High School Students' Perceptions of High School GPA

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High school GPA is a critical metric of educational success, influencing the opportunity to take advanced courses in high school, the likelihood of timely graduation, and the possibility of future success (Radunzel & Noble, 2012; Sanchez, 2013; Sawyer, 2013; Westrick et al., 2015). The use of high school GPA in determining college admissions, scholarship awards, and even employment opportunities highlights its significance as a metric of students' knowledge and content mastery at the conclusion of high school. Nevertheless, the validity of high school GPA has been under scrutiny due to the escalating phenomenon of grade inflation—an increase in grades that may not reflect an increase in content mastery (Sanchez & Moore, 2022; Sanchez, 2023). Given evidence of the uneven impact of grade inflation on students from different socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds, grade inflation impacts not only the validity of high school GPA but also its fairness.

Furthermore, high school GPA is a multidimensional metric affected by factors such as course rigor; teacher grading standards; extracurricular activities; and student motivation, determination, and perseverance, as just some examples (Dickinson & Adelson, 2016; Mattern et al., 2016). The complexity in interpreting high school GPA underscores the limitations of relying solely on high school GPA to assess a student's readiness for future academic and professional endeavors. Through this study, we seek to uncover a more nuanced perspective on how high school GPA, as a pivotal yet complex metric, is shaped by students' educational experiences and perceptions.

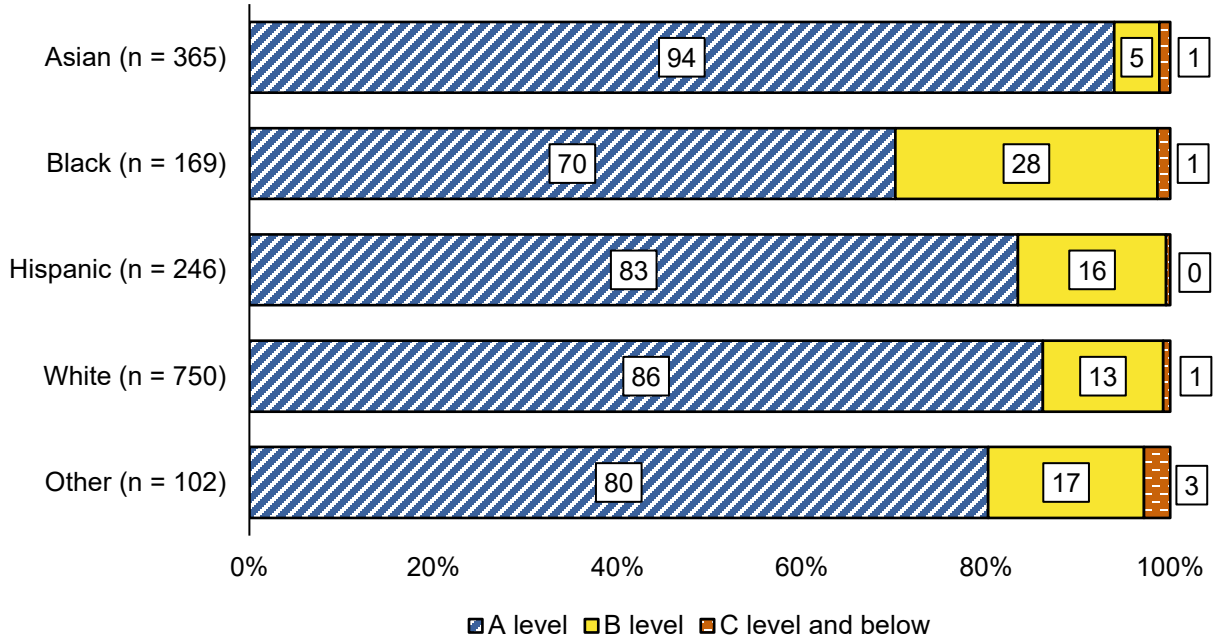
To understand students' perspectives on high school GPA, in September 2023, we reached out to a random sample of high school students via an online survey (see the technical appendix for more details about the student sample). The survey questions centered on students' perceptions of how well high school GPA represents content mastery, whether it is fair to use high school GPA as a benchmark in college admissions, and whether it is fair that taking advanced courses can result in a higher GPA. We endeavored to explore the myriad of nonacademic influences on high school students' GPAs. We also examined which metrics students used to assess their college readiness. Using a mixed-methods approach that employed both quantitative analysis and qualitative insights, we tried to capture a broader perspective on high school GPA. What follows are key findings from our study. Where applicable, we note significant differences by student subgroups (e.g., race/ethnicity, family income, and gender).

Most Students Report Having an A-Level High School GPA

In our study sample, the vast majority of students (86.5%) reported having an A-level high school GPA (3.5 or higher). This was true across all racial/ethnic categories examined (Figure

1). Of note is that Asian students had the highest percentage reporting an A-level GPA (94%). Hispanic and White students had similar percentages reporting an A-level GPA (83% and 86%, respectively). Although the percentage was lower for Black students, seven out of 10 Black students (70%) still reported having an A-level GPA. Considerably fewer students from each racial/ethnic group reported a B-level GPA (2.5–3.4), and very few students reported a C-level GPA (1.5–2.4). This is consistent with the research on grade inflation (Sanchez & Moore, 2022) demonstrating that more and more students are reporting, and attaining, A-level high school GPAs.

Figure 1. Percentage of Students Reporting A-, B-, and C-Level and Below High School GPAs, by Race/Ethnicity



Note. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Students Believe That High School GPA Reflects Much More Than Academic Achievement

As previously discussed, high school GPA is an inherently multidimensional metric of achievement reflecting more than educational achievement. In our sample, eight out of 10 students (81%) agreed that their high school GPA was influenced by nonacademic factors. Some of the factors students identified were teamwork or group projects, timely assignment completion, assertiveness or self-advocacy, and school or teacher grading policies. The impact, or weighting, of these factors on high school GPA likely varies from teacher to teacher. This inherent variability in the assignment of grades makes it difficult to ascertain a student's true content mastery and impossible to assess these other nonacademic factors.

In response to an open-ended question, students expressed their thoughts on the influence of these factors on their high school GPA.[1] Some students perceived an inherent unfairness in being assigned a grade based on group projects where they felt students had not equally contributed to the final product. In this case, students felt that their GPA was hurt by the performance of the other students in their groups. One student shared this sentiment:

> *"Teamwork almost always negatively influences my GPA. Grading one student based on the effort of others is ridiculous."*

Timely assignment completion also affected high school GPA, as indicated, for example, by this student:

> *"Getting work submitted on time has positively affected my GPA."*

While it is unclear whether on-time assignment completion and submission had direct positive impacts on grades, we can glean several positive insights about students from their timely assignment completion. For example, students who demonstrate planning, goal setting, and effort regulation complete assignments on time (Cooper et al., 2005; Bembenutty, 2011). Their on-time assignment completion may increase their sense of self-efficacy in academic tasks, and by turning in work on time, they also demonstrate responsibility and work ethic, which are traits that are valued by teachers.

Additionally, student self-advocacy, including assertiveness, is an important trait particularly when students feel that errors were made in grading. Assertiveness can help students advocate for grades that better reflect their content knowledge or true performance, and students who underperform or perform poorly but can advocate for themselves may have additional opportunities to raise their high school GPAs, as noted by this student:

> *"Assertiveness was another negative influence as I lacked the assertiveness to take the most advantage of my schools testing policies and my GPA was hurt because I was too afraid to talk to teachers when they made errors in grading."*

Finally, grading policies, particularly those that change from year to year, can strongly affect students' high school GPAs, especially if either the student or the teacher does not understand the policy changes. In these situations, a student's high school GPA is less reflective of the student's core content knowledge and more reflective of how the teacher understands and implements the policies. One student shared the following:

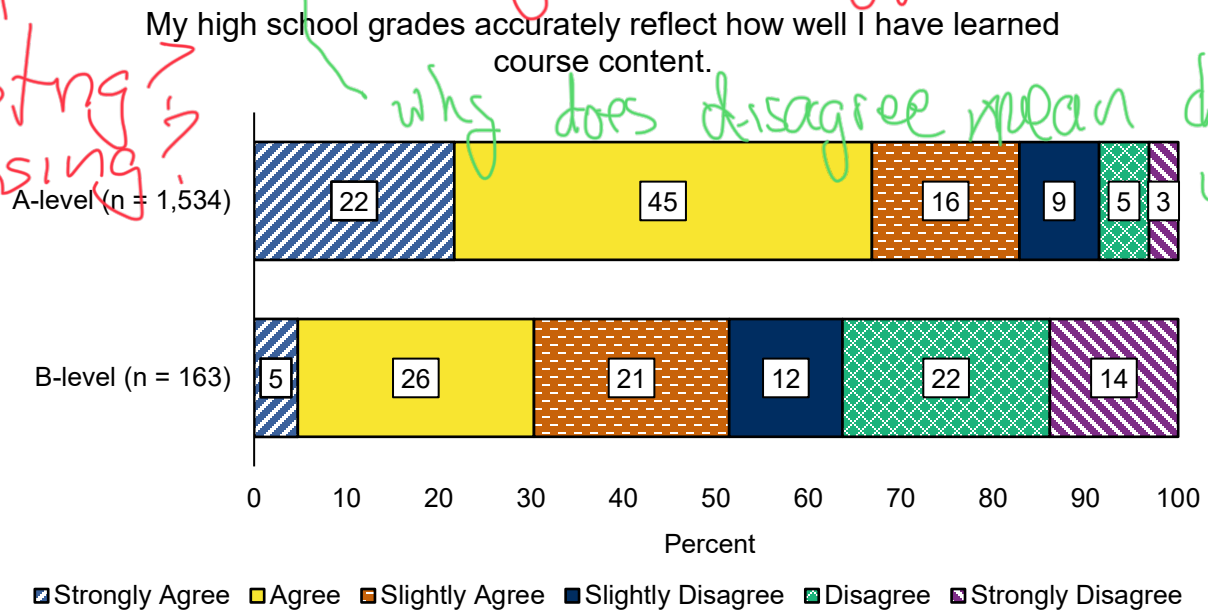
> *"The grading policies of my school have changed dramatically each year, and each teacher understands those policies differently. Most of my lowest grades have been because of insufficient teacher grading policies or having a first year teacher in a college level course."*

Overall, all these factors could affect students' high school GPAs positively or negatively, making it hard to tell a student's true content mastery using high school GPA.

Students With A- and B-Level High School GPAs Differ in Beliefs About How Well High School GPA Represents Their Content Mastery

Students with self-reported A-level and B-level high school GPAs had different opinions on whether their high school GPA accurately reflected how well they learned course content, with A-level students significantly more likely to agree that their GPA was an accurate reflection.[2] While 83% of A-level students at least slightly agreed that their high school grades accurately reflected how well they learned course content, only 52% of B-level students did so (Figure 2). This means that 48% of B-level students disagreed that their GPA was an accurate reflection of content mastery. Interestingly, while 22% of A-level students strongly agreed that their grades reflected their content mastery, only 5% of B-level students expressed similarly strong agreement. These results indicate that students with different GPA levels have different interpretations of their high school GPAs. If students do not clearly understand how high school GPA is calculated and what factors it incorporates, it is possible they will misunderstand their own academic achievement and preparedness.

Figure 2. Percentage of Students Who Felt Their High School GPA Accurately Reflected Content Mastery

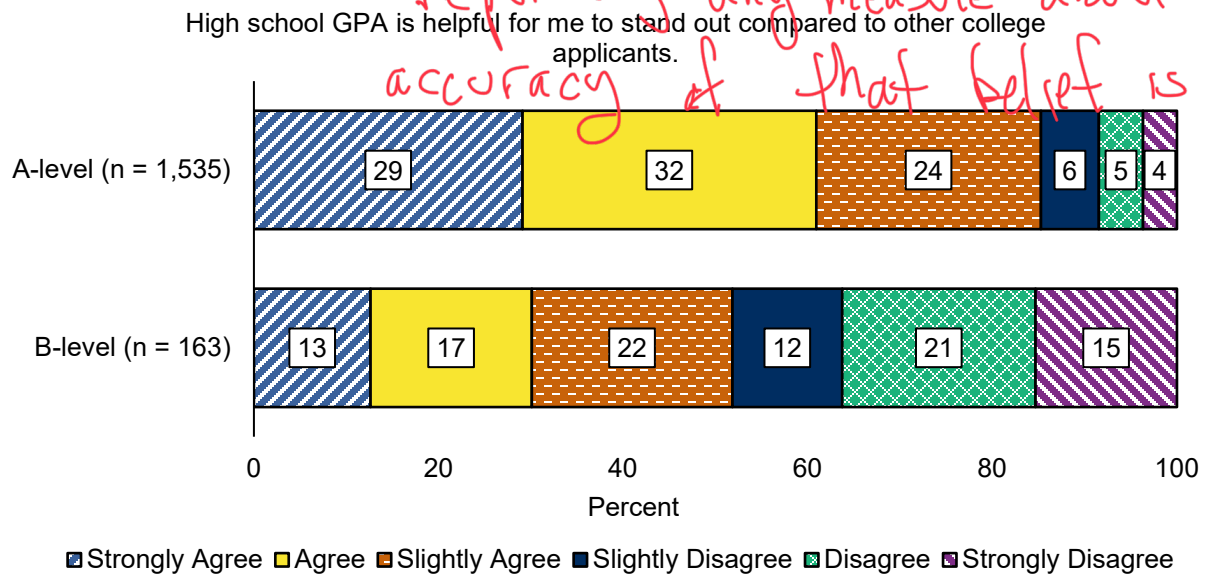


Note. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

We also saw a difference in how students believed high school GPA helped them stand out compared to other college applicants (Figure 3). While 85% of A-level students believed that high school GPA helped them stand out, only about half of B-level students (52%) believed so.[3] Moreover, when we looked specifically at which students strongly agreed that their high school

GPA helped them stand out, we found that 29% of A-level students believed so, while only 13% of B-level students did.

Figure 3. Percentage of Students Who Felt Their High School GPA Helped Them Stand Out Compared to Other College Applicants

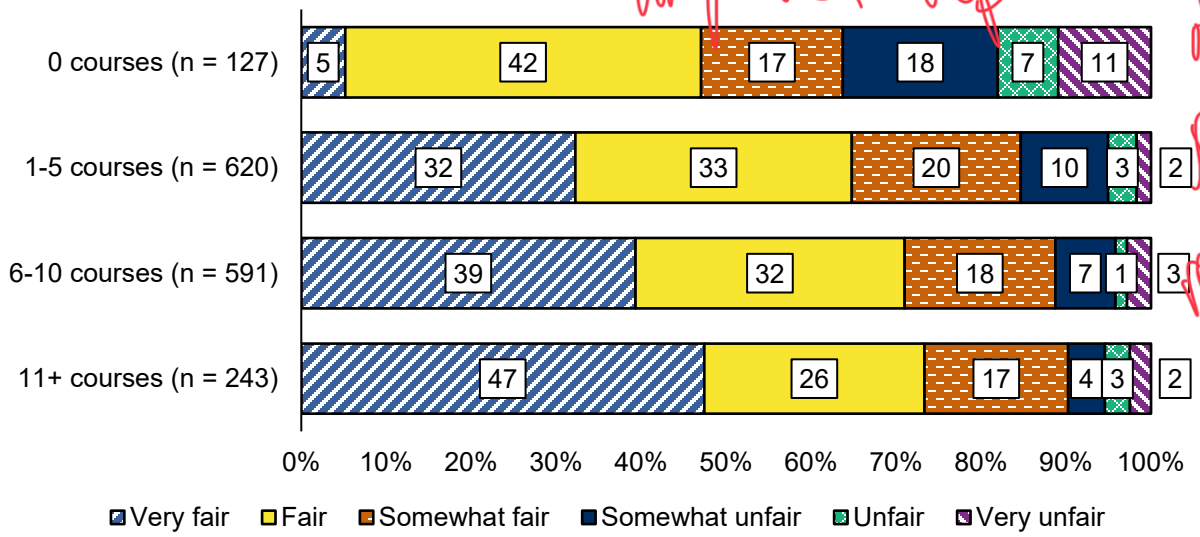


Note. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Students Who Did Not Take Advanced Courses Feel It Is Unfair to Receive an Increase in High School GPA for Taking Advanced Courses

At some high schools, when students take advanced courses (e.g., AP, IB, dual/concurrent enrollment, dual credit, honors courses), they receive an increase in their GPA for taking the course regardless of their performance, which then results in a higher weighted GPA that takes course difficulty into account. In the survey, we asked students whether they thought this was a fair or unfair practice. Thirty-six percent of students who did not take any advanced courses[4] felt it was at least somewhat unfair (Figure 4). This percentage was significantly higher than that of students who took at least one advanced course.[5] Overall, the more advanced courses a student took, the more likely the student was to report that this practice was fair. It makes sense that a student who has taken more advanced courses would have a more favorable view of the GPA increase. Notably, the percentage of students who thought the practice was very fair increased from 32% for students who took one to five courses, to 39% for students who took six to 10 courses, and finally to 47% for students who took 11 or more courses. These results indicate that students have different opinions on the practice of schools granting students a GPA increase for taking advanced courses regardless of their performance; such a practice could make it hard to figure out a student's true content mastery using GPA.

Figure 4. Percentage of Students Who Felt It Was Fair to Receive an Increase in High School GPA, by Number of Advanced Courses Taken



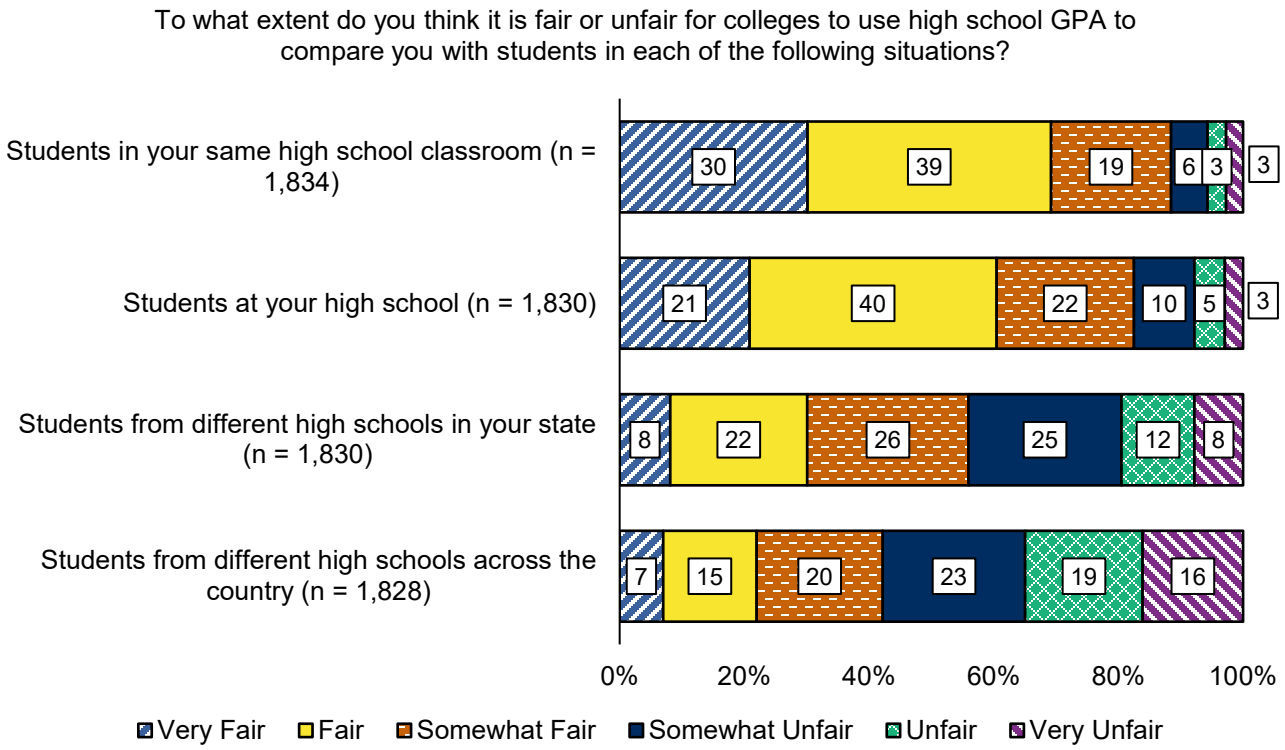
Note. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

Many Students Feel It Is Unfair to Compare High School GPAs Unless It Is With Those of Other Students in the Same Class or School

Given the multidimensional nature of high school GPA along with the variability in grading standards from teacher to teacher and across classrooms, schools, and districts, we sought to understand how students viewed the fairness of using high school GPA as a comparison metric. We found that students felt that this practice was most fair when the GPA metric was applied to students within the same high school classroom. They also felt that the metric became less and less fair as the groups of students they were compared to grew more different, starting with students in other classrooms, then those in other high schools within their state, and finally those in other states (Figure 5). For example, while 88% of students felt it was fair (somewhat to very fair) to use high school GPA to compare students within the same classroom, and 83% felt it was fair to use GPA to compare students at the same high school, only 56% felt it was fair to compare students from different high schools in the same state, and only 42% felt it was fair to compare students from different states. There are important implications to this finding for the college admissions process. Postsecondary institutions typically need to compare many students from different high schools within and across states. Yet 45% of students felt it was unfair to use high school GPA to compare students from different high schools in the same state. Moreover, 58% of students felt it was unfair to use high school GPA to compare students from different states. Since using high school GPA is a common practice in the college admissions process, these perceptions of unfairness by students cannot be understated, though

it is important to note that colleges do not know whether students are in the same classroom and therefore cannot make what students in this survey considered the fairest comparison.

Figure 5. Students' Perception of the Fairness of Using High School GPA to Compare Students

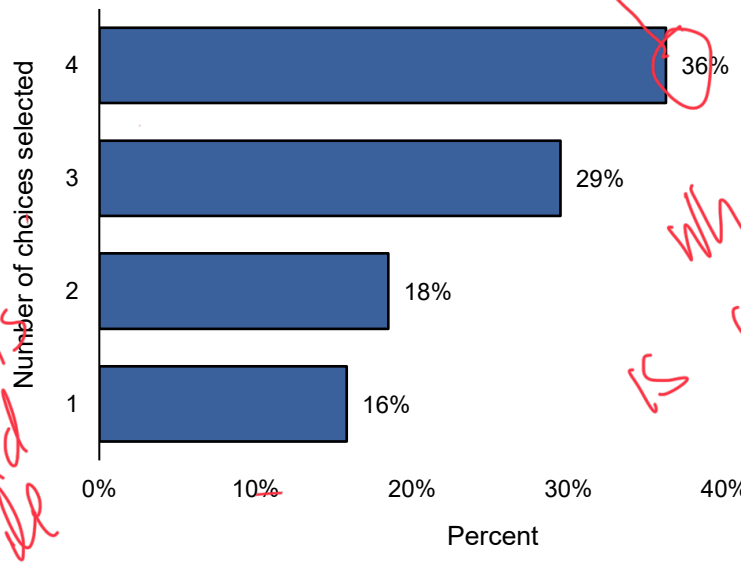


Note. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding. The *n* counts are unweighted sample sizes, while the percentages were calculated after weighting.

A Holistic Approach to Academic Readiness: Most Students Use Multiple Indicators

In the survey, we also asked students to indicate what high school academic information they would use to evaluate their chances of success in first-year college courses. The options we provided included high school GPA, standardized test scores (e.g., ACT®, SAT), difficulty level of high school courses, grades in college-credit-bearing courses, and an open-ended Other category.[6] The results showed that while high school GPA was most common, the vast majority of students used more than one indicator to evaluate academic readiness (Figure 6). In fact, 83% of respondents used two or more metrics when evaluating academic readiness, and 36% used all four. Among combinations of two metrics, high school GPA and standardized test scores was the most common (35%), followed by difficulty level of high school courses and grades in college-credit-bearing courses (20%) and finally by high school GPA and difficulty level of high school courses (19%). These results indicate that students tend to use a holistic approach to evaluate their academic readiness.

Figure 6. Number of Metrics Students Used to Evaluate Their Academic Readiness (n = 1,841)



Implications

The present study adds context about how students evaluate their academic readiness. Specifically, from the responses of the sampled high school students, we found that most students self-reported an A-level GPA, consistent with what literature has shown about grade inflation (Sanchez & Moore, 2022; Sanchez, 2023). We also learned that students felt that grades assigned in schools reflected more than simply their content mastery, and we discovered that students with different high school GPA levels had differing opinions on how well their high school GPA reflected their content mastery and how well it could help them stand out in college applications. Furthermore, the surveyed students questioned the fairness of using high school GPA to compare students in different high schools in their states and across the country, which is a common practice in the college admissions process. When evaluating their own academic readiness, a majority of students adopted a holistic approach, using different types of academic information rather than just high school GPA.

The findings of this study have important implications for the college admissions process and educational policy. When using high school GPA as a metric to evaluate students, colleges should consider the variability of grading standards and the nonacademic factors influencing GPA. Also, most students perceived that it was most fair to use high school GPAs only when comparing students in the same classroom or school. This perception of fairness dramatically decreased when we extended the comparison to students from different schools and states. This finding suggests that students have concerns about the equity and validity of colleges using high school GPAs to compare applicants from diverse educational contexts. If they have not done so already, colleges should adopt holistic evaluation criteria, encouraging students to demonstrate comprehensive academic achievement using various pieces of academic information.

The findings of this study also have important implications regarding how students interpret their GPAs and what evidence they could use to evaluate their academic readiness for college. High schools should help students learn about different metrics they can use to evaluate their academic readiness. Helping students understand the meaning and limitation of each metric would be beneficial. A better understanding of students' perceptions of GPA can also help motivate high schools and parents to advocate for more holistic and equitable college admissions processes. This study also emphasizes how important it is that students focus on multiple aspects of their college admissions application, such as standardized test scores, extracurricular activities, and personal essays, which can help provide a well-rounded representation of their capabilities and achievements. Students with different academic achievement levels may be better able to prepare academically for college if they are encouraged to use various metrics to understand and demonstrate their academic readiness.

At ACT, we advocate for the use of multiple measures in order to gain a holistic picture of students' academic readiness for college. The findings of this study support this approach, indicating that students themselves make use of multiple measures to evaluate their academic readiness. Colleges should do the same and not rely too heavily on GPA alone, which shows little variability across students and generally reflects factors other than academic achievement, making it an insufficient metric when it comes to college admissions.

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Notes

[1] In response to an open-ended question, students shared what nonacademic factor(s) had positively or negatively influenced their GPA during their high school years. Thematic qualitative analysis procedures were conducted to analyze students' responses to the open-ended question. All responses were read, segmented by relevance (some comments were excluded because of irrelevance), and coded by a qualitative research expert to construct categories. All student quotes in this paper are reproduced as written and without editing.

[2] A non-parametric test (chi-square test of independence) was conducted to explore whether agreement with the statement "My high school grades accurately reflect how well I have learned course content" was associated with students' self-reported high school GPA. Students with self-reported A-level GPAs and students with B-level GPAs were compared. The three positive options (strongly agree, agree, and slightly agree) were combined into an "agree" group, and the three negative options (strongly disagree, disagree, and slightly disagree) were combined into a "disagree" group. The options were combined because the purpose of this comparison was to examine the differences in positive versus negative agreement rather than the degree of agreement, as well as to ensure reasonable numbers in each cell. The percentage differences between students with A- and B-level GPAs were significant at an alpha level of .05.

[3] A non-parametric test (chi-square test of independence) was conducted to explore whether agreement with the statement "High school GPA is helpful for me to stand out compared to other college applicants" was associated with students' self-reported high school GPAs. Students with self-reported A-level GPAs and students with B-level GPAs were compared. The three positive options (strongly agree, agree, and slightly agree) were combined into an "agree" group, and the three negative options (strongly disagree, disagree, and slightly disagree) were combined into a "disagree" group. The options were combined because the purpose of this comparison was to examine the differences in positive versus negative agreement rather than the degree of agreement, as well as to ensure reasonable numbers in each cell. The percentage differences between students with A- and B-level GPAs were significant at an alpha level of .05.

[4] Students were asked how many courses they had taken during high school that awarded college credit (e.g., AP, IB, dual/concurrent enrollment, dual credit). To complete the descriptive analysis, we first excluded students who entered a number bigger than 50 and then excluded students whose answers were two standard deviations (*SD* = 5.2) above the mean (6.8). Then, based on their responses, students were assigned to four groups: 0 courses, 1–5 courses, 6–10 courses, and 11+ courses.

[5] A non-parametric test (chi-square test of independence) was conducted to explore whether students' opinions on the fairness of receiving an increase in GPA for taking advanced courses in high school was associated with the number of advanced courses taken. There were four groups for the number of advanced courses taken: 0 courses, 1–5 courses, 6–10 courses, and

11 or more courses. The three positive options (very fair, fair, and somewhat fair) were combined into a “fair” group, and the three negative options (very unfair, unfair, and somewhat unfair) were combined into an “unfair” group. The overall chi-square test showed a significant result at an alpha level of .05. The follow-up tests showed that the percentage differences between 0 courses and each of the rest of the course groups were significant at an adjusted alpha level of .0083.

[6] Only 73 students out of the 1,842 students responded to the open-ended option. The most common category mentioned was extracurricular activities. The open-ended option was not included in the descriptive analysis.

Technical Appendix

Sample

This study was part of a larger survey research project. The survey focused on students' self-reported academic preparedness, methods of evaluating their academic preparedness, and perspectives on high school grades and college academic preparedness. This report summarized the findings about students' perspectives on high school grades, including how well high school GPA represents students' content mastery, whether it is fair to receive an increase in GPA for taking college-credit-bearing courses, and whether it is fair to compare students in different situations.

The target population was high school students who registered for the September 2023 ACT national test who reported that they resided in the U.S. The sampled population (N = 79,221) excluded students who opted out of ACT communications. It also excluded students who were included in recent student survey samples. A stratified random sample of 51,500 high school students nationwide was used for this study. These students were presumed to be college-bound, although it is possible that some of them did not attend college. The sample was stratified on a combination of racial/ethnic group and GPA categories to ensure there were enough respondents for analyses by race/ethnicity and GPA. Students reported their GPA during test registration but were again asked for their GPA in the survey, both to verify their registration GPA and to fill in missing data.

Students were invited via email to participate in the online survey after ACT test scores were released to students. The survey opened on September 22, 2023, and closed on November 14, 2023. Students who answered at least half of the closed-ended survey items were included in the analytical sample of the survey (n = 1,842, a response rate of 4%). The response rate is not unusual for online surveys, but we do not know whether non-respondents' opinions are similar to those of the respondents, which is a limitation of this study.

We used propensity weighting to complete the survey analyses to compensate for the differences in sample size and the overrepresentation of respondents from subgroups. We also conducted multiple imputation to address the issue of missing data in calculating weights. The imputed data were not used in other analyses.

Student characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, family income, parental education) are reported in Table A1 for the survey's sampled population, analytical sample, and weighted analytical sample. All the characteristics in the table were reported by students and were collected when the students registered for the ACT national test.

Table A1. Characteristics of the Sampled Population, Analytical Sample, and Weighted Analytical Sample (Percentage)

Characteristic	Group	Sampled population (*N* = 79,221)	Analytical sample (*n* = 1,842)	Weighted analytical sample (*n* = 1,842)
Gender	Female	57	65	58
	Male	42	33	41
	Other/unknown	1	2	1
Race/ethnicity	Asian	11	21	12
	Black/African American	8	10	9
	Hispanic/Latinx	10	14	9
	Other [a]	5	6	5
	White	60	44	60
	Race/ethnicity missing	5	5	5
Family income	<$36,000	4	7	4
	$36,000 to $60,000	5	10	5
	$60,001 to $100,000	11	17	11
	More than $100,000	49	58	49
	Family income missing	30	8	30
Parental	No college	6	7	6
	Some college	9	10	9
	College or higher	78	76	77
	Parental education missing	8	7	7
High school	A level	82	87	82
	B level	17	11	17
	C level and below	1	1	1

[a] Other races/ethnicities include Native American, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, and two or more races/ethnicities.

[b] Parental education levels: No college = less than high school or high school graduate/GED; Some college = business/technical school, certificate program, some college with no degree or certificate, or associate's degree (2 year); College or higher = bachelor's degree (4 year) or higher.

[c] The percentages of the high school GPA levels were calculated using the data from multiple imputation.

Survey Items

The following are the survey items relevant to this issue brief:

1. What high school academic information would you use to evaluate your chance of success in first-year college courses? (Select all that apply)

   - ☐ High school grade point average (HSGPA)
   - ☐ Standardized test scores (e.g., ACT, SAT)
   - ☐ Difficulty level of high school courses
   - ☐ Grades in college credit-bearing courses (i.e., AP, IB, dual/concurrent enrollment, dual credit)
   - ☐ Other (please specify) _____

2. To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? (Scale: Strongly disagree, disagree, slightly disagree, slightly agree, agree, strongly agree)
   a. My high school grades accurately reflect how well I have learned course content.
   b. My high school GPA is influenced by factors other than academic performance, such as determination, attendance, work ethic, effort, and teamwork.
   c. High school GPA is helpful for me to stand out compared to other college applicants.

3. What non-academic factor(s) (e.g., determination, attendance, work ethic, effort, and teamwork) have positively or negatively influenced your GPA during your high school years? (Open-ended) (Display this question only to students who answer slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree in Q2b)

4. To what extent do you think it is fair or unfair for colleges to use high school GPA to compare you with students in each of the following situations? (Scale: Very unfair, unfair, somewhat unfair, somewhat fair, fair, very fair)

   a. Students in your same high school classroom
   b. Students at your high school
   c. Students from different high schools in your state
   d. Students from different high schools across the country

5. When students take advanced courses in high school (i.e., AP, IB, dual/concurrent enrollment, dual credit, honors course), some of them will receive an increase in their GPA

for taking the course regardless of their performance, resulting in a higher weighted GPA. To what extent do you think this is a fair or unfair practice?

- Very fair
- Fair
- Somewhat fair
- Somewhat unfair
- Unfair
- Very unfair

6. During high school, how many course(s) have you taken that award college credit (i.e., AP, IB, dual/concurrent enrollment, dual credit)? (Please enter a number)

7. What is your average high school GPA?

- A+ (100+) (4.0+)
- A (94-100) (3.8 - 4.0)
- A- (90-93) (3.5 - 3.7)
- B+ (87-89) (3.2 - 3.4)
- B (83-86) (2.8 - 3.1)
- B- (80-82) (2.5 - 2.7)
- C+ (77-79) (2.2 - 2.4)
- C (73-76) (1.8 - 2.1)
- C- (70-72) (1.5 - 1.7)
- D+ (67-69) (1.2 - 1.4)
- D (63-66) (0.8 - 1.1)
- D- (60-62) (0.5 - 0.7)
- F (0-59) (less than 0.5)
- I do not have a GPA. / My school does not give grades

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