

# REIMAGINING COLLEGE ACCESS

Performance Assessments From K–12 Through Higher Education

## Performance Assessment in College Admissions: How Students Show What They Know and Can Do

### 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 Common App

The Common App is a not-for-profit membership association committed to the pursuit of access, equity, and integrity in the college admissions process. Over 900 colleges and universities across 49 states, DC, and around the world accept the Common App. The platform annually supports 1 million applicants to submit 5.6 million applications to its member schools; 33% of users on the Common App platform are first-generation college applicants.

Since the 2013–14 application cycle, Common App has collaborated with SlideRoom, a secure online system for receiving and evaluating applications, to support supplemental portfolio submissions on the Common App. The collaboration provides seamless integration of Common App and SlideRoom accounts for flexible data import and review to suit the needs of individual member colleges. Fee waivers for the Common App carry over to SlideRoom.

Building on familiar tools and existing integrations, Common App offers a promising platform to advance holistic application processes. These efforts by the Common App, in partnership with SlideRoom, have created a channel through which their members can collect more meaningful information that will help gauge potential for student success.

### RCA Spotlight

The Reimagining College Access initiative is spotlighting Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Wheaton College, two institutions of higher education that are leveraging application platforms to accept and review supplemental materials, including performance assessments, as part of the admissions process.

**Spotlight:** [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#)

**Type of IHE:** private

**Undergrad enrollment:** 11,376

**Class of 2022 Applicants:** 21,706

**Why they wanted to create a portfolio:** To provide an opportunity for students to showcase projects that require creative insight, technical skill, and a hands-on approach to learning by doing.

**How do they use it?** Members of the MIT Engineering Advisory Board (which includes faculty members, alumni, and/or experts in the field) review the [MIT Maker Portfolio](#), providing calibrated quantitative and qualitative feedback to admissions officers to support holistic review alongside other aspects of a student's application.

**What platform do they use?** Applicants submit the MIT Maker Portfolio via SlideRoom.

**What have they learned?** The use of portfolios helps the MIT admissions team distinguish applicants who have demonstrated their achievements and ability to do well academically through hands-on, project-based work.

## Lessons Learned

**Know what you are looking for to develop the right ask.** On their own, samples of student work often do not clearly communicate the critical skills and abilities with which students engage in the learning process, such as creativity, persistence, and collaboration. Applicants should be encouraged not only to submit their most compelling work, but also to share what was meaningful about their experience. Asking specifically for performance assessments—which are typically evaluated by students and teachers on externally validated rubrics—can help admissions officers gather more useful, contextualized, and compelling information about students without having to reevaluate quality or make assumptions about the critical skills and abilities demonstrated.

**K–12 systems can strengthen the pipeline.** K–12 systems that include performance assessments as part of their teaching and learning approach engage students in the processes of doing, reflecting, and learning—and directly capture these processes through their performance assessments. Such systems can strengthen the pipeline of high-quality applications by (1) encouraging college applicants to showcase their skills through performance assessments completed as part of their high school curriculum; and (2) clearly explaining the system’s approach to teaching, learning, and assessment on school profiles, transcripts, and other forms of communication.

**Admissions is just the beginning.** Curating and reflecting on supplemental materials encourages students to consider the skills, passions, and experiences that they may continue to build on throughout their postsecondary education and beyond. Performance assessment artifacts provide rich information that is useful not only for admissions, but also for other decision-making in higher education, including yield and advising.

**Anticipate iteration.** Piloting new admissions processes involves continuous learning and improvement. Both MIT and Wheaton began their first cycle with broad, open-ended prompts that they have committed to tailoring over time based on the submissions they receive. Institutions of higher education interested in similar admissions processes should anticipate iteration to clarify and course-correct to ensure students submit supplemental materials that demonstrate their achievements and potential.

## RCA Spotlight (continued)

**Spotlight:** [Wheaton College](#)

**Type of IHE:** private

**Undergrad enrollment:** 1,760

**Class of 2022 Applicants:** 3,674

**Why they wanted to create a portfolio:** To identify applicants with the critical skills and abilities needed to thrive in their open curricula, but who may be overlooked using traditional measures.

**How do they use it?** Admissions staff read [Wheaton Admissions Portfolios](#) closely, alongside traditional admissions materials in a holistic review process.

**What platform do they use?** Applicants submit the Wheaton Admissions Portfolio via Common App, via SlideRoom.

**What have they learned?** Though small in its first year, the pilot was successful in helping admissions staff identify college-ready skills among some of their applicants. Wheaton is refining and clarifying the option for next year in order to increase the quality of submissions. They are requiring a student reflection and providing more information about the option to high school counselors and students.

## 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?
- 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 if students possess, or are you looking for more **holistic information about the learner generally**?
- **What platform(s) do you use** to receive and process application materials? How might new information be transferred, received, and reviewed on existing platforms?
- **Who would review** additional information about applicants? What training would be needed to ensure **calibration and moderation of scores**?
- How could a new option **affect students’ experience in the application process**? What steps can be taken to deescalate the admissions process for applicants?