

The Mastery Transcript: Navigating the College Admissions Process in the Absence of Traditional Measures

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mastery learning is a pedagogical approach that focuses on mastering content and competency based learning. Students in mastery learning schools may have a set of skills, or competencies, they must master in order to graduate from high school but also have the opportunity to personalize their learning to match their interests. The Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC), our client, is a membership organization that developed a transcript platform to support schools when reporting mastery learning where traditional, grade point average (GPA)-based transcripts are not the best way to report student learning. High school counselors who engage in college advising with students and their families at schools using the Mastery Transcript have a more complex role than their colleagues in traditional high schools since the Mastery Transcript does not include grades nor a GPA, which college admissions officers expect to see. MTC's aim in requesting this research was to learn how to better support high school counselors at mastery learning schools who have fully transitioned to the Mastery Transcript and are submitting these records to colleges as part of each students' admissions application.

This paper reports findings on the following research questions:

RQ1: What organizational and structural factors influence high school counselors' understanding of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work?

RQ2: What organizational and structural factors influence high school counselors' application of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work?

RQ3: How do college admissions officers perceive the value and relevance of mastery transcripts?

We worked in partnership with MTC, learning from their experiences and their struggles. This partnership, as well as a review of pertinent research literature, informed the research questions and our research design. The design included surveys and interviews to gather insights from high school counselors, mastery school leaders, and college admissions officers.

Our findings include:

- Counselors and teams at schools who have not fully adopted the Mastery Transcript are struggling to understand the Mastery Transcript.
- Counselors at sending schools are confident in their knowledge of the Mastery Transcript and build systems to work with students and parents as they navigate the college admissions process.
- There are challenges in working with the Mastery Transcript for both the high school counselors and admissions professionals, especially around how those unfamiliar with the transcript will engage with it on an admissions application.
- College admissions officers are concerned about the amount of time it takes to read a Mastery Transcript compared to a traditional transcript.
- There is a lot of turnover in admissions offices which makes it difficult to train application readers in the Mastery Transcript.

Recommendations for MTC from this study include:

- Support high schools in the process of becoming mastery learning schools
- Recognize and highlight sending schools that are doing the work well and encourage them to connect with other member schools that are seeking to become sending schools
- Be an influential voice on state policies around college admissions requirements
- Identify key personnel in admissions offices and designate them as Mastery Transcript experts
- Support higher education institutions to develop a streamlined means of reading the Mastery Transcript for college admissions
- Work with higher education institutions to revise their financial aid policies so that GPAs are not the only requirement.

2. DEFINITION OF THE ISSUE

In order to best understand how the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC) operates, it is best to begin with mastery learning. After this brief introduction, the work of MTC will be described.

Mastery Learning

Mastery learning is not a new concept. At its core, it is a method of instruction that should allow all students to meet standards and give them the ability to demonstrate their learning. Benjamin Bloom (1968) expanded upon the idea of learning for mastery. He argued that there is an economic reason for helping all students learn; the complexity of the United States economy demands that all students have the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to be successful in a variety of career types (Bloom, 1968). According to Bloom, the method to meet this demand for a skilled labor force was learning for mastery. A rich and complex education was not only for the top percent of the population (Bloom, 1968). In his time, studies were conducted to measure student outcomes and the perceptions of these outcomes. Students reported no longer feeling like they were “bad” in a certain subject when taught using learning for mastery methods. They also reported feeling like they were in charge of their own learning. Lastly, students reported feeling more interested and engaged in certain subjects as a result of experiences with learning for mastery methods of instruction (Bloom, 1968). Bloom created a framework that would assist in the implementation of learning for mastery that others would expand.

This expansion included concrete steps that teachers and school leaders could take to implement mastery learning at a level that would impact all students. Bloom (1968) established that teachers often did not differentiate their instruction much for individual students. This leads to varying outcomes for students. As Guskey (2015) put it, “little variation in the teaching resulted in great variation in student learning.” Mastery learning would give the individual attention students need in order to meet their learning situation. One-on-one tutoring is an example most often linked to mastery learning. In this scenario, students are usually working individually with a tutor and will not move on to the next topic until it is mastered. In this example, the actions the tutor takes are what is to be done in a

larger group setting to implement mastery learning. The tutor monitors what the student does, points out errors when a student makes them, and offers further clarification and explanations to help correct the errors (Guskey, 2015). The framework is a cycle that instructors can use to implement mastery learning. The five steps in the cycle are pre-assessment, instruction, formative assessment, corrective or enrichment instruction, and summative assessment (Guskey, 2010, Pearson & Flory, 2014).

Schools that implement mastery learning often see students perform better on standardized state assessments (Guskey, 2015). The framework blends well with what effective teachers are already doing in their classrooms. There has been a positive relationship between student grade point averages and standardized assessments results and mastery learning. Student motivation and attendance rates have also increased, as have the rates of their involvement in extracurricular activities and class participation in schools that have implemented elements of the mastery learning framework. Schools and students can also get a better understanding of what traditional letter grades mean when they are used in conjunction with the mastery learning framework. The grades come from a summative assessment that focuses on predetermined standards. The grade is relative to these standards and determined on whether or not the student has met them. Prior to this summative assessment, students have had formative feedback to guide their learning and are given the help they need in order to improve (Winget & Persky, 2022). As schools become more invested in the use of mastery learning, grades often no longer become the end all be all goal for students. The learning becomes the goal rather than the grade at the end. While it is true that many schools have implemented mastery learning and continue to use traditional grades, some have left them behind and have moved to a binary yes or no performance assessment to measure student learning (Martin, 2019). One example of this is the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC).

Mastery Transcript Consortium

According to the organization, schools, individuals, or full districts can join as MTC members. Member schools understand that traditional letter grades and transcripts may not necessarily represent true demonstrations of a student's knowledge and skills. They are seeking a new means to capture what students do in schools and presenting that on a different type of transcript. Many stakeholders make up a school community, and if a

school is not ready to take the leap to joining MTC, individuals within a school are able to be members of MTC. An individual membership in MTC allows that person to learn more about mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript as well as receive news and information about the work MTC is doing. The flagship members of MTC are high schools who are re-envisioning how high schools operate and how courses and mastery learning should be shared with colleges and universities. Full districts can also join and align the work with middle schools and the community. As MTC seeks to expand into more public school districts, they will need alignment across various levels of schools in order to accomplish their goals. Colleges can be a part of MTC to further shift the paradigm of how students demonstrate what they know and how they can be considered admissible students from the new transcript. (Mastery Transcript Consortium, 2021)

MTC has developed an online platform for schools to use in order to publish the Mastery Transcript and send it to colleges on behalf of students. Below is a brief example of the Mastery Transcript (Mastery Transcript Consortium 2023). A full example of the Mastery Transcript can be found in [Appendix E](#).

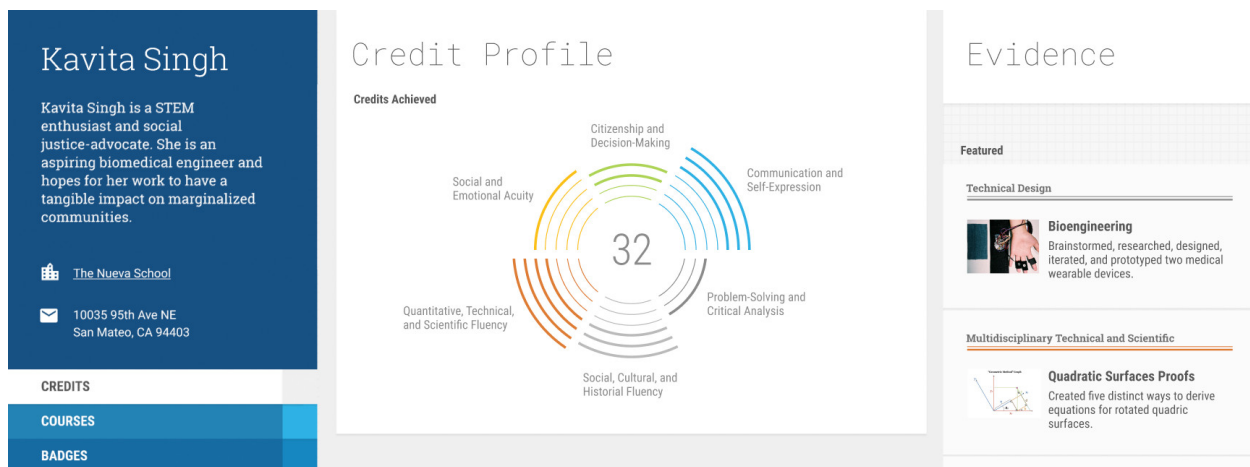


Figure 1: Example Mastery Transcript

MTC states that the transcript is flexible, compact, student-centered, and equitable. There are no traditional letter grades on the transcript, which represents a major difference between most high school transcripts and the Mastery Transcript. Credits through the Mastery Transcript are split into domains, and the number of domains is chosen by each

school. Students have the opportunity to earn foundational and advanced credits in each of these domains. Foundational credits are what every student at a member high school would need in order to graduate, and students are expected to earn the foundational credits that are established by their school. Each school chooses this set of foundational credits. Advanced credits are areas where the student can decide to pursue more advanced study in a particular domain. The transcript highlights areas in which students have strengths and also areas where they are making progress. Colleges have traditionally preferred to compare students from the same high school based on their GPA and test scores. The Mastery Transcript challenges this practice and instead allows students to highlight their strengths in different ways. Student strengths are highlighted by the advanced credits they complete. Additionally, readers of the transcript can see how in-depth a student went into a particular area and the average number of courses a student completed in that area. A quick read of the transcript is possible by looking at the graphic representation of credits, both foundational and advanced, but more information is available should the reader choose to dive deeper into specific content areas or example work products. Students have the ability to highlight certain projects or achievements on their transcript. If there is something they are particularly proud of and want to showcase to a reader, they can do that. The focus of the transcript, and the MTC member schools more broadly, is to provide a means for all students to demonstrate their strengths and mastery of domains (Mastery Transcript Consortium, 2021). Transcripts are built by students. Students select artifacts as evidence that they have mastered certain competencies. Each school defines the competencies that students must learn. This evidence is then reviewed and confirmed by the students' teachers or school counselors. Students have leadership over their learning.

MTC has developed an infographic for schools to help them understand the progression from traditional grades to mastery-based learning.

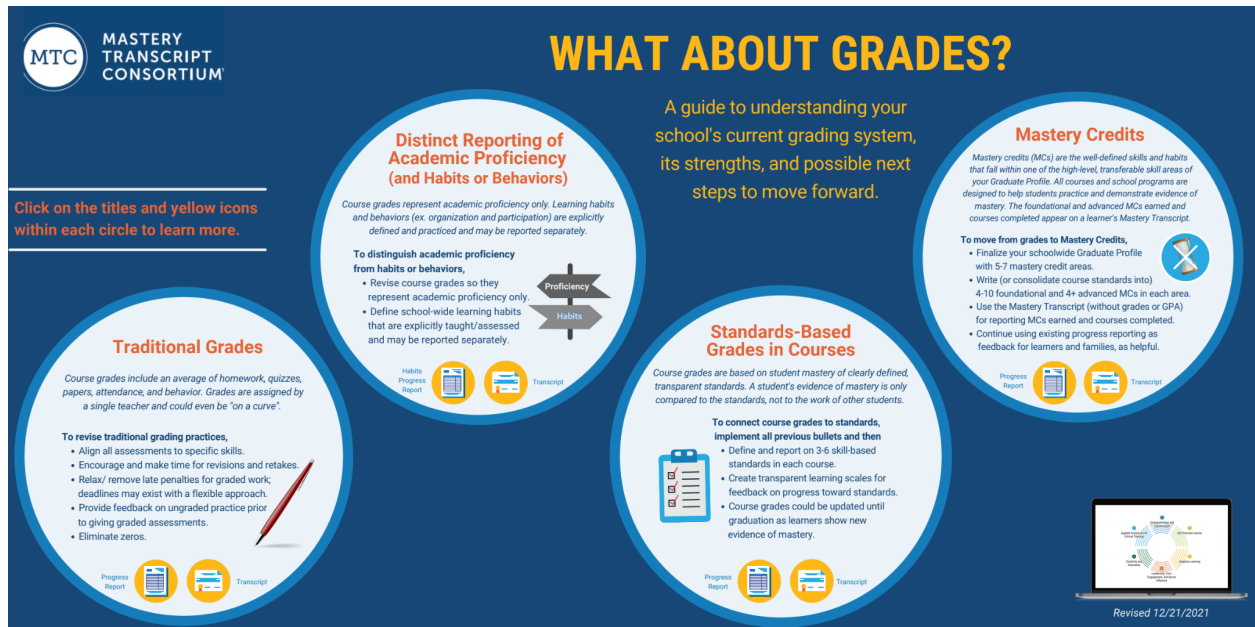


Figure 2: Progression from traditional letter grades to mastery learning

This infographic identifies the four different stages that schools may adopt in their journey from traditional grades to full mastery credits: 1) Traditional Grades, 2) Distinct Reporting of Academic Proficiency, 3) Standards-Based Grades in Courses, and 4) Mastery Credits. The first phase is what many schools use for their courses and transcripts. In most traditional transcripts, student courses and letter grades are listed in each semester or school year they have taken them. Schools can be members of MTC but continue to use traditional grades. In the two middle phases schools retain traditional grades but the basis for grades transitions from traditional tests, homework, and classroom assignments to more competency based assignments and projects. Schools may continue to use traditional grades but they are based on components of mastery learning. The fourth phase is full mastery learning where students do not earn traditional grades but rather earn credits based on their mastery of certain competencies and skills (Mastery Transcript Consortium, 2021). Instead of reporting letter grades, students determine the competencies they would like to highlight and select artifacts they have completed to demonstrate that learning. When schools move into this stage and only use the Mastery Transcript to report student learning, they are known as sending schools. Nearly 400 schools nationwide are members of the Mastery Transcript Consortium. This means that this group of schools have indicated their willingness to join a network of schools that

seeks to change how transcripts are created and how student learning is reported. These schools fall somewhere in the four stages described above. Approximately 30 of these schools have fully transitioned to sending schools and solely provide students with the Mastery Transcript as their high school transcript. This is also the transcript that is submitted with college applications.

A key organizational challenge facing the Mastery Transcript Consortium is developing a framework and process to support high school counselors as high schools make the transition from traditional grades and transcripts to mastery credits and use the Mastery Transcript. High school counselors assist students and parents as they navigate the college admissions process. Part of the work includes explaining to students and families how college admissions officers review transcripts. In a traditional high school that uses a traditional transcript, this process may be familiar to students and families. This is especially true if they have an older sibling that has already gone through the process with a traditional high school transcript. The Mastery Transcript changes and expands the role of the high school counselor. This change leads to a more complex set of responsibilities where counselors educate students and families about the Mastery Transcript, ensure that colleges accept and are familiar with it, and field questions from college admissions offices about the student's application, which may or may not include questions about the Mastery Transcript.

MTC wishes to assist school counselors in taking on this expanded role. Before the Mastery Transcript Consortium can implement support for high school counselors who are new to mastery-based schools, the organization needs to understand what current counselors perceive as the most challenging aspects of this transition and where additional support can be provided. This capstone project draws upon the experiences and expertise of high school counselors, school leaders, and college admissions officers to inform strengths, weaknesses, and next steps for MTC.

The project questions for this capstone include:

RQ1: What organizational and structural factors influence high school counselors' understanding of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work?

RQ2: What organizational and structural factors influence high school counselors' application of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work?

RQ3: How do college admissions officers perceive the value and relevance of mastery transcripts?

3. CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Definitions and Terminology

Terminology tends to vary across schools. Having a common understanding of terms helps to guide the conversation forward without misunderstandings. This review considers high school counselors to be those individuals in high schools who are providing school counseling, including college advising, for their students, while college admissions officers are the professionals working in the admissions offices at college and universities. High school counselors work with a number of students each year. This group of students is referred to as their caseload.

The role of high school counselors is complex and varies across schools. Some counseling departments are divided into different roles; school counselor, social worker, college advising, and school psychologist, to name a few, while in other counseling departments high school counselors work alone filling all of the needed roles. The extant literature elaborates on the roles and responsibilities that counselors have. Additional literature outlines the foundations and benefits of mastery learning, which was described above, as well as the college application process for high school students in this country.

Not only is the correct terminology important for describing high school counselors and their responsibilities, it is also important when discussing mastery learning and college admissions work. The literature referenced in this review defines mastery learning to be an

educational framework where students focus on deep mastery of content. Non academic factors (NAF) are those additional factors that colleges examine when making admissions decisions that are not grades or test scores.

The definitions and terminology discussed above align to the areas of literature to which we will map our findings; mastery learning, the traditional role of a high school counselor, and the college admissions process.

The Role of High School Counselors

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has outlined three domains for the role of a high school counselor. These three domains are academic development, social and emotional development, and career and college development. McDonough and O'Connor (2005, 2018) agree that high school counselors have too many roles. Additionally, McDonough and O'Connor (2005, 2018) agree that school counselors are stretched too thinly across areas such as mental health, administrative responsibilities such as registration and scheduling, college advising, and test administration, to name a few. There is some debate about whether high school counselors should even focus on college guidance, with one reason being that it takes away from their priority of student mental health (McDonough, 2005). While the academic and social/emotional domains are important aspects of a school counselor's role, this study focused primarily on the college and career advising domain of high school counseling. A description of that domain is outlined below.

Career and College Development

Currently, one of the critical roles of a high school counselor is college advising. In her study on college advising in high schools, McDonough (2005) reports that this process is best when it involves strong relationships with families and students, starting the college process as early as ninth grade or even middle school, and nurturing a culture of college aspirations.

One way that high school counselors can support students is by forming strong relationships with families (McDonough, 2005). This is particularly true for students whose parents did not attend college and are not familiar with the process. The literature outlines

the need for families to understand the cost, process, and educational options so all parties involved in the process and the high school counselor can have a large role in building this partnership (McKillip et al., 2012). Studies show that this positive relationship with families can also increase student attendance and engagement in school (Carey, 2012). None of the other pieces of college advising are relevant if students are uninterested in attending college. McKillip et al. (2012) found that high school counselors create a college-going culture in their school buildings by having clear college guidance focus in their counseling departments where the support is ongoing for students and collaborative with teachers.

McKillip et al. (2012) also go into detail about the importance of relationships when assisting students with life altering decisions such as attending college. Students tend to receive information from those they trust, such as parents, members of the community, and their counselors. Unfortunately resources, with one of them being high school counselors, are severely lacking in many areas (McDonough, 2005). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a counselor to student ratio of 250-1, meaning that for every 250 students there should be one counselor to work with them on academic planning, social/emotional counseling, and college and career planning (ASCA, 2023). The ASCA recently reported data from the National Center for Education Statistics regarding average counselor caseloads across the country. The average counselor to student ratio for the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent year for which data is available, was 408-1 across the country, with all but one of the states with caseloads above the recommended ratio (ASCA, 2023). With caseloads as large as they are, it is a challenge for high school counselors to be able to build these important relationships (Perna et al., 2008). Studies have shown that when caseloads are smaller and stronger relationships can be formed, attendance and student behavior improve (Carey, 2012).

In order for students to attend the college of their choice, colleges and universities, in general, prefer to see students enroll in a rigorous course schedule (Hines, Lemons, & Crews, 2011). An aspect of the college advising role is that high school counselors work with students to choose these appropriate and challenging classes. In order to do this and to provide meaningful college advising, the literature suggests that high school counselors are working with students from the beginning of ninth grade and taking the time to get to know their students (McDonough, 2005).

College advising is a very large part of the role of a high school counselor. Yet for such a critical component, many high school counselors were not trained in college advising and are not as prepared as they could be. High school counselors are generally trained in mental health and therefore are better equipped to help students with their social and emotional development than the college admissions process (McDonough, 2005).

The College Admissions Process

The number of college applicants has increased in the past few years (Magouirk et al., 2023). The Common Application is a non-profit membership organization that has developed one application that high school students use to apply to almost 1,000 member institutes of higher education (Common App, 2023). According to a report released by the Common App (2023), there was a 24% increase in the number of applicants for the 2022-2023 cycle compared to the 2019-2020 cycle. This increase in the number of applicants has created an increased sense of competition among students applying to their first-choice colleges (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009). An increase in the feeling of competition can lead families to take drastic measures to ensure that their children are accepted to their top choice schools (Fishman, Teasley, & Cederquist, 2019). An example of this is the sense that some families feel they must ensure their students are involved in as many activities as possible, or hiring independent college advising “experts” who may or may not give them a leg up in the admissions process (Wood, 2022).

Colleges state they are looking for well rounded applicants and high schools are feeling the pressure to provide these kinds of opportunities for their students (Wood, 2022). Well rounded students often have a number of co-curricular activities, a “rigorous” schedule, mostly high grades, and demonstrated commitment to community service (Jimenez & Sargrad, 2018). Research shows that traditional schools are working to have more AP classes, opportunities for test preparation for their students, and a wider variety of extra curricular activities for students to engage with, because they know that these are appealing to colleges (Chatterji et. al., 2021). Mastery learning schools have a unique opportunity to help students show interest and mastery of content areas in a different way from a large AP course offering list (Mastery Transcript Consortium, 2021). AP classes tend to look like traditional classrooms where students are learning and preparing for the AP

exam. Mastery learning classrooms could look very different to this and could provide opportunities for students to dive deeper into areas that are particularly interesting to them, whether or not they are part of the AP curriculum.

Perna et al. (2008) explored how high school counselors across different schools have varying experiences when advising students in the college application process. Colleges have various degrees of transparency when it comes to how they evaluate applicants. There is also a high degree of variability when it comes to what colleges consider important on an admissions application. There are a few studies that attempted to examine how colleges review applications and what they deem important. College admissions professionals prefer to have something on a student's application they can refer to that is norm-referenced and verified via conventional measurement principles (Fishman, Teasley, & Cederquist, 2019; Erbes, Wizner, & Powles, 2021). An example of this would be a standardized test score such as the SAT or ACT, or a grade point average, or a class ranking or percentile. This gives the admissions professionals the ability to understand academic potential that is considered reliable. More and more colleges are moving towards test-optional admissions policies, making this information increasingly less likely to be present in a student's application (Einhorn, 2022).

Additionally, admissions professionals prefer to have as much context about a student's application as possible. This adds value to the application and helps the reader understand more about the student. Context allows an application reader to understand a certain grade in a class or why a student decided to participate in a certain co-curricular activity. A nontraditional transcript can be an example of a student providing context, but the admissions professionals need additional training on how to read and understand it (Erbes, Wizner, & Powles, 2021). Traditional letter grades and grade point averages allow professionals to better understand a student's academic history but adds stress to students and families as they navigate high school and seek out opportunities to earn the best grades. The focus is on earning the highest grade possible in a class rather than the learning itself (Erbes, Wizner, & Powles, 2021)

Admissions professionals do seek out nonacademic factors when reviewing student applications, though their degree of use varies from college to college (Hossler et al., 2019).

More selective colleges will use these factors to determine which students to admit since nearly all of their applicants are admissible. The students who apply to these highly selective colleges all have nearly similar courses, grades, and standardized test scores. Thus these nonacademic factors are important to college admissions officers in understanding the context for students, including activities that appear on their application. The majority of the decisions made by these selective colleges use these factors (Hossler et al., 2019). In a recent study, Sackett, Sharpe, and Kuncel (2021) measured the amount of importance colleges placed on test scores and grades. The researchers sought to determine which one received more importance by examining what colleges said and then developing an empirical measure to determine what the colleges were actually doing. It was found that, on average, the majority of colleges did place an equal weight on both test scores and high school grades when making admissions decisions (Sackett, Sharpe, & Kuncel, 2021). It appears that colleges will use whatever information is available to them on a student's application when making their admissions decision. It is thus imperative for high schools to provide students with the best opportunity to highlight their strengths and interests.

Against this backdrop of the work high school counselors do and how students are admitted to college, MTC seeks to provide an opportunity for students at mastery-based high schools to demonstrate their learning and highlight their strengths. The organization seeks to allow any readers of their transcript to learn more about the student, what matters to them, and how they have guided their own learning. What follows is the study conducted to learn more about high school counselors at sending schools.

4. SITE AND DESIGN

Site Description

The Mastery Transcript Consortium has more than 400 membership schools and nearly 30 sending schools (MTC, 2023). Member and sending schools are a mix of public, charter, and private or independent schools. Figure 3 describes the type of sending schools associated with MTC.

Type of Sending School

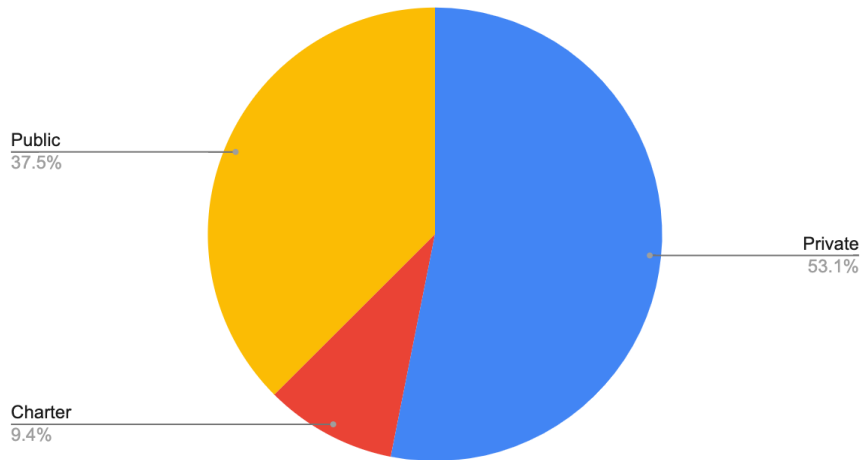


Figure 3: Type of Sending School

Since MTC is a national membership organization and there is not a single school district or specific site to work with, we cast a wide net across a combination of sending and member schools. We conducted surveys and interviewed individuals at member and sending schools, college admissions officers, and MTC staff. [Appendix A](#) describes the interview participants.



Figure 4 describes the geographic location of the interview participants' school site.

Research Design

Surveys

The research design for this study included both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. The quantitative data collected is descriptive in nature. There were three different surveys developed and participants received one of the surveys depending on their role: high school counselor, high school leader, or college admissions officer. MTC supplied a list of email addresses for individuals identified as a college admissions professional who had either worked with MTC directly or was on the list of colleges who had received a mastery transcript. We first sent a message to approximately 700 college admissions professionals inviting them to complete the survey. There were 86 surveys returned, with 54 completed for a response rate of 8%. Next MTC sent the school leader survey on our behalf to 370 school leaders inviting them to complete the survey. 48 were returned, with 30 completed for a response rate of 8%. Finally, MTC sent the school counselor survey on our behalf to 136 high school counselors inviting them to complete the survey. There were 43 returned, with 22 completed for a response rate of 16%.

The surveys asked participants for demographic information including how many years they had been in their current field and the type of institution in which they work. Additionally participants were asked about their knowledge of mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript. Finally, survey participants were asked about their current role. Counselors were asked about their responsibilities, leaders were asked how they support their counselors, and admissions officers were asked about what they look for in an application. Survey questions ([Appendix B](#)) were adapted from the Tennessee Educator Research Alliance 2022 annual school counselor survey. This survey was chosen because it was used to gather data and perspectives from school counselors statewide. Additional questions were created by the research team based on the extant literature.

Interviews

We traveled to San Diego to participate in the MTC annual symposium in September 2022. There we learned about mastery learning in depth and the organization's mission in detail. We also networked with prospective research participants. From this initial list messages were sent to individuals inviting them to participate in an interview. After each interview we

used a snowball strategy and asked the participant for suggestions on additional interviewees. Additionally, the last question on each survey invited participants to share their email address and to participate in an interview. Interviews were conducted with 15 individuals, falling into four categories; college admissions professionals, high school counselors, school leaders, and MTC staff. The high school counselors were all from sending schools, and one school leader was from a sending school while two were from member schools. During interviews, participants were asked basic demographic questions, questions related to the Mastery Transcript, their familiarity with the transcript, and their role in the college admissions process. Interviews were conducted via video chat and were 30-45 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. The interview protocols can be found in appendices F, G, and H.

Method Rationale

In developing this study we decided to use both quantitative and qualitative research methods to hear from many individuals, and also to dive deep with a few stakeholders who are deeply involved with mastery learning and college admissions spaces. Our study utilized a non-probability sampling model for our data collection. The anonymous, voluntary online survey created through Qualtrics was sent to school leaders, high school counselors, and college admissions officers which aligns with a convenience sampling strategy. Questions focused on learning whether individuals are knowledgeable and comfortable with mastery learning, the Mastery Transcript, and the application of the Mastery Transcript in college admissions work.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured model (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the interviews we looked for unique insights into the mastery learning college admissions process as well as ideas and suggestions for improvement from those on the ground. Questions were asked about training, experiences working in schools, experiences working with families and students, and challenges participants have had with the Mastery Transcript. The information shared gave us an insight into the work being done in schools utilizing the mastery transcript.

Reasons for choosing to implement a convenience sample include time and logistical constraints. As a team we were looking to collect data during the 2022-2023 school year. An

advantage of using a convenience sample is that we were able to utilize a snowball method to widen our interviews conducted. The disadvantage of our use of a non-probability, convenience sample is that the responses received will not be representative of a larger population. Additionally, by asking for volunteers for our survey and interviews, there is a possibility that the data collected are not fully representative of MTC's demographics, which may make it difficult to draw accurate conclusions.

Data Analysis Plan

Our analysis plan included four components: a listening tour, analytical memos, individual matrices, and consolidation of the individual matrices into master matrices for each category of interview; high school counselor, high school leader, college admissions officer, and MTC staff.

We began the analysis by engaging in a listening tour. Each researcher initially listened to and read through the transcripts of interviews in specific categories to gain general familiarity. During the second and third rounds of listening to the interviews, we identified emergent themes and extracted illustrative quotes which were then arranged according to the category of interviewee: high school counselor, MTC staff, school leader, and college admissions officer. The themes and key quotes were organized to form a matrix for each conceptual bucket of the interview protocol. The matrices served as blueprints to examine our data and identify patterns and key takeaways.

Following the individual listening tours, each researcher produced and shared an analytic memo to synthesize their thoughts and reflect on new learning that resulted from the interview process. The memos helped us gain clarity around the direction of our analysis. In sharing these memos with each other, we were able to establish a starting point for the combined analysis and discussion.

Data analysis of the survey consisted of computing the mean ratings and standard deviations of the responses when applicable. Additionally, since most of the survey questions were descriptive in nature, the analysis consisted of counting the response/response types for each question and utilizing tables and graphs to show the difference in opinions among respondents.

Limitations

There are limitations to qualitative research, especially when conducted across the country, via video chat, and with volunteer participants. We considered these limitations as we analyzed and shared our findings.

Reliability

In terms of external reliability, we recognized that our status as third-party researchers outside of the MTC network created some limitations in our ability to conduct wide-spread interviews. The process of reaching out to various college admissions officers and high school leaders and counselors was challenging but we were able to leverage MTC as a partner and the Annual Symposium as a starting point for making connections. We had trouble gaining individuals to interview initially, which led to us having 15 interviews rather than the sought-after 20+. We recognize that this could challenge the internal reliability of our research, as well as the external validity. All our interviews were conducted with individuals who did not have any connection to us personally or professionally.

Other limitations to our research lay within the way our interviews were conducted. Due to the nationwide nature of MTC and the wide dispersal of member schools across the country we decided to conduct interviews exclusively through a video chat platform. Our methods of data collection and analysis have been supported through the literature, and were aligned with other qualitative research projects. Additionally, the response rates for completed surveys were low. While we are pleased with the responses we did receive, we recognize that a greater response rate from all three categories of respondents would have allowed us to gain a broader insight and strengthen our findings and recommendations.

In terms of internal reliability factors and limitations, we believe that other researchers would likely come to the same conclusions. Through extensive note taking and transcriptions, our listening tours proved successful and led to each researcher reaching conclusions aligned across the interview groups.

5. FINDINGS

We structured the findings section by examining evidence that helped us answer our research questions: RQ1: What organizational and structural factors influence high school counselors' understanding of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work? RQ2: What organizational and structural factors influence high school counselors' application of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work? RQ3: How do college admissions officers perceive the value and relevance of mastery transcripts? Our findings for these questions are organized by the themes we discovered from interviews related to each research question.

I. **The organizational and structural factors influencing high school counselors' understanding of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work.**

Understanding Mastery Transcripts: *"It's a reframing"*

The traditional experience for high school students is to take classes, earn grades, and have a transcript with a grade point average (GPA) when they graduate. Mastery learning schools are changing this norm and expectation for their students, school, and community. Before high school counselors can support students in the college application process using the Mastery Transcript, they must first learn about the transcript and how it works. They must have a deep understanding of the transcript, which is most likely not something they learned through their own high school experience.

In addition to implementing the Mastery Transcript, a critical piece to becoming a mastery learning school requires a shift in a school's educational vision and philosophy. The leader of a private high school in the Northeast expressed hesitation to a formal, public-facing transition to the Mastery Transcript. This head of school described the situation by saying, "I wish that I had focused a bit more on the idea of the process of shifting internally to mastery learning rather than getting all tied up in college admissions and external representation of that." The leader suggested that it is not enough to declare a school to be a mastery learning school and begin implementing the transcript. He elaborated that schools need to make the shift from within, reframing what their educational process looks

like and how they teach and evaluate students. One school counselor described switching a school from traditional to mastery learning as “building the plane while flying it,” in terms of both teaching the faculty, students, and families about mastery learning while also having students add artifacts to their transcripts at the same time. This concern about a full-scale school transition was not a sentiment that arose when speaking with schools who opened as mastery learning schools or had successfully transitioned to being fully sending schools. One school leader shared that “It’s [transition to mastery learning and/or adopting the Mastery Transcript] easier to do if you’re a newer school, if you’re deemed more progressive. It’s an easier thing to do than a school that’s been around a while that has a certain reputation.”

Depending on the counselor and school leader relationship, some of the counselors shared that they are partners with their school leaders in helping move the school towards mastery learning and helping teachers understand what it is. One counselor shared that process as a journey and that “now teachers are familiar with it, we include it in a staff meeting every year, the teachers who’ve been here longer will talk in their classes about [how] this would be a great artifact to include in your Mastery Transcript.” As a result, the counselors and teachers must both be knowledgeable about mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript and knowledgeable enough to be able to explain the transcript to others; students, parents, college admissions offices, or anyone else that may ask about the Mastery Transcript. Respondents on the survey were asked whether or not they have trouble explaining the Mastery Transcript to others. Based on the survey data, described in Table 1, counselors were divided regarding how they felt about explaining the Mastery Transcript to others.

Table 1			
<i>"Do you have any difficulties explaining the mastery transcript to others? If so, please explain."</i>			
	<u>Sending School</u>	<u>Not Sending School</u>	<u>Total</u>
Indicated having trouble explaining the Mastery Transcript to others.	1	8	9
No indication	6	7	13
Total	7	15	22

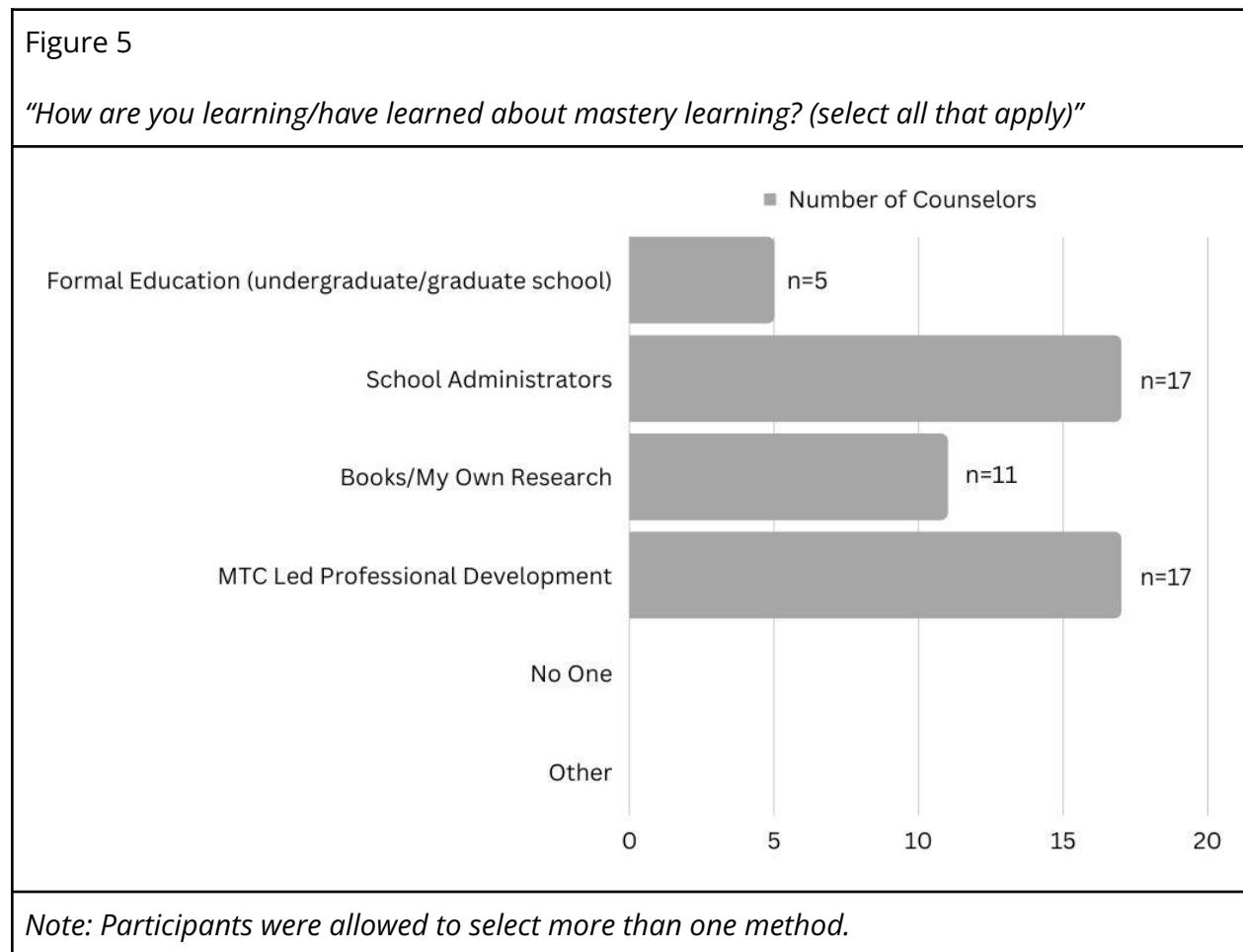
In the interviews conducted, both counselors and school leaders who participated considered themselves to be the experts on the transcript. However, they did experience challenges explaining the transcript. As an example of what is challenging about explaining the transcript to others, one counselor shared how, "Many parents are not understanding the transition from traditional grading to mastery and how their student will remain competitive at post-secondary institutions." High school counselors have the responsibility to share their deep understanding of mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript with these parents to help them gain an understanding as well.

High school counselors are on the front lines of the Mastery Transcript. They are the individuals who have to share the transcript with students, families, and college admissions officers. One counselor shared that at their school, they are "the person who holds the most knowledge about how the transcript works (and) what it looks like." As a result they were the expert on the Mastery Transcript.

Learning about Mastery Learning: *"If I can help our counseling team to really fully embrace this process, I think they'll be the bridge that we need for families to have confidence that we can do it."*

At the beginning of their journey with mastery learning or with sending schools, high school counselors may not yet have the expertise, but they indicated various sources of gaining that knowledge. Mastery learning is not typically something that current high school

teachers and counselors are used to or how they were initially trained, especially when it comes to preparing students for college and college admissions work. Of the 23 surveys completed from high school counselors, only five respondents shared that they learned about mastery learning through formal education (undergraduate or graduate school.) The remaining respondents shared that they learned about mastery learning from MTC led professional development or from their administrators. Figure 5 lists the sources that counselors used to learn about mastery learning.



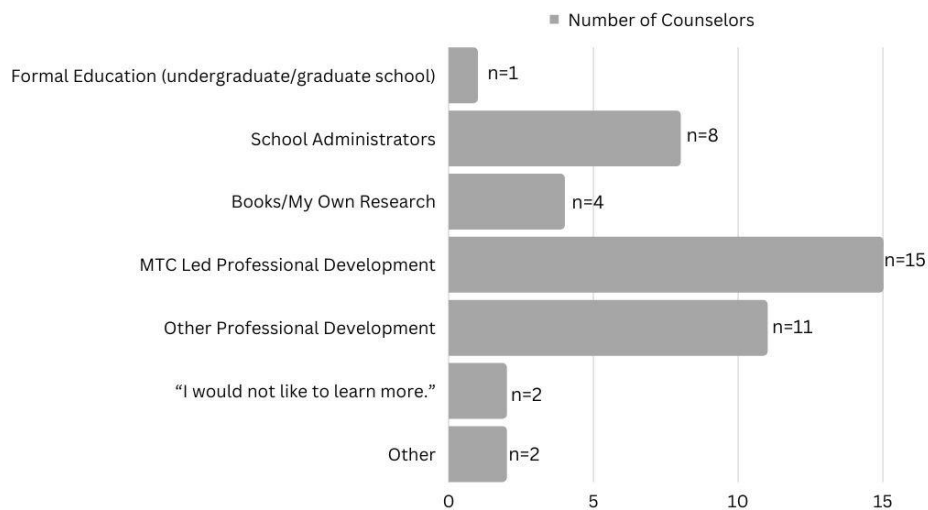
Mastery learning and implementing the Mastery Transcript is a new process for many and can be part of the onboarding training that new hires at mastery learning schools undergo. It can be a difficult change, as one counselor shared, “it was a heavy lift to change schools, to go from a traditional comprehensive high school with the International Baccalaureate program to our kind of school.” High school counselors may have come into a sending

school after spending time in a traditional high school. The counselors shared that they often decided to work in a school that does not use a traditional transcript because of the philosophical fit they had with the school. One counselor shared that they followed a particular school leader to a mastery learning school to continue to work with that particular individual. Another counselor explained that they learned about mastery learning and MTC from the organization and were intrigued by the prospect of a non-traditional transcript. This counselor sought out more information from the organization and later found a school that was doing the work.

When asked how high school counselors wanted to continue their education about the Mastery Transcript, the majority shared that they were interested in participating in professional development activities, either run by the Mastery Transcript Consortium or another entity.

Figure 6

“How would you like to continue to learn about the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)”



Note: Participants were allowed to select more than one method.

Two participants selected “other” when asked how they wanted to continue to learn about the Mastery Transcript. One of their responses was, “working with folks in admissions offices.” This relationship between high school counselor and college admissions officer is

critical and is explored in more detail later in the Findings section. The other respondent shared that they are “not convinced it is right for our school.” This is an opinion that came up from a few counselors at schools that have not yet transitioned fully and are still exploring mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript.

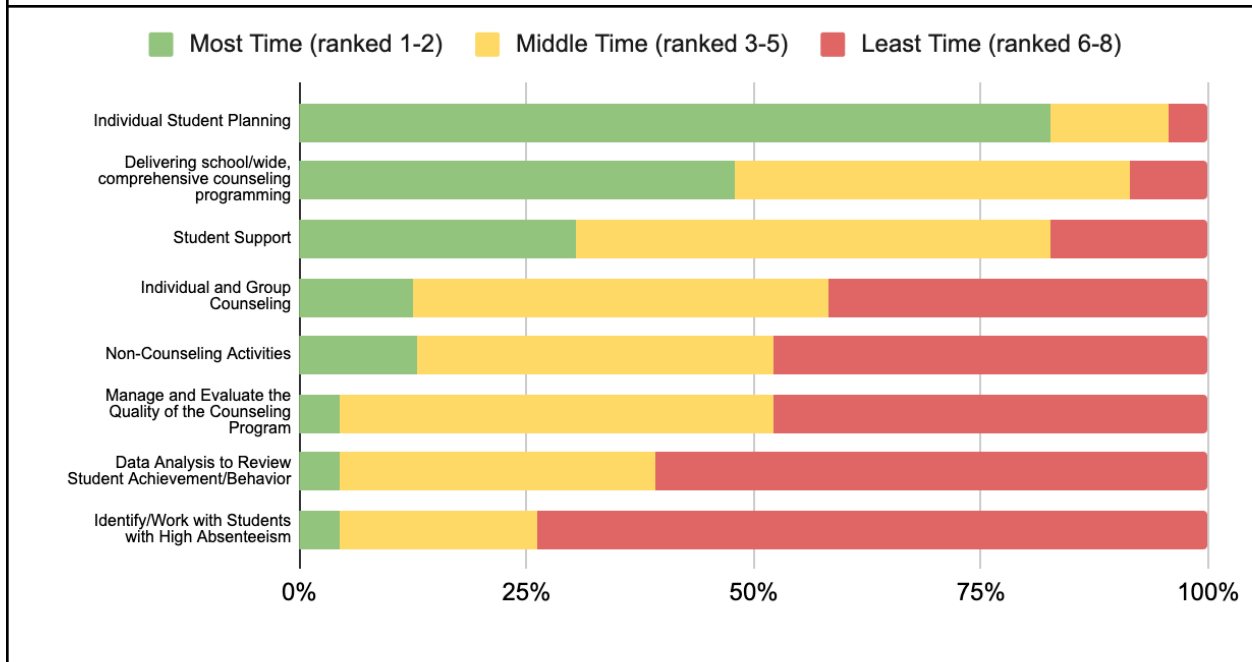
A comprehensive understanding of mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript, while critical for a high school counselor, is not enough. High school counselors also must be able to apply this understanding in their work with students, families, and college admissions officers.

II. The organizational and structural factors influencing high school counselors’ application of mastery-based transcripts in college admissions work.

High school counselors have many roles and responsibilities associated with their work. High school counselors at mastery learning schools are no exception. On the survey, counselors were invited to order their responsibilities based on how much time they spend on them. Counselors reported spending most of their time on individual student planning. Individual student planning can include both academic and college and career planning, working with students as they complete admissions or financial aid applications, or working with students on their social or emotional counseling needs. In addition to individual student planning, counselors reported spending their time delivering their comprehensive counseling programming. This programming can include the same activities or lessons as individual student planning but done in classroom sized groups of students. Counselors also shared that they spend the least time on non-counselor activities and working with students with high absenteeism rates. The full list of time that is spent on various responsibilities is listed in Table 2, showing how many counselors indicated which items they spent the most through least time on.

Table 2

"Please order the items below based on how much time you spend on them. (from most time to least time)"



While counselors reported having a variety of roles, the interview participants noted they were able to spend much of their time working with students individually or in whole group settings as they worked on college or financial aid applications. We next explore the work they do.

Counselor collaboration with Students and Families: *"I meet with our freshman families...and share with them our success stories."*

In high school counselors' work and application of the Mastery Transcript, a number of themes emerged from the interviews. One theme, collaborating with students and parents on the entire application process, is an important component of school counselors' work. The counselors all described their approach as collaborative and a team effort among themselves, the student, and the student's parents or guardians. The majority of the counselors described much of their work as helping students and parents manage expectations related to college admissions. One way counselors shared how they manage expectations is to reassure students and parents that they will be admitted to college.

Counselors described how they reassure students and parents to trust the transcript and the information it contains. One counselor cited the use of evidence as a key variable in this relationship: “I just have evidence of kids getting into colleges, kids getting good scholarships, kids getting this and that. And so I just think, continuing to figure out how we can help people get over that anxiety hump, and just try it.” Another counselor noted how she reassures parents: “Parents see it and see that this is what we’re going to use and we have the list of schools that have accepted the Mastery Transcript and that seems to put parents at ease.” One counselor described their process as a journey, stating that “at the beginning of every year, I meet with freshmen families to talk about how our transcript works, how college applications from our school work, and to share with them our success stories.” The counselors all described how they introduce the Mastery Transcript to students and parents at the beginning of their high school career but there were some differences when credits are added or how students actually use the transcript. One school, a charter high school on the West Coast, has all their first year students use it while another school in the Midwest introduces the process gradually, having juniors use it after two years of high school already under their belt. Counselors described that their students know what the Mastery Transcript is and that it will be used to share what they have learned. The process for selecting the artifacts that will go on the transcript is different from school to school. One counselor described it as a way to build excitement around the beginning of the college search and application process that takes place during junior year. The counselor stated that “it’s more exciting to roll out the transcript when there’s actually something to put on it. And so we go in and pre-fill in their credits earned at the end of first semester junior year, because then every student has stuff that shows up.” The counselors also described their caseloads as smaller than average, leading them to have the ability to utilize an individualized approach to the college advising work. The largest caseload was 100:1 while the smallest was 20:1. This is a huge difference from the national average and allows for this type of individualized, mastery-based approach.

Building Credibility: *“It’s even more critical that the high school counselors have a relationship with that admissions office.”*

The interviews conducted with high school counselors suggested that there is value in the transcript. One counselor described the value they see in it, stating that “[p]rior to the MTC

transcript we really just had a Google Doc so it does feel like it's legitimate and professional and it's connected to something bigger than us which I think makes it legitimate for parents too." One counselor felt that the transcript helps "de-stress the process" because of the expanded ability it has to demonstrate student learning and show a reader exactly what their knowledge and skills are in a given domain. This counselor described how their students recognize that a college has all the information it needs in order to know what this student has learned. Other counselors noted student's ability to highlight their work or projects through the transcript as a helpful component. The counselors noted how the process of reviewing and selecting the artifacts that are part of the transcript helped students recognize the amount of learning they did and feel more confident in their applications. The same counselor who felt the process is less stressful also shared that they "think empowerment really is the key piece of that for me, and helping sort of demystify the process and help them see that what they did here matters and how colleges are looking at their applications." The counselors noted that students are able to highlight important moments from their high school careers. They are also able to select artifacts that they truly care about. One counselor shared a reflection that a student commented to them, saying:

I think generally they like having something tangible, that they can actually show what they've done [and] that they're proud of, that they like being able to show that it feels really real. And they, I think a lot of them appreciate, especially now those that have graduated, they appreciate the fact that they can show so much of the work that they've done that even didn't really coincide with the class, but was something that they did outside of outside of a class, but it was still related to school.

The counselors saw value in how the transcript is a better tool to demonstrate student learning and describe exactly what students learned in a meaningful way.

An additional theme that emerged in the application of the Mastery Transcript to the school counselors' work is fostering relationships with the colleges that are receiving the transcript. A staff member with MTC recognized that "there's certainly a relationship that we wanted to have with our higher ed partners, but more importantly I know that it's even more critical that the high school counselors have a relationship with that admissions office." One college admissions officer relayed their surprise at receiving a Mastery

Transcript, stating that they were “under the false impression that there weren’t schools that would be submitting the mastery transcript this year.” The officer also shared that they saw the transcript for the first time in the current application cycle with a student’s application. The admissions officer wanted to build a relationship with both the high school that sent the transcript and MTC in order to learn more. They stated that “this is a fundamental shift and I think there’s a lot of good that’s coming from that. But I do think conversations and opportunity to learn is a really important component of that and really want to welcome further conversations with MTC and with other admissions officers who are thinking through these ideas as well.”

The high schools also recognized the value of building a relationship with the college admissions offices. The counselors received phone calls and messages with questions or comments. The knowledge they have of the mastery transcript helped them feel “like I’m [a] more effective advocate and can provide better service to my students”, as one counselor described it. In the counselor survey one high school counselor shared a concern they are facing with communication with college admissions officers.

I find that the on the ground admissions counselors do not know about it. MTC seems to talk to high level admissions staff and it isn’t trickling down. Also with the high higher ed turnover...any previous knowledge is lost.

This reiterates the importance of high school counselors having relationships with their own regional admissions officers.

Not only do high school counselors recognize the importance of strong relationships with college admissions officers, but the admissions officers also recognize and value their relationships with high school counselors. Of the 56 survey responses from college admissions officers, 34 (~61%) shared that they have strong relationships with high school counselors sharing quotes such as, “positive, I feel comfortable reaching out if I have questions and I am open to talking to counselors directly” and “we have a great relationship with our high school counselors and understand the importance of their role in the admission process.”

Challenges with the Transcript: *“They’re gonna call us and then we’re going to talk it through.”*

Another theme in the application of the Mastery Transcript is the challenges associated with using the transcript. College admissions officers have questions, which will be expanded on in our third research question. Building on the relationships that have been developed between high school counselors and college admissions offices, officers will reach out when there is a question or confusion around the transcript and what something means.

The counselors shared that students also had questions when filling out parts of the application. Some college applications ask students to enter courses and grades, and this will be a separate section on the application. Many counselors noted that this has been a challenge for students because they do not have traditional course names or grades. One school leader noted that “It’s hard for students to fill out college applications when it comes to having to fill out their courses and their credits and so the counselor and I both work with students to try to translate that for them.” Another counselor noted that some colleges believe students have left out some information on the application, stating, “anytime one of our students applies to a school for the first time, I always get an email or phone call from the admissions office. They’re saying, ‘Hey, I think you forgot to include grades.’” The counselors noted that the conversations that follow have generally been positive even if there was confusion at the beginning. One counselor stated that “it’s almost always a great conversation when I talk about the model of our school and what our students have to do, you know, and how they advance. It’s never been a deterrent.” The majority of the conversations, according to the counselors, have been about the level of rigor students experienced in their high school courses. Counselors reported that college admissions offices wanted to know if students completed Algebra II, US History, or a senior-level English class. Counselors also always submit a school profile that details the classes students take and the progression of courses as they move through high school. This information, according to the counselors, is helpful for application readers.

Additionally, admissions officers also shared that they want to ensure that students have completed certain course titles if they are interested in certain majors that may require

students having prerequisite knowledge, such as computer science or pre-professional studies. MTC recognized this as a challenge of using the transcript, noting that “We need to spend some time thinking about the given specific majors; your engineering, your pre-med that require a much more multi-dimensional look into a student’s background and experience that I think we have the potential to incorporate.” A high school counselor at a public mastery learning school described this challenge for students with Mastery Transcripts.

And so even though it's not a course, like we'll say they've learned geometry concepts, right, they've learned algebra and trig concept. Same with science. And like, you know, if especially for students going into a STEM field, they want to know about chemistry, and they want to know about physics or other physical science. And so we have just tried to weave that into either like the way the credit areas are set up in our transcript or in the way we explain things in our school profile.

Another challenge is reporting a student’s GPA. For many college applications, students are asked to report a GPA. This may be needed for admissions purposes or financial aid purposes. In these instances, students will often choose not to enter any information. The counselors reported that admissions representatives will contact them seeking this info. Many of the counselors reported simply estimating this number to satisfy the requirements needed for financial aid offices. One counselor was clear in their approach, stating that they simply “make it up.” The approach that is taken tends to vary from school to school. One counselor said that their estimated GPA is based on student experiences, school philosophies, and what the college is asking for. They put it like this:

And everybody has this kind of roll your own approach to estimating GPA, which is effectively a made up number because we don't award recorded report grades, so we can't really have GPA, but we come up with these made up numbers based upon our students experiences there that sort of slot them into some hierarchy that colleges can understand so that they can get scholarships and financial aid.

While the counselors and school leaders noted the many challenges students have had in completing their applications, they did note that students gaining admission to their first-choice colleges, and the positive experiences and emotions that brings, have outweighed the confusion and stress that has come with the process. The open lines of

communication counselors have with the admission officers can help both parties navigate the confusion that may exist. One counselor recognizes that “[college admissions offices] are gonna call us and then we’re going to talk it through”. This counselor also noted that the process can be much more empowering and clear cut for students since they are in complete control over what goes on the application. Despite the challenges, the counselors all felt that the transcript has worked for students and they will be successful. Revisiting a statement made by a counselor above, “it just works.”

We heard from many high school counselors and high school based individuals about their thoughts and work related to the Mastery Transcript. However, the interviews with two college admissions officers revealed differences in their approach to reviewing applications with the Mastery Transcript. One interview was with an admissions officer at a large public university and the other was with an officer at a small liberal arts school. Their perceptions about the Mastery Transcript were valuable and informative in how these particular institutions approach a non-traditional transcript.

III. How college admissions officers perceive the value and relevance of mastery transcripts.

Application Components: *“I think what we’re hoping to learn is the same, it’s just a different way of processing information.”*

Before the responses from the admissions officers are explored, it is helpful to note what admissions offices deemed important on an application. There are various factors that are important to college admissions offices, and no two colleges are exactly the same in terms of what is important to them. Table 3 highlights six of the factors that colleges review when considering an application for admissions. College admissions officers were asked to rate these factors on a scale of 1-4, where 1 is the least important and 4 is the most important. The average responses for each factor are shown below.

Table 3

"What are you looking for in an application? Rate the following on a scale of 1 - 4 where 1 is least important and 4 is most important."

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Average Response</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
Standardized Test Scores	2.29	0.59
Grades/GPA	3.80	0.40
Essay	2.84	0.55
Responses to Short Answer Questions	3.03	0.66
Extracurricular Activities	2.47	0.68
Letters of Recommendation	2.71	0.66

These data suggest that grades/GPA hold the most weight with college admissions officers who responded to the survey, followed by an applicant's essay or personal statement. Interestingly, standardized test scores were rated the lowest. The same question was asked of the two interview participants. They did not talk about grades or GPA specifically but wanted to know the context around the success they had in the classes that a student took. The admissions officer from the public university shared:

We are looking at how a student is doing within their particular high school, what performances and classes they are offered, how they are doing within it and then we get into a lot of sort of extracurricular activity and socioeconomic backgrounds that are contexts that we can take into place.

The admissions officer at the liberal arts college shared that they want to know "what they've learned and the degree to which they've learned that." This admissions officer also recognized that every high school is different and there is not a set answer to what factors are important in an application. Both admissions officers hinted at what is important to their respective universities when reviewing applications, but there were differences in how each university reads an application from a student with a Mastery Transcript.

Norming the Review Process: *"I do think that there'll be a lot more training that's required and we'll also as a college have to really articulate what we're expecting of students."*

A theme that arose from these interviews was the fairness of the application reading process when a student applies with a Mastery Transcript. The admissions officer from the large, public university suggested that it is unfair that students with a Mastery Transcript require the reader to spend more time on their application than they would on the application with a traditional transcript. This officer's perspective was founded on the belief that Mastery Transcripts provide students with an unfair advantage. This individual shared that they want to know how students are performing and if they are a good fit for their university, but that using the Mastery Transcript to provide that information is a different way of processing and thinking about the question. They stated:

I think it is unfair that students who are coming from a school with a Mastery Transcript would be getting an additional type of review that they would be given an opportunity that other students would not get. The short answer is we are doing everything we can to mitigate that in our process because with [a large number of] students it's not fair that the less than 1% at the moment that are currently coming this way are getting reviewed in a significantly different way.

This college admissions officer felt that the Mastery Transcript required extra time and that the application their institution had developed worked well for them. The introduction of a document that disrupted the use of their application created this unfair advantage. However, the admissions officer did add that they were "not going to treat these students any differently than we would anyone else, at least philosophically based on what it is that we're looking for."

Alternatively, the admissions officer from the liberal arts college was open to receiving more applications that featured a Mastery Transcript. While the actual number they received was, according to them, "less than 1%", the admissions officer was able to learn much more context around that particular student's learning. The admissions officer shared that "there's a lot more nuance, and understanding that we get from that kind of

detail” present on a Mastery Transcript. They found the information on course goals and student skill sets beneficial. The context that was present with the Mastery Transcript allowed this admissions officer to know more about a student. Though they were not as familiar with the transcript, this admissions officer was eager to learn more.

Capacity of Admissions Officers: *“Trying to delve into really understand the student is not something we can train our literally hundreds of readers on so instead it falls to the shoulders of a handful of individuals.”*

MTC staff were also interviewed about the work they have done with colleges and universities as they prepared for the Mastery Transcript to be sent as part of admissions applications. They shared that even with the goal of learning about students, that “systems are not in place to evaluate Mastery Transcripts at high volumes [...] but the potential of having that be part of the way things are done” is there. This different way of processing the information is taking more time than colleges and university admissions teams were ready for.

A theme that arose when speaking with both college admissions officers and MTC staff was the training necessary for college admissions officers and readers to be able to fully understand the Mastery Transcript when it is received. The MTC staff recognized this issue in our conversation with them and noted how the internal workings and turnover of admissions offices complicate matters further:

One of the constraints with that, admissions officers come and go so whatever we provide an institution this month, by the time that we come around for a review next year, either that person has left, that person has moved on to other roles and are no longer part of the reading process. So it’s the constant retraining that’s the nature of the work.

The admissions officer at the small liberal arts school shared the struggle they have faced when receiving a Mastery Transcript; they are not familiar enough with the transcript. Since they only see a few applications with a Mastery Transcript each year, it is hard to know what they’re looking for or what changes may have occurred since the previous application

cycle. This admissions officer believes that the Mastery Transcript is quite valuable; however, they described how they feel they are lacking information and guidance to review them appropriately. They described a need to norm the Mastery Transcript to help them understand a particular student as they relate to the rest of the senior class and other schools that are using the Mastery Transcript. They shared that “seeing the way in which different schools are approaching the use of Mastery Transcript will be really, really helpful.” As more schools potentially begin using the Mastery Transcript, admissions officers will need to learn more. One admissions officer shared that students with a Mastery Transcript “were always the few exceptions. But if you've now got a large consortium that is putting together hundreds of schools, that's a very different thing.”

A school leader also noted the challenge of students applying to colleges that are open to the Mastery Transcript but may lack the resources needed to truly interpret it. This leader stated that “The conceptual conversation is there with colleges but the logistics; they're still so focused on traditional schools so if your experience doesn't translate...”, hinting at the possibility that students could be at a disadvantage because they have a Mastery Transcript. A counselor shared:

The Mastery Transcript assumes students are applying to liberal arts colleges. Many colleges have moved to students self-reporting their transcripts. I do believe the educational philosophy around the Mastery Transcript is awesome and I appreciate the focus on skill development and distance traveled in a student's educational career. That said, idealism vs. realism is a tension here.

There was a concern from college admissions offices about the time it takes to read applications. As the number of applications increases, the time given to read an application gets lower and lower. Interviews from both sides of the college admissions desk noted the 3-5 minute transcript read as being an essential part of the application review in order to learn about the academic history of a student. More time can be needed to find that information when grades or a GPA are not present, which is the case with the Mastery Transcript. One admissions officer shared that “it is requiring a great deal more” of time to review these applications.

In order to address some of the issues that college admissions offices have raised about the Mastery Transcript, MTC introduced the Learning Record. MTC has developed this document to serve as a bridge between a traditional transcript and the Mastery Transcript. According to MTC, the Learning Record can be used in partnership with a traditional transcript and looks like a simpler version of the Mastery Transcript. As schools make their transition to be fully mastery based, they can use the Learning Record to report student learning while still providing a traditional transcript with grades and GPA. Schools that have fully transitioned can also use the Learning Record to make it somewhat easier for transcript readers to understand what students have reported. The Learning Record made its debut at the symposium we attended in September 2022, and participants we interviewed expressed enthusiasm for it and a desire to learn more about the Learning Record and its potential use in the college admissions process. An example of the Learning Record can be found in [Appendix J](#).

6. DISCUSSION

The findings shared above fit with the previous research on the college advising aspect of high school counseling in traditional schools while at the same time revealing key differences in the work strategies and approaches embraced in MTC member schools and sending schools. At the onset of this study we sought to learn how high school counselors conduct their college advising when using the Mastery Transcript. We anticipated finding that the college advising process is different, possibly more complex, for mastery learning schools. Grounded in previous literature, we seek to map these findings to what has previously been studied. A discussion is below.

The Role of High School Counselors

The ASCA recommends a 250:1 student to counselor ratio (ASCA, 2023). We found that the average caseload for the counselors that were interviewed is much smaller. It is also much smaller than the national average of 408:1 (ASCA, 2023). This is significant in that it allows the counselors at the MTC member schools to form relationships with their students and parents as they go through the application process. This relationship is an important

component of the college advising aspect (McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012). The findings establish that this relationship forms part of the process that counselors use in helping students navigate both the college application and how best to present their artifacts on the Mastery Transcript. It also allows counselors the time to field the questions that come from the college admissions offices. One important distinction in the student to counselor caseload ratio is that the counselors at MTC member schools are often the only individual working with students on college advising. While there may be additional counselors that support the other aspects of a comprehensive school counseling program, including academic planning or social/emotional counseling, the counselors who we surveyed and interviewed solely work with students as they completed their college applications. Once again this created the opportunity for the counselors to forge the necessary relationship in order to best support their students. Finally, many of the schools are smaller than traditional high schools. This was true for both the public and private high schools that we interviewed. This can also contribute to the smaller caseloads since there are fewer overall students. Regardless of the number of students they serve, the counselors all sought to establish a relationship with their students and their families in order to be the best resource as they completed college and financial aid applications.

The extant literature on the role of high school counselors shows the many directions in which counselors are pulled (McDonough, 2005). While the interview participants were spending the majority of their time working with students on college applications, survey participants did indicate the variety of roles they have at their schools. Similar to McDonough (2005) and O'Connell's (2018) findings, our study highlighted the different roles school counselors also serve. Some are expected to provide mental health support, perform administrative tasks, and support in college guidance. Like their colleagues in traditional high schools, some of these same tasks were required of high school counselors in mastery learning schools.

One role that may be unique to high school counselors and leaders in sending schools is that of being one of the experts of the Mastery Transcript. Since it is different and requires training for all who use or read it, the high school counselor or school leader becomes a source of knowledge for others, particularly college admission offices, seeking information. With smaller caseloads and a role that is only focused on college advising, there is time for

these individuals to take phone calls that come in from college admissions officers. The training MTC conducts also helps alleviate some of these questions that come in. Perhaps most importantly, the relationships that counselors establish with students and parents help in the explanation of how the process will work with a Mastery Transcript. The work completed at all steps in the process helps build the college going culture that McKillip, Rawls, & Barry (2012) describe. The counselors described the work they do with students and parents begins at different times but it is done to create that environment needed to promote student success. Despite the role being more complex because it adds the explanation and application of the Mastery Transcript, the ultimate goal of these high school counselors is the same as any high school counselor in any high school; to help their students gain admission to their first-choice college.

College Application Process

There is wide variety among what college admissions offices deem critical on a college application (Sackett, Sharpe, & Kuncel, 2021). Our findings from the college admissions professionals survey support this. Our findings also support the previous research in how colleges approach admissions and what the high school counselors were experiencing. We did not find any major differences between the literature and the experiences the high school counselors were reporting. There are some minor differences that could be attributed to the use of the Mastery Transcript, again making the work more complex. Our survey results indicated that admissions professionals rated grades and GPA highest on an application. The Mastery Transcript does not provide letter grades, potentially creating a tension between what an admissions officer would prefer to see and what is provided. The information it can provide is an example of student learning. A reader has the ability to see an example of student learning if they wish to view it. The Mastery Transcript provides a means for students to demonstrate their learning that is far different from a letter grade. While earning a grade of "A" may be familiar for college admissions representatives, there is little context to help them understand what exactly that grade means (Martin, 2019). There is an assumption that students have learned the topic for a given class. Readers of a Mastery Transcript have the information they need in order to understand just what a student has learned. Rather than seeing an "A" on a transcript, the reader can see the evidence for why a student received credit for a given course or, if a

letter grade is given, the reason that particular grade was awarded. There is the ability for a student story to be presented in a way that a traditional transcript is unable to do. In the absence of grades, the Mastery Transcript can provide more information about what a student knows but at the risk of being buried in the sheer volume of information present on the transcript. This adds complexity to the work done by the high school counselors in order to help their students highlight appropriate artifacts and ensure the admissions offices are able to access and use that work. The concern that the Mastery Transcript is not being used as intended has merit.

Context matters to college admissions professionals. The ability to know as much about a student as possible helps an application reader know them from the information they share. As we found in the previous research, having more information is helpful for the college admissions office (Erbes, Wizner, & Powles, 2021). The Mastery Transcript offers a way to provide the extra information and context admissions professionals are asking for. These colleges are seeking nonacademic factors when making their decision. These factors are important to colleges to help them distinguish between equally qualified applicants (Hossler et al., 2019). Despite the availability of this additional context, the variety of colleges to which students apply creates a wide variety of how their applications are read. Once again, the importance placed on different components of the application changes from college to college. This makes it difficult for school counselors who use Mastery Transcripts to advise their students. The challenge of knowing what information is important to one college compared to another makes the work more complex and difficult.

Research shows that colleges are looking for students with challenging course loads and strong transcripts (Wood, 2022). The interdisciplinary nature of the classes at MTC member schools make it difficult for college admissions officers to ascertain the course rigor that students experienced as they progress through their high school journey. They are also unsure if students are prepared, thus making it difficult to know if the students have met prerequisites needed in order to be admitted to study certain disciplines. This adds complexity to the work as high school counselors must have conversations with admissions offices to help them understand what a student has learned. It also speaks to the limited familiarity the application readers have with the Mastery Transcript since the information they are seeking is available to them. On a traditional transcript, which most college

admissions offices are familiar with, this information can be found as a course title that is generally the same from high school to high school. On a Mastery Transcript it can be difficult for college admissions professionals to know what content was covered in a certain course. As we found, the Mastery Transcript provides examples of student work while at the same time requiring extra training for readers. This can create learning gaps for college admissions who simply seek to know if a student has completed Algebra II or Physics. While we found that it can be difficult for school counselors to explain their courses to college admissions offices, the conversations that follow help reassure the admissions offices what students have experienced. The complexity comes with the added time needed to field the questions.

While college admissions officers declare they can be flexible with the types of transcripts they receive from colleges, the majority of those transcripts will have somewhat similar information. The Mastery Transcript is different, requiring more time and training to fully understand. While the college admissions offices will want to do their due diligence and review each individual application, the volume of applications they receive may limit this ability. As was described by a college admissions officer, the time needed to read the application may create inequality in the system. High school counselors also expressed a worry that their students would be disadvantaged because of the time needed to read the Mastery Transcript. The disposition of the application reader at the time the application is read is something the high school counselors expressed concern about. The college admissions offices publicly indicate they will read each application with the time and care they deserve but questions and concerns remain regarding what the actual practice may include – and exclude. The uncertainty surrounding college admissions and the Mastery Transcript creates difficulty for high school counselors that are attempting to reassure and reduce anxiety in students and parents.

High school counselors want their students to gain admission to the colleges of their choice. Admissions officers want to offer admission to the students who apply. As time has gone on, the quest to best produce an application that captures all the relevant information from a student's high school journey has gone through many iterations. For high schools that use the Mastery Transcript, the work has become more complex because there is more information to present. The usual challenges related to the college admissions

process exist in these schools. The high school counselors and school leaders take on the added challenges to best serve their students and help them take the steps to reach their goals. Despite the small number of sending schools, there has been an impact from these schools on how college admissions offices are reading applications. Colleges may welcome these changes warmly or begrudgingly, but they are being forced to recognize that some high schools are doing something different. Admissions offices will read the applications they receive and use the information they contain as best as they can to make their decision. Ultimately, the end goal remains; helping students gain admission to college.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The Mastery Transcript Consortium is still a relatively new organization. They have grown tremendously over the past five years and continue to push for the Mastery Transcript to be accepted and valued in both the high school space and the college admissions space, and high school counselors are a key component to making this happen.

When first analyzing the data collected from counselors, school leaders, and college admissions officers, we suspected that high school counselors may struggle with their understanding of the Mastery Transcript, which would lead to having a difficult time explaining them to parents, students, and other stakeholders. Finally, we believed that college admissions officers would be on board with the mastery transcript and open to learning more about how it can benefit students. We explored the interviews and survey responses and found that counselors at sending schools have a full understanding of the Mastery Transcript and how to explain it, but counselors at non-sending schools are struggling to master and share the Mastery Transcript. Additionally, we found that college admissions officers have mixed perspectives about their appreciation and understanding of the Mastery Transcript. Taken together, the Mastery Transcript is serving its purpose to highlight student work but making it more arduous to understand on a college application. These dual purposes make it both an effective tool to demonstrate student learning and a significant challenge for readers to overcome.

In summary, the college admissions process, both from the high school counseling side and from the college admissions side, is complex at Mastery Transcript sending schools.

According to the data, high school counselors at sending schools understand the mastery transcript and are comfortable explaining it to others, but counselors at member schools that have not fully transitioned to the Mastery Transcript are struggling much more. Furthermore, college admissions officers are open to the idea of receiving the Mastery Transcript. However, with the amount of turnover in the college admissions space, they struggle to fully implement systems and structures to read them as they would a traditional transcript.

The results of this analysis have implications for The Mastery Transcript Consortium and the college admissions world. There are numerous areas for further research. If we were to extend this analysis, it would be worthwhile to examine the implementation of the new MTC Learning Record ([Appendix J](#)) as a tool for schools who are transitioning to sending the Mastery Transcript. It would be valuable to explore how it integrates with the Mastery Transcript and how colleges interact with it if they become part of admissions applications. It would also be beneficial to study the outcomes of the students themselves who are applying to college using the Mastery Transcript. How are they performing compared to their peers who applied with traditional transcripts? What have their experiences been like? Looking longitudinally at students from mastery high schools as they progress through college and beyond would have the added benefit of showing how the lack of a traditional transcript impacts college success, completion, and beyond. Additionally, financial aid offices use information from traditional transcripts, like grades, GPA, or standardized test scores, to make financial aid decisions. This is something that students applying to college with the Mastery Transcript must navigate, and additional research would benefit the impact it is having on financial aid decisions. What are the implications of the omitted data on a Mastery Transcript and a student's financial aid award? Lastly, exploring the impact of professional development about the Mastery Transcript on college admissions offices would be helpful to better understand how best to support the individuals that will be reading applications with the Mastery Transcript. Given the limitations of our study, we recognize that our findings and analysis may be considered tentative and require further research. However, as the Mastery Transcript is an emerging area of interest, there is certainly room for continued analysis.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

We strive to learn the best ways to support college counselors as valuable members of school teams as their schools transition to mastery learning. Our three research questions focus on how well high school counselors understand the Mastery Transcript, apply the Mastery Transcript, and how college admissions officers receive and perceive the Mastery Transcript. Given our limitations, we propose recommendations for the Mastery Transcript Consortium which align to these research questions and the findings associated with each.

- **Support high schools in the process of becoming mastery learning schools**

We found that high school counselors at member schools who are in the process of, or considering, transitioning to sending Mastery Transcripts to colleges are struggling more with understanding the transcript than their counterparts at sending schools. High school counselors at sending schools are knowledgeable about mastery learning and the Mastery Transcript. As schools work through this transition from traditional to mastery learning, the transcript seems to be a sticking point for some. We know this is not the organization's current focus since it is somewhat separate from the transcript itself, but if more schools are able to successfully transition to being full mastery learning schools, then they will have an easier time adopting the transcript. It is important for schools who are interested in making the change to mastery learning to set up explicit systems and structures to help their teachers learn the best practices of mastery learning and also to promote a crosswalk between traditional schooling and transcripts and mastery learning and competencies. MTC's new Learning Record is a great tool for this. It allows teachers and schools to begin the transition to grading for mastery while still maintaining their current grading and transcript practices. This transitional use of the Learning Record can lead to schools becoming more comfortable with the Mastery Transcript, ultimately resulting in the schools feeling confident in becoming fully sending schools.

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- **Recognize and highlight sending schools that are doing the work well and encourage them to connect with other member schools that are seeking to become sending schools**

With reference to the application of the Mastery Transcript, school leaders from both an established private school on the east coast and an alternative private school on the west coast shared that the teachers at their schools don't know where to start when it comes to teaching for mastery and supporting students with their transcript. These leaders would love to see exemplars not only of the transcript but also how it should look in the classroom and across the school in general. In the eyes of some MTC member schools, the membership and the network lends legitimacy to the Mastery Transcript. Using this network to build relationships among schools and increase the use of the Mastery Transcript will continue to strengthen how the Mastery Transcript is viewed. This could be a way for MTC to support schools during their transition from traditional learning to mastery learning. One school leader expressed a desire for those invested in the mastery learning space to collaborate more and to work together to build competencies and to streamline the Mastery Transcript process. Each school is working independently to develop their competencies and build their transcripts. This is an area where established schools can support newer schools; they can share their competency areas as inspiration and provide exemplars of the Mastery Transcript for new and potential mastery schools to learn from.

- **Be an influential voice on state policies around college admissions requirements**

As MTC grows and seeks to expand into public schools at the district or state level, there is an opportunity to join the conversation on admissions requirements that are set by state legislative bodies or state boards of education for public universities. Some of these requirements include minimum GPAs, test scores, or completion of certain courses to demonstrate academic preparedness. One interview participant shared that admissions requirements are set by the state and it is difficult for students with a Mastery Transcript to demonstrate that they have met these requirements. Though it is difficult to gain admission it is not impossible, and these students are admitted after conversations with the high school and MTC. However, if MTC is able to leverage their collective network to

preemptively influence state policy around these admissions requirements, the process can be made easier not only for students at sending schools but all students.

- **Identify key personnel in admissions offices and designate them as the Mastery Transcript expert**

The college admissions space also needs support as it relates to using the Mastery Transcript for college applications. This team found that there is so much turnover in admissions offices that training a team once may only be enough for that application cycle. It is unlikely that every member of an admissions team will change from year to year, but training should be ongoing and widespread. As the use of the Mastery Transcript increases, more admissions offices should become familiar with it. Identifying key personnel would allow admissions offices to have someone that can educate regional representatives or others in the office about the Mastery Transcript. This expert would also receive regular updates from MTC. The admissions officer at the small liberal arts school shared the struggle they face when receiving a Mastery Transcript since they are not familiar enough with the transcript to know if they are looking at a strong example or not. It would be helpful for them to see exemplars of a Mastery Transcript that demonstrates and highlights the competencies a student has mastered. The in-house expert can also be familiar with these exemplars and train their colleagues on how to be familiar with the documents they are receiving.

- **Develop a streamlined means of reading the Mastery Transcript for college admissions**

With the increase in the number of applications admissions professionals must read, it is difficult to spend the time needed to truly understand everything that is available on the Mastery Transcript. There is potential to have two versions of the Mastery Transcript; one for high schools that students can use as portfolios of their learning and how they meet graduation requirements, and the other for colleges that is more condensed and usable for an admissions office to ensure applicants have met certain admissions requirements. If it is not possible to have an expert on staff, the ability to have a short version of the Mastery Transcript would be an invaluable resource. The intended use of the transcript that

demonstrates student learning is still available to the high schools while also allowing it to be more accessible to college admissions offices.

- **Work with higher education institutions to modify financial aid policies to remove the need for a GPA requirement**

There is a real concern around the use of traditional student measures like a GPA to determine the amount of financial aid a student is awarded. If the number of students who use the Mastery Transcript increases and there is a level of advocacy for these students, colleges will begin to rethink how they award merit-based financial aid awards. This can make it a more equitable process for all students.

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10. Appendices

Appendix A

<i>Number of Interviews in Each Percent of Interview Categories</i>	
<u>Type</u>	<u>Number of Interviews</u>
Public HS Counselors	3
Private HS Counselors	5
Public HS Leaders	1
Private HS Leaders	2
College Admissions Officers	2
MTC Staff	2
Total	15

Appendix B
MTC High School Counselor Survey

We invite you to participate in the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC) High School Counselor Survey

Before MTC can implement support for high school counselors who are working with students and families through the college admissions process, the organization needs to understand what current counselors perceive as the most challenging aspects of this transition and where additional support can be provided. This study will draw upon the experiences and expertise of high school counselors, principals, and college admissions officers to inform strengths, weaknesses, and next steps for MTC. If you are not the right person to complete the counselor survey, or you feel others would also provide valuable insight, please feel free to forward it to counselors in your building who support students in college guidance.

We would greatly appreciate it if you would complete the questionnaire below as soon as possible. It only takes 15-20 minutes to fill out the survey. Please return this survey by Monday, November 28, 2022.

We need your input as an expert in college counseling and advising.

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are a high school counselor with experience and expertise supporting students as they progress through the college application process. Whether or not you participate in the survey is entirely up to you and your responses will remain anonymous unless you decide to share your email address at the end. If you choose to complete the survey, and if there is a question you do not wish to answer, simply skip it. We hope you will answer as many questions as possible. Your responses will help ensure that the study reflects your experiences.

For further information about this study, please contact Principal Investigator Lukas Mendoza at 574-404-7043 or via email, matthew.lukas.mendoza@vanderbilt.edu. If you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board at 615-322-2918.

We thank you for your important contribution to this study.

Part 1: Fast Facts

Q1 What is your role?

- School Counselor (1)
- College Counselor (8)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q2 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q3 How many years has your school been sending the Mastery Transcript to higher education institutions?

- We haven't yet, but we plan to in the future (1)
- This is the first year (2)
- This is the second year (3)
- Three or more years (4)

Part 2: Foundations of Mastery Learning & The Mastery Transcript

Q4 How are you learning/have learned about mastery learning? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- School administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- No one (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q5 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q6 How would you like to continue to learn about mastery learning? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- School administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I would not like to continue to learn about mastery learning (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q7 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q8 How are you learning/have learned about the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- School administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- No one (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q9 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q10 How would you like to continue to learn about the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- School administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I would not like to continue to learn about the mastery transcript (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q11 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q12 Do you have any difficulties explaining the mastery transcript to others? If so, please explain.

Part 3: Role as a High School Counselor

Q13 How long have you been a high school counselor?

- This is my first year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 4-6 years (3)
- 7+ years (4)

Q14 How long have you been a counselor in a mastery learning school?

- This is my first year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 4-6 years (3)
- 7+ years (4)

Q15 What training have you received about how to support college guidance? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- My principal or other administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- None (6)
- Other, please specify below: (7)

Q16 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q17 How often do you meet with your school principal?

-
- Once per week (1)
 - 2x-4x per week (2)
 - Everyday (3)
 - Only informally, no scheduled meetings (4)
 - Never (5)

Q18 I would like to meet with my school principal:

- More than I do now (1)
- The same as I do now (2)
- Less than I do now (3)

Q19 Which of the following best describes the way in which students at this school are assigned to counselors?

- There is only one counselor at my school (all students at this school are assigned to their caseload) (1)
- Students are assigned to counselors alphabetically (2)
- Students are assigned to counselors based on their grade or grade band (3)
- Students are assigned to counselors by cohort, so they have the same counselor throughout their time at the school (4)
- Students are assigned to counselors based on certain pathway or program of study (5)
- Students are assigned randomly (6)
- Not sure (7)
- Other, please elaborate below: (8)

Q20 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q21 Please order the items below based on how much time you spend on them. (from most time to least time)

- _____ Delivering school-wide/comprehensive counseling programming (e.g., development of personal-social skills, development of academic skills, postsecondary and career planning, development of PD/materials for teachers) (1)
- _____ Individual student planning (e.g., developing student educational, postsecondary, and career plans; interpreting student assessment data) (4)
- _____ Individual and group counseling to address discipline, behavior, or a response to a crisis (5)
- _____ Student support: collaboration, consultation, referral (6)
- _____ Manage and evaluate the quality of the school counseling program (7)
- _____ Identify and work with students with high absenteeism rates (8)
- _____ Data analysis to review changes in student achievement, behavior, etc. (9)
- _____ Other non-counseling activities (e.g., testing coordination, master scheduling) (10)

Q22 Rate the following statements on a scale of 1-4 where 1 is not true and 4 is very true.

Not Applicable
1 2 3 4

My school's counseling program is improving students' academic skills development. ()
My school's counseling program is improving students' personal-social skills development. ()
My school's counseling program is improving students' postsecondary and career going knowledge, skills, and mindsets. ()

Q23 Who do you go to for advice about refining your counseling practices? (Select up to two options)

- Other counselors in the school (1)
- Other counselors in my district/professional network (2)
- School administrators (3)
- District staff (4)
- MTC staff (5)
- Regional Counselor Coaches (6)
- Faculty from my preparation program (7)
- There is no one to help me refine my practices. (8)
- Other, please specify below: (9)

Q24 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q25 In what ways do you communicate with families about college and/or the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)

- Email (1)
- Phone calls (2)
- Text messages (3)
- In person (4)
- Groups (parent nights/breakfasts/gatherings) (5)
- I don't communicate with families (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q26 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q27 What components are included in your school profile?

Part 4: College Admissions

Q28 How would you describe the relationship you have with college admissions officers? Please explain.

Part 5: Identifying Information (Optional)

Q29 Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this survey. If you'd like to continue this conversation with us, please share your name and email address below.

Appendix C
MTC School Leader Survey

We invite you to participate in the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC) High School Principal Survey

Before MTC can implement support for high school counselors who are working with students and families through the college admissions process, the organization needs to understand what current administrators perceive as the most challenging aspects of this transition and where additional support can be provided. This study will draw upon the experiences and expertise of high school counselors, principals, and college admissions officers to inform strengths, weaknesses, and next steps for MTC. If you are not the right person to complete the principal/administrator survey, or you feel others would also provide valuable insight, please feel free to forward it to administrators in your building who support counselors in college guidance.

We would greatly appreciate it if you would complete the questionnaire below as soon as possible. It only takes 15-20 minutes to fill out the survey. Please return this survey by November 4, 2022.

We need your input as a support in college counseling and advising.

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are a high school principal with experience and expertise supporting students as they progress through the college application process. Whether or not you participate in the survey is entirely up to you and your responses will remain anonymous unless you decide to share your email address at the end. If you choose to complete the survey, and if there is a question you do not wish to answer, simply skip it. We hope you will answer as many questions as possible. Your responses will help ensure that the study reflects your experiences.

For further information about this study, please contact Principal Investigator Lukas Mendoza at 574-404-7043 or via email, matthew.lukas.mendoza@vanderbilt.edu. If you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board at 615-322-2918.

We thank you for your important contribution to this study.

Part 1: Fast Facts

Q1 What is your role?

- Head of School (1)
- Principal (2)
- Assistant Principal (3)
- Dean (4)
- Director (5)
- Coordinator (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q2 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q3 How many years has your school been sending the Mastery Transcript to higher education institutions?

- We haven't yet, but we plan to in the future (1)
- This is the first year (2)
- This is the second year (3)
- Three or more years (4)

Part 2: Foundations of Mastery Learning & The Mastery Transcript

Q4 How are you learning/have learned about mastery learning? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- Other administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- No one (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q5 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q6 How would you like to continue to learn about mastery learning? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- Other administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I would not like to continue to learn about mastery learning (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q7 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q8 How are you learning/have learned about the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- Other administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- No one (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q9 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q10 How would you like to continue to learn about the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- Other administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I would not like to continue to learn about the mastery transcript (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q11 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q12 Do you have any difficulties explaining the mastery transcript to others? If so, please explain.

Part 3: Role as a High School Principal

Q13 How long have you been an administrator?

- This is my first year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 4-6 years (3)
- 7+ years (4)

Q14 How long have you been an administrator in a mastery learning school?

- This is my first year (1)
- 1-3 years (2)
- 4-6 years (3)
- 7+ years (4)

Q15 What training have you received about how to support college guidance (both the people and the process)? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- Other administrators (2)
- Books/My own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- None (6)
- Other, please specify below: (7)

Q16 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q17 How often do you meet with your school counselor(s)?

- Once per week (1)
- 2x-4x per week (2)
- Everyday (3)
- Only informally, no scheduled meetings (4)
- Never (5)

Q18 I would like to meet with my school counselor(s):

- More than I do now (1)
- The same as I do now (2)
- Less than I do now (3)

Q19 Which of the following best describes the way in which students at this school are assigned to counselors?

- There is only one counselor at my school (all students at this school are assigned to their caseload) (1)
- Students are assigned to counselors alphabetically (2)
- Students are assigned to counselors based on their grade or grade band (3)
- Students are assigned to counselors by cohort, so they have the same counselor throughout their time at the school (4)
- Students are assigned to counselors based on certain pathway or program of study (5)
- Students are assigned randomly (6)
- Not sure (7)
- Other, please elaborate below: (8)

Q20 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q21 Rate the following statements on a scale of 1-4 where 1 is not true and 4 is very true.

1 2 3 4

My school's counseling program is improving students' academic skills development. ()

My school's counseling program is improving students' personal-social skills development. ()

My school's counseling program is improving students' postsecondary and career going knowledge, skills, and mindsets. ()

Q22 Who do you prefer your counselors go to for advice about refining their counseling practices? (Select up to two options)

- Other counselors in the school (1)
- Other counselors in their district/professional network (2)
- School administrators (3)
- District staff (4)

-
- MTC staff (5)
 - Regional Counselor Coaches (6)
 - Faculty from their preparation program (7)
 - There is no one to help them refine their practices. (8)
 - Other, please specify below: (9)

Q23 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q24 In what ways do you communicate with families about college and/or the mastery transcript? (select all that apply)

- Email (1)
- Phone calls (2)
- Text messages (3)
- In person (4)
- Groups (parent nights/breakfasts/gatherings) (5)
- I don't communicate with families (6)
- Other, please elaborate below: (7)

Q25 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q26 What components are included in your school profile?

Part 4: College Admissions

Q27 How would you describe the relationship you have with college admissions officers?

Q28 How would you describe the relationship your counselor(s) has with college admissions officers?

Part 5: Identifying Information (Optional)Block 5

Q29 If you'd like to continue this conversation with us, please share your name and email address below.

Appendix D
College Admissions Officer Survey

We invite you to participate in the Mastery Transcript Consortium (MTC) College Admissions Officer Survey

Before MTC can implement support for high school counselors who are working with students and families through the college admissions process, the organization seeks to understand what current admissions officers perceive as the most challenging aspects of this transition and where additional support can be provided. This study will draw upon the experiences and expertise of college admissions officers to inform strengths, weaknesses, and next steps for MTC. If you are not the right person to complete this survey, or you feel others would also provide valuable insight, please feel free to forward it to admissions officers who look at non-traditional high school transcripts such as the Mastery Transcript.

We would greatly appreciate it if you would complete the questionnaire below as soon as possible. It only takes 15-20 minutes to fill out the survey. Please return this survey by Friday, October 21, 2022.

We need your input as an expert in the college application process.

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you are a college admissions officer with experience and expertise in the college application process. Whether or not you participate in the survey is entirely up to you and your responses will remain anonymous unless you choose to share your email address at the end. If you choose to complete the survey, and if there is a question you do not wish to answer, simply skip it. We hope you will answer as many questions as possible. Your response will help ensure that the study reflects your experiences.

For further information about this study, please contact Principal Investigator Lukas Mendoza at 574-404-7043 or via email, matthew.lukas.mendoza@vanderbilt.edu. If you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Vanderbilt University Institutional Review Board at 615-322-2918. We thank you for your important contribution to this study.

Part 1: Fast Facts

Q1 What is your role in college admissions?

- Vice President/Provost of Enrollment (1)
- Dean (2)
- Director (3)
- Assistant Director (4)
- Admissions Counselor (5)
- Other, please specify below: (6)

Q2 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q3 How long have you worked in college admissions?

-
- This is my first year (1)
 - 1-3 years (2)
 - 4-6 years (3)
 - 7+ years (4)

Q4 Please select the type of college/university where you work.

- Four-year public college/university (1)
- Four-year private college/university (2)
- Community college/2-year program (3)
- Other, please specify below: (4)

Q5 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q6 Please select the size of the college/university where you work.

- Small (2,000 or fewer students) (1)
- Medium (2,000-10,000 students) (2)
- Large (more than 10,000 students) (3)

Q7 The college/university where I work accepts students applying with the Mastery Transcript.

(Sample transcript can be seen at <https://transcript.mastery.org> with the access code 74YI+0)

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Unsure (3)

Part 2: Foundations of Mastery Learning & The Mastery Transcript

Q8 How would you rate your understanding of mastery learning?

- I don't really know what it is. (1)
- I'm learning but still have more to go. (2)
- I understand mastery learning. (3)
- I understand it so well I could teach it to others. (4)

Q9 How are you learning/have learned about mastery learning? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- High school administrators (2)
- Books/my own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I'm not/I haven't (6)
- Other, please specify below. (7)

Q10 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q11 How would you like to continue to learn about mastery learning? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- High school administrators (2)
- Books/my own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I would not like to learn about mastery learning. (6)
- Other, please specify below: (7)

Q12 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q13 How would you rate your understanding of the Mastery Transcript?

- I don't really know what it is. (1)
- I'm learning but still have more to go. (2)
- I understand mastery learning. (3)
- I understand it so well I could teach it to others. (4)

Q14 How are you learning/have learned about the Mastery Transcript? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- High school administrators (2)
- Books/my own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I'm not/I haven't (6)
- Other, please specify below: (7)

Q15 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Q16 How would you like to continue to learn about the Mastery Transcript? (select all that apply)

- Formal education (undergraduate/graduate) (1)
- High school administrators (2)
- Books/my own research (3)
- MTC led professional development (4)
- Other professional development (5)
- I would not like to learn about mastery learning. (6)
- Other, please specify below: (7)

Q17 If you selected "other" above, please explain:

Part 3: Role as a College Admissions Officer

Q18 How would you describe the relationship you have with high school counselors in general?

Q19 How would you describe the relationship you have with high school counselors at mastery learning schools?

(e.g. member schools with the Mastery Transcript Consortium:
<https://mastery.org/mtc-member-schools/>)

Q20 What are you looking for in an application? Rate the following on a scale of 1 - 4 where 1 is least important and 4 is most important.

Not Applicable

1 2 3 4

Standardized Test Scores ()

Grades/GPA ()

Essay ()

Responses to Short Answer Questions ()

Extracurricular Activities ()

Letters of Recommendation ()

Q21 What else, not mentioned above, do you look for in college applications?

Q22 What do you see as valuable in the Mastery Transcript? (select all that apply)

(Sample transcript can be seen at <https://transcript.mastery.org> with the access code 74YI+0)

- Competency Profile (1)
- Portfolio Examples/Student Work (2)
- Other, please elaborate below: (3)

Q23 If you selected "other" above, please elaborate:

Q24 For high schools who send the Mastery Transcript, what components do you look for in their School Profile?

Part 4: Identifying Information (Optional)

Q25 Thank you so much for taking the time to share with us.

If you'd like to continue this conversation in person, by phone, or over zoom, please share your name and email address below and a member of our team will reach out to you. If you'd like to remain anonymous then you may click ahead to complete the survey.

Appendix E

Sample Mastery Transcript

Currently previewing Juliet Guastella's Transcript
Export full transcript as PDF

Juliet Guastella

1 Main Street
Burlington, VT 05401


Juliet believes in the principle of choosing one's own path. Driven by the notion of making the world a better place, her strengths lie within places she can help others succeed and realize their importance.

CREDITS

COURSES

Enosburg Falls High School - SAMPLE
(460130)
65 Dickinson Ave
Enosburg Falls, VT 05450
[Link to school profile](#)


4550992977
John Smith
100
4/27/2020



Credit Profile

Distribution of credits earned by student.

Filter by Advanced Foundational



49

Transferable Skills 4

- Self-direction
- Generate solutions
- Evaluate information
- Synthesize information
- Apply knowledge
- Making a difference
- Respecting diversity
- Practicing responsible digital citizenship
- Use technology effectively
- Taking responsibility
- Collaboration
- Identify and define problems

The Arts 4

- Performing
- Connecting
- Creating
- Responding

Health & Physical Education 3

- Physical health
- Social emotional health
- Sexual health
- Leadership **Advanced**

Science & Mathematics 4

- Statistical reasoning
- Algebraic reasoning
- Geometric reasoning
- Scientific experimental design
- Scientific explanation
- Scientific modeling
- Advanced Statistical Reasoning **Advanced**

Disciplinary Literacy 3

- Central Ideas
- Language Analysis
- Analyzing Claims
- Writing
- Advanced Writing **Advanced**
- Vocabulary
- Conventions

Global Citizenship 3

- International Relations **Advanced**
- STEM **Advanced**
- Geography
- Research **Advanced** **Advanced**
- Geography **Advanced** **Advanced**
- Research
- Civics
- Leadership **Advanced**
- Creativity **Advanced**
- Entrepreneurship **Advanced**
- Civics **Advanced** **Advanced**

Communication 3

- Consider the audience and purpose when communicating
- Ask questions and provide feedback
- Participate effectively in discussions
- Listen to build understanding

Evidence

Featured work selected by the student.

Synthesize information

Unethical Medical Research During the Holocaust

An extensive research paper outlining the research atrocities conducted by Nazis onto p...

Scientific experimental design

Physics in Movies: Batman's High Dive

A physics report that unravels the possibility of performing the famous Batman High Div...

Geography

Cult Museum Project: Exploring Cults in Fiction

A deep dive into a specific cult from HBO's Game of Thrones known as the Faceless Men. ...

Research

Gorilla Project: "Youthful Offenders"

My Gorilla Project about the state of Vermont's law change regarding who is considered ...

Civics

Did the Constitution Establish a Just Government?

An essay outlining Juliet's opinion regarding the Constitution's ability to create a ju...

Leadership **Advanced**

CADCA Leadership Forum

A multi-page reflection of my first trip to Washington D.C. and the national CADCA conf...

Courses

This student has met all state graduation requirements.

Group by Year Subject

2016 - 2017		2017 - 2018	
Health	01/2017	PACE	06/2018
Humanities History	06/2017	Modern world history	06/2018
Algebra 1	06/2017	Journaalism	06/2018
Geometry Accelerated	06/2017	Algebra 2	06/2018
Earth Science	06/2017	College Prep Biology	06/2018
Graphic Design	06/2017	French 2	06/2018
French 1	06/2017	Modern World Literature	06/2018
2018 - 2019		2019 - 2020	
Dystopian Literature	01/2019	AP Statistics	01/2020
Creative Writing	01/2019	Human Development	01/2020
Documentary Film	05/2019	Senior Seminar	01/2020
American Literature	06/2019	Leadership and Empowerment	06/2020
U.S. History	06/2019	America 301	06/2020
Physics of Superheroes	06/2019	French 4	06/2020
AP Psychology	06/2019	Cyber Security	06/2020
French 3	06/2019		

Mendoza & Kramer O'Brien

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Appendix F

High School Counselor Interview Protocol

Intro script:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We have a few questions about your experiences with the mastery transcript and how you and your school use it. We are recording this interview unless you do not wish to do that. Your responses will remain confidential.

Basic demo questions

- How long have you been here?
- How long have you been in counseling?
- Why did you decide to work at _____ school?
- How many students do you work with?
- What platforms do you/your school use?

MT & college advising

- How would you describe the way you work with your students? We can start with your goals and your strategies.
- What events do you/your school host related to college advising/financial aid?
- How has using MT impacted your work?
 - What was the learning curve for MT like?
 - How did you learn about MT?
 - If you worked at a non-MT school previously, what was the transition like?
 - How have students reacted to MT?
 - How have parents reacted to MT?
 - How have college admissions reps reacted to MT?
 - How much contact do you have with colleges about MT?
 - What do admissions reps say is important info for MT?
 - What sorts of clarifying questions do you receive from college admissions officers?
 - What feedback are they providing?
 - What percentage of students apply without a test score?
 - How does MT add (or not) to students that apply without a test score?
- What are the most common schools where your students are being accepted?
- Are there any standouts (highly selective, unique, etc)?
- Have any schools flat out refused to accept or told you they will not accept the MT?
 - If yes, which ones (if you'd like to name them)?
- What do you like about MT?
- What would you like to improve?
- What type of support has MTC provided you? What do you wish they would provide?

- Is there anything you wish I had asked you? What else would you like to share?

Appendix G

High School Principal Interview Protocol

Intro script:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We have a few questions about your experiences with the mastery transcript and how you and your school use it. We are recording this interview unless you do not wish to do that. Your responses will remain confidential.

Demo questions

- How long have you been with your school?
- How many students attend your school?

MT

- How has MT been implemented at your school?
- What role do you play in the college application process?
- How are counselors supported in their work with students?
- How has using MT impacted your work?
 - What was the learning curve for MT like?
 - How did you learn about MT?
 - If you worked at a non-MT school, what was the transition like?
 - How have students reacted to MT?
 - How have parents reacted to MT?
 - How have college admissions reps reacted to MT?
- What do you like about MT?
- What would you like to improve?

- Is there anything you wish I had asked you? What else would you like to share?

Appendix H

College Admissions Officer Interview Protocol

Intro script:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We have a few questions about your experiences with a nontraditional transcript/mastery transcript. We are seeking your insights about the mastery transcript. We are not seeking to convince you of its use but want to gather your thoughts and opinions about it, both good and bad. We are recording this interview unless you do not wish to do that. Your responses will remain confidential.

- How long have you been here?
- How long have you been in admissions (either side of the desk)?

MT & admissions

● How many students (percentage) do you see with an MT?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● How has the MT impacted your work?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How did you learn about it?○ How were you supported in learning how to read it?○ What is the value you see?○ What are some challenges?○ What clarifying questions do you ask high school counselors about MT?	<p><i>**If none or clear dislike for it... **</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● What does your office do with non-traditional transcripts in general?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What factors are you looking for in a transcript?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How does MT change that?● How has test optional impacted your work?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How does MT add (or not) to students that apply without a test score?● What do you like most about MT? What do you like least about MT?● What would you like to improve?● Do you see MT growing in popularity in the near term? Why? ● Is there anything you wish I had asked you? What else would you like to share?	

Appendix I

Mastery Transcript Consortium Personnel Interview Protocol

Intro script:

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. We have a few questions about the work MTC is doing with the mastery transcript. We are recording this interview unless you do not wish to do that. Your responses will remain confidential.

Demo questions

- What is your name?
- How long have you been with MTC?

MT

- How was MT developed?
- Why was MT developed?
 - How does it capture student learning?
 - What information is most important on MT?
- How have you supported colleges when they receive MT?
 - What goes into that process?
 - How much contact do you have with colleges?
 - What about the high schools themselves?
 - What do admissions reps say is important info for MT?
 - What are some key challenges?
- How have you supported sending schools with regards to MT?
 - How are counselors supported?
- What are key strengths related to MT?
- What are some areas that could be strengthened or improved?
- What are the growth goals/trends for MT, moving forward?
 - Have you considered integrating with Naviance, Scoir, or other college admissions systems?
- Is there anything you wish I had asked you? What else would you like to share?

Appendix J

Sample Mastery Learning Record

Student details
Competencies Earned
Experiences Completed
Organization Profile

Taylor Gemini

DOB: 10/02/2004
 Graduation: 2023
 Address: 123 Main Street, Centerville, OH, 40001
 Published: 11/30/2022
 Organization: MTC-18 (Tou - MLR sample)

Student Statement

"Taylor believes in the principle of choosing one's own path. Driven by the notion of making the world a better place, Taylor's strengths lie within the places he can help others succeed and realize their importance."

MTC-18 (Tou - MLR sample)

Learning record authorized: Amy Authorizer, Registrar, Mora

Evidence

Featured work selected by the learner.

AC Advanced Competency



CADCA Leadership Forum
 Competency: Emergent Leadership / Leadership, Civic Engagement, and Social Influence
 A multi-page reflection of my first trip to Washington D.C. and the national CADCA conference.
 Experience Mentions: Conference/Symposium Attendee

AC Advanced Competency



Independent Gym Project: Daily Yoga and Meditation
 Competency: Self-Determination / Self-Directed Learner
 Independent extended learning opportunity in which I practiced yoga on a daily basis, reflected, and improved.
 Experience Mentions: Independent Study

FC Foundational Competency



Physics in Movies: Batman's High Dive
 Competency: Scientific Reasoning & Process / Adaptive Learning
 A physics report that unravels the possibility of performing the famous Batman High Dive in reality.

Taylor's Competency Distribution

55 completed | 3 in progress



Taylor's Competency List

- ◆ Advanced Competency
- Competency in progress
- ▲ Includes evidence

Taylor's Competency Summary

FOUNDATIONAL COMPETENCY
 41 completed
 0 in progress

ADVANCED COMPETENCY
 14 completed
 3 in progress

Applied Analytical and Critical Thinking

- Advanced Statistical Reasoning ◆
- Problem Solving
- Ideation
- Reasoning
- Transfer ◆
- Authentic Contribution ◆
- Compelling Curiosity
- Statistical Reasoning
- Iteration
- Evaluating Evidence
- Information Literacy

Communication and Collaboration

- Responsible Contribution
- Fostering Collaborative Team Environment
- Persuasion ◆
- Negotiation
- Literature Analysis
- Articulation in Writing
- Creative and Formal Written Expressions
- Academic Conversations
- Deep Listening ◆
- Public Speaking ◆ ○

Adaptive Learning

- Science of Learning
- Mathematical Reasoning
- Data Interpretation
- Historical Reasoning
- Scientific Process
- Advanced Scientific Investigation ◆
- Scientific Reasoning & Process ▲
- Bilingualism

Self-Directed Learner

- Self-Determination ◆ ▲
- Growth Mindset
- Integrity & Responsible Decision Making
- Resilience
- Academic & Intrapersonal Reflection
- Resourcefulness
- Process Engagement ◆
- Self-Advocacy
- Goal Setting

Leadership, Civic Engagement, and Social Influence

- Global Citizenship
- Historical Connections ▲
- Exploring Perspectives
- Leadership Collaboration ◆
- Ethical and Moral Integrity ◆
- Community Engagement ◆
- Digital Citizenship
- Global Interdependence ◆
- Project Leadership
- Geographical Analysis
- Emergent Leadership ◆ ○ ▲

Creativity and Innovation

- Divergent/Lateral Thinking ◆
- Public Exhibition Design ◆
- Entrepreneurship
- Original Expression
- Creativity From Synthesis
- Public Exhibition of Work
- Creativity From Transfer
- Apprenticeship
- Advanced Original Expression ◆ ○

Taylor's Completed Experiences

▲ Indicates one or more evidence records mention this experience

There is not a one-to-one relationship between competencies and listed learning "Experiences." Learners gather the evidence needed to earn each competency from a combination of experiences in which they have participated.

2020 - 2021	2019 - 2020
Independent Study 1▲ 06/2021	Conference/Symposium Attendee 1▲ 01/2020

Organization Profile for MTC-18 (Tou - MLR sample)

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

About
 MTC-10 is a public high school serving communities in the North Country. Our families choose MTC-10 for the flexibility, challenge, and support that students receive through our programming as they