

# **Beyond Affirmative Action: Can Performance-Based Admissions Boost Diversity in STEM?**

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### Abstract

Despite admissions procedures remaining a significant obstacle regarding access and equity among institutions, higher education continues to offer opportunities for transformation (Geisinger, 2023). Historically, Affirmative Action initiatives aimed to combat systemic inequalities; however, the 2023 Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College and University of North Carolina* restricted race-conscious admissions practices, diminishing institutions' ability to promote diverse student populations (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 2023). In response to these challenges, performance-based admission (PBA) has emerged as a viable model for enhancing access, particularly in STEM graduate programs, by prioritizing academic performance over conventional admissions metrics (McAndrew, 2023). This study aims to utilize institutional theory to investigate how higher education institutions (IHEs) view and implement PBA models, and further assess whether PBA can boost diversity without relying on subjective criteria that have historically perpetuated inequity. Triangulating institutional data, literature, and qualitative, phenomenological interviews, this research will collect enrollment data and interview strategic enrollment managers from various institutions to explore administrators' perceptions of PBA's advantages, challenges, and institutional support. The findings seek to evaluate the effectiveness of PBA as a fair admissions strategy and to contribute to broader initiatives aimed at maintaining diversity and access in higher education in a post-Affirmative Action landscape.

### **Introduction**

Higher education is often described as a foundational experience; however, admissions practices remain a significant barrier to access and equity across colleges and universities (Geisinger, 2023). Geisinger's point represents a pillar of Affirmative Action, which was to address the suffering of millions of Black Americans affected by the legacy and ongoing impact of racism. At its inception, Affirmative Action provided equal opportunities and safety for Black Americans to engage in and benefit from higher education, and up until recently, its protections extended to support people of color, women, people with disabilities, veterans, and the LGBTQ+ community (Ford et al., 2023).

However, the United States Supreme Court's 2023 decision ending race-conscious admissions at selective institutions, in the case of *Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) v. Harvard College and the University of North Carolina*, significantly altered the higher education landscape (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 2023). Although the ruling did not completely reverse the advancements in higher education gained since 1964, it limited institutions' capacity to promote a diverse student body via their admissions processes (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, 2023). The Supreme Court's ruling undermines the United States' progression toward equity in higher education, which has nurtured diverse student bodies to "enhance student learning and cross-cultural competence" (Hossler & Bontrager, 2023, p. 158).

In response, institutions of higher education (IHEs) are under pressure to explore alternative admissions models that advance equity and access, without violating legal restrictions. An example of this attempt to navigate this uncharted territory is a new admission model of performance-based admission (PBA), which seeks to enhance access for STEM

graduate students by selecting specific coursework that highlights candidates' academic abilities in particular academic programs (McAndrew, 2023). As a result of PBA's infancy, little is known about the practical outcomes and perceptions of PBA on diversity in STEM admissions, thus presenting a gap in the literature. This research, which is a work-in-progress, argues that PBA may be a practical, unbiased alternative to more traditional admissions in STEM disciplines (McAndrew, 2023). Yet, PBA's success depends on thoughtful implementation, proactive recruitment, informed research, and nimble practice by the institution's strategic enrollment management administrators (SEM). This ongoing research explores how SEM administrators perceive the advantages and challenges of PBA, aiming to shed light on its potential as a post-Affirmative Action tool for enhancing entry into STEM graduate programs.

### **Performance-based Admission**

With the removal of race-conscious admissions, institutions must reconsider how they admit students while seeking to improve access and diversity. In this context, PBA is an alternative that minimizes subjective judgment while maintaining academic rigor (McAndrew, 2023). Performance-based admission evaluates students' aptitude through their academic performance in predetermined coursework (Mark, n.d.). This method eliminates the admission counselor from the evaluation process, discards inequitable standardized tests, and aims to reduce partiality toward white, affluent applicants (Bennett, 2022). The number of students admitted, retained, and graduated from these programs appears to demonstrate that PBA works in proving student aptitude and future success. In support of the aforementioned, Kuskin states that PBA is not simply an "easy-in"; it represents an "enormous challenge for these students, however: they must gauge their own ability and be willing to withdraw" (2019). McAndrew (2023) adds that "performance pathways derive from an institution's established, accredited

curriculum, which is already designed to challenge and engage learners to programmatic and institutional standards.”

Although supporters argue that PBA fosters an equitable process, empirical research and data regarding its positive impact on student diversity remain limited (Kuskin, 2020). Moreover, the model presents challenges to institution-wide implementation; such hypothesized challenges may be the limited awareness of PBA among underrepresented groups, institutional marketing and outreach, and inequities for those lacking essential preparatory resources and coursework.

Given PBA’s infancy, the claim that performance-based admission makes attendance at select institutions more accessible has not yet been verified. Scarce data illustrate how PBA functions as a novel admission practice and its perceived effectiveness from the institution’s perspective.

## **Methodology**

Institutional theory “stresses the dependency of actors on institutions and the role of human agency in institutional change” (Cai & Mehari, 2015, p. 19) and is an answer to why institutions are “imitative or mimetic, adopting others’ successful elements when uncertain about alternatives...” (Zucker, 1987, p. 444). Institutions are consistently influenced by external political, governmental, and social forces that define their structures and business practices, resulting in homogeneity (Manning, 2018). When applied to PBA, institutional theory offers an intriguing perspective. Larger, more established, and well-known institutions, such as the University of Colorado Boulder and others using PBA, lead the charge for change (Manning, 2018). Without this leadership, smaller and less influential institutions remain in a state of purgatory, resigned to continue past practices for fear of disrupting their stability and safety (Manning, 2018). When the University of Colorado Boulder adopted the PBA model, it opened

doors for smaller or less influential institutions to follow suit and potentially shield themselves from scrutiny by SFFA and similar groups.

Effective change at the institutional level necessitates data-informed decision-making (Manning, 2018). To pursue the above-noted goal, this study focuses on the following research questions.

- (R1) Do admissions representatives from institutions utilizing performance-based admission perceive it enhances diversity in online STEM programs?
- (R2) Do admissions representatives at performance-based admissions schools perceive they have sufficient institutional backing and resources to establish and maintain the process?
- (R3) What benefits and challenges do admissions representatives from institutions with performance-based admissions see in implementing PBA?

Through the lens of R1 study will collect and examine enrollment data from selected institutions, including the University of Colorado Boulder, Northeastern University, Ball State University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Illinois, through self-reported data from the institutions' strategic enrollment managers (SEM) to better contextualize enrollment trends. This data will be purely descriptive and will not require statistical analysis. By providing enrollment details disaggregated by race from the online STEM degree programs, along with information about these programs' supporting staff, the data will offer a snapshot of how PBA is performing (whether there is decreased, increased, or stable enrollment of racial minorities and how the staff provides support for racial growth).

Strategic enrollment practitioners play a vital role in the success of PBA (Hossler, Kalsbeek, & Bontrager, 2014). Through the lens of R2 and R3, the study will triangulate the enrollment data, and a phenomenological hermeneutic study will capture administrators' lived experiences with facilitating PBA, as their insights offer essential perspectives on the model's viability (Bontrager & Green, 2014). The planned study will conduct interviews with two SEM

administrators from IHEs that utilize PBA to ensure a manageable workload for the researcher. The semi-structured, individual interviews will center on administrators' perceptions of institutional support for PBA implementation and daily operations. Interviews will explore their experience with targeted marketing outreach, administrative support specific to the needs of marginalized populations, and institutional data collection, among other topics. Participants will be asked to share their experiences of their institution's dedication to fostering and maintaining PBA initiatives and their insights into institutional interest in investigating PBA's effectiveness. A particular emphasis will be placed on how participants comprehend and assess PBA's potential to enhance access and cater to a more diverse student population at their institutions.

The interview data will be analyzed using thematic a priori coding within a structured phenomenological qualitative framework to explore the lived experiences of administrators delivering PBA to their prospective students. Due to the study's in-progress nature, the thematic a priori coding has been left out of this paper.

### **Limitations**

The narrow, peer-reviewed research on PBA limits future findings. Moreover, due to the current political climate in the United States, some institutions using PBA may choose not to participate in this study, thus limiting the scope of the results. Finally, qualitative research is interpretive; thus, the collected data may be influenced by the researcher's perspectives (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). To mitigate this bias, the study will include a second coder and confirm the interview transcripts with each SEM practitioner.

### **Conclusion**

As the landscape of admissions in higher education continues to undergo scrutiny, no single department, program, SEM administrator, faculty, policymaker, or leadership can claim

responsibility for PBA's success alone; instead, they represent a strata dedicated to research, planning, and effective implementation (Manning, 2018). This work-in-progress seeks to illuminate whether PBA genuinely delivers on its promise to diversify STEM graduate programs by those institution administrators tasked with developing and supporting it. By exploring these practitioners' lived experiences, this research seeks to inform institutional decision-making. The study also seeks to enhance national discussions on maintaining commitments to diversity amidst legal and political uncertainty. Ultimately, findings from this research aim to help develop more inclusive admissions practices that are true to equity and contribute to the broader conversation about accessible education.



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