

# Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work



This report describes the history, context, implementation, and early results of a unique college admissions pilot, one that provides new evidence in the ongoing debate about how colleges should evaluate students to determine who is likely to thrive. Since 2015, the City University of New York (CUNY), serving over 250,000 students through 25 two- and four-year colleges, and high schools in the New York Performance Standards Consortium (the Consortium), which use performance-based assessments to assess student progress, have collaborated to add authentic evidence of student learning to the college admissions process.

Drawing on a data set that links data from the New York City Department of Education and the CUNY system, this report provides a statistical portrait of the progress of Consortium graduates attending CUNY, including a subset who were admitted to college based, in part, on performance assessments, student work, and teacher recommendations but who scored below the SAT cutoff score for CUNY admission to 4-year institutions.

The report describes the schools' performance-based assessment system and how it functions within Consortium schools. It details how teachers and students

collaborate to produce high-quality work and how teachers within each school and throughout the network collaborate to maintain and support the rigor and relevance of the assessment process. It describes how the work that students produce through these systems can inform college admissions and what the results of those admissions decisions were in this pilot, as measured through credit accumulation, college GPA, and college persistence.

## **The Consortium and Performance-Based Assessment Tasks**

The Consortium network is made up of 38 schools located in New York City, Rochester, and Ithaca, New York, that currently educate more than 30,000 k–12 students. In New York City, where the pilot took place, Consortium schools across four boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx) serve a diverse range of high school students, including a greater-than-citywide proportion of English learners, students with disabilities, youth living in temporary housing, Hispanic students, and students in economic need.

Unlike other public schools in New York City, the Consortium high schools operate under a waiver from the state Regents exams that organize the curriculum of most schools. Aside from the English Regents exam, which their students take, the schools use a system of practitioner-developed, student-focused, and externally reviewed projects, papers, performances, experiments, and experiences called performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs). Proponents of the Consortium model have argued that its high-quality assessment system promotes deep engagement and critical thinking; promotes rich evidence of student learning; and ameliorates, to some extent, traditional achievement gaps.

## **Events That Gave Rise to the Consortium–CUNY Pilot**

Historically, Consortium graduates had routinely applied to and been accepted by CUNY in the same way as all other New York City students, without submitting performance assessments. Over time, Consortium educators began to notice their students, particularly students of color from low-income families, were accepted at test-optional private colleges but denied entry to CUNY 4-year colleges. At the same time, a report by the Community Service Society, a nonprofit advocacy group, linked the decreasing numbers of New York City students of color gaining

admission to CUNY's 4-year colleges to three changes: the CUNY system's growing reliance on strict cutoff scores on college entrance exams and GPA for admission, efforts to raise minimum test scores among accepted applicants, and the cessation of "conditional admission" through which a low-scoring student might gain admission to a 4-year program by successfully completing coursework over the summer. While the CUNY admission team might review additional supporting materials submitted by a candidate, such a review was not common, and the standard application form did not call for it.

When advocates raised concerns about the dwindling share of socioeconomically disadvantaged students, CUNY agreed to launch a small pilot to evaluate an alternative admissions approach for its 4-year colleges. The pilot admitted Consortium students who had fulfilled their high school graduation requirements with high-quality work but who had SAT scores below the cutoff needed to gain admission to CUNY 4-year programs. Researchers agreed to follow these pilot students over time to assess their academic progress at CUNY, disaggregated by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic need, as possible. To ensure both transparency and accountability, this study documented the academic progress of successive cohorts of Consortium–CUNY students, comparing (1) all Consortium graduates, (2) pilot students, and (3) other New York City–based high school graduates.

## **Piloting the Use of Performance-Based Assessment Tasks for Admissions**

The students that the Consortium–CUNY pilot admits are thrice vetted: first by their teachers, as students submit PBATs that have received, at minimum, the score of Competent required to graduate; then by college counselors at the high school; and, finally, by CUNY admissions officers.

High school counselors at Consortium schools support students whose SAT scores fall below the CUNY minimum requirement to build their applications in a special format by the end of December, an earlier timeline than would otherwise apply. Students seeking admission through the pilot are required to submit the following: the CUNY common application (including a rank order of preferred colleges), letters of recommendation, evidence of their GPA, a personal essay, a performance-based assessment paper, and a statement from their high school describing its assessment policy. Once the pilot applications arrive, CUNY's central admissions office engages in a holistic review of each applicant file, deciding whether or not to send the application on to colleges according to the

applicant's priorities. If an offer is extended, the applicants decide whether or not to attend CUNY. Between half and two thirds of the Consortium–CUNY pilot students admitted choose to attend CUNY in their first year of college.

## Preliminary Results for Pilot Students

Preliminary quantitative evidence demonstrates that students in Consortium schools begin high school more educationally and economically disadvantaged than their peers and yet are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and persist in college than demographically similar peers. Those who go on to attend CUNY are more likely to be Black and Hispanic and are more likely to be from the Bronx than their CUNY peers. Early evidence suggests that Black males, in particular, benefit from a Consortium education when compared to Black males educated in traditional high school settings: They are noticeably more likely to persist in college and to receive higher grades.

The results also indicate positive outcomes for students admitted to CUNY through the Consortium–CUNY pilot: On average, they achieve higher first-semester college GPAs, earn more initial credits, and persist in college after the first year at higher rates than peers from other New York City schools, who, on average, have higher SAT scores.

These results suggest that a more holistic review of admission applications that include evidence of student work can help identify students with strong potential to succeed in college, despite lower scores on college entrance exams. Continued analysis is needed to determine the impact of these practices on graduation rates and degree GPA, by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

## Summary of Key Findings and Implications

The research has several key findings and implications.

**The authentic learning and assessment practices of Consortium schools contribute to enhanced 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 higher GPAs than their peers. This evidence reinforces the findings of other research suggesting that learning experiences structured around performance-based assessments support student advancement and can help narrow race, class, and linguistic gaps in secondary and higher education achievement.

**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 entrance exams. Admissions officers found the information valuable and have been transforming the broader admissions process to expand what they can learn about students and their work. Performance-based assessment offers one path for how holistic scoring might enrich equity in access and success.

**Performance assessment can be a catalyst for equity conversations and institutional change:**

This small pilot has opened an institution-wide conversation about admission criteria, racial/economic equity, and academic success in one of the largest urban systems of higher education in the country—one with 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. During the early years of the pilot study, CUNY developed a new online platform that allowed students to submit a broader range of evidence of their learning, encouraged applicants to submit various forms of academic work, and allowed for a more holistic and student-centered view of student potential.

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