



Direct Admissions:
A Promising Low-Cost
Policy Innovation to
Increase College Access
and Equity

Midwest Report

Overview and Background

There is a need for innovative, low-cost public policies to increase college access for students, particularly by racial, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts. Specifically, this report explores **direct admissions** as a promising policy option for Midwestern states. A direct admissions system side-steps the typical college admissions process with students *proactively admitted* based on a data match between K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions. Students, parents, and high schools receive letters indicating a student has been admitted to a set of institutions and outlines steps for how students can “claim their place” using a common and free application. Typically, all students in a state are admitted to open-access institutions, and students who surpass a pre-identified threshold (based on high school academic performance such as GPA, ACT/SAT, class rank, or a combination of measures) are automatically admitted to selective institutions.

As a universal policy, direct admissions holds great potential to reduce equity gaps, provide important college-going signals to high school students, alleviate potential access gaps for rural and urban populations, and eliminate the need for extensive financial and cultural capital to navigate the college application process. This policy draws upon rich underpinnings in behavioral economics and may change the life course of individuals by offering more and higher quality postsecondary opportunities. Direct admissions is also a **low-cost** policy compared to other interventions seeking to increase college access and equity (such as traditional grant-aid programs, mentoring, or wrap-around services).



In 2015, Idaho developed the nation’s first state-level direct admissions program, admitting all high school graduates to the state’s public postsecondary institutions. By leveraging data and proactively signaling college opportunities to students and families, Idaho reversed declining postsecondary enrollments and out-of-state migration. In addition to Idaho, South Dakota began proactive admissions for the high school class of 2018.¹ In 2019, the Illinois General Assembly passed Public Act 101-0448 to develop a pilot program for the 2020-2021 academic year to automatically admit high-performing Illinois high school graduates to targeted public institutions of higher education.

Outcomes

Following the fall 2015 introduction of direct admissions, Idaho reported *substantial* changes to students’ college-going behaviors. Among these included a:

- 3.1% increase in overall college enrollment across two- and four-year institutions, and
- 6.7% increase in the number of high school graduates immediately enrolling in college.²

Growth continued in fall 2017 as Idaho introduced, *Apply Idaho*, the state’s new common application, including an:

- 88% increase in applications to college completed (up by 12,937),
- 6.7% cumulative enrollment increase (compared to a national increase of 2.2 %), and

¹ Gewertz, 2017; South Dakota Department of Education, 2019.

² Kelly, 2018; Kovacs, 2016.

- 3-percentage-point *decrease* in students leaving Idaho for college.³

Evaluating Direct Admissions

In our analysis of the program, Idaho's implementation of direct admissions was associated with a statistically significant increase in undergraduate enrollment of 11.02% at the institutional level, as well as institutional increases in in-state enrollment between 11.09-16.3%. Similarly, direct admissions was associated with a statistically-significant, statewide increase in full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment of 11.32%. Please see the full report with technical appendix for more details about our evaluation of direct admissions policies.

Translating Direct Admissions to Midwestern States

This report specifically considers the potential of direct admissions in the Midwestern region. The research team used descriptive and advanced statistical models to estimate the potential impacts of direct admissions across the Great Lakes and in a select group of Midwestern states. A complete description of direct admissions, academic literature that supports the promise of direct admissions, an evaluation of the direct admissions program in Idaho, further detail on the potential of direct admissions in the Midwest, and a technical appendix can be found in the full report.

Descriptive Estimates for the Midwest

Given the observed changes in Idaho noted above, it is likely other states would see positive increases in students' college-going behavior. Potential outcomes for Great Lakes states include:

- Increasing postsecondary applications and enrollment,
- Reducing gaps in access by race, socioeconomic status, and geography, and
- Leveraging community college systems to expand postsecondary access.

Important implications for a direct admissions policy include both the short-term goals of college enrollment, and long-term influences on regional and state economies, including the educational attainment rate of a state's working-age population and the proportion of jobs in a given region that require a college credential.

The observed increase in statewide FTE enrollment in Idaho of 11.32% represented nearly 6,300 students. A comparable increase in Michigan, however, would represent over 46,000 students, and in Wisconsin, over 25,700 students. Taking the findings from the full report, a summary of these possible effects is detailed in Table 1.⁴ This table shows estimates of large enrollment changes across the Great Lakes region and selected states if a direct admissions policy were to be implemented. For example, were the Great Lakes region to adopt direct admissions and experience comparable proportional increases to statewide FTE enrollment as Idaho, each state could expect to see an average FTE increase of over 35,000 students, ranging from 23,289 students in Minnesota to 46,592 students in Ohio. The cumulative increase in FTE enrollment across the region would be just over 210,400 students. Similarly, public institutions operating within the Great Lakes states could experience an average increase in undergraduate

³ Howell et al., 2019.

⁴ See Table 13 in the full report.

enrollment of more than 960 students (11.02%) *per institution*, representing nearly 6,500 new undergraduate students in aggregate.

Table 1. Possible state- and institution-level effects with adoption of direct admissions at modeled effect sizes.

		Estimated Effect	Average Possible Effect						Total	
			Great Lakes	Illinois	Indiana	Michigan	Minnesota	Ohio		Wisconsin
State	FTE	11.32%	35,069	41,639	27,069	46,080	23,289	46,592	25,743	210,412
	UG	11.02%	963	929	1,980	1,119	622	888	951	6,489
Institution	In-State	11.09%	138	125	327	166	78	133	133	962
		16.30%	203	183	481	244	114	196	195	1,413

Source(s): Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association. Note(s): Authors' calculations; Table identifies estimated effect from difference-in-differences and synthetic control models and extrapolates potential outcomes given pre-treatment period (2010-11 through 2015-16) means by region/state; FTE is an estimated average statewide (or regional) effect, while UG Enrollment and In-State Enrollment are per-institution effects; Total is aggregated across the Great Lakes/Midwestern states; Figures rounded.

Applying Current Findings to the Midwest: Generalized Additive Modeling

As discussed in the full report, Idaho differs from the rest of the nation on many observable and unobservable factors, including its college-going rate and education governance structure. For example, Idaho has 8 public institutions compared to 60 in Illinois (a Great Lakes state), and Idaho serves over 106,000 undergraduate students annually compared to nearly 450,000 in Illinois. Because of these differences across states, in addition to the descriptive estimates presented above, we also present estimates of possible effects in Midwestern states using generalized additive modeling. The goal of a generalized additive model is not to *explain* a phenomenon (i.e., What happened after direct admissions? Or, how did direct admissions work?), but to fit an algorithm to existing data in these states as closely as appropriate to identify how changes in their outcomes (e.g., enrollment) may be related to the policy in question.

The results from the generalized additive model are presented in Table 2 for the Great Lakes region in total, as well as for two example states: Illinois and Minnesota.⁵ The models suggest Great Lakes states, on average, could have increased FTE enrollment by 9,400 students using a direct admissions system. This average, per-state increase equates to a 3.03% increase in FTE enrollment. Similarly, under direct admissions, Illinois could have increased FTE enrollment by nearly 28,400 students, or 7.72%. These estimates are statistically significant. For statewide aggregated applications to college, the additive model identified significant effects for Illinois and Minnesota in this example. Under these conditions, Illinois might have increased applications by almost 6,050 (4.62%), and Minnesota by over 13.06% (10,768 applications), estimates which are also statistically significant.

Given the possibility to positively increase statewide FTE enrollment and college applications—as well as in-state and undergraduate student enrollment—through a direct

⁵ See Table 14 in the full report.

admissions policy, the diffusion of direct admissions policies to Midwestern states holds strong potential for states and their students.

Table 2. *Generalized additive modeling estimates of potential effects of direct admissions.*

	FTE Enrollment	Applications
Great Lakes	9,400.39* (4,432.67)	-1,458.56 (5,313.50)
Illinois	28,388.81** (5,135.20)	6,041.93+ (2,757.12)
Minnesota	-2,823.35 (2,412.63)	10,768.20+ (4,703.69)

+ $p \leq .10$; * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Source(s): American Community Survey, Common Core of Data, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, and State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.

Notes(s): Tables reports coefficients (constant linear coefficients for the direct admissions indicator estimated by the generalized additive modeling fitting process) and standard errors (in parentheses); Figures rounded to hundredths.

Policy Recommendations



States should consider direct admissions policies as **effective and low-cost mechanisms to increase the enrollment of students in public higher education.**

Evidence from our evaluation of Idaho’s direct admissions policy and extrapolated models to Midwestern states suggests direct admissions as a broad education policy holds the potential to increase statewide FTE enrollment and college applications, as well as the enrollment of in-state and undergraduate students. Further, information from Idaho’s adoption of direct admissions suggests the policy is an exceptionally affordable policy alternative, requiring only a statewide longitudinal data system and either posted or e-mailed acceptance letters.

States should explore policies related to direct admissions systems (*e.g., common applications*), regardless of their decision to adopt direct admissions.



A common application allows students to use a single application to apply to multiple institutions at once, thereby simplifying the college-application process and making it easier, faster, and more straightforward for students and families. Common applications may also encourage students to explore more postsecondary options—particularly at public institutions in their own state, reducing the odds a student goes out of state for college—and increase college choice options given the simplicity of the application process. An important component

of common applications to increase access and equity is a fee-free application for students, further eliminating informational and financial constraints in the college-search process.⁶ While some states (such as Wisconsin) already use a common application, other Great Lakes states could also benefit from the development of a common application.



States should maintain their focus on the identification and adoption of policies seeking to increase the enrollment of **low-income and racial minority students**.

Not only is increased educational attainment required to fuel the modern workforce, but persistent gaps in college access and completion across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts present real challenges for states and their communities. States should consider direct admissions and related policies as an innovative low-cost, viable options to support postsecondary enrollment and attainment.

States should **partner with researchers and policy organizations** in the design and evaluation of direct admissions, common application, and related policies.



Whether it concerns the design and implementation of a direct admissions system or a state- or system-wide common application, or discussions and evaluations of existing policies and programs, partnerships with researchers and policy organizations are important. Researchers can provide a high degree of technical support from an unbiased, third-party point of view—while also considering the national, state, and regional implications of public policies concerning higher education and workforce development. Researchers can also provide empirical evidence on successful policy designs and use in other states, and provide evidence-based support for programmatic features to address statewide goals.

Conclusion

States need **new and innovative, yet low-cost** mechanisms to increase access to and enrollment in postsecondary education. Not only is increased educational attainment required to fuel the modern workforce, but persistent gaps in college access and completion across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts present important challenges for the Great Lakes region and many Midwestern states. Direct admissions is an exceptionally low-cost policy option, only requiring a state longitudinal data system and, if selected, paper and postage for acceptance letters. Given the possibility to positively increase statewide FTE enrollment and college applications, as well as in-state and undergraduate student enrollment, the policy holds strong potential for the Great Lakes region and Midwestern states, systems, and students. In all, our findings suggest direct admissions is a promising low-cost and effective mechanism to increase institutional and statewide enrollment in postsecondary education.

⁶ Hoxby & Avery, 2013.

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