Admissions Boards Face 'Grade Inflation'

By JUSTIN POPE
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Josh Zalasky should be the kind of college applicant with little to worry about.

The high school senior is taking three Advanced Placement courses. Outside the classroom, he's involved in mock trial, two Jewish youth groups and has a job with a restaurant chain. He's a National Merit semifinalist and scored in the top 3 percent of all students who take the ACT.

But in the increasingly frenzied world of college admissions, even Zalasky is nervous about his prospects. He doubts he'll get in to the University of Wisconsin, a top choice. The reason: his grades.

It's not that they're bad. It's that so many of his classmates' are so good. Zalasky's GPA is nearly an A minus, and yet he ranks only about in the middle of his senior class of 543 at Edina High School outside Minneapolis.

That means he will have to find other ways to stand out.

"It's extremely difficult," he said. "I spent all summer writing my essay. We even hired a private tutor to make sure that essay was the best it can be. But even with that, it's like I'm just kind of leveling the playing field." Last year, he even considered transferring out of his highly competitive public school, to some place where his grades would look better.

Some call the phenomenon that Zalasky's fighting "grade inflation" - implying the boost is undeserved. Others say students are truly earning their better marks. Regardless, it's a trend that's been building for years and may only be accelerating: Many students are getting very good grades. So many, in fact, it is getting harder and harder for colleges to use grades as a measuring stick for applicants.

Extra credit for AP courses, parental lobbying and genuine hard work by the most competitive students have combined to shatter any semblance of a Bell curve, one in which 'A's are reserved only for the very best. For example, of the 47,317 applications the University of California, Los Angeles, received for this fall's freshman class, nearly 21,000 had GPAs of 4.0 or above.

That's also making it harder for the most selective colleges - who often call grades the single most important factor in admissions - to join in a growing movement to lessen the influence of standardized tests.

"We're seeing 30, 40 valedictorians at a high school because they don't want to create these distinctions between students," said Jess Lord, dean of admission and financial aid at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. "If we don't have enough information, there's a chance we'll become more heavily reliant on test scores, and that's a real negative to me."

Standardized tests have endured a heap of bad publicity lately, with the SAT raising anger about its expanded length and recent scoring problems. A number of schools have stopped requiring tests scores, to much fanfare.

But lost in the developments is the fact that none of the most selective colleges have dropped the tests. In fact, a national survey shows overall reliance on test scores is higher in admissions than it was a decade ago.

"It's the only thing we have to evaluate students that will help us" tell how they compare to each other, said Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania.

Grade inflation is hard to measure, and experts caution numbers are often misleading because standards and scales vary so widely. Different practices of "weighting" GPAs for AP work also play havoc. Still, the trend seems to be showing itself in a variety of ways.

The average high school GPA increased from 2.68 to 2.94 between 1990 and 2000, according to a federal study. Almost 23 percent of college freshmen in 2005 reported their average grade in high school was an A or better, according to a national survey by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. In 1975, the percentage was about half that.

GPAs reported by students on surveys when they take the SAT and ACT exams have also risen - and faster than their scores on those tests. That suggests their classroom grades aren't rising just because students are getting smarter. Not surprisingly, the test-owners say grade inflation shows why testing should be kept: It gives all students an equal chance to shine.

The problems associated with grade inflation aren't limited to elite college applicants.

More than 70 percent of schools and districts analyzed by an education audit company called SchoolMatch had average GPAs significantly higher than they should have been based on their standardized test scores - including the school systems in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Denver, San Bernardino, Calif., and Columbus, Ohio. That raises concerns about students graduating from those schools unprepared for college.

"They get mixed in with students from more rigorous schools and they just get blown away," said SchoolMatch CEO William Bainbridge.

In Georgia, high school grades rose after the state began awarding HOPE scholarships to students with a 3.0 high school GPA. But the scholarship requires students to keep a 3.0 GPA in college, too, and more than half who received the HOPE in the fall of 1998 and entered the University of Georgia system lost eligibility before earning 30 credits. Next year, Georgia is taking a range of steps to tighten eligibility, including calculating GPA itself rather than relying on schools, and no longer giving extra GPA weight to vaguely labeled "honors" classes.

Among those who work with students gunning for the more selective colleges, opinions differ as to why there seem to be so many straight-A students.

"I think there are more pressures now than there used to be, because 20 or 30 years ago kids with a B plus average got into some of the best colleges in the country," said William Shain, dean of admissions and financial aid at Bowdoin College in Maine. "It didn't matter if you had a 3.9 instead of a 3.95. I don't know if it matters now either, but people are more likely to think it does."

Lord, the Haverford dean, sees grade inflation as the outcome of an irrational fear among students to show any slip up - in grades or discipline. In fact, colleges like his are often

more interested in students who have overcome failure and challenge than robots who have never been anything less than perfect.

"There's a protection and encouragement of self-esteem that I don't agree with, but I think it's a lot of what's going on here," he said. "And the college admissions process feeds into that."

Back in Minnesota, Edina may join a growing number of schools that no longer officially rank students - a move that could help students like Zelasky, who says he was told by Wisconsin his class rank makes him a longshot.

"They feel they're being left behind or not getting into the schools that they're applying to because of a particular class rank," says Edina counselor Bill Hicks. "And there is some validity with respect to some certain schools that use certain formulas."

But the colleges most popular with Edina students already know how strong the school is: Students' median verbal and math SAT scores are 1170 out of 1600.

Hicks isn't willing to blame the concentration of grades at the top on spineless teachers, or on grade-grubbing by parents and students. Expectations are high, and grades are based on student mastery of the material, not a curve. Wherever teachers place the bar for an A, the students clear it.

"Everyone here is, like, 'if I can get an 98 why would I get a 93?'" said Lavanya Srinivasan, who was ranked third in her Edina class last year. Far from being pushovers, she says, Edina teachers are tougher than those in a course she took at Harvard last summer.

Zalasky agrees the students work hard for their high grades.

"The mentality of this school is, if you're not getting straight A's you're not doing well," he said. "There's just so much pressure on us day in and day out to get straight A's that everybody does."

Hicks compares the atmosphere at Edina to the World Series expectations that always surround the superstar lineup of the New York Yankees.

"If they don't win it," he said, "then it's failure."