



MASTERY
TRANSCRIPT
CONSORTIUM™

mastery.org

GETTING OUR SIGNALS STRAIGHT FOR STUDENTS

HOW THE MASTERY TRANSCRIPT CONSORTIUM IS
RE-ALIGNING THE PATH FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE



Introduction

The transition from high school to college marks a moment of monumental and exciting change for students and families, but it represents an equally monumental impediment to positive change in high schools and higher education. College admissions rely upon an outdated and outmoded means of communicating student learning: the traditional high school transcript. This reliance reinforces a century old model of education and impedes the innovation that is sorely needed if we are, as a nation, to prepare all students for the evolving worlds of college, career, and life.

“In partnership with our members and allies, we are redesigning the high school transcript so that the interests of students, high schools, and higher education are aligned. The Mastery Transcript values the higher order skills necessary for success in college and career. It conveys to admissions officers a deeper, more authentic story about a student: who they are, what they have learned, how they have grown, what they love, and who they want to be.”

STACY CALDWELL, CEO, MASTERY TRANSCRIPT CONSORTIUM

At the Mastery Transcript Consortium™ (MTC), the “why” of our work is clear: the status quo is failing our students. The high school transcript reduces students to a list of course grades and a Grade Point Average (GPA) that tell us very little about who they are today, and even less about who they could be tomorrow. Yet, the high school transcript continues to be the primary means of representing a student within the college admissions process, and plays a powerful role in establishing what “counts” as learning and who is “competitive” for college. The outsized power of the traditional transcript reinforces outdated modes of education, constrains innovation, and impedes the pursuit of educational equity. Moreover, it constrains our ability as a nation to prepare all students with the knowledge and skills they will need if they are to rise to the dynamic challenges and opportunities of a world we cannot yet imagine¹.

This paper describes our “how:” MTC is realigning the path from high school to college. MTC is bringing high schools and colleges together around new visions for learning in order to reinvent how students prepare for their futures. MTC is more than an organization. MTC is a network of high school and higher education leaders committed to true educational equity²: ensuring all

1 Wagner, T. (2014). *The global achievement gap: Why even our best schools don't teach the new survival skills our children need-and what we can do about it*. Basic Books.

2 This definition of equity is derived from the National Equity Project, available at this link: <https://nationalequityproject.org/about/equity>

students experience education that develops their gifts and prepares them to thrive on a course of their choosing.

Achieving equity and opportunities for success for all requires a collective, sustained effort by communities, organizations, and institutions across the country. MTC contributes to this collective effort by addressing one strategic point of leverage: the high school transcript. This paper will describe how the high school transcript operates as a lever for change and how MTC is using this lever to mobilize high schools and higher education for lasting systemic impact.

The Current State

High schools serve many purposes, arguably the most important of which is preparing all students for college, career, and life. Being prepared requires a deep sense of purpose and self; skills for lifelong learning; and the ability to apply skills to meaningful work, challenges, and opportunities.³ But rather than learning how to work collaboratively, think critically, and solve complex problems, too many students only experience learning in outdated systems: those that reward the acquisition and retention of information, that rank and sort students, and that fail to develop or value students' unique interests and gifts. Decades of policy and practice reform have shown pockets of progress toward preparing all students for success, but still this truth remains: too many students continue to graduate high school unprepared for the work and learning that awaits them.

"A GPA is not an equalizer; a GPA is a diminisher. Kids have been distilled to a number and they've been distilled down to a very narrow range of things that can be measured."

SCOTT LOONEY, FOUNDER AND BOARD CHAIR OF MASTERY TRANSCRIPT CONSORTIUM

Many factors hold the traditional high school steadily and seemingly intractably in place. Innovators, advocates, and policymakers have been chipping away for decades. Yet, transformational progress remains elusive. MTC is pursuing systemic change by focusing on one unique factor that has remained an impediment to transformation: the high school transcript. Why? Because the high school transcript represents and maintains a deeply broken system in which higher education admission drives the nature, shape, and content of high school education, resulting in shallow learning and persistent equity gaps.

Institutes of higher education signal to high schools what matters most to them through their primary admissions requirements: course grades, GPA, and test scores. Many institutions of higher education recognize these as reductive and limited measures of student learning. Nonetheless, they continue to rely on them as the safest predictors, not necessarily of student potential, but of admissions yields and class composition. High schools pick up on higher education's signals and use them to make key decisions about what they teach, how they teach, and what they value as learning. Using course grades, GPA and test scores as the primary

3 Bialik, M., Fadel, C., Trilling, B., Nilsson, P., & Groff, J. (2015). *Skills for the 21st Century: What should students Learn*. Centre for Curriculum Redesign, Boston, Massachusetts.

means of translating students' experiences to colleges and universities, high schools are incentivized to organize learning within core content areas, use letter grades and units of time to capture what students have learned, and reduce students to a single standardized number. These actions drastically limit the learning that students experience, fail to cultivate and honor students' diverse skills and abilities and, too often, graduate students who are not ready to thrive in college and career.

In this broken system, no one's needs are adequately met. High schools struggle to support authentic learning, improve college and career readiness, and close achievement gaps. Colleges and universities struggle, too: they struggle to cultivate holistic diversity within their student body⁴, promote health and wellness on campus⁵, and admit intellectually curious students who are prepared to contribute to vibrant learning environments.⁶ But it is perhaps students who struggle the most. Students – if they graduate high school and if they are admitted to college or university – struggle in the transition to higher education, often paying thousands of dollars for remedial coursework to fill gaps left by their high school experiences.⁷ And upon earning a degree, too many find themselves unprepared for the evolving world of work: unemployed or underemployed on the margins of a changing economy.⁸

The Mastery Transcript Consortium™ Theory of Action

MTC has launched an effort to redesign the high school transcript and in doing so begins the process of reconfiguring the college admissions process so that it is fully aligned with today's understanding of student learning – how they learn and what they need to learn to be fully prepared. However, simply creating a new transcript isn't enough. MTC needs a broader set of strategies to begin to heave the century old reliance on time-based courses and the GPA to make way for a college admissions process that is fully aligned with the interests of students, high schools and higher education. In order to leverage this change in the transcript and college admissions process, the MTC theory of action draws upon three critical levers for change.

1

Build a **Mastery Transcript** that authentically and holistically captures student learning, progress, and interests.

2

Create a networked innovation space where **High Schools** can use the Mastery Transcript to catalyze and support redesign.

3

Engage **Higher Education** institutions who will adopt the Mastery Transcript as a catalyst for rethinking admissions and mobilize their peers to do the same.

4 Pappano, L. (January 16, 2019) America's colleges struggle to envision the future of diversity on campus. Retrieved from: <https://hechingerreport.org/whither-diversity/>

5 Pope, D., Brown, M., & Miles, S. (2015). *Overloaded and underprepared: Strategies for stronger schools and healthy, successful kids*. John Wiley & Sons.

6 Deresiewicz, W. (2015). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. Simon and Schuster.

7 Butrymowicz, S. (January 30, 2017) Most colleges enroll many students who aren't prepared for higher education. Retrieved from: <https://hechingerreport.org/colleges-enroll-students-arent-prepared-higher-education/>

8 Mourshed, M., Farrell, D., & Barton, D. (2013). *Education to employment: Designing a system that works*. McKinsey Center for Government.

By activating these levers we believe that we will, in the long term, realign high schools and higher education to fully support the preparation of students for college, career and life. However, given how deeply ingrained the transcript is in our society and the powerful role it plays in the traditional education system, an equally powerful strategy is needed to dislodge it. MTC knows that it will take more than one organization's leverage to create innovation space within the college admissions process. Thus, the theory of action, described below, is built on the assumption that everything is done in partnership with member schools and allies. Equal attention will be paid to creating the proof points as to building the demand for change.

Build a Mastery Transcript

The high school transcript is the primary means of communication between high school and higher education. MTC is building a Mastery Transcript as a first, critical step toward changing the way higher education admissions influences high school design, thereby unleashing new possibilities in mastery learning.

The transcript is the entity—the single piece of paper or digital file—that translates achievement between high school and higher education. It is also the entity that is used and trusted to define young people's value to colleges, universities, and future employers. But the traditional high school transcript is misleadingly reductive, and it says very little about student learning or identity:

- It reduces four years of hard work and the rich diversity of students' skills, passions, and experiences to a single number;
- It only values learning that happens within courses in discrete subject areas;
- It values achievement at the exclusion of growth; and
- It ignores the development of lifelong learning skills, character traits, and other competencies that are crucial for success in college, career, and life.
- It encourages pursuit of perfection and points (through weighted classes) rather than learning and real-world learning.

What are the implications of this? First, the traditional transcript contributes to inequity and opportunity gaps by failing to represent young people fully or fairly. A grade point average conceals students' growth over time, and a low grade point average fails to represent young people's future potential. Second, the traditional transcript is an impediment to innovation and mastery learning. It holds high schools in place, forcing them to tread water in teaching, learning, and school design practices that were invented in the industrial age. Third, the traditional transcript is a barrier to success in higher education. Offices of admissions recognize that the traditional transcript tells them little about the students they wish to admit, and that the outdated high school practices held in place by the transcript do not prepare students to thrive in a higher education learning environment.

Enter the Mastery Transcript, a dramatic alternative to the status quo. The Mastery Transcript takes the transcript off the page: from a two-dimensional accounting of student time spent on single subjects and a listing of grades without context, to an interactive digital transcript that highlights mastery of content and interdisciplinary skills. The Mastery Transcript values the

higher order skills necessary for success in college and career, and it tells a story about a student: who they are, what they have learned, what they love, and who they want to be. The Mastery Transcript also enables (and necessitates) mastery learning. Its power is not only in what it communicates, but also in what it empowers: learning that is deeply personalized, student driven, based in authentic engagement, and designed to educate the “whole student.”

To build a Mastery Transcript, MTC has established the following priority strategies:

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| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Build a clear and reliable Mastery Transcript that communicates a holistic representation of each student’s unique skills, strengths, and interests. | Generate demand for and support adoption of the Mastery Transcript as an alternative to the traditional high school transcript | Demonstrate the Mastery Transcript’s validity as a representation of student potential in higher education admissions | Normalize the adoption of the Mastery Transcript as an acceptable tool for higher education admissions |

Facilitate a Powerful Peer Network for High School Redesign

The traditional transcript is a barrier to high school innovation. MTC removes this barrier, offers a transformative tool in the Mastery Transcript, and creates the conditions in which high schools can accelerate the shift toward mastery learning.

Leaders, schools, districts, and organizations have spent decades developing mastery learning (also referred to as competency-based or proficiency-based education), and many have made laudable strides. Still, all continue to run up against the traditional transcript as a barrier in their innovation. When they are beholden to the traditional transcript as a means of communicating students’ experiences to colleges and universities, high schools are incentivized to organize learning in discrete subject areas, prioritize acquisition of content knowledge at the exclusion of broader competencies, uphold traditional grading practices, and rank and sort students based on achievement instead of growth. In the name of helping students communicate their readiness to colleges and universities, schools are discouraged from pursuing the very innovations in learning that can prepare students for success in college, career and life. The transcript can cap innovation in schools that are on the path to innovation, and prevent others from even embarking on the journey.

Adopting the Mastery Transcript does more than remove a barrier to innovation; it unleashes innovation in high schools. It brings innovators together and accelerates them on the pathway to mastery learning and mastery school design, whether they are just beginning that journey ...or are well along their way. The Mastery Transcript encourages and supports schools to define the broader set of outcomes they will use to measure success, describe the types of deeper learning experiences students will need to have in order to develop those outcomes, and identify the critical systems and structures needed to sustain such reimagined learning.

This process — redesigning high school to enable mastery learning and use the Mastery Transcript — is not simple and it does not happen in isolation. Therefore, MTC facilitates a networked learning environment that supports member schools along the redesign pathway, with the shared goal of ensuring all students are prepared for college, career, and life. MTC recruits member schools that represent the diversity of high schools in the nation, supports them to learn and innovate, and activates them for broader change.

To facilitate a powerful peer network for high school redesign, MTC has established the following priority strategies:

1

Engage member schools in rich peer-to-peer learning experiences that help them create conditions for mastery learning

2

Support member schools in leveraging the Mastery Transcript for high school redesign, including creating mastery credits, providing mastery learning experiences, and aligning school systems and structures to support both.

3

Empower member schools as leaders and influencers for broader change.

Engage and Activate Higher Education

“The Mastery Transcript will give us a better understanding of kids and help us to open up opportunities to a much broader set of students and know they are prepared and ready for our institution.”

ZINA EVANS, VICE PRESIDENT FOR ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT AND ASSOCIATE PROVOST

The traditional high school transcript is a limited tool for higher education admissions; while it is widely seen as the safest predictor of key admissions metrics, it is too narrow to fully represent the range of skills, experiences, interests, and potential that colleges and universities seek to cultivate in their communities. MTC offers a transformative new tool in the Mastery Transcript, and activates higher education leaders to make systemic changes in admissions practices and policy.

Colleges want to support authentic, rich education focused on the full range of skills that students need. Among institutions of higher education there is growing understanding of the broad academic, social, and higher order competencies as well as passions and interests that allow students to thrive on a college campus. There is also a growing movement towards valuing richer, deeper education for students, both at the high school and higher education levels. And, there is a growing recognition that current admissions policies — those that rely on course grades and grade point averages — do not reflect those broader competencies or enable that richer, deeper education. And yet, change in higher education admissions has been slow to come. For many in admissions, the “safest” choice is to continue to operate within the system that has yielded predictable, if imperfect, results. And, a complex network of institutions and policies — financial

aid, scholarships, and NCAA eligibility, for example – contribute to reinforcing the status quo of admissions practices, making change seem politically and strategically daunting. What will it take to mobilize change in an environment where there is curiosity about change, but little collective will or capacity to break away from known practices? It will take a push to change the game. The MTC believes we can provide that push.

MTC is engaging representatives from leading colleges, universities, and related institutions as changemakers and influencers toward sustainable change in higher education admissions. MTC will offer higher education an alternative to the traditional transcript: one that provides more nuance and depth than grades and grade point averages, while still providing consistency and validity for successful admissions. MTC will identify influential institutions of higher education willing to advocate for a change in the status quo and support policy and practice changes needed for sustainable changes to admissions. As adoption increases, MTC will show how partner institutions have used the Mastery Transcript successfully, showcasing proof points for change within higher education admissions. And, we will activate partner institutions to advocate for policy and practice changes across the field of higher education.

To engage and activate higher education, MTC has established the following priority strategies:

- 1** Identify, connect, and engage influential institutions of higher education willing to lead for innovation in higher education admissions.
- 2** Support institutions of higher education to make necessary shifts to admissions policy and practice within their institutions.
- 3** Engage partner institutions as advocates for sustainable policy and practice change across the field of higher education through advocacy and technical support.

Putting the Pieces Together

MTC's levers for change operate together for combined impact over time. In our initial phase, MTC is piloting the Mastery Transcript with a small set of schools, building a network of high schools on the path to mastery learning, and engaging institutions of higher education. This work will lay the foundation for MTC to enter a second stage of redesigning and realigning the college admissions process by demonstrating the validity of the Mastery Transcript as a tool for capturing student achievement and predicting college success. Finally, MTC will shift toward a third and final stage focused on advocacy and scale. In this phase, MTC will move to realize a vision in which the Mastery Transcript is widely and consistently accepted in high schools and higher education alike, unleashing innovation and driving the spread of mastery learning for all.

Phase 01
**Develop, Engage,
and Connect**

This phase of work focuses on cultivating conditions for change: increasing awareness and adoption of the Mastery Transcript in the field, engaging and connecting early adopters to lead the way for innovation.

Phase 02
Redesign

This phase of work focuses on proving the potential of the Mastery Transcript. Specifically, MTC will prove the tool's validity and supporting schools and higher education to optimize the Mastery Transcript in their contexts through changes to school design, policy, and practice.

Phase 03
**Advocate
and Grow**

This phase of work focuses on expanding and accelerating mastery learning: increasing the adoption of the Mastery Transcript, leveraging high school and higher education networks as advocates, and supporting sustainable policy changes that allow for mastery learning at scale.

- Build a clear and reliable Mastery Transcript that communicates a holistic representation of each student's unique skills, strengths, and interests.
- Generate demand for and support adoption of the Mastery Transcript as an alternative to the traditional high school transcript

- Demonstrate the Mastery Transcript's validity as a representation of student potential in higher education admissions

- Normalize the adoption of the Mastery Transcript as an acceptable tool for higher education admissions

- Engage member schools in rich peer to peer learning experiences that help them create conditions for mastery learning.

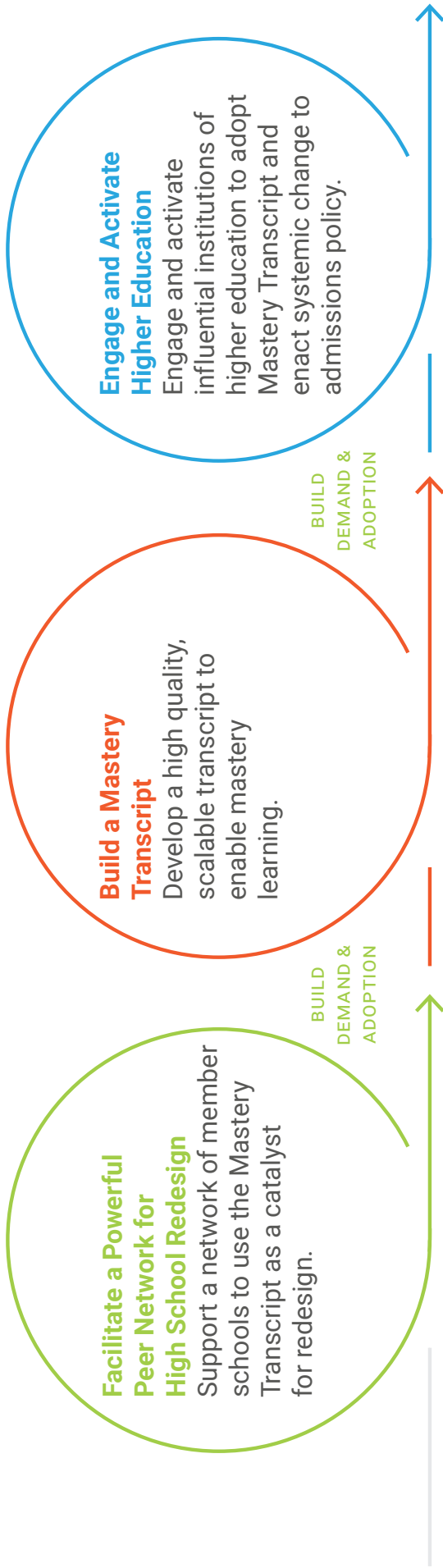
- Support member schools to leverage the Mastery Transcript for high school redesign, including creating mastery credits, providing mastery learning experiences, and aligning school systems and structures to support both.

- Empower member schools as leaders and influencers for broader change.

- Identify, connect, and engage influential institutions of higher education willing to lead for innovation in higher education admissions

- Support institutions of higher education to and make necessary shifts to admissions policy and practice within their institutions.

- Engage partner institutions as advocates for sustainable policy and practice change across the field of higher education through advocacy and technical support.



Conclusion

The college admissions process, transcript and reliance on the GPA have constrained high school improvement and innovation for far too long. We can do better. We must do better if we are going to fully prepare students – not some but all – for college, careers and life.

Transformation starts by having the courage to imagine a different relationship between high school and colleges. Imagine high schools designed to cultivate authentic, cross-disciplinary, community-connected learning and focused on helping students grow, not on ranking them. Imagine a college admissions process that lifts aspirations and inspires students to develop their intellectual curiosity, apply their knowledge and skills to real-world problems, and have a deep sense of purpose in pursuing higher education. Imagine a high school to college pathway that values learning and student mastery, not just good grades, and that truly prepares students to thrive.

At MTC, this vision guides us day in and day out. In partnership with our members and allies, we are redesigning the transcript so that the signals are straight and that the interests of students, high schools, and higher education are aligned.