



MAKING THE GRADE

University of New Hampshire and Williams College admissions' directors weigh in on BMA's narrative-based assessment philosophy

When Warren Witherell founded BMA in the 1970's, he held a firm (and unconventional) belief that evaluating academic progress based on an objective grade labeled students to a standard that would limit their growth. In his idealistic vision of "one school that works," he was convinced there was a better way for students to learn and grow intellectually. From there was born BMA's counterculture, non-grading and narrative-based assessment philosophy which has stood the test of time and is still upheld to this day.

With hundreds of Burkie's having attended top tier colleges and universities since the academy's inception, we checked in with college and university admissions' experts to gain their view on BMA's narrative-based assessment philosophy and assess its pertinence in today's day and age.

Kristen Butterfield, Sr. assistant of Admissions at the [University of New Hampshire](#), and **Dick Nesbitt**, Director of Admissions at [Williams College](#) share their perspectives on BMA's college applications and narrative-based student academic profiles.

KRISTEN BUTTERFIELD

Sr. Assistant Director of Admission, University of New Hampshire



As an admission staff and reviewer, how do you perceive BMA college applicants in general?

KB. I perceive BMA students to be disciplined and academically prepared. Students take rigorous courses through their four years, which is very important for us in admissions in feeling confident about their academic transition to college. Beyond their academic preparation, I know that BMA students are coming in with advanced skills in areas of time management and personal responsibility based on their athletic and social commitments at BMA. In addition, I know students have a deep sense of community responsibility based on the school culture and I have seen this social responsibility in applicants.

In what unique ways does BMA prepares its students for college success?

KB. When I review BMA students, I know that they are coming with a certain level of maturity, organization and ability to balance many competing responsibilities. Lauren, Alex, and any BMA staff with whom I have worked do a great job of speaking to the life of a BMA student and how students manage rigorous academics with rigorous athletic practice and competition - and the discipline it takes to do so. This gives me some confidence in these students in terms of how they will succeed and adjust to the transition in college.

How do BMA applications stand out/differ from those you receive from public and other boarding schools?

KB. I have gotten to know Lauren, the college counselor at BMA, quite well and I think the level to which BMA faculty know their students really stands out. Through the BMA student applications, I gain a holistic view of a candidate. I don't just see how a student does in a class, but I hear in depth how they learn, examples of how they overcame difficult subject material, in which parts within a subject they are challenged and in which parts they excel. This helps me gain a greater understanding than I otherwise might of how a student will be in a classroom at UNH and how they will become part of our community.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Burkie's narrative-based portfolios?

KB. Strengths: very personal, detailed and thorough - I really get a sense of the student and their personality, natural strengths, as well as work ethic and overall achievement through descriptions of how they do in class. Weaknesses: Can be lengthy to read and time consuming during a busy reading season. However, in working with the BMA college counselor, they now send junior year summation narratives and then beginning of senior year narratives, along with a page that tells the student's courses over their four years. This shortens the review quite a bit and still helps me get the information I need. If I need more I'm always able to reach out and get more information, and I have many times.

What should prospective BMA students know about the narrative-based assessment philosophy as they prepare for university/college admission?

KB. The narrative-based approach gives a much more thorough and holistic view of a student than do traditional grading scales. This is a benefit to students. Many public schools are now moving to competency-based grading, per state law, so schools are starting to provide at least some narrative review of student achievement to distinguish within the competency scale. We are finding this in many states across New England and the East Coast.

Any other comment you'd like to make about the pertinence of narrative-based assessments in general?

KB. At first, I found the narratives a bit challenging to review, but over time (I have reviewed BMA apps for four years). Now, I find them incredibly helpful, insightful, and thorough - and the level to which I

can understand who a student is becomes a great advantage. I enjoy reading about BMA students and how they learn, and what they bring to a classroom setting, so the narrative is well-received. In addition, the wonderful relationship Lauren develops with Admission Counselors really set BMA apart and enhances the narrative assessment as well.

DICK NESBITT

Director of Admissions, Williams College

As an admission staff and reviewer, how do you perceive BMA college applicants in general?

DN. I have great respect for BMA and the quality students it produces. The academy obviously grooms strong and highly specialized skiers but also highly autonomous individuals with superior time-management skills and lots of self-motivation - all of which are essential to thrive at the college level. We appreciate BMA applications and look for these signature Burkie attributes when reading them.

In what unique ways does BMA prepares its students for college success?

DN. Historically, we've seen BMA produced students who are well prepared for the demands of college. Burkies come to our school with very high work ethics, time management skills and an ability to effectively integrate our campus community. With our small class sizes, our professors require lots of active classroom participation and engagement. We see Burkies as being fit for this type of environment because it resembles what they've experienced at BMA. As admissions' personnel, it gives us reassurance to know the level of excellence expended by BMA and how that will translate into college success at Williams.

How do BMA applications stand out/differ from those you receive from public and other boarding schools?

DN. BMA does an outstanding job of presenting the full breadth and depth of its students' skills sets through its balanced narrative portfolios. While our admissions' staff still looks at SAT scores and personal written statements, we also carefully review BMA's college counsellor narrative assessment along with the provided teacher evaluations. These assessments are so in depth and balanced that it's easy for us to evaluate a student's capacity to thrive in the classroom and on our campus community even without a grade. We are able to make a solid decision on a student's' admissibility based on all the quality material we receive from BMA as part of the application process.