



MAKING THE GRADE

Upholding BMA's narrative-based academic 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 they would limit themselves to attain. 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.

We caught up with Jon Rice, Director of Academics at BMA, to assess the state of BMA's narrative-based assessment philosophy, which remains one of a kind amongst ski academies across North America and charter schools at large.

How does BMA's narrative-based assessment work?

JR Our students receive two major written, narrative evaluations per school year in January and June from each of their teachers in addition to two brief written progress reports in October and April. The evaluations they receive and share with their parents outline academic progress and areas for improvement. In addition, the narrative evaluations written by faculty members also address students' development with respect to our community's five core values: responsibility, self-awareness, consideration, drive and curiosity. The Athletic coaching staff also use narrative feedback to provide insight to our student athletes on how they've evolved over the season and focus on areas for the coming season.

What's at the heart of BMA's narrative-based assessment philosophy?

JR Our school's approach to learning is focused on exposing our students to highly challenging and rigorous work. To align with this flexible and stimulating learning pathway, faculty members focus on evaluating individual progress and effort rather than focusing solely on outcomes. We believe in pushing students to do excellent work and don't think grades are the carrot to motivate this journey to intellectual curiosity and academic work ethic.

How do students adapt to BMA's learning environment and narrative-based approach?

JR It varies per student. It mostly depends on what type of learning environment the student has been exposed to in the past. What we've observed is that it usually takes students a year to fully understand how to thrive and grow as a learner in our unique environment.

How does BMA's narrative-based approach prepare students for college success and beyond?

JR At BMA, we must be extremely efficient with students' in class time because of all the other demands on them. For this reason, teachers are constantly trying to expose students to very impactful and thought provoking projects. This translates into students' heightened ability to synthesize information, apply critical thinking skills and challenge themselves intellectually. In parallel, students grow through their community engagement both on campus and beyond. This holistic focus on skill development and dispositions inevitably empowers our students to become very engaged and curious college students. This sets the foundation for them to become effective employees for the future job markets. It also prepares them to face all of life's challenges they may encounter.

How does BMA's narrative-based assessment philosophy align with the highly competitive work environment that awaits students?

JR At the root, Burkies are intrinsically highly motivated due to their commitment to their athletic goals and aspirations. This translates in the classroom where our teachers don't see the need to use grades to motivate effort and performance. In terms of preparing for a competitive work landscape, BMA students face no shortage of opportunities to acquire those essential skills as part of their athletic pursuits at the academy. Each day, our students are physically, mentally and emotionally tested to push their individual limits and prepare for the challenges they will face in life and in their future careers.

Are BMA's narrative-based evaluations accepted as part of the college admission process?

JR Yes. In keeping with our assessment philosophy, BMA's director of college placement prepares a detailed student profile narrative to support each application. Along with this document, we submit excerpts from the student's' academic narratives from the past two academic years. Since Burkies tend to apply to the same core group of universities and colleges, admissions officers are very familiar with BMA's progressive assessment philosophy and know what to expect when reviewing our students' applications. Colleges and universities get excited when they receive applications from our students because they know our track record for grooming students with a relentless quest for excellence, passion, and curiosity.

How has BMA's academic philosophy evolved since the early establishment of the narrative-based methodology?

JR In the early days, BMA's narrative-based approach and curriculum were extremely progressive and flexible. While we've remained inspired by this open mentality towards education, we've since developed tools and rubrics to ensure all faculty embrace and apply this philosophy using a common approach that benefits the students. Although faculty members have the flexibility to adapt the academy's philosophy to match the needs and ideas of the students, we all still work very much within a similar framework. The BMA curriculum is probably what has evolved the most to remain in line with

national academic standards. Over time, we've also added the core community values to our evaluations to ensure we consistently look at the development of the entire student.

How are you ensuring that BMA's narrative-based methodology remains current?

JR BMA faculty are in constant communication with each other to share ideas and best practices. BMA is blessed to have an engaged and reflective faculty that is committed to each student's personal growth. The teachers meet weekly to ensure that all students are finding success. In addition, the teaching group tweaks the overall system yearly to ensure that it remains timely and in balance with our progressive tradition. Our faculty holds itself to a very high standard in terms of continuously pushing the boundaries. We challenge ourselves to make sure our approach grants utmost development and success for each student.

OUTLOOKS ON BMA'S NARRATIVE-BASED ASSESSMENT PHILOSOPHY

CURRENT BMA FACULTY

"I find that teaching and learning without grades best supports our ideal of learning for learning's sake. I can have conversation with my students about what they know and are able to do versus what number will appear on their report card. I have also found that it supports a differentiated learning approach which is helpful in our heterogeneous classes. Every student can have his/her own goals and feedback can reflect that. I have also found that more often than not it allows students to reach beyond their comfort zone and take risks in their learning. There is no fear of judgement. There is encouragement. Mistakes are rewarded with additional opportunities. Narrative evaluation versus grades creates a wonderfully refreshing, honest, and supportive learning environment."

VIVIAN BUCKLEY, BMA Math teacher

THE COLLEGE ADMISSION OFFICERS

"At first, I found the narratives a bit challenging to review, but over time (I have reviewed BMA apps for 4 years) 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."

KRISTEN BUTTERFIELD, Sr. Assistant Director of Admission, University of New Hampshire

"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. 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."

DICK NESBITT, Director of Admissions, Williams College

BMA ALUMNI IN EDUCATION

"Burke's narrative-based assessment philosophy had a profound impact on me. Before I went to BMA, I thought that learning was simply about getting good grades. Through the narrative assessment approach, I discovered my love of learning, and it is this love that still drives me in my career today. I know how transformative an authentic and inspiring education can be because of my time at Burke, and I now strive to create that experience for my students every day."

AMY FULWYLER '86, Head of School at the Jackson Hole Community School (Jackson, WY)

"I am currently the Director of Teacher Development for a high performing network of charter schools in Denver, Colorado. I've been in the education field for the past 15 years as a teacher, instructional coach, principal and now director and have witnessed the ill-effects of today's testing culture. The narrative-based assessment philosophy allows room for students to thrive beyond the "standard"... something that has been useful to how I approach work and life beyond Burke. Kudos to the founders of Burke for establishing systems that encourage critical thinking, resilience, responsibility and joy for learning."

Jahi Rohrer '96, Director of Teacher Development, Highline Academy (Denver, CO)

"Not having to worry about receiving a formal letter grade at BMA allowed me to foster a love of learning. It allowed me to dive into the process of learning new things and to appreciate the struggle. The satisfaction came from solving a difficult math problem or having a conversation in French, not from a generic letter that signified success or failure. Today, as a 5th grade teacher in the Bronx, I try to instill that same love of learning into my students. While my students do receive a 1-4 to denote how they are progressing towards 5th grade mastery, the emphasis is placed on the one page comments that they receive each term. The comments serve as a guide to both the student and parent to help them understand what they excel at and how to overcome their challenges. Embedded within the comments are strategies to tackle their weaknesses and ways to leverage their strengths to further improve in subjects they've found difficult. Every student develops in different ways and has different strengths and I think the way Burke celebrates the process is something more schools should look to emulate."

TREVOR LEAFE '07, 5th Grade Team Leader, South Bronx Classical Charter School (Bronx, NY)