

**Summary Report and Recommendations from Contextualized Transcript Working Group
submitted by Christopher Derickson, Assistant Provost and University Registrar
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The Contextualized Transcript Working Group consisted of the following members:

Ronald Strauss, Executive Vice Provost
Abigail Panter, Senior Associate Dean, Undergraduate Curricula
Stephanie Schmitt, Associate Dean for Academics, Graduate School
Andrew Perrin, Special Assistant to the Provost and Dean for Compliance and Curricular Innovation
Donna Gilleskie, Professor, Economics
David Thissen, Professor, Psychology and Neuroscience
Candy Davies, Director, ITS – EA ConnectCarolina
David Pass, CS Senior PeopleSoft Analyst
Kendall Luton, student
Townes Dean-Bouchard, student
Christy Samford, Senior Associate University Registrar and Deputy Director
Christopher Derickson, Assistant Provost and University Registrar

The charge of the working group was to review all the concerns identified by the Educational Policy Committee (EPC) and the University Registrar as related to the implementation of the contextualized transcript for undergraduate students. The primary concerns discussed by the committee were the following: 1) auditability and/or verifiability of the contextualized information on the transcript; 2) the readability or overall understanding of the transcript with the contextualized data added; 3) potential technical challenges and/or opportunities of having a contextualized format; 4) relevance or usefulness of the contextualized data for readers of the transcript (with a focus on graduate and professional school admission offices); 5) how to roll out a new transcript format, with the options being to start with an entering class of students or to start with a specific term and have the contextualized transcript apply to all students; and finally, 6) what should the communication plan be for informing the campus that the change is coming?

1) Auditability or Verifiability of Contextualized Information on the Transcript

The working group discussed at length this primary concern of a constantly changing transcript and how to best mitigate the risks of confusion and frustration related to the fact that an individual student's transcript can change multiple times without any changes to their own record. Any grade or registration changes in the sections on a

student's transcript will potentially result in a change to the contextualized information on an individual student's transcript. Such changes would be most common in the 6-10 weeks after the end of a grading period when temporary Incomplete (IN) and Absent from Final (AB) grades are being converted to final grades. The inherent challenge in these scenarios is that the University Registrar's office would not be able to "prove" the accuracy of the changed contextualized information to a student who questioned such changes because contextualized data, by its very nature, relates to the records of other students, not that individual student.

The working group had several recommendations related to this concern. The first, if no other changes are made, would be a transcript policy indicating that students cannot request a previous iteration of a transcript that may have had more "friendly" contextualized data. This issue is a primary concern of the University Registrar and without such a policy, the changing nature of the contextualized transcript could create a potentially contentious relationship between the Registrar's Office and the students that office serves.

However, the working group did originally discuss two possible recommendations for changes to the policy around the implementation of the contextualized transcript that could address this specific concern. The first would be to create a "grade census" date when contextualized grade information would freeze, and therefore could be published for students to be able to verify their own contextualized transcript data. This approach also addresses the identified concern that a transcript should capture a student's permanent academic record, and a changing transcript could cast doubt on the accuracy of the UNC transcript itself and present challenges for verifying the authenticity or accuracy of transcripts if/when they are called into question. The second possible recommendation was to eliminate the percentage ranges from the transcript as these are the data elements that are most likely to fluctuate (as compared to the median grades) as grade and registration changes occur. Based on subsequent discussions and a later recommendation discussed in point #2 below, the working group's recommended solution for this issue would be the first option, which is to create a grade census date and not to publish contextualized data until that agreed upon date. With this grade census approach, a date for grade data to freeze and appear on the transcript would need to be carefully determined, as there are pros and cons to any date chosen.

2) Readability and Overall Understanding of the Contextualized Transcript

The working group reviewed the contextualized transcript, as it is currently formatted, of Ramses Tarheel, a fake student, with real class information. The group also reviewed UNC's current, official transcript, along with several other universities' transcript formats as a means of establishing some context for the current state of transcripts. Two recommendations came out of the discussion related to this identified concern. The first was a general overhaul of the spacing and overall formatting of the proposed

contextualized transcript. This is in keeping with the confusion expressed at demos and by students that the contextualized data was difficult to distinguish from the student-specific data. I agree wholeheartedly with this recommendation and would go further to suggest that an expert in visually or graphically representing data be involved in the final design decisions.

A second, and unanimous, recommendation by the group was to replace the numerical percentage ranges on the transcript with a graphic representation of the grade distribution information and the median grade for the individual classes. The credit for this recommendation and the attached prototype goes to David Thissen, who has been a great addition to this ongoing discussion about the contextualized transcript.

In discussing the possibility of such an enhancement with ITS, such a graphic could be done but it would be very complicated and possibly could not be completed within ConnectCarolina (the system of record for student information). The pros of such a drastic improvement of representing the contextualized data would need to be weighed against the cons of such a complex technical enhancement. As University Registrar, I would not support producing the transcript outside of the official student information system, so a solution would need to be found within ConnectCarolina.

3) Potential Technical Opportunities and Challenges

The largest technical opportunity that was identified by the group was the fact that the transcript itself is evolving away from a strictly paper-based format. Stanford University, for example, is increasingly adding links to students' work (theses, foreign language oral exams, etc.) on their transcripts. This technical evolution greatly opens up the possibility of how the contextualized transcript could be formatted. However, while many of these technical innovations are possible, the risk and cost are still at a point that it is difficult to justify the move toward an electronic only transcript with either links or other interactive capabilities primarily because of the challenges identified by the group.

The primary technical challenge discussed by the group (other than the challenge mentioned in #2) relates to the increasing move toward the electronic exchange of transcript data between universities and colleges as opposed to providing a paper or even electronic pdf version of the transcript. As this means of providing transcripts to other institutions grows, this would represent an increased disjuncture between the data that a school on data exchange would receive about our students versus those who would still receive the paper or electronic pdf version. The issue here is that schools have to build tables to store the data received via transcript exchange, and if schools are not building tables for median grade, percentile range, or SPA, then that data will not be stored as a part of the "transcript" received by that university. The assumption is that if

the contextualized transcript grows in popularity with UNC setting the standard, then more and more schools would build tables that would allow for the consumption and storing of this additional transcript data. On the other hand, if our transcript does not become a trendsetter, then it's very possible that we would essentially have two different versions based on how schools exchange or receive transcripts.

In my final estimation, this is similar to the issue raised with #2. Technology and the future direction of transcripts in general will dictate how much of a risk or reward the move toward a contextualized transcript will be. My concern is that if we are not a trendsetter with this new transcript type, then we risk an inconsistency in how we represent our students based on where they may apply to transfer or continue on with a graduate or professional degree.

4) Relevance or Usefulness of Contextualized Transcript for Readers

While there wasn't time or money for a full-fledged focus group to get detailed feedback on the utility of the data presented on the contextualized transcript, the working group did invite three admission professionals from key UNC programs to review the proposed format and provide feedback to the group. The three participants were Sridhar Balasubramanian (who goes by Dr. B.) from the MBA program, Anna Ballew O'Connell from the Biological and Biomedical Sciences Program (BBSP), and Matthew Morano from the DDS program. All three admissions professionals were extremely generous with their time and provided extensive and very helpful feedback. Dr. B's primary feedback was a concern about publishing our grading data on the transcript and making the University look bad without a consistent approach to grading patterns for students. His primary recommendation was to consider a standardization of grading patterns to accompany the new transcript.

Anna Ballew O'Connell noted the number of transcripts that her program reads each year, which is well over 1500, and she expressed concern that the readers in her program would not have the time to utilize the additional data provided by the contextualized transcript. In fact, the primary message was that GPA and even test scores are not seen as reliable predictors of success in their program, so additional information related to the GPA would not necessarily benefit their evaluation of the student's qualifications for the program. Anna did present the opposite point of view of Dr. B by indicating that she thought the contextualized grading information would reflect well on the University by highlighting the variation and grading patterns and providing more data to bring a more honest depiction of what the grade meant in relation to other grades awarded.

Finally, Matt Morano from the Dental School highlighted an issue that many in the working group did not realize. Dental programs (and many other professional programs, such as Medicine, Law, Pharmacy, etc) never see the transcripts of student who apply to their programs. Our dental school and others go through a clearinghouse to help with the processing and evaluation of applications for the DDS program. These clearinghouses, often referred to as “CAS” centers, which stands for Credential Assembly Service, help to assemble the records of thousands and thousands of applicants to the various professional or graduate programs. UNC already provides transcripts to over 20 CAS’s and the number of these services are growing almost yearly. The significance of these clearinghouses goes back to concerns raised in point #3 – inconsistency in transcript information being provided depending on where or how a student applies for admission. Matt was very clear that the summary reports would not have a place for the contextualized grading data at this time, and presumably, this type of information would have to become the norm (or at least close to it) in order for these assembly services to expand the summary formats that they provide to participating programs. While UNC will certainly be a leader with respect to the implementation of a contextualized transcript, there is a clear level of risk with respect to consistency and even technical cost, if other schools do not choose to follow the example we are setting.

As noted, the three representatives provided very honest, helpful feedback. We could expand the informal evaluation of the transcript to include businesses and/or government employers, but there is a built-in limitation in that this is a completely new and innovative approach to the academic transcript, and it’s reasonable to assume that as readers become more familiar with the data, their evaluation of the utility of the information could and likely would change. Far more important, in my view, is the “CAS” problem, which has already been detailed, and the clear confusion over what the SPA meant. This has been a recurring theme in demos, review sessions, and in the evaluation of the working group. A strong recommendation of the group was to rename this data element, either to Median Grade Average or Average Median Grade.

5) Who Should New Transcript Apply To?

One of the key objections of students when discussing the contextualized transcript was the perceived unfairness of having the new data start in a given year and, therefore, to start mid-career for some students. The primary objection was that the SPA and other contextualized information would be based on the latter years of a student’s career, when typically they are taking courses in their major and earning relatively higher grades than those achieved in introductory courses. This could mean that the SPA would be based on courses that one would expect to see higher grades in, but the student’s overall GPA would include all courses from the beginning of their career,

including those larger, introductory courses that could see lower overall grades. While logically this is a very valid concern, as a Registrar, I have a larger problem with changing the rules on students mid-career, especially if there is not a clear advantage inherent in that change. My rationale is based on the notion of catalog year, which is the idea that a student enters an institution with a “published” set of rules and requirements, and universities generally will not require that a student change to new or updated rules or requirements unless there is a clear advantage for students in making such a change. While many students could benefit from the new transcript format, many others would not. As such, I would have a hard time accepting a model that involved starting this new transcript type in the middle of a student’s career. The working group actually agreed with this approach, while acknowledging a larger issue about the technical challenges of not starting with a given year but with a given cohort of students instead.

With respect to the cohort approach, implementing the new transcript for an entering class or cohort would be nearly impossible to maintain, as it would result in two separate and distinct official transcripts for undergraduate students – one with contextualized information and one without. While I’m certain that changes could be made to the current formats of each to possibly align them in a similar format, right now, the official transcript of the University is in a landscape format with two columns, and the contextualized transcript would require a portrait format with one column. The amount of data that each transcript type requires makes it very difficult to have a shared format. And having two formats would either require manual processing of one or the other, or a technical enhancement that would allow for automated processing. Considering that the Registrar’s office currently produces more than 30,000 transcripts annually, anything manual would be a serious setback to this critical process.

As a bit of a compromise, the working group recommended a retroactive approach with the application of all contextualized data back to Fall 2010 when records were first maintained in ConnectCarolina. The rationale is that the vast majority of current students would have contextualized data for all terms on their record. While I agree that this is a possible solution for current students, any approach that starts with a specific term or date will result in thousands of records that will be on both sides of the transcript divide and would require a manual solution for the Registrar’s office.

6) Communication Plan for Implementation

This is perhaps the easiest and least controversial recommendation of the working group. Everyone agreed that the one year testing period during which all undergraduates would have access to an unofficial version of the contextualized transcript would be both a significant boon for validating and ensuring the accuracy of

the new transcript while also providing an ideal opportunity for ensuring that the entire UNC community is aware of this initiative. A key aspect of the one year evaluation period would be a feedback mechanism so that faculty, staff, and students identify concerns or ask questions during this critical period.

Summary of Working Group Recommendations: 1) establish a grade census date to freeze the contextualized information; 2) replace the numerical representation of the percentage ranges with a graphic representation of this information; 3) rename the SPA to either Median Grade Average (MGA) or Average Median Grade (AMG); 4) apply the contextualized grade information retroactively to Fall 2010; and 5) implement with a one year testing period in which the contextualized transcript is available as an unofficial transcript for all undergraduate students.

Alternative recommendation: there were a couple members of the working group who expressed concern about having the contextualized data on the transcript and recommended that the larger focus be on producing more widely available grading pattern reports for all faculty and especially for chairs and deans. While both the transcript and the grading pattern reports are part of the current legislation, these working group members felt strongly that the focus should be more on the reports than on the transcript. I don't think I would be fairly representing the entire discussion of this group without including this additional information.

Final Recommendations: as the University official tasked with implementing the contextualized transcript, the thoughtful and collaborative work of this group was invaluable and extremely appreciated. However, after much consideration of these findings, I ultimately have to recommend that the University not proceed with an official contextualized transcript for undergraduate students. The reasons for this recommendation are based on two primary factors: the potential inconsistency in how the contextualized information would be consumed by those we send transcripts to and the technological challenges that currently exist for producing a transcript for all students that is consistent in form, and also readable and understandable.

For a variety of reasons, the contextualized grade data will not be consistently consumed by readers of the transcript, which calls into questions the equity of the data being reported directly on the transcript. As the working group discussed, there are at least three reasons for this inconsistency. The first relates to the identified need for a grade freeze or census date for grades. The reasons for such a date would be to avoid a constantly changing transcript for students as grades are changed, incompletes are completed, etc, and also to allow students and others to validate or verify the contextualized data on the transcript (see above discussion on these points). Unless the day after the end of a term is the chosen date (which seemingly undermines the stated purpose of the transcript to address grade inflation since average grades will be at their lowest), then there would be periods when the transcript did not have

contextualized data. The University can only send a transcript at a student's request, so unless a student were to ask that a new transcript be sent with contextualized data, this well-intentioned recommendation would create a gap in our policy for only issuing this new transcript. A second and even more challenging factor to overcome is the "CAS" problem. Most of the professional schools and programs, including Medicine, Dentistry, Law, and others, use Credential Assembling Services to facilitate the admission process. In these cases, the professional schools will never see a contextualized transcript, and the CAS's will not report this additional information to the schools. As such, our students who apply to these highly competitive programs will be doing so without the contextualized data being considered. By contrast, students applying to programs that do not have CAS's will be held to the standard of this new transcript. That inconsistency does not exist with our current official transcript and is very hard to justify as a University Registrar. A third and similar situation will exist as transcript exchange services proliferate. More and more schools are moving away from issuing paper transcripts and are moving toward electronic PDF's. The next step in the automation of transcript exchange is to simply send transcript data to another school. Many schools are already involved in the electronic transfer process, and as this trend grows, it poses another threat to the consistency of our reporting contextualized data. The challenge is that schools have to build tables to consume and store the data that is exchanged. As a trendsetter, it's unlikely that other schools will build custom fields for our unique format, which means that only the "traditional" data will be exchanged, which again creates an inconsistency in how a student's transcript is reported based on whether or not a school requests a paper, PDF, or electronic version of our transcript. While these issues could be addressed by future changes either in technology or practice, until such changes are made, I would not support making the proposed changes to our official transcript because our students' academic records would be reported differently and inconsistently, which is not the case now.

The second concern that I have relates to technology and the current limitations for how we could implement a transcript that is in the format recommended by the working group. As noted above, the working group was strongly in favor of replacing the numerical representation of the percentage ranges of grades in a class with a graphic representation of this same information. In addition to being more readable, the group felt that the graphics clearly marked this contextualized data as something different than the individual student data on the transcript (which has been a common criticism of the previous format). After researching this option, ITS has definitively stated that the current student system (ConnectCarolina) cannot produce this type of format for a transcript. The only technical option at this point would be to use an outside system to produce the transcript, which would either require a significant modification to the official student system or would mean producing the official transcript outside of the system of record, which would be a serious concern from my perspective. Similarly, there is no way currently to have an official transcript without contextualized data that comfortably co-exists with an official transcript with contextualized data. The former format currently fits on landscape paper and the latter on portrait. It's certainly possible to find

a common format that would allow both to be on the same official transcript paper, but the variance in the volume of data on the two types presents a significant challenge to having a common format. Having two official transcripts is a risk for a University, not just for consistency and common knowledge on what a UNC transcript looks like, but also for efficiency of processing transcripts. Our current vendor and our current printing process would not allow for an automated process with two types of transcript paper. This may change in the future, as may the overall technology within the student system with respect to transcripts, but until these types of changes are in place, I have significant concerns about the proposed solutions that would allow for implementing the format that the working group recommended.

After long consideration of the issues that have been identified, especially the consistency concerns, the furthest I would be willing to go with my recommendation is to make the contextualized transcript an optional, unofficial transcript. In conjunction with this approach, I would also recommend that more effort be dedicated to producing and delivering more robust reports on faculty grading patterns that can be regularly available to chairs, deans, and other academic leadership on campus. This approach would allow students to provide this optional version if they chose to and would avoid the larger system issues identified above, by keeping the official transcript and unofficial transcript separate. This approach would also align with recommendations of the working group to more broadly share the grading data with the campus community. The downside to this recommendation and one that EPC would need to consider is the amount of time and effort that would be spent to develop an unofficial transcript. I do see value to starting this new transcript as an unofficial version and letting interest and momentum build without the risks identified above, but that is a larger policy and budgetary decision that would have to be made.