Bush_on_One_Flori.shtml

A review of Florida's Talented 20 is presented in this article.

- Lang, D. (2007, Spring). Class rank, gpa, valedictorians: How high schools rank students. Retrieved online http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7452/is_200704/ai_n32227050/

This article presents and analyzes the procedures used in a sample of 232 of the largest school districts in the United States. It also discusses the flaws inherent in many of these systems.

- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2010, March). Class rank, GPA, and grading. Retrieved online <http://www.principals.org/Content.aspx?topic=61042>

This article describes NASSP's stance on class rank, GPAs and grading. It contains a large reference section.

- Ramirez, E. (2008, October 3). More high schools consider eliminating class ranking. Retrieved online <http://www.usnews.com/blogs/on-education/2008/10/03/more-high-schools-consider-eliminating-class-rankings.html>

This is a brief article that describes the results of eliminating class ranking from a high school in Wisconsin. Several blogs follow it.

- Rozacky, A. T. (2010, May 20). Top percentage, guaranteed acceptance; Does class rank give an unfair advantage? Retrieved online

<http://www.cphswolfpack.org/lifestylesvoice/top-percentage-guaranteed-acceptance-it-r-does-class-rank-give-an-unfair-advantage/>

This article describes Texas House Bill 588 that requires publicly funded state colleges to accept the top 10% of graduating high school seniors. Some pros to this are also cited.

- Smith, A. (2008, June 4). Class rank demoted in college admissions process. Retrieved online <http://www.news-sentinel.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080604/NEWS/806040320/0/FrontPage>

Factors for college admission other than class rank are described in this piece.

- Stahl, L. (2009, August 12). Highland Park officials still working on proposal to limit student rankings. Retrieved online <http://www.allvoices.com/s/event-3896896/aHR0cDovL3d3dy5kYWxsYXNuZXdzLmNvbS9zaGFyZWVjb250ZW50L2R3cy9uZXdzL2xvY2FsbmV3cy9zdG9yaWVzLzA4MTIwOWRubWV0aHBpc2RyYW5raW5ncy40NDNIODFjLmh0bWw=>

This article is brief in its description of reasons to rank or not rank students in the top 25% of their class.

- University of California. (2010). Freshman admission. Retrieved online http://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/undergrad_adm/paths_to_adm/freshman.html

The qualifications for a freshman to the UC system of California are described, of which one includes being in the top 4% of one's class.

- University parent connection. (2009, February 18). Retrieved online <http://www.universityparent.com/2009/02/18/class-rank-unimportant>

A very brief article from the parent perspective to high school students telling them to control what they can and do their best.

- Weber, T. (2010, June 18). School district ponders whether to get rid of class rank. Retrieved online <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/06/18/classrank/>

A description of reasons why one school district in Minnesota is considering dropping class ranking is provided in this article.

- What is the Talented 20 program? (2008). Retrieved online <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/2234464/WHAT-IS-THE-TALENTED-20-PROGRAM>

A concise description of Florida's Talented 20 program where the top 20% of high school seniors are guaranteed admission to one of the state's 11 state universities.

- Wolf, K. (2009). What college admissions officers look for: Transcript, academic averages, class rank, types of courses taken. Retrieved online
<http://www.education.com/reference/article/roadmap-what-my-academic-average-class/>

This is a descriptive article written for high school students about what college admissions officers look for when accepting students.

- Ziatos, B. (2008, November 28). High school class rank loses luster. Retrieved online
http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/news/s_600502.html

A brief article on reasons why many high schools are dropping class rankings.

Example of School Policy

- Oak Park, Illinois. Graded point average calculations, class rank and more. Retrieved online
http://www.ophs.opusd.k12.ca.us/gpa_&_class_rank.htm

This policy includes a statement as to why this school does not use class rank.

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