



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

Summary 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. This summary report explores **direct admissions** as a promising policy option. 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 *significant* 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),

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

² Kelly, 2018; Kovacs, 2016.

- 6.7% cumulative enrollment increase (compared to a national increase of 2.2 %), and
- 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.

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.⁴



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

³ Howell et al., 2019.

⁴ Hoxby & Avery, 2013.

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 (and unsuccessful) policy designs and diffusions across other states, relating each to the context within another given state, and provide evidentiary support for programmatic features to address statewide goals (e.g., How can this policy better serve low-income students?).

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 states and their communities. Direct admissions is an exceptionally low-cost policy option, only requiring a state longitudinal data system and, if chosen, 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 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.

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