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The Power and Promise of Performance Assessments

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By *Roneeta Guha, Senior Researcher at the Learning Policy Institute*

In Oakland Unified School District, every senior completes a **capstone project** that engages them in research on a topic of personal interest and social importance. This research must meet a standard of integrity and evidence, as well as clarity of presentation in writing and an oral presentation to a committee of adults and peers.

In last year's round of defenses, Marwat Al-Olefi passionately explained--with persuasive statistics--what she learned in her study of racial biases in healthcare and explained why she wanted to "put all of her effort into this study" that was so motivating to her. Kennedy Russ described her shock as she collected data about the lack of access to reproductive healthcare for women, and completed a six-week internship at a local hospital where she "saw these issues in real life" and became "committed to her civic duty" to change the injustices she researched and observed. Students and teachers comment that the deep learning students engage in during these projects impacts their academic skills as well as their perspectives on civic engagement and their future lives.

As educators in Oakland and many other districts have found, performance assessments have the power to improve teaching and learning, and hold promise for helping schools and colleges better develop and assess students' college and career readiness. They can also help increase students' access to higher education, especially for those furthest from opportunity. That's why the **Learning Policy Institute** (LPI) is working on two related initiatives to expand the use of performance assessments in high schools and colleges:

- The first is a grassroots effort in California led by a statewide network of practitioners working to refine and scale performance assessment practices and to influence local and state policies. The **California Performance Assessment Collaborative** (CPAC) is composed of key leaders and schools from seven major school districts (Los Angeles, Oakland, Pasadena, San Francisco, Fresno, Sacramento, and Long Beach) and several school networks (Envision Education, High Tech High, New Tech Network, Big Picture Learning, the Internationals Network for Public Schools, and Summit Schools), which focus on deeper learning and authentic assessments. CPAC includes at least 40 pioneer schools and many more that are part of the learning community.
- The other initiative--**Reimagining College Access**--is a partnership of K-12 and higher education policy and practice leaders who aim to bring performance assessments into higher education admissions, placement, and advising. Their goal is to advance equity and diversity through more robust information about students' deeper learning competencies and readiness for college.

Expanding the use of performance assessments

For years, many schools and districts across California have required students to demonstrate their mastery of higher-order skills through student portfolios, capstone research projects, senior exhibitions, and defenses of learning. In 2015, when California suspended its use of the high school exit exam, those schools and districts saw an opportunity to lift up the performance assessments they were using and to push for policies that would support that work. They turned to LPI to explore how we could help.

What began as an effort to promote a state graduation policy that would recognize the use of existing high school graduation performance assessments quickly evolved into a professional learning community: CPAC. The exam was never reinstated, and CPAC members began sharing what they learned to improve the ways they were teaching and assessing students; they accomplished this through in-person meetings, site visits, and information sharing.

At convenings, CPAC members grapple with and explore questions around scaling performance assessments: training teachers to develop and implement assessments and to make instructional shifts based on data; calibrating teachers around student scoring; creating master schedules that allow students adequate time to work on their capstone projects or portfolios and teachers time to collaborate with each other and support students, and more. They also explore the best ways to support students to ensure their success, including **students with learning challenges or for whom English is a second language**.

CPAC members report that performance assessments are challenging students and teachers in important and beneficial ways--requiring students to take ownership of their learning and teachers to step back and allow their students to learn and master important skills independently. Through capstone projects, portfolio development, and other projects, students build content knowledge, resourcefulness, and inquiry skills and have opportunities to reflect on their learning and revise their work--developing a growth mindset in the process. LPI's **research and documentation** is designed to share the strategies and outcomes of this work, illustrating **what students learn**--and **what teachers learn**, as well as how schools can support this work.

When students have developed these college-ready skills, the next question is: how they can be communicated to colleges and universities who want students with these abilities, but have had limited ways to learn about student accomplishments?

Taking performance assessments to college

Building on our work with CPAC, LPI, and EducationCounsel, we have launched a new national initiative that brings together K-12 and higher education policy and practice leaders to support the expansion of high-quality performance assessment systems, and their use in college admissions, placement, and advising.

The **Reimagining College Access** (RCA) initiative reflects insights from **The Promise of Performance Assessments: Innovations in High School Learning and College Admission**, a report examining how performance assessments are used to inform high school and college decision-making. Some universities are already soliciting student work as part of their admissions process, recognizing that they reveal more about capacities to succeed than standardized test scores. Many colleges see the need to increase college access and success, especially for historically underrepresented students, and are moving toward broader explorations of student knowledge, qualities, and skills. RCA aims to pave the way to help higher education achieve those goals.

RCA's three task forces, chaired by higher education and K-12 leaders, are exploring:

- standards and a process for recognizing high-quality K-12 performance assessment systems at the national and/or state level;
- a digital portfolio to capture and efficiently display information about students' work and accomplishments so they can be considered in admission, placement, and advising decisions;
- and the creation of a network of leading states, districts, and higher education institutions to allow K-12 school systems with strong performance assessment methods to engage more deliberately with postsecondary institutions through piloting ideas developed by the other two task forces.

Across the diverse higher education community, distinctive institutions may find different ways to use performance assessments when considering candidates or placing and advising students. The intention is to encourage more colleges to use these assessments as they become more widely accepted as a truly authentic measure of what students know and can do, thus encouraging more high schools to engage in this kind of powerful learning and teaching.

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