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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

UMaine Study Examines Dilemma of Weighted Grades

ORONO, Maine -- The value assigned to an “A” varies in high schools throughout Maine and nationally, and as college admissions and scholarships based on class rank raise the stakes, administrators are scrambling to devise rigorous, equitable grading systems.

About half the nation's school systems assign weighted grades, allowing more points for high grades in Advanced Placement or other accelerated courses than for the same grades in less demanding classes, according to a new study from the University of Maine. But with no state or national standards to guide high schools that weight grades or to clarify their meaning to college admissions officers, school systems are facing potential legal consequences as well as increasing pressure from parents and students.

“It's very much a local issue. Decisions about grade systems in different schools are arrived at in different ways, and the best attempts to find solutions often create more problems,” says Walter McIntire, director of the Center for Research and Evaluation at UMaine's College of Education and Human Development.

Appropriately titled “Weighted Grades: A Conundrum for Secondary Schools,” the study examines national research on the issue and presents some of the dilemmas high schools face in designing grade systems that encourage and fairly reward students for pursuing challenging work and that adequately reflect the quality of their work.

Although many college admissions directors state that students with weighted grades on their transcripts do not have an advantage, admission results refute this claim, according to the study. And, because the college admissions process tends to value grade point average, rank in class and program of study more highly than SAT scores and extracurricular activities, weighted grades ultimately influence students' academic futures and scholarship chances.

It's important for school policymakers to decide what they want to accomplish with a weighted system before they start recalculating grades, McIntire advises. “Do they want to motivate all kids to challenge themselves,” he asks. “Is the goal to entice the brighter students to take more honors courses? Or do they want to create a school environment where every student, regardless of ability, has some chance of being valedictorian or salutatorian?”

In the controversial debate over weighted grades, every strategy has pros and cons and ramifications, he cautions.

Copies of the report on weighted grades are available, free of charge, by calling (207) 581-2761; e-mail: kay.hyatt@umit.maine.edu

Released: June 19, 2000

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