

# MAKING THE CONNECTION

## Using K–12 Performance Assessments for College Placement and Advising

Across the nation, K–12 systems increasingly use performance assessments to demonstrate and evaluate student learning. Since 2017, [Reimagining College Access \(RCA\)](#), an initiative led by the Learning Policy Institute in collaboration with EducationCounsel, has been committed to the idea that these assessments are not only a way to foster deeper learning and equity at the high school level but also a promising source of information to support college access and success. In the past year, RCA has focused on promoting broader understanding of the value of using K–12

performance assessments in college admissions, placement, and advising decisions and building national demand for their use.

Using K–12 performance assessments at the postsecondary level will require changes across the K–12 and postsecondary sectors, especially to address issues around equity. To identify issues that need to be considered when developing policy on the use of K–12 performance assessments in college advising and placement, RCA and Complete College America (CCA) partnered to form a cross-sector task force.

## *What Are Performance Assessments?*

Performance assessments are measurements and/or demonstrations of students' knowledge, skills, and abilities that ask them to use their learnings in real-world contexts. These assessments typically yield a tangible product—such as a paper, presentation, portfolio of artifacts, or research investigation—scored against specific criteria. In high school, performance assessments can serve as evidence of readiness for college-level work. Students typically revise their work until they meet the standards. Such assessments, where in place, empower students to own their own learning through reflection, feedback, and revision. They also function as learning tools themselves, helping students develop the ability to apply knowledge to complex problems and improve co-cognitive skills such as collaboration, communication, perseverance, and growth mindset.

Performance assessments are a key feature of programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) and the new Advanced Placement (AP) Capstone diploma program. Numerous school networks and districts, such as the [Internationals Network](#), [Linked Learning](#), and [Fairfax County Public Schools](#), also require capstone projects and portfolios for graduation. The assessments can include scientific investigation, mathematical modeling, literary analysis, social scientific inquiry, artistic performance, and interdisciplinary competencies. For an example of a portfolio, see the [Los Angeles Unified School District](#).



This brief highlights how college placement and advising currently work and the opportunities the task force identified for using K–12 performance assessments to improve those processes, with special emphasis on solving persistent racial and socioeconomic disparities in postsecondary academic pathways and course placement. It further lays out the challenges the task force highlighted for implementing and using these assessments, starting with the need to better integrate systems between and within the K–12 and postsecondary sectors.

Based on those findings, the brief lists a series of issues to be considered for performance assessment policy and specifically for bridging the siloed high school, college admissions, and college advising processes that presently govern student transitions from K–12 to postsecondary education. Finally, the brief highlights the next steps laid out by the task force to cement policy recommendations for this promising, innovative alternative for college placement and advising.



## About the Task Force

To guide the work of the task force, CCA and RCA connected with additional equity-focused education organizations and institutions, forming a steering committee of nationally renowned groups from K–12 and postsecondary. The steering committee charged the task force with identifying the following:

- Opportunities—and potential challenges and roadblocks—for using K–12 performance assessments in college advising and placement.
- Communication channels or mechanisms that are needed to connect high school staff, admissions officers, and college advisers during the student transition from high school to college.
- Considerations for potential policy recommendations to guide how to effectively use K–12 performance assessments in college placement and advising.

Task force members included a diverse group ranging from practitioners on the ground in high schools and colleges to leaders of national organizations focused on secondary

and postsecondary education (see the Appendix for a list of members). These multiple perspectives allowed the task force to engage, learn, reflect, and push one another's thinking based on their system and sector experience. The varied experience of the task force members allowed the greater group to identify both the opportunities and the challenges inherent in changing the mechanism and process used at the postsecondary level for course placement and advising.

The task force met six times between August and October 2021. The first meeting was designed to help participants understand performance assessment, the history and focus of RCA, and the goals for the task force. The subsequent three meetings were a deep dive into specific areas around advising; placement; and connecting high school staff, college admissions officers, and advisers during student transitions. The final two meetings were used to identify stakeholders and communication strategies for the broader K–12 and postsecondary communities, review challenges and roadblocks, summarize key points from previous meetings, and discuss next steps.

## HOW COLLEGE PLACEMENT AND ADVISING CURRENTLY WORK

Students entering college bring with them their whole personal and professional selves—their interests, learnings, longings, experiences, expertise, challenges, concerns, and aspirations. The American history of college course placement and advising, however, has been informed by only a fraction of these traits—most often through a single standardized examination that does not fully represent students’ interests, passions, and future potential.

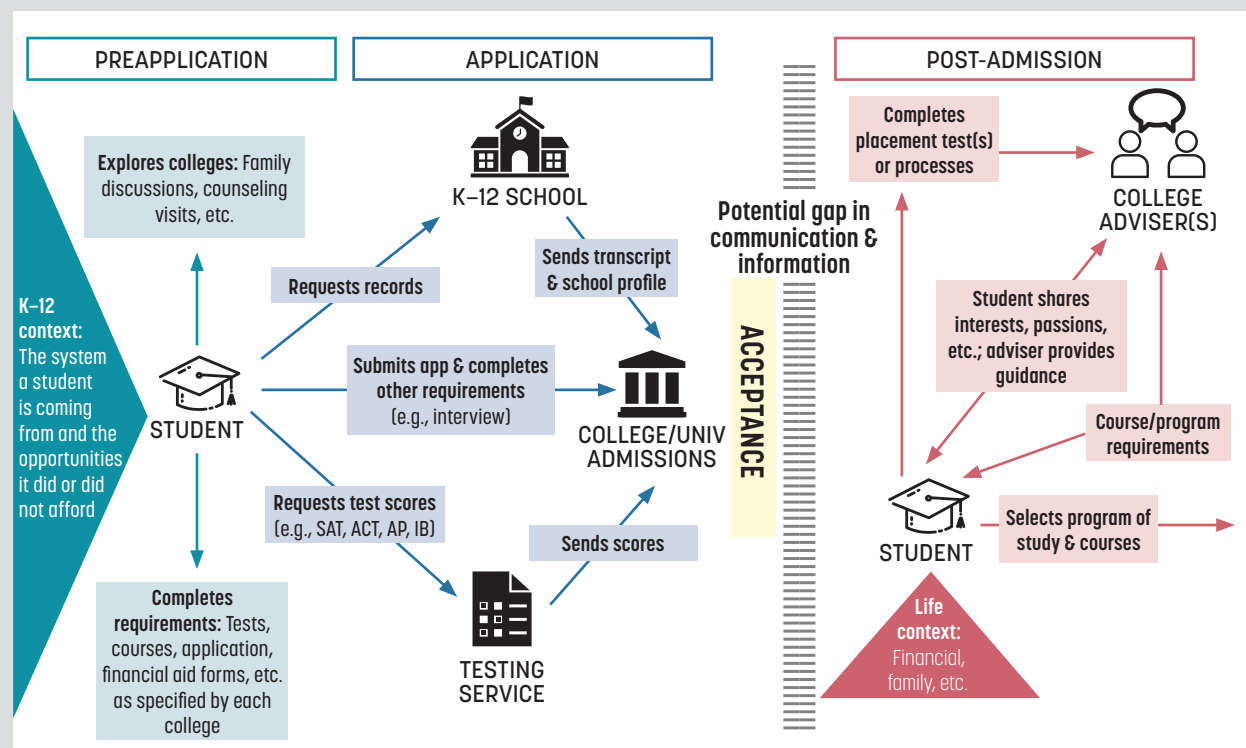
Many students, especially in community college environments, are unaware that placement tests for college-level coursework even exist until they are told to take them, much less that these tests will

determine the courses they can take. Students who, based on their placement tests, are required to take math and English coursework that is not college level do not receive credit toward graduation for these courses, wasting precious financial aid money and time. Reports show that disproportionately, those students are BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, People of Color) and/or from under-resourced families.

These placement decisions—and the incomplete information that leads to them—also factor into advising. Staffing for college advising takes many forms—from faculty to professional advising staff to mixed and other types of staff.

### *Information Exchange from High School to College*

The student transition from K-12 to postsecondary involves the exchange of information to guide admissions, placement, and advising decisions. Students start this process by exploring colleges and completing admissions requirements, such as taking standardized tests, for the colleges they are interested in attending. Then they begin the application process, which prompts additional information to be sent to colleges and universities, such as the scores on the standardized tests students have taken and transcripts. Once students are accepted into college, the college then makes placement decisions, often based on a single test and without using other information collected for admissions. These placement decisions then factor into the advising process and program of study/course selections.





These staff members meet with students to ensure that they have structured educational plans and enough support to achieve the aims of their academic pathways. The meetings typically involve conversations to construct academic plans; select courses in alignment with these plans; assist students in balancing life and academic needs; and integrate and connect students with other offices and functions, such as financial aid, academic support, the business office, the registrar's office, and many other entities both within and outside the college. But too often advisers do not have the full picture they need to effectively guide these conversations.

Without a more effective way to deliver evidence of learning and readiness, the college advising and placement processes will continue to overly rely on multiple-choice questions and essay prompts. These tests are incomplete encapsulations of all learning that has come before, often leading to incorrect placement in introductory level courses. They also do not provide enough information about students' strengths, interests, and aspirations for advisers to effectively support them.



## Clarifying Language

In discussing the people affected by racial inequity in education, CCA aims to choose words that underscore essential ideas, acknowledge the people affected by inequity, and are clear and consistent across our communications.

We use the following terms in this report:

**BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, People of Color).** CCA chose this term in the context of its work on educational attainment. Using CCA's metric of college completion, the data shows consistent institutional performance gaps for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students.

**Institutional performance gaps.** These are gaps among student groups in completion rates and other outcomes. This term puts the focus on the institutional barriers that are the root causes of inequities, whereas the term *equity gaps* implies that students are the cause of (and/or are responsible for changing) gaps in performance and completion.

**Students from under-resourced families.** In college data, Pell Grant status is a proxy for family income, which typically correlates with completion rates. CCA says *students from under-resourced families* instead of *low-income students* or *students from low-income families*. We use this term because we recognize that family income also correlates with access to food, health care, technology, and other resources that affect students' ability to succeed.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR USING PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS TO IMPROVE COLLEGE PLACEMENT AND ADVISING

Using performance assessments in placement and advising allows institutions to shift their mindset to embrace the whole student. This approach focuses on highlighting student assets as opposed to using a single standardized examination that focuses on student deficits by delineating gaps in student learning.

## An Alternative Approach for Placement

K–12 and postsecondary systems have a shared interest in increasing the number of students who graduate from high school ready for the demands of college and careers. While many institutions currently rely on a single test, a multiple measures approach to placement would allow them to use other methods to give them a better understanding of student readiness and place students in the appropriate courses.

These other methods could include noncognitive assessments, high school grade point average, guided self-placement, and/or high school transcripts, as well as performance assessments.

Performance assessments meet this multiple measures imperative especially well. At the high school level, these assessments—in which students investigate meaningful problems and complex questions to demonstrate their knowledge and skills—support curricula focused purposefully on teaching the research, analysis, and communication skills students need to succeed in college.

Research suggests that students who demonstrate competence on performance assessments that measure deeper learning are more successful in college than other similar students, even if they score lower on standardized test measures such as the SAT (see [Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work](#) for more information).

Because performance assessments surface examples of how students really use their academic and nonacademic learning in authentic situations, postsecondary institutions can use these results to better understand the students' competencies,



strengths, interests, motivations, and potential. This information provides a more holistic view of students than standardized tests alone, which can address the historical under-placement of BILPOC students and students from under-resourced families.

## Valuable Information for Advising

K–12 performance assessments can also better or more holistically inform advising. When an adviser meets with a new student—whether during course registration, in new student orientation, or throughout their first semester or year—having all the information that is contained in a performance assessment would allow the adviser to better support the student. The adviser could use the information to ask questions to draw out information about student needs, interests, and goals; build student self-sufficiency; advocate for correct placement and planning; and serve as a critical friend in the shared assessment of academic strengths and opportunities to improve upon in the first years of postsecondary education.

# CHALLENGES FOR USING PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS IN COLLEGE PLACEMENT AND ADVISING

## Systems Integration Is Priority One

As the task force examined the opportunities—and potential challenges and roadblocks—for using K–12 performance assessments in college placement and advising, a consistent theme emerged: the need to connect systems across and within different sectors and educational entity types to achieve any lasting improvement in placement and advising. **Systems are required to support advising and retention and to incorporate mechanisms that allow for demonstration of student performance in admissions metrics.** At present, people, processes, policy, and technology are too often walled-off into separate entities. The siloed nature of these entities means that there is little opportunity, for example, for rich assessment information from K–12 to systematically enhance postsecondary technology, data, and overall operations as students register for courses and receive advising and other supports.

Therefore, as much as anything, the task force identified a strong need for systems integration—for tighter partnerships not only between the K–12 and postsecondary sectors but also within postsecondary to ensure that the information goes beyond the admissions office to support placement and advising. Realizing the great promise that performance assessment holds for meeting student success goals will occur only through much deeper sharing of information through technology.

## Factors for Systems Integration

Better integrating systems to enable the use of K–12 performance assessments in college placement and advising cannot be done without considering a number of factors.

**Funding.** Switching from a single standardized examination that focuses on gaps in student learning to a placement mechanism that embraces the whole student is not cheap. Therefore, any policy solution requires examination of holistic assessment practices to inform both placement and advising, and any imperatives laid out in the policy must be feasible to fund and implement. Students

should not face additional financial charges for providing this information. Furthermore, if students' schools are not able to meet any new requirements posed by implementing more holistic performance assessment, those students must not be penalized.

**Communication and Staffing.** Communication between the K–12 and postsecondary sectors is always a work in progress, with the latter consistently in need of more information from the former about student interests, abilities, strengths, and opportunities for growth. But institutions need to balance this information sharing not only with student privacy concerns but also with the possibility of overloading an advising function that is typically already understaffed relative to student need for academic coaching, guidance, and support. Indeed, short-staffing predicaments are particularly endemic at community colleges and Minority-Serving Institutions—a situation that has been only exacerbated by increasing student need, uncertainty, and anxiety during the pandemic. The sectors should also consider options that creatively link them and even blur the lines to build the capacity of internal stakeholders and allow them to work together more effectively.

**Equity.** Most critical to the feasibility of policy reform efforts in this space is having equity at the forefront. Not all high schools have the same ability to move forward with such holistic provision of qualitative and quantitative information to colleges. Any policy recommendations failing to account for present funding, resourcing, and capacity—on either the high school or the postsecondary side—risks further privileging the already privileged. Provided a compelling research base for performance assessment, all schools need sufficient resources to streamline ways to submit this information. A more holistic student assessment is strengths based and can counter assumed practices that disproportionately negatively affect BILPOC students and those from under-resourced families. The task force emphasized the need to furnish accurate reflections of who students are, their full abilities, and their full potential.



# CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY TO IMPROVE PLACEMENT AND ADVISING THROUGH PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

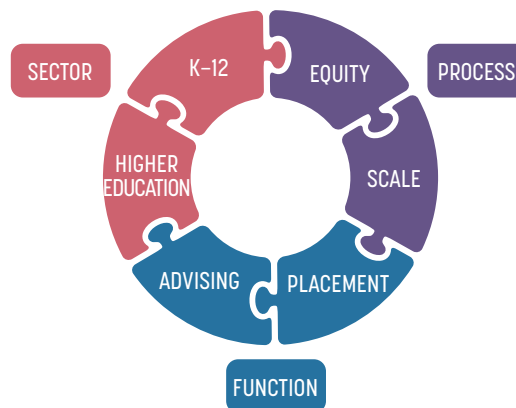
To identify issues that need to be considered when developing policy on the use of K–12 performance assessments in college advising and placement, the task force explicitly embraced the sector, process, and function domains listed in the figure at right. In addition to finding that establishing strong connections between and within the K–12 and postsecondary sectors is a necessary first step, the task force further emphasized that policy recommendations would have to consider the interplay across domains, especially the scalability and equity implications of any impact on the college placement and advising functions.

## Overall Issues to Be Considered

The task force identified a number of issues it considered foundational for any K–12 and postsecondary policy recommendations related to performance assessment. The policy must:

- **Emphasize the iterative nature of assessment** and facilitate the demonstration of multiple dimensions of students' learning experiences as well as a broader set of competencies than are available via standardized tests, further increasing opportunities for meeting individual career and educational aspirations.
- **Foster recurring and enhanced connections between high schools and colleges** by aligning the content of the K–12 performance assessment with the measures colleges use to determine postsecondary readiness, developing a shared understanding of expectations of learning, and valuing student competencies from multiple perspectives.
- **Focus on using knowledge gleaned from students' performance assessments to appropriately support and place students** in academic courses and pathways, taking into account student passions and subjective experiences.
- **Demand holistic, scalable, accessible K–12 performance assessments** for students that colleges can use to close gaps in course access, deepen advising, and facilitate progression on semester-by-semester student pathways.
- **Prioritize training and support for teachers, administrators, admissions professionals, high school counselors, college faculty, college advisers, and others** when creating and using high-quality performance assessments so that many stakeholders can participate in advancing learning for individual students and broader education systems.
- **Reinforce the benefits of performance assessment to help postsecondary institutions connect students with academic programs and resources** to build on student strengths, shore up gaps in student preparation, and facilitate the application of student talents to complex problems—benefiting communities, organizations, and business.
- **Require that performance assessment results be provided** in ways that are digestible and easy to understand.

## Policy Considerations: Critical Domains



## Making Policy Worthwhile

Performance assessment policy is feasible only if the right systems, technical and otherwise, are in place to make it a reality. The task force determined that a policy is *worthwhile* only if it:

- Centers students' passions, interests, and experiences.
- Emphasizes proficiency in learning and self-reflection about the learning process, including in service of academic exploration and demonstration of creative abilities and critical thinking.
- Mitigates student under-/over-placement into introductory college courses (as is common with high-stakes exams).
- Emphasizes recurrent, deep connections between high schools and colleges, including shared understanding between advisers and counselors, as well as with students, regarding the learning that has already taken place.
- Individuates assessment and embraces the whole student.

## SPECIFIC POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

Addressing the overall issues identified by the task force is not possible without improved connection and seamless systems integration between and within the K–12 and postsecondary sectors. Currently, seamless integration is not the norm, and creating it comes with a hefty price tag. Therefore, following are basic systems connection requirements to avoid entrenchment of the systemic equity issues presently hindering the college placement and advising processes:

- **At the high school level**, states, communities, and school districts should examine the feasibility of embedding performance assessment requirements for high school graduation, including as an accepted way to meet graduation guidelines. Such policy development should be undertaken in collaboration with local college partners, putting primary emphasis on not just the comprehensiveness of the performance assessment but also the sharing of information and the systems required. Sharing this information and tracking gaps by race, gender, or household income is especially critical in the face of long-standing inequities in college-going patterns; such policy development must occur in tandem with the requisite infrastructure and professional development funding that is often inequitable and leads to inequitable student outcomes.
- **For college course and academic pathway placement**, digital transmission of performance assessment portfolios from high schools to colleges must be embedded in college or college system institutional policy, or in statewide requirements, highlighting the need for connectivity and systems integration. Policy ramifications in the placement process include moving from admissions test requirements to solutions based on multiple measures that embrace performance assessment. **Such policy must, at the institutional level, be buttressed by procedural documentation on systems integration and scalability**, including time required for evaluation as part of the course registration process, which at most institutions today does not typically afford a sufficient window for the scrutiny required for fair placement.
- **For college advising**, performance assessment should redefine internal concepts of college readiness, building off student strengths, experiences, and interests demonstrated through curricular portfolios from the high school environment. To meet this objective, policy requirements around resourcing and time for holistic advising—complementary to holistic placement—will need to be in place at the institutional level. Internal sharing between advising and placement functions help make that happen.



## NEXT STEPS

The issues identified by the task force are a first step to developing policy (and practice) to use K–12 performance assessments as a viable placement mechanism and supplementary advising tool. State policymakers should establish, fund, and provide a timeline for a state-level committee consisting of K–12 and postsecondary leaders to determine contextualized, effective policy recommendations, including appropriate funding to avoid reinforcing existing institutional performance gaps caused by imbalanced high school or postsecondary institutional access to the resources this process demands. They then must communicate these recommendations to outside stakeholders.

Creating such policy recommendations requires further exploration in at least six areas, with the first three being most critical:

- 1. Deep empirical research** into the impact of performance assessment on student enrollment, retention, and ultimate graduation outcomes—starting with cases of extensive implementation and including both the two- and four-year sectors.
- 2. Cross-sector collaboration** to identify modalities and content for professional development and then estimate the cost.
- 3. A digital infrastructure/systems integration cost study** for portfolio compilation and transmission between high schools and postsecondary institutions, as such infrastructure is required if any solutions are to be developed with requisite scalability.
- 4. A net cost study** relative to status quo placement costs and institutional revenue opportunity costs from unrealized enrollment benefits resulting from using performance assessments.
- 5. Restructuring of the course registration and academic pathway selection cycles** for new students, especially at community colleges, examining the time required—and the resulting process and policy adjustments that will need to be made—to allow for scalable implementation of performance assessment.



- 6. Additional ways performance assessment could be used** to show authentic examples of learning and knowledge among populations beyond graduating high school students.

Moving to performance assessment as a key input for college placement and advising requires changes—not just in training, institutional interaction, and processes but in community-based dynamics and mindsets. Most importantly, it must start with systems integration between and within the K–12 and postsecondary sectors. Indeed, for performance assessment to equitably bolster student success by mitigating under-/over-placement and individuating assessment to embrace the whole student, deep technological and professional development advances must happen that allow for the delivery of just the right information at just the right time to optimize the placement and advising processes. Therefore, any policy in the venues of high school, college placement, or college advising must maximize mechanisms and opportunities; consider funding requirements; and itemize costs saved, not just costs added.

Evidence of successful practice—and the monitoring of results and gathering of outcomes data—will strengthen knowledge around the viability of using K–12 performance assessments for college placement and advising. More research and exploration can lead to workable policy recommendations that embrace the whole student, placing and advising them fairly and complementing their personal and professional aspirations.

# APPENDIX

## Task Force Members

- **Julie Adams**, Research and Policy Associate, Learning Policy Institute
- **Charles Ansell**, Vice President for Research, Policy, & Advocacy, Complete College America
- **Beth Blankenship**, Innovation Specialist, Assessment Coach, and English Teacher, Madison High School, Fairfax County, Virginia
- **Sean Bridgen**, Associate Director for External and Institutional Partnerships, NACADA
- **Joyce Brown**, Partner, National Postsecondary Strategy Institute
- **Kayla Elliott**, Director of Higher Education Policy, The Education Trust
- **Amber Garrison Duncan**, Executive Vice President, Competency-Based Education Network (*formerly Strategy Director, Lumina Foundation*)
- **Tom Green**, Director, Strategic Enrollment Management, Salesforce (*formerly Associate Executive Director, Consulting and SEM, American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers*)
- **Karla Hardesty**, Associate Dean of Academic Planning, Assessment & Improvement, Colorado Mountain College (*formerly Executive Director of Enrollment Management, Adams State University*)
- **David Hawkins**, Chief Education and Policy Officer, National Association for College Admission Counseling
- **Khalia Joseph**, Manager of College Readiness, Internationals Network
- **Rasmus Lynnerup**, Assistant Vice Provost for Academic Alliances, Arizona State University
- **Monica Martinez**, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Learning Policy Institute
- **Tia McNair**, Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Student Success and Executive Director for the Truth, Racial Healing, & Transformation Campus Centers, American Association of Colleges & Universities
- **Brandon Protas**, Strategy Director, Complete College America
- **Ryan Reyna**, Principal, Education Strategy Group
- **Esther Soliman**, Linked Learning Administrator, Los Angeles Unified School District

■ *Member of the Steering Committee*

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