

The Secure Transcript: Survey of National Universities' Use of the SSN on Academic Transcripts

Aaron Titus
11 May 2007

Summary

Most universities have moved away from using students' Social Security Numbers as their Student ID, but because the SSN continues to be a convenient identification number, ancillary higher education organizations, such as lending institutions, continue to use the SSN as a universal identification number. As a result, some universities which have otherwise discontinued using the SSN as a student ID, continue to print the student's SSN on academic transcripts and official documentation. Though academic transcripts should be treated as secure documents, students are often required to disseminate dozens of transcripts to entities with which they will have only one-time contact, most of whom have no need for the SSN. Despite the dangers, the national registrar association, American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), recommends printing the SSN on transcript, and says that 79% of American colleges did so, in 2003. However, this 2007 survey indicates that now only 26% of *US News and World Report's* top 126 colleges and universities mandatorily print the SSN on academic transcripts.

Background

The 2000 US Census reports that 52% of the population over 25, or 94 million people, have attended some college, and therefore potentially have an academic transcript. (http://www.census.gov/edu/chart_education.html, accessed 5 May 2007). Universities use transcripts to transfer credit. Potential employers use them to verify class standing. Financial institutions, private study abroad corporations, organizations awarding scholarships, and a wide range of other public and private institutions require academic transcripts for a variety of reasons. Before and after graduation, a single student may send dozens of transcripts to organizations with which he may have only passing contact.

Very few of these organizations, including *potential* employers, have a legitimate need for students' Social Security Numbers. But each time a student sends a transcript to an organization or prospective employer, the transcript information is usually captured digitally, logged in a database, and stored indefinitely. Since names, birthdates and SSNs are often printed on academic transcripts, these documents pose a potential risk to students and former students, if the information is misused or mishandled. Risk of data breach or identity theft increases proportionally as the student's personal information is stored in more databases and paper files.

Most of the time, students can easily provide their Social Security Numbers to organizations with a legitimate need, using other methods than an academic transcript. Though employers need the SSN in order to report taxes, most *potential* employers don't have a legitimate need for the information. The Washington, D.C. Attorney General warns, "avoid providing your social security number or other personal information to

prospective employers until you have verified the legitimacy of the organization and their need to verify your background." (http://occ.dc.gov/occ/lib/occ/id_theft_tips.pdf, accessed 5 May 2007). Countless other Attorneys General, state agencies, and experts across the country publish similar warnings. A few states have even outlawed placing the Social Security Number on transcripts and other academic documents altogether.

Survey Results & National Trends

Despite the potential risks posed to students and former students, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) currently recommends that universities print SSNs on academic transcripts for convenience and universality. In fact, their most recent publication addressing this issue, the *AACRAO 2003 Academic Record and Transcript Guide*, reports that 79% of national colleges and universities print the SSN on transcripts. AACRAO is the recognized national authority in the University Registrar field.

I conducted a new survey of US News & World Report's top 126 national universities in mid-January, 2007, to complement AACRAO's four-year-old data. The purpose of the survey was to determine the current practices of leading national colleges and universities, with respect to printing students' Social Security Numbers on official academic transcripts. Representatives from all 126 registrar offices responded to the following questions:

Question 1: *Is a student's Social Security Number printed on official transcripts?*

Question 2: *If so, may students request that their social security number be withheld from the transcript?*

The responses varied from "No," to categorically "Yes." Of the many universities that answered no, several indicated that they withheld the SSN for privacy reasons, and one representative mistakenly explained that the privacy provisions of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibited them from printing Social Security Numbers on transcripts. Other registrars were more direct. The UC Davis registrar replied simply, "the answer is 'no'." Others, like Boston University, include only "the last four digits of your SSN." Several university registrars explained that the SSN would appear on older university transcripts because they are stored on microfilm, which are not editable. One or two colleges, such as Colorado State University, indicated that they planned to discontinue printing the SSN on transcripts in the near future.

A few, like Texas Christian defended their practice of mandatorily printing the SSN on transcripts by appealing to AACRAO's recommendations: "Following AACRAO... recommendations we print the SSN on the transcript... as one step in reducing fraudulent use of academic records. AACRAO states the official transcript is a secure document that contains a large amount of confidential data all of which should be kept secure. In addition, in most cases, the transcript will be provided to those (schools and employers) who already have the SSN. We do not accept requests to withhold the SSN from the transcript."

The responses were divided into four groups:

Category A: Colleges and Universities which did not print the SSN on academic transcripts. Most of these colleges print the Student ID Number, instead.

Category B: Colleges and Universities which print only a partial SSN on academic transcripts.

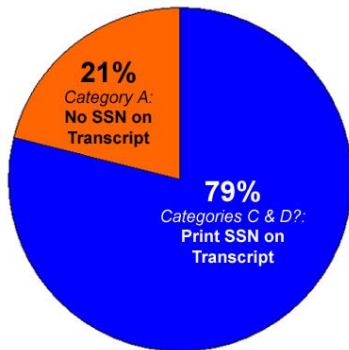
Category C: Colleges and Universities which print the full SSN on academic transcripts by default, but allow students to withhold it upon request.

Category D: Colleges and Universities which mandatorily print the SSN on academic transcripts.

Six colleges indicated that they include the full SSN on transcripts, but did not specify whether students could withhold it upon request. For purposes of this study, those six were placed in category D. The survey ignores indications of imminent policy changes—it represents a snapshot of practices during the month of January, 2007.

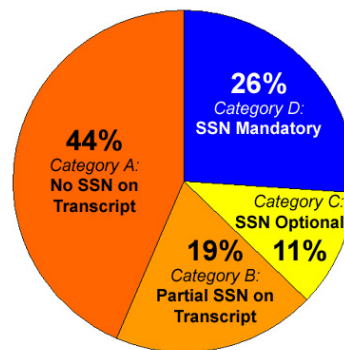
The results of the 2007 survey contrast sharply with AACRAO's 2003 data:

**AACRAO 2003 SURVEY
OF NATIONAL COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES**



IN 2003, MORE THAN $\frac{3}{4}$ OF NATIONAL COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES REPORTED USING THE SSN ON TRANSCRIPTS, ACCORDING TO AACRAO.

**JANUARY 2007 SURVEY
OF US NEWS & WORLD REPORT'S TOP 126
COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES**



IN JANUARY 2007, ONLY $\frac{1}{4}$ OF TOP NATIONAL UNIVERSITIES MANDATORILY PRINTED THE FULL SSN ON TRANSCRIPTS.

CATEGORY A: Colleges and Universities which did *not print the SSN on academic transcripts*. Most print the Student ID Number, instead.

CATEGORY B: COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WHICH PRINT *ONLY A PARTIAL SSN ON ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPTS*.

CATEGORY C: COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WHICH PRINT THE FULL SSN ON ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPTS BY DEFAULT, BUT *ALLOW STUDENTS TO WITHHOLD IT UPON REQUEST*.

CATEGORY D: COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WHICH *MANDATORILY PRINT THE SSN ON ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPTS*.

Findings

As of January 2007, roughly 2/3 of nationally ranked universities printed a Student ID or only a partial SSN (such as the last 4 digits) on official transcripts. For instance, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, and Duke do not use students' SSNs on transcripts at all, while Georgetown and Berkeley print only the last four digits. 14 nationally ranked schools print the SSN on transcripts, but allow students to withhold it upon request.

Several possible explanations for the contrast between the two surveys may exist. First, the 2007 survey sampled only nationally ranked colleges and universities. Presumably, the 2003 AACRAO data includes a much broader sample of colleges. The

absence of local community colleges on the 2007 survey may account for some of the difference, since smaller schools may not have as much funding to overhaul record-keeping systems. However, if nationally ranked colleges serve as a bellwether for national trends in this area, the 2007 survey may also indicate a sea change in how universities treat students' SSNs. Regardless, only a small minority of nationally ranked colleges and universities now mandatorily print the SSN on academic transcripts.

I presented these findings to AACRAO in a February 2007 letter, and requested that they review their 2003 data and resulting recommendations. As of the date of this article, AACRAO has not responded to my letter.

I also presented the results to the George Washington University administration in Washington, DC. Presently, the university mandatorily prints the SSN on all academic transcripts. However, as a result of this survey, GW University has committed to change their transcript policy, and will allow students to withhold the SSN from transcripts upon request in the near future.

Conclusion

Students and former students should be aware of the risks associated with disseminating academic transcripts, and check their university's transcript policy. If the policy does not provide sufficient protection, students should push registrars to meet their privacy needs. With persistence, many registrar offices will work with students to come up with creative solutions, on an individual basis.

In the current atmosphere of rising identity theft, students and former students need the ability to control how and to whom their personal information is transmitted. Even among universities that have ceased using the Social Security Number as a student ID, University Registrars should become more aware of this issue, and the trend away from printing Social Security Numbers on transcripts.

About Aaron Titus

Aaron Titus works as a Program Manager at an Alexandria, VA non-profit association. He is also attending the George Washington University Law School, specializing in Information Privacy Law. When he's not busy being a proud father of two, he writes about privacy, and hosts several podcasts. These include *The Privacy Podcast* (www.aarontitus.net/privacy), and *Free Space* (www.libertycoalition.net/liberty-coalition-podcast).

A summary of this article is available at <http://www.aarontitus.net/privacy/index.php?id=13>.

DATA

I have included a table of results. Question 1 was, *"Is a student's Social Security Number printed on official transcripts?"* Question 2 was, *"If so, may students request that their social security number be withheld from the transcript?"*

Answers in the column labeled "Question 2 Answer" reference the question 1 answer. Thus, if the question 1 answer was "Student ID," and question 2 answer is "Yes: Optional," it means: "Academic transcripts print the student ID, but the student ID may be omitted at the option of the student."

Where the answer to question 1 was "Student ID," the registrar indicated that the Student ID was not the SSN. "Category" references the descriptions and graphs below:

Category A: Colleges and Universities which did not print the SSN on academic transcripts. Most of these colleges print the Student ID Number, instead.

Category B: Colleges and Universities which print only a partial SSN on academic transcripts.

Category C: Colleges and Universities which print the full SSN on academic transcripts by default, but allow students to withhold it upon request.

Category D: Colleges and Universities which mandatorily print the SSN on academic transcripts.

University	State	Question 1 Answer	Question 2 Answer	Category
University at Buffalo—SUNY	NY	Student ID	No: May Not Remove	A
American University	DC	Student ID	No: May Not Remove	A
University of the Pacific	CA	Student ID	No: May Not Remove	A
College of William and Mary	VA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Brown University	RI	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Pennsylvania State U.—University Park	PA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Drexel University	PA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
University of Tulsa	OK	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Cornell University	NY	Student ID	Not Specified	A
New York University	NY	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	NY	Student ID	Not Specified	A
SUNY—Stony Brook	NY	Student ID	Not Specified	A
New Jersey Institute of Technology	NJ	Student ID	Not Specified	A
U. of North Carolina—Chapel Hill	NC	Student ID	Not Specified	A
North Carolina State U.—Raleigh	NC	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Harvard University	MA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Boston College	MA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Worcester Polytechnic Institute	MA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Clark University	MA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
University of Chicago	IL	Student ID	Not Specified	A
U. of Illinois—Urbana - Champaign	IL	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Loyola University Chicago	IL	Student ID	Not Specified	A
University of Iowa	IA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Howard University	DC	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Catholic University of America	DC	Student ID	Not Specified	A

University	State	Question 1 Answer	Question 2 Answer	Category
Stanford University	CA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Univ. of California—Los Angeles	CA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
University of California—Davis	CA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Univ. of California—Santa Cruz	CA	Student ID	Not Specified	A
University of Arizona	AZ	Student ID	Not Specified	A
Virginia Tech	VA	Student ID	Yes: Optional	A
University of Utah	UT	Student ID	Yes: Optional	A
University of San Diego	CA	Student ID	Yes: Optional	A
Univ. of Wisconsin—Madison	WI	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Southern Methodist University	TX	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Vanderbilt University	TN	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of Oregon	OR	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of Rochester	NY	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Princeton University	NJ	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Dartmouth College	NH	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of New Hampshire	NH	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Duke University	NC	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Wake Forest University	NC	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Univ. of Minnesota—Twin Cities	MN	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Michigan State University	MI	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Tufts University	MA	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Purdue Univ.—West Lafayette	IN	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of Delaware	DE	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of Connecticut	CT	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of Denver	CO	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Univ. of California—Riverside	CA	No SSN	Not Specified	A
University of San Francisco	CA	No SSN	Not Specified	A
SUNY College of Env. Sci. and Forestry	NY	No SSN	Not Specified	A
Univ. of Massachusetts—Amherst	MA	No SSN	Yes: Optional	A
Yale University	CT	No SSN	Yes: Optional	A
Lehigh University	PA	Last 5 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Marquette University	WI	Last 4 SSN Digits	No: May Not Remove	B
Case Western Reserve Univ.	OH	Last 4 SSN Digits	No: May Not Remove	B
Columbia University	NY	Last 4 SSN Digits	No: May Not Remove	B
University of Colorado—Boulder	CO	Last 4 SSN Digits	No: May Not Remove	B
University of California—Irvine	CA	Last 4 SSN Digits	No: May Not Remove	B
University of Vermont	VT	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
University of Virginia	VA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
St. Louis University	MO	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Univ. of Missouri—Columbia	MO	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
University of Missouri—Rolla	MI	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Northeastern University	MA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
University of Kansas	KS	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
University of Notre Dame	IN	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Indiana University—Bloomington	IN	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Emory University	GA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B

University	State	Question 1 Answer	Question 2 Answer	Category
Georgia Institute of Technology	GA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Georgetown University	DC	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
University of California—Berkeley	CA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Univ. of California—San Diego	CA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Univ. of California—Santa Barbara	CA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Pepperdine University	CA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Not Specified	B
Iowa State University	IA	Last 4 SSN Digits	Yes: Optional	B
Boston University	FL	Last 4 SSN Digits	Yes: Optional	B
Washington State University	WA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Texas—Austin	TX	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Texas A&M Univ.—College Station	TX	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Baylor University	TX	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Texas Christian University	TX	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Tennessee	TN	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Clemson University	SC	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Pennsylvania	PA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Carnegie Mellon University	PA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Ohio State University—Columbus	OH	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Miami University—Oxford	OH	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Fordham University	NY	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
SUNY—Binghamton	NY	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Univ. of Nebraska—Lincoln	NE	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Michigan—Ann Arbor	MI	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Johns Hopkins University	MD	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Brandeis University	MA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Tulane University	LA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Kentucky	KY	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Georgia	GA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Miami	FL	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Florida State University	FL	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
George Washington University	DC	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Colorado State University	CO	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Univ. of Southern California	CA	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
University of Alabama	AL	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Auburn University	AL	Full SSN	No: May Not Remove	D
Rice University	TX	Full SSN	Not Specified	D
University of Pittsburgh	PA	Full SSN	Not Specified	D
University of Oklahoma	OK	Full SSN	Not Specified	D
Univ. of Maryland—College Park	MD	Full SSN	Not Specified	D
Northwestern University	IL	Full SSN	Not Specified	D
California Institute of Technology	CA	Full SSN	Not Specified	D
University of Washington	WA	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Brigham Young Univ.—Provo	UT	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Univ. of South Carolina—Columbia	SC	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
University of Dayton	OH	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Ohio University	OH	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C

University	State	Question 1 Answer	Question 2 Answer	Category
Yeshiva University	NY	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Syracuse University	NY	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Rutgers—New Brunswick	NJ	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Stevens Institute of Technology	NJ	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Washington University in St. Louis	MO	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	MA	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Kansas State University	KS	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
Illinois Institute of Technology	IL	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C
University of Florida	FL	Full SSN	Yes: Optional	C

Category A:	55	43.7%
Category B:	24	19.0%
Category C:	14	11.1%
Category D:	33	26.2%
Total	126	100.0%