

CAE



SSA+

Sample
Assessment

HIGHER EDUCATION

www.cae.org

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► Overview

Success Skills Assessment (SSA+) for higher education is designed to measure students' critical thinking, problem-solving and written communication skills regardless of their field of study. These skills are necessary not only for success in college, but also for success in the workplace and life outside the classroom. Our online assessments include real-world scenarios and documents that reflect an authentic situation. No prior knowledge is necessary to perform well.

SSA+ includes a 60-minute Performance Task (PT) with an open-ended prompt that requires a written response. The PT assesses analytical reasoning, the evaluation of information, problem solving, writing effectiveness, and writing mechanics.

A 30-minute Selected-Response Question (SRQ) section is also included in the assessment which contains three types of questions: Data Literacy (DL), Critical Reading and Evaluation (CRE), and Critiquing an Argument (CA). The SRQs ask the student to choose the best response based on the information provided.

The following is an abbreviated version of a PT, scoring rubric, and SRQs.

About CAE

CAE partners with educational organizations to help prepare students for their next steps. Using our authentic performance-based assessments, educators, students, and their families gain actionable insights to help them develop their critical thinking, problem-solving, and written communication skills — the skills that are necessary for academic success and most in-demand by employers. Instructional materials are available to support essential skill development along with professional development on using performance tasks and how to integrate essential skills instruction into existing curricula. CAE can also develop custom performance-based assessments to measure the specific skills your organization is interested in, including for core subject areas.

For more information, visit www.cae.org.

► Performance Task: Parks

ROLE

You have recently been appointed Director of the Parks and Recreation Department for Tiverton, a small city with an economically diverse population.

SCENARIO

The Parks and Recreation Department organizes and provides financial support for two programs for local high school-aged youth: Forest Adventures and Sports & School.

TASK

Your task is to analyze the documents that your staff members have collected and answer the questions pertaining to them. You will be asked to support your answers with ideas and evidence found in the documents.

At the end of the task, you will be asked to write an email to the mayor of Tiverton stating your conclusion as to whether the Parks and Recreation Department should continue to support Forest Adventures.

► Document Library

Document 1: Youth Programs Website

Document 2: Letter from Shana Robichaux

Document 3: Student Survey Responses

Document 4: Tiverton Memorial Hospital Data Reports


Document 5: Letter from Kwame Johnson

Document 6: Minutes of Meeting

► DOCUMENT 1: Youth Programs Website

Parks & Recreation

Secure | <https://tiv.ci.us.gov/parks/programs/youth/0004219/>



Department of Parks & Recreation

Official Website of the Tiverton Department of Parks & Recreation

ABOUT PARKS EVENTS PROGRAMS

YOUTH PROGRAMS

The City currently offers two exciting programs to the high school-aged youth of Tiverton. These programs are intended to promote academic and personal growth.

SPORTS & SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

This program offers high school students a rich and varied after-school experience led by student-athlete mentors from State College. The Sports & School Experience is offered Monday–Thursday at the Tiverton Hills Recreation Center, which is adjacent to the Tiverton High School campus.

Mentors are varsity athletes with a required minimum GPA of 3.2. These tutor/coaches provide athletic training plus academic support, and they represent positive role models to program participants. Sports activities that have been included in the program are flag football, soccer, baseball, volleyball, gymnastics, and tennis. The student fee is \$50/semester. There are no requirements other than being a Tiverton High School student with no history of disciplinary problems, and the program can currently accommodate up to 200 students per semester.

FOREST ADVENTURES WILDERNESS EXPEDITION

Forest Adventures is an award-winning national organization that has been in operation since 1962. Yearly, over 10,000 high school students nationwide gain a deeper understanding of their potential through participating in challenging wilderness activities including hiking, rock climbing, and white-water rafting. Counselors are trained in wilderness survival, character-building exercises, and first aid and CPR, and most have five-plus years of experience working for Forest Adventures.

Forest Adventures collaborates with our Parks and Recreation Department to offer a two-week backpacking expedition in Tiverton State Forest every August. This immersive experience builds real-life problem-solving skills, appreciation of nature, and physical strength. Due to a generous subsidy from a local alumnus of the program, the program is free to selected local high school students (a \$2,000 value per student). The town covers insurance costs for the program and buses students to and from the expedition. There are spaces for 35 students per semester. Competition is intense, so interested students are encouraged to apply early.

For more information, please call the Youth Programs office at 132-4576 between 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday.

▶ DOCUMENT 2: Letter from Shana Robichaux

To the Town of Tiverton:

As the parent of a young man who recently participated in Forest Adventures, I am writing to urge that the town discontinue its support for the program.

My son Erik has the potential to do well academically, but because of low self-esteem, he often fails to complete his coursework. Also, I am a single parent working full-time and have never had the resources to send Erik to nature camp. As a result, both Erik and I were thrilled when his school counselor recommended Erik as the kind of student Forest Adventures is designed to help, and Erik was chosen from among 120 local applicants.

According to its promotional materials, the goal of Forest Adventures is to “emphasize personal growth through the mastery of new skills—tackling obstacles rather than avoiding them.”

Unfortunately, the reality is not so positive. Inner-city high school students, most of them with no wilderness experience, are challenged to hike long distances, climb steep rocks, and canoe for hours. Because of pressure from counselors and their peers, these poor kids engage in dangerous activities that they are unprepared for—afraid of looking “wimpy.” And since the program is only two weeks long, how can students experience real growth and change?

Erik was severely injured on a hike. He slipped on some mossy rocks and experienced a very painful twisted ankle; he had to be evacuated several miles over bumpy paths on a makeshift stretcher before reaching the road—and the ambulance that was waiting there.

Tiverton’s Sports & School program is a much safer way for local teens to improve their physical skills. It also provides students like Erik with the academic tutoring that they need to succeed in school. Finally, Sports & School provides mentorship throughout the academic year (36 weeks total) instead of just two weeks in summer. Let’s take the funds used to send a small number of Tiverton youth to camp for two weeks and use that money to expand and improve the Sports & School program.

Sincerely,



Shana Robichaux

► DOCUMENT 3: Student Survey Responses



Survey Responses: Participants in Forest Adventures

(Percentages are based on responses from all Tiverton High School students who have attended the program over the past four years.)

	Disagree Strongly	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree Strongly
1. Did the counselors provide you with sufficient training in problem-solving and wilderness survival skills?	2%	8%	36%	54%
2. Did you feel physically safe during the two-week experience?	5%	16%	18%	61%
3. Did you enjoy the experience?*	15%	20%	23%	42%
4. Did you feel challenged to go beyond your initial comfort level?	0%	2%	9%	89%
5. Do you feel that the experience improved your ability to deal with real-life challenges and problems?	11%	0%	13%	76%

* Students who did not enjoy the experience were asked to give reasons why:

- 47% of dissatisfied students noted that although their tuition was fully funded, they either lacked or struggled to afford the specialized clothing and gear that would have made the experience optimal (e.g., hiking shoes, quick-drying athletic clothing, a lightweight but heavy-duty backpack, high-energy snacks, and sunscreen and insect repellent).
- 32% of dissatisfied students noted that they did not enjoy the wilderness aspect of the program and would have preferred a similar level of challenge in a more urban environment.
- 21% of dissatisfied students did not give reasons.

▶ DOCUMENT 4: Tiverton Memorial Hospital Data Reports



Data Report

Table: Fractures, abrasions, dislocations, and ruptures reported for high school-aged students over the past year, based on the program they were participating in at the time of the injury.

	Forest Adventures	Sports & School
Admitted to Emergency Room	1	6
Treated in Emergency Room	2	24
Referred to Operating Room	1	22
Admitted Multiple Times	0	2

▶ DOCUMENT 5: Letter from Kwame Johnson



Kwame Johnson, Principal

November 15

Dear Parks and Recreation Director:

I strongly encourage you to continue your support of the Forest Adventures program. While I understand this program has come under fire recently, it has been responsible for some dramatic, positive effects in the students it has served. It has also improved our community as a whole—even though the scope of the program is small.

As Principal of Tiverton High School, I have seen firsthand that Tiverton's inner-city residents face great challenges. Their children have less confidence in their ability to overcome life's challenges than children from more economically privileged families. This poor self-esteem often leads to lower academic performance, discipline problems, and students dropping out of school before graduation. Furthermore, inner-city families are less likely to have the resources to expose their children to the joys of a wilderness experience.

I see substantial positive changes in the inner-city youth who participate in the Forest Adventures programs. According to the Forest Adventures website, "The carefully structured challenges of our wilderness adventures, along with the reliance on group problem-solving strategies, build participants' confidence, resilience, and trust." As a result, graduates of the program get better grades the semester after participating. Former campers are also twice as likely to graduate as their peers who did not participate in the program.* Forest Adventures is a unique program designed to meet the specific needs of youth with low self-esteem; no other school or community program in Tiverton specifically targets these vulnerable students.

Our community is home to a successful entrepreneur who credits Forest Adventures with transforming him from a troubled kid into a confident, resilient adult. Every year, he repays his good fortune by covering tuition for 35 low-income local teens who otherwise would be stuck all summer in neighborhoods with limited opportunities. Canceling Forest Adventures would be throwing away a \$70,000 gift to our community every year! I have spoken privately with this benefactor, and there is no chance that he would allow his donation to be used for any other program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kwame Johnson".

Kwame Johnson, EdD

Principal, Tiverton High School

Tiverton City Unified School District

*Based on data from a study of Tiverton High School students on free and reduced lunch over the past four years.

► DOCUMENT 6: Minutes of Meeting

Meeting Minutes

Attendees:

Jennifer La Jolla (former Director, Tiverton Parks and Recreation Department)

Edmund Huang (Associate Dean, State College Department of Education, in charge of Outreach Programs)

Subject: Problems with Sports & School and possible solution

La Jolla: The program is very popular; we consistently have 200 students sign up for Sports & School. According to fire codes, we cannot accommodate more than 200 students at the Recreation Center. Even with that cap, there are never enough scholar-athletes to provide services for that many students. In addition, many parents—especially those of our more academically gifted participants—are complaining that Sports & School is just glorified babysitting.

Huang: Frankly, I'm shocked to hear that. We in the Department of Education screen our applicants very carefully. They are all highly qualified—both academically and in terms of athletics.

La Jolla: Well, I have been monitoring absenteeism rates, and they are unacceptable. On any given afternoon, somewhere between 10 and 20% of your mentors are absent for all or part of the two-hour slot they are assigned to.

Huang: But Jennifer, we discussed this issue when you and I first set up the program. You stated that you wanted to keep costs low, and you said that student fees would cover only the cost of using the Recreation Center. Your department could not afford to pay our scholar-athletes for their time, so their only compensation has been experience they can list on their resumes. Given the fact that the program is staffed by volunteers, you and I realized from the beginning that competing interests might pose a conflict with attendance.

La Jolla: I anticipated the occasional absence, not ongoing understaffing. Another thing: our website advertises that the program offers a range of sports and tutoring in all high school courses. But the student-athletes only provide skills-practice in the sports they play, and I have heard repeated complaints that, on some days, no one is available to tutor certain subjects.

Huang: I guess that comes with having a volunteer staff, Jennifer. If Tiverton could secure funding to pay our student-athletes minimum wage, I promise that we would guarantee that more students would sign up and that they would show up regularly. Nonperforming mentors would be fired and replaced. In addition, we would be able to ensure more variety in mentors' athletic and academic backgrounds.

La Jolla: I will pass this suggestion on to my colleagues.

Performance Task Answer Sheet

Student Name:

1. After reviewing the documents, rate them as “More reliable” or “Less Reliable.” For the purpose of this question, “reliability” refers to objectivity. Mark one box per document.

	More Reliable	Less Reliable
Document 1: Youth Programs Website		
Document 2: Letter from Shana Robichaux		
Document 3: Student Survey Responses		
Document 4: Tiverton Memorial Hospital Data Reports		
Document 5: Letter from Kwame Johnson		
Document 6: Minutes of Meeting		

2. The following statement from Ms. Robichaux's letter is contradicted by evidence in other documents.

Statement:

"Because of pressure from counselors and their peers, these poor kids engage in dangerous activities that they are unprepared for—afraid of looking 'wimpy.'"

Which of the below statements or data points from the provided documents is the strongest pieces of conflicting evidence?

- ☐ Document 5: "According to the Forest Adventures website, 'The carefully structured challenges of our wilderness adventures, along with the reliance on group problem-solving strategies, build participants' confidence, resilience, and trust.'"
 - ☐ Data point from Document 4: Treated in Emergency Room: 2 from Forest Adventures | 24 from Sports & School
 - ☐ Document 3: 61% of students "Agree Strongly" that they felt physically safe during their wilderness adventures.
 - ☐ Document 3: 36% of participants "Agree Somewhat" and 54% "Agree Strongly" that the counselors prepared them adequately for the challenges of Forest Adventures.
 - ☐ Document 1: "Counselors are trained in wilderness survival, character-building exercises, and first aid and CPR, and most have five-plus years of experience working for Forest Adventures."
3. Which arguments in favor of retaining Forest Adventures are stated or implied in the documents? *Select all that apply.*
- ☐ The Forest Adventures program has positive effects on participants.
 - ☐ The Forest Adventures program specifically targets students in need of positive intervention.
 - ☐ The Forest Adventures program provides academic assistance to students at risk of dropping out of school.
 - ☐ The Forest Adventures program is designed to turn troubled youths into successful entrepreneurs.
 - ☐ The Forest Adventures program provides staff with an effective training program.
 - ☐ The Forest Adventures program results in fewer serious injuries than Sports & School.

4. Which additional pieces of evidence would support the assertion that Forest Adventures helps at-risk teens develop “confidence, resilience, and trust”? *Select all that apply.*

- ☐ A study identifying the risk factors that increase the likelihood of someone dropping out of school.
- ☐ Studies indicating that some individuals are more resilient than others as a result of inborn temperament rather than life experiences.
- ☐ Participant self-assessments before and after participation in the program.
- ☐ A letter from the anonymous donor describing how the Forest Adventures program changed his behavior.
- ☐ A medical study showing that time spent outdoors can boost self-esteem.
- ☐ Detailed descriptions of Forest Adventures group activities designed to build trust.

5. What additional information is needed to determine whether or not discontinuing Tiverton’s support for Forest Adventures would provide sufficient savings to pay the student-athletes who run Sports & School?

For each piece of information, determine whether it is relevant or not relevant to the decision, and whether it is provided or not provided in the documents you reviewed. Mark one box per piece of information.

	Relevant & Provided	Relevant, Not Provided	Provided but Not Relevant	Not Provided & Not Relevant
The cost of insurance for Forest Adventures				
The specific cost of gear and clothing per student for Forest Adventures				
The amount of money the donor pays for Forest Adventures tuition				
Minimum wage in Tiverton				
The cost of running the Recreation Center for Sports & School				
The number of scholar-athletes who serve as mentors in Sports & School				

6. Which is the **strongest** argument in favor of canceling the Forest Adventures program and moving the funds to Sports & School? Using Document 6: Minutes of Meeting, *select one*.

- ☐ Sports & School could improve mentor attendance rates.
- ☐ Sports & School could hire mentors with more diverse specialties.
- ☐ Sports & School could afford a larger Recreation Center.

7. Write a letter to the mayor explaining your recommendation either to retain or to drop the Forest Adventures program. Explain your reasoning, and cite evidence from the documents to support your argument.

Performance Task Scoring Rubric

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Analysis and Problem Solving Making a logical decision or conclusion (or taking a position) and supporting it by utilizing appropriate information (facts, ideas, computed values, or salient features) from the Document Library.	May state or imply a decision/conclusion/position Provides minimal analysis as support (e.g., briefly addresses only one idea from one document) or analysis is entirely inaccurate, illogical, unreliable, or unconnected to the decision/conclusion/position	States or implies a decision/conclusion/position Provides analysis that addresses a few ideas as support, some of which is inaccurate, illogical, unreliable, or unconnected to the decision/conclusion/position	States or implies a decision/conclusion/position Provides some valid support, but omits or misrepresents critical information, suggesting only superficial analysis and partial comprehension of the documents May not account for contradictory information (if applicable)	States an explicit decision/conclusion/position Provides valid support that addresses multiple pieces of relevant and credible information in a manner that demonstrates adequate analysis and comprehension of the documents; some information is omitted May attempt to address contradictory information or alternative decisions/conclusions/positions (if applicable)	States an explicit decision/conclusion/position Provides strong support that addresses much of the relevant and credible information, in a manner that demonstrates very good analysis and comprehension of the documents Refutes contradictory information or alternative decisions/conclusions/positions (if applicable)	States an explicit decision/conclusion/position Provides comprehensive support, including nearly all of the relevant and credible information, in a manner that demonstrates outstanding analysis and comprehension of the documents Thoroughly refutes contradictory evidence or alternative decisions/conclusions/positions (if applicable)
Writing Effectiveness Constructing organized and logically cohesive arguments. Strengthening the writer's position by providing elaboration on facts or ideas (e.g., explaining how evidence bears on the problem, providing examples, and emphasizing especially convincing evidence).	Does not develop convincing arguments; writing may be disorganized and confusing Does not provide elaboration on facts or ideas	Provides limited, invalid, over-stated, or very unclear arguments; may present information in a disorganized fashion or undermine own points Any elaboration on facts or ideas tends to be vague, irrelevant, inaccurate, or unreliable (e.g., based entirely on writer's opinion); sources of information are often unclear	Provides limited or somewhat unclear arguments; presents relevant information in each response, but that information is not woven into arguments Provides elaboration on facts or ideas a few times, some of which is valid; sources of information are sometimes unclear	Organizes response in a way that makes the writer's arguments and logic of those arguments apparent but not obvious Provides valid elaboration on facts or ideas several times and cites sources of information	Organizes response in a logically cohesive way that makes it fairly easy to follow the writer's arguments Provides valid elaboration on facts or ideas related to each argument and cites sources of information	Organizes response in a logically cohesive way that makes it very easy to follow the writer's arguments Provides valid and comprehensive elaboration on facts or ideas related to each argument and clearly cites sources of information
Writing Mechanics Demonstrating facility with the conventions of standard written English (agreement, tense, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling) and control of the English language, including syntax (sentence structure) and diction (word choice and usage).	Demonstrates minimal control of grammatical conventions with many errors that make the response difficult to read or provides insufficient evidence to judge Writes sentences that are repetitive or incomplete, and some are difficult to understand Uses simple vocabulary, and some vocabulary is used inaccurately or in a way that makes meaning unclear	Demonstrates poor control of grammatical conventions with frequent minor errors and some severe errors Consistently writes sentences with similar structure and length, and some may be difficult to understand Uses simple vocabulary, and some vocabulary may be used inaccurately or in a way that makes meaning unclear	Demonstrates fair control of grammatical conventions with frequent minor errors Writes sentences that read naturally but tend to have similar structure and length Uses vocabulary that communicates ideas adequately but lacks variety	Demonstrates good control of grammatical conventions with few errors Writes well-constructed sentences with some varied structure and length Uses vocabulary that clearly communicates ideas but lacks variety	Demonstrates very good control of grammatical conventions Consistently writes well-constructed sentences with varied structure and length Uses varied and sometimes advanced vocabulary that effectively communicates ideas	Demonstrates outstanding control of grammatical conventions Consistently writes well-constructed complex sentences with varied structure and length Displays adept use of vocabulary that is precise, advanced, and varied