

BEST PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING A SCHOOL PROFILE

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NACAC

National Association for
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Introduction

There are 23,814 public secondary schools,¹ as well as 34,580 private elementary and secondary schools,² in the United States, and thousands more around the world. Consider, then, the difficulty faced by postsecondary admission offices at the 3,315 non-profit institutions in the US³ in attempting to assess the variables associated with a student's education at a given high school while accounting for contextual differences between schools, including (but not limited to) student demographics, curriculum, grade distribution, grading systems, transcript format, and school resources. As NACAC research has indicated for more than a decade, postsecondary institutions factor variations among secondary schools into their consideration of student academic records as part of the application review process. As such, providing access to descriptive information about the school, often via the **school profile**, is a critical, if underutilized, step for secondary schools to take.

NACAC first made recommendations on best practices for school profiles in its 1977 "Guidelines for Designing a School Profile" publication, prepared jointly with the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASPP). The publication noted, "One common misconception of secondary [school] counselors is the assumption that their school, its standards and curricula, is well-known by colleges." As the numbers above suggest, this assumption turns out to be nearly mathematically impossible.

The publication continued to note that admission officers "say that some profiles are not very informative, are more cumbersome to decipher than they need to be, or are valueless as interpretive documents." Some specific concerns outlined in the "Guidelines" document included:

- With every school planning its own profile content and layout without accepted guidelines, the entire document has to be searched to see if it does contain the needed information.
- Frequently, what is offered as a school profile reads more like a promotional piece from the chamber of commerce of real estate board into which some school information has been added.
- Some schools believe that the more information they provide, the more helpful and persuasive the profile will be, when relatively brief, compact statements and summaries are much preferred.

College admission officers agreed, though, that school profiles are useful and informative tools that can help educational professionals connect prospective students with best fit institutions. Often, best practices need to be considered in the formation and drafting of a school profile. This updated guide, based on the original "Guidelines," ensuing updates, and the 2017–18 revision (see "Methods"), serves as a compilation of feedback, guidelines, and best practices from hundreds of experienced counseling and educational professionals. International and non-traditional perspectives were also taken into account in the revision of this guide.

¹ SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Statistics of State School Systems, 1967-68 and 1975-76; Statistics of Public Elementary and Secondary Day Schools, 1970-71, 1972-73, 1974-75, and 1976-77 through 1980-81; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey," 1982-83 through 2016-17.* (This table was prepared November 2018.)

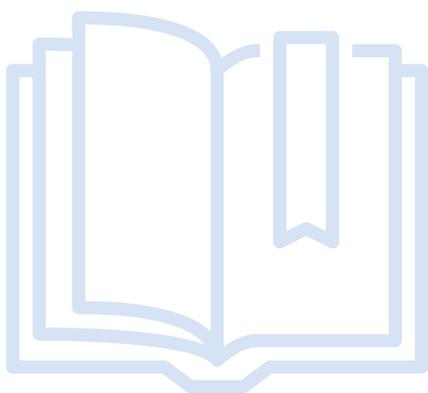
² SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Private School Universe Survey (PSS), 2005-06 through 2015-16.* (This table was prepared June 2017.) Note: This count includes all private schools. The Department of Education does not provide a current count differentiated by grade level.

³ SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Education Directory, Colleges and Universities, 1949-50 through 1965-66; Higher Education General Information Survey (HEGIS), "Institutional Characteristics of Colleges and Universities" surveys, 1966-67 through 1985-86; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Institutional Characteristics Survey" (IPEDS-IC:86-99); and IPEDS Fall 2000 through Fall 2017, Institutional Characteristics component.* (This table was prepared April 2019.)

1. Have a School Profile, and Make Sure People Can Find It

NACAC research shows that more than 75 percent of schools maintain a school profile. Those least likely to maintain a school profile are the smallest schools, and schools with large percentages of low-income students. A comprehensive school profile ensures that all stakeholders, including colleges, have access to important information that supports secondary school students in the college admission process.

Post the school profile prominently on the school's website and keep it regularly updated. Make sure the web link works and is easily accessible from the main school page.



Percentage with a School Profile Available on the School or District Website, by Selected School Characteristics

All Survey Respondents	75.5%
by School Type	
Public	73.0
Private	
<i>Private, non-parochial</i>	82.6
<i>Private, parochial</i>	78.4
by School Enrollment	
Fewer than 500 students	68.2
500 to 999	75.6
1,000 to 1,499	82.0
1,500 to 1,999	90.0
2,000 or more students	91.0
by Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL)	
0 to 25% of students eligible	84.4
26 to 50%	73.3
51 to 75%	69.5
76 to 100%	61.8

Source: NACAC 2017-18 Counseling Trends Survey.

2. “Fundamental” Elements of the School Profile

The school profile can help a college admission officer, among other stakeholders, “decode” information about your school quickly and easily. One overarching recommendation for effective use of the school profile is that the data reported on school profiles and other documents should be **accurate and current**, and should be transparent about when the data were gathered and the groups that are included or excluded from the data.

Don’t take it for granted that anyone will know basic information about your school. There are new stakeholders entering your sphere of interest each year—rookie college admission officers, parents, administrators, and others—who will need basic information about your school.

A. Provide School and Community Facts

Admission decisions require sufficient contextual information to properly assess a student’s academic performance within his or her school, and more generally how different schools’ curricula are defined. Providing the following information can assist colleges in their efforts to contextualize academic records as they review applications.

- Name, address, web address, and contact information;
- School control and type (public, private, boarding, day, etc.)
- Grade cohorts included in school population
- Enrollment, including 12th grade class size
- Faculty and counselor-to-student ratios
- CEEB and ACT code numbers
- Accreditation or licensing
- A basic overview of the school’s mission and/or structure
- Community overview—population, demographics, locale
- Student demographics and characteristics

B. List School Staff and Contact Information

Surprisingly, many school profiles make it difficult for college admission officers to reach school staff by neglecting to list up-to-date staff and contact information. School profiles should include:

- School leadership information
- List of counselors or a head counselor, as well as information about counselor caseload assignments
- Contact information for counseling staff

C. Describe Grading System and Related Procedures

There are nearly as many grading systems as there are secondary schools, so including information about the school’s grade structures, grade-point average system, or other details unique to the school is a critically important step. NACAC research has found that nearly half of four-year colleges, and particularly highly-selective colleges, recalibrate GPAs across schools to ensure more comparability among applicants. Absent detailed information about a school’s grading system, colleges may be prone to draw conclusions on their own. Information that colleges consider important includes:

- Details about the grading scale used by faculty;
- Method of computing GPAs and class rank (if computed);
- Grade distribution;
- Policy on reporting class rank to colleges;
- Policies on weighting courses and on repeating courses;
- Graduation requirements; and
- School’s policy on reporting disciplinary infractions to colleges and universities.

D. Provide Standardized Test Score Information

While standardized test scores should be considered in their proper (limited) context for college admission, offering information about the *distribution* of scores at your school can help college admission officers contextualize their consideration of your students' scores.

- Provide the middle 50 percent range of ACT/SAT scores for students at your school.
- Offer an overview of specialized test scores (such as Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate, as well as TOEFL or IELTS for international students) distribution at your school.
- Include other test score summaries that might be relevant (such as state-required or national tests, in the case of non-US schools) to stakeholders.

Note that international students can face additional hardship when taking standardized tests. More information in the profile about the disadvantages that international school students face in the standardized testing process could help admission officers when reviewing profiles/applications.

E. Offer an Overview of Student Educational Outcomes

Whether your school sends most of its students on to postsecondary education or not, providing some information about destinations of the students who attend postsecondary education, as well as any information about persistence through higher education, is helpful for admission offices. Note that this is not a contest about how many “brand name” colleges your school’s students can get into—colleges simply appreciate context when reviewing applications.

- A list of colleges that students from your school have either been accepted to or attended.
- Outcomes of previous graduates, such as postsecondary persistence/completion rates, if available.
- Information about all postsecondary destinations of former students, such as entrance into the military or the workforce.

F. Provide a Curriculum Description, Including Special Features

Make sure that stakeholders know what is required of students in order to graduate from your school. This is an area in which schools with non-traditional models can help college admission officers and others understand what makes your school different, and how to properly view/interpret grades and other information students will present from your school. Increasingly, schools are requiring students to complete performance-based assessments as end-of-course or graduation requirements. Performance-based assessments require students to produce an artifact—a report, experiment, performance, presentation, video, or other product—and can provide robust information about students' achievements and potential for postsecondary success. Components of, as well as requirements for, these assessments should be clearly described so that admissions officers can understand the full depth of a student's educational experience.

- Summary of curricular offerings, including advanced curriculum, programs, or defining characteristics
- Basic course information required for graduation (and at what level, e.g. honors, advanced)
- Schools that have non-traditional programs (ex: no grading scales, lack of AP classes) should focus on explaining why and what alternatives do they use.
- Summary of curricular offerings, including advanced curriculum, programs, or defining characteristics, and a detailed explanation of curricular offerings that vary from traditional models, including who has access to the non-traditional models, honors courses, and other special programs.

G. Summarize Other Unique Information About the School, Program, or Curriculum

If needed, provide additional information that might fall outside of curricular offerings, or that might further distinguish a school's curriculum.

- Description of individual campuses from a network of schools;
- Information about national networks or recognitions associated with school curriculum;
- Special interpretations, abbreviations, or other definitions specific to the school.

3. Additional Elements That Can Enhance Your School Profile

Less is more

- Profiles on average roughly appear to be four pages. The respondents seem to favor two to three pages maximum.
- Sections are easier to process rather than paragraphs.
- Information is presented in a logical progression, such as the structure of the preceding recommendations for content.
- Less text and more graphics, including charts and graphs for grade distribution and test scores

Visual clarity

- Fonts and colors that are consistent and not excessive;
- Sections that are easy to find and clearly labeled;
- Bullet points rather than long sentences;
- Name of school on every page;
- Unique graphics: some of the international schools incorporated small pictures of their location.
- Unique features or unusual graduation requirements could be noted
- Postsecondary institutions where former students **applied** and **enrolled** differentiated by bold/italics

Other potentially important elements

- Some schools, both domestic (US) and international, offer different curricula within a school. If differing curricula are offered within the same school, provide a side-by-side listing.
- Include words in the filename online so that the profile is easily found by searching either the school's website or using internet search engines



4: Pitfalls to Avoid

According to admission officers, the following school profile pitfalls can be particularly frustrating, particularly in an environment as bereft of time as a college application review process.

- Lack of sections, too many paragraphs, difficult to find specific information.
- Grading system not clearly explained or easy to find
- Outdated trend information: Recent cohort data is preferred over long run historical trends
- Unnecessary content: some profiles list their accomplishments and extracurricular activity at length. Should be highlights instead.
- Every college acceptance for the past five years. Sometimes less is more.
- Names of staff but no contact details
- Some schools make it difficult to find the profile on their webpage or have the profile split into multiple parts
- Broken web links to or in the profile
- In general, any information that is out-of-date can cause frustration for admission offices and other stakeholders. Examples that NACAC members pointed out include:
 - Dated information about population, demographics, or other community features
 - Out-of-date disciplinary policy



A Statement About Methods

These recommendations were based on NACAC's original "Guidelines for Designing a School Profile" publication, a joint project of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Updates to the recommendations followed a request by the NACAC Assembly, during the 2017 NACAC National Conference, that the association provide updated recommendations for school profiles. In response to the Assembly's motion, NACAC conducted the following activities:

1. Collected data on secondary school use and display of school profiles as part of the 2018 Counseling Trends Survey;
2. Collected more than **1,200 samples** of school profiles from NACAC member secondary schools;
3. In conjunction with the NACAC Professional Development Committee, conducted a review of a sample of 300 school profiles in which 30 NACAC members, from the national and affiliate professional development committees, the national Global Engagement Committee, the Assembly motion sponsor, and select staff responded to a series of questions about various aspects of the profiles based on the original "Guidelines" document; and
4. Summarized reviewers' comments and synthesized consensus recommendations into a set of revised guidelines, drafted by staff and reviewed by member-leaders and external stakeholders (to be named at formal publication).

