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## Grading a School's Grades

By [ALAN FINDER](#)

SIMSBURY, Conn. — Standards have always been high at Simsbury High School, with A's earned, not handed out haphazardly. But in an era of widespread grade inflation, grades here actually went down.

Alarms went off all over this affluent, woodsy suburb northwest of [Hartford](#). Parents became concerned that their teenagers might lose ground in the ever stiffening competition for admission to elite colleges.

Into the breach stepped Robert M. Hartranft, whose son had graduated from Simsbury, and who had little previous involvement with grading.

Mr. Hartranft, a nuclear engineer who had been forced to retire early because of Parkinson's disease, came up with what he thinks is a rigorous mathematical model to compare the school's demanding grading system with more lenient grading in other schools. The model, he and some local school administrators say, is a bold new way to think about grades.

"I'm giving you a G.P.S. navigation system, as opposed to scraps of maps," Mr. Hartranft said. "If all you have are scraps of maps, which is all that admissions offices get in the existing protocol, then this gives you an overall orientation."

Mr. Hartranft created an analytical method he calls the g.p.a. plot; it uses national data on grade-point averages and SAT scores to compare national grading norms with those at the local high school. The purpose, he said, is to reduce the variability and subjectivity of grades — and to make it absolutely clear to college admissions offices that a B or B-plus at Simsbury may be the equivalent of an A at most high schools.

Simsbury has included his statistical comparison in its admissions submissions for the last four years. In the suburb just to the north, Granby Memorial High School is using the g.p.a. plot for the first time this fall.

Here in Simsbury, administrators and parents appear satisfied with the results of the model,

even though it is unclear whether it has helped increase the number of Simsbury students admitted to elite colleges. Neil Sullivan, the high school's principal, said the proportion of students admitted by the most selective universities had increased somewhat over the last four years, after dipping slightly when the number of A's dropped sharply between 1998 and 2001. But the number of A's given out by Simsbury teachers has also increased in recent years.

Given how much more competitive admissions have become, Mr. Sullivan said, the g.p.a. plot may have helped raise Simsbury's overall results since it was introduced in 2003.

Mr. Hartranft, who has disdain for what he sees as the soft, intuitive decision-making at many admissions offices, believes fervently that he has come up with a breakthrough tool to make admissions more exacting, if not scientific. Not everyone is convinced, however. School officials in Avon, a suburb south of Simsbury, have resisted the idea.

"What evidence do we have that college admissions officers understand the graph and how to apply it for college admissions?" asked Richard W. Kisiel, the Avon superintendent of schools. "Even my board, they couldn't understand it."

But some college admissions deans are intrigued by Mr. Hartranft's idea.

"Here is a school system that's being proactive and making a thoughtful, good-faith effort to help us understand their educational community," said William M. Shain, dean of admissions and financial aid at Bowdoin College. "I support some creativity in figuring out what can be cited to give us useful context. Without context, grades have no meaning."

Other admissions officials questioned whether it makes any sense to use SAT scores as an external standard to compare schools' grading systems.

"Those kinds of correlations between SATs and grades are really tricky," said Robert S. Clagett, dean of admissions at Middlebury College. "I used to be a teacher, and I would hate to have somebody take my standards and arbitrarily correlate it to the SAT. It's attempting to make a science out of what is very much an art."

"There are plenty of schools out there that pride themselves on having been relatively immune to grade inflation," Mr. Clagett added. "We would rather just get straightforward information from the high school."

The comparison of grading systems may be especially useful for students who apply to large state universities, which often process tens of thousands of applications and tend to make

admission decisions largely by the numbers, Mr. Hartranft and Mr. Sullivan said. It can also be extremely helpful, they said, when students apply for merit scholarships, which are not based on financial need and are often determined strictly by grades and SAT scores.

Jo-Ann Lardie's three children graduated from Simsbury. Her oldest did not qualify for a large merit scholarship five years ago, she said, in part because his grades were not high enough. But her second child was awarded a large scholarship by the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps, which Mrs. Lardie attributed to the g.p.a. plot.

When local parents began contesting a grading system that many thought too harsh, Mr. Hartranft, who retired seven years ago at 55, found himself with time and analytical skills to contribute.

"I'm a certified workaholic and I needed something to work on," he said.

Trying to devise a rigorous way to demonstrate the demanding nature of Simsbury's grading, he said he thought through the problem for hours on end, often while lying in bed with his eyes closed to alleviate the effects of the Parkinson's.

He decided he needed an external standard, something that would compare grades at the local school with those around the country. His solution was the SAT.

He took the scores of 1.5 million students and graphed them against the students' grade-point averages, as reported by the students on their SAT exams. In a given year, for instance, the analysis might show that on average nationally, students with an A average had a combined SAT score of 1,150, under the old two-part aptitude test. Then he would perform the same comparison for students at Simsbury, where, on average, a student with an A average might have a combined score of 1,220.

An individual Simsbury student's grade-point average is then plotted against the national norms; in this example, it might show that someone with an A average at Simsbury performed equivalently to A-plus students nationally.

The analysis, Mr. Hartranft argues, is the most accurate method yet to show how grades at one high school compare with grades elsewhere.

Mr. Hartranft has recently developed a more complex analytical system, which he thinks enables schools to measure students within each course with more precision than an ordinary grade and also gives colleges a more rigorous way to predict how an applicant will perform in

college. As with the g.p.a. plot, he offers the new method, called the Standardized Academic Scoring System, to schools without charge (details can be found at [hartranft.org](http://hartranft.org)).

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