Using Performance Assessment in College Admissions

Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work

The Reimagining College Access (RCA) initiative seeks to advance more equitable postsecondary access and success by incorporating k–12 performance assessments, such as student projects, portfolios, and capstone projects, into higher education admissions, placement, and advising decisions. The approach is intended to provide better information about students' preparedness for higher education.

A growing number of colleges and universities are expanding how they evaluate student admissions applications to determine an applicant's academic readiness, potential contribution to the incoming class, and potential for success both in school and beyond. A Learning Policy Institute report, *The Promise of Performance Assessments: Innovations in High School Learning and College Admissions*, describes some leading k–12 and higher education institutions that are beginning to use rigorous, validated, and high-quality performance assessments.

The City University of New York Pilot

One such long-standing effort is a pilot program at the City University of New York (CUNY). It is a promising case study of how to use performance assessments to admit qualified applicants who have college entry exam scores below CUNY's requirements for admissions. This document summarizes new research on the process and initial outcomes of this pilot.

In response to mounting concerns about the underrepresentation of qualified students of color in their 4-year colleges, CUNY launched the small pilot in 2015 to evaluate an alternative admissions approach. The pilot is for students who meet the performance-based graduation requirements of the New York Performance Standards Consortium and who have SAT scores under the minimum typically required for CUNY 4-year colleges.

With encouragement from their teachers and college guidance counselors, these students can submit the CUNY common application, SAT scores, and GPA, along with recommendations, statements of academic and curricular requirements of the Consortium schools, graded rubrics, and student work samples from performance assessments. The CUNY central admissions office then conducts a more holistic review than they would for traditional candidates.

Assessment in the New York Performance Standards Consortium

The New York Performance Standards Consortium provides a high-quality system of performance assessment. Students in Consortium schools write and orally present a series of **Performance-Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs)**, which engage them in disciplinary inquiries across each of the major subject areas. As part of this process, students conduct a literary analysis, a scientific investigation, a social science research paper, and a project that applies mathematical modeling, exploring questions generated from their own intellectual curiosity, with feedback from educators, external scholars, and professionals.

Learn more about the Consortium's PBATs by visiting their online library of student work.

Pilot Results

To ensure both transparency and accountability, CUNY researchers agreed to document the academic progress of successive cohorts of Consortium-CUNY students over time, comparing (1) all Consortium graduates, (2) pilot students, and (3) other New York City–based high school graduates. Thus far, the evidence suggests that Consortium-CUNY Pilot students, who are disproportionately from underrepresented groups, outperform both their Consortium and non-Consortium peers in terms of first-semester grades and credit attainment and persistence at CUNY after the first year.

Key Takeaways

The authentic learning and assessment practices of Consortium schools contribute to enhanced equity and academic progress for students. Students educated in Consortium schools are immersed in inquiry-oriented and project-based instruction that is linked to an assessment system that is innovative, rigorous, student-focused, teacher-directed, and externally validated. Diverse by race, ethnicity, immigration status, (dis)ability, gender, housing circumstances, socioeconomic status, academic history, and first language, these students begin high school with more marginal academic records but graduate, enter college, persist in college, gain credits, and sustain better-than-average GPAs than their peers.

Performance-based assessments are a useful component of holistic review. Students who demonstrate competence through performance assessments appear to fare well in the CUNY system, even when they score below the admissions threshold on college entry exams. Admissions officers found the provided information valuable and have been transforming the broader process to expand what they can learn about students and their work.

Performance assessment can be a catalyst for equity conversations and institutional change. This small pilot has opened an institution-wide conversation about admissions criteria, racial and economic equity, and academic success in one of the largest urban systems of higher education in the country, receiving more than 100,000 applicants a year. The pilot study helped seed conversations within CUNY about ways to view college readiness through a wider aperture, rather than simply focusing on test scores and GPA.

Things to think about for using performance assessment as an admissions criterion:

- What **equity-related goals** do you have for your student body? What additional information would help you realize these goals?

- What do you want to know about something that is **not addressed by traditional application measures** (e.g., grades, test scores, lists of extracurricular activities), or do you want **more information to contextualize** the provided measures?

- Is there a **specific set of knowledge, skills, and abilities** that you want to determine whether a student possesses, or are you looking for more **holistic information about the learner generally?**

- What indicators might support **admissions decisions and intentionally support student success** once students are admitted?

- Do you want **all students to submit performance assessments**, or is this information you want to see from **particular applicants** (e.g., early admissions applicants or applicants to a specific program/pathway)?

- Do you want to have performance assessments **required or optional as part of your applicant's admissions submissions?**

learningpolicyinstitute.org/rca

First-Year, Full-Time Students Pursuing a BA in the CUNY Pilot Had a Higher Rate of Persistence After One Year

School Type	Total (N)	Retained (N)	Retained (%)
Consortium (non-Pilot)	522	440	84.3
NYC Public*	24,504	21,331	87.1
Pilot	54	51	94.4

Note: Students who enrolled but did not attempt any credits in their first semester are excluded from this analysis; thus, total numbers (N) in this table for some student groups differ from the other tables.

A Higher Percentage of First-Year, Full-Time Students Pursuing a BA in the CUNY Pilot Earned 80% or More of Attempted First-Semester Credits

School Type	Total (N)	Earned 80% or More of Attempted Credits (N)	(%)
Consortium (non-Pilot)	516	395	76.6
NYC Public*	24,316	19,910	81.9
Pilot	54	48	88.9

Note: Students who did not attempt credits are excluded from this analysis; thus, total numbers (N) in this table for some student groups differ from the other tables.

First-Year, Full-Time Students Pursuing a BA in the CUNY Pilot Had a Higher Grade Point Average for One Year

School Type	Total	Mean GPA	GPA SD	Median GPA
Consortium (non-Pilot)	515	2.77	1.1	3.07
NYC Public*	24,284	2.87	0.9	3.09
Pilot	54	3.06	0.7	3.16

Note: Students with unknown GPAs are excluded from this analysis; thus, total numbers (N) in this table for some student groups differ from the other tables.

* Specialized New York City public schools, such as Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Technical High School, and the Bronx High School of Science, are excluded from this analysis.

Note: These results are based on the population of students who graduated from high school in 2015 or later and entered one of CUNY's senior colleges as first-time, full-time freshmen pursuing a baccalaureate degree without delay (usually within 6 months of graduating from high school) and include entering cohorts of fall 2015, 2016, and 2017.

Source: The CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment provided raw data for this analysis.