

How to Deal With High School Credentials From Ontario

by Richard Kearney

In 1999, Ontario will offer a new four-year high school curriculum to students entering grade 9.

The new program will lead to abolition of the current university-preparatory curriculum that many students now complete by enrolling in elementary and secondary schools for 13 years.

Because this reform represents the second major change in Ontario's high school system since 1984, U.S. admission officers should consider reviewing current policies for admission and advanced placement/standing or transfer credit based on the credentials they expect to receive from Ontario applicants.

The following review is intended to assist in that process.

Until 1984, students seeking admission to undergraduate programs in Ontario completed a two-stage secondary school cycle.

The first stage (grades 9-12) led to a Secondary School Graduation Diploma, while the second stage consisted of one year of university-preparatory study in six subjects (Grade 13) and led to an Honour Graduation Diploma.

Students graduating with a grade 12 diploma could continue their education at non-university colleges, but only grade 13 graduates could enter universities.

The 1984 reform abolished the fixed structure of the university-preparatory year and replaced the two diplomas with one new Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). The first OSSDs were awarded in 1986.

Under the reform, grade 13 courses were thoroughly reviewed and gradually reintroduced into secondary schools under a new name, Ontario Academic Courses (OACs).

The provincial Ministry of Ed-

ucation intended the OACs to be taken during a carefully planned four-year high school cycle, because OACs could count toward the requirements for an OSSD.

Universities continued to demand six subjects for admission, but a 13th year was no longer mandatory.

To ensure high academic standards, the ministry exercised greater control over the content of OACs than had been the case under the previous system.

For students, this new, flexible structure meant university studies could begin after grade 12.

In practice, however, many students remained in high school for a 13th (and even 14th) year to accumulate the six minimum OACs required for university admission or to improve grades in OAC subjects already completed.

This was, in effect, the downside of flexibility. Of the 30 "credits" of study required for an OSSD (one credit is equal to at least 110 hours of instruction in a subject), almost half consisted of electives.

Poorly planned programs could leave students without adequate prerequisite study to undertake OAC subjects.

The new reform attempts to strike a better balance between flexibility and uniformity in secondary education.

Although 30 credits will still be required for an OSSD, 18 credits will be compulsory, with a greater emphasis on

mathematics, language, and science.

The ministry has promised an increase in academic standards in all grades, so no student will need to remain in school beyond grade 12.

Beginning in grade 9, courses will be streamed as academic or applied in focus, though both types will share a common core.

Students, parents and teachers will be encouraged to review the general direction of individual programs as early as grade 7 by means of a formal "annual education plan," but students will continue to have the option of changing direction.

OACs will be discontinued. Instead, courses will fall into one of the following four categories (called "series" by the ministry):

Series 1: General or interdisciplinary courses not connected to postsecondary plans

Series 2: Courses designed for direct entry to work, apprenticeship programs or non-degree college programs

Series 3: courses designed for admission to a university or more demanding college programs

Series 4: "Transfer" courses designed to enable students to move between series 2 and series 3 in their general plan of study

The ministry claims the new university-preparatory courses will be more challenging than the OACs.

Depending on when a student graduates, then, admission officers will receive transcripts identi-

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fying university-preparatory study in different ways (as grade 13, OACs, or series 3 courses) and should consider them comparable to each other in the general context of current admission policies.