An Invitation to College

A State Leader's Guide to Launching a Direct Admissions Initiative

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Only three out every five high school graduates immediately enroll in postsecondary education or training after high school.[1] And college-going rates have declined since the start of the pandemic, especially for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds. To reverse this tide and set more individuals up for economic mobility and success, education leaders need to be innovative in how they provide high school students with clear messaging and information about the value of higher education and support seamless student transitions from high school to postsecondary education.

One emerging approach is to offer "direct" admissions (also referred to as "proactive" or "guaranteed" admissions), which notifies students of their admittance to participating postsecondary institutions, based on a predetermined set of criteria, at the beginning of their senior year. In practice, these initiatives allow students the ability to bypass the traditional college application process, which can act as a significant barrier to students most at risk of not enrolling in postsecondary education or training.[2]

Because they remove the onus on students to apply, direct admissions programs can result in significant increases in higher education enrollment. In Idaho, which developed and implemented the nation's first statewide approach to direct admissions, the state experienced a 3.1 percent increase in overall college enrollment across two- and four-year institutions in the two years following its implementation in 2015, and a 6.7 percent increase in the number of high school graduates immediately enrolling in college.[3] Researchers evaluating this innovative approach to admissions have noted that direct admissions holds great potential to reduce equity gaps, provide important college-going signals to high school students, help alleviate potential access gaps for rural and urban populations, and eliminate the need for extensive financial and cultural capital to navigate the traditional college application process.[4]

From conversations with direct admissions leaders in over a half-dozen states, there are clear lessons learned from direct admissions work over the last decade. In particular, key lessons learned include the following:

> **Direct admissions initiatives allow students to bypass the traditional college application process, which can act as a significant barrier to students most at risk of not enrolling in postsecondary education or training.**

- ⮕ Direct admissions programs alone will not eliminate college access barriers;
- ⮕ State legislation is helpful, but not necessary to start a direct admissions program;
- ⮕ Evaluating existing data practices and ensuring the proper technical infrastructure for data collection and reporting is in place is the key starting point;
- ⮕ Prepare for programmatic changes year-over-year and keep engaging those closest to the program; and
- ⮕ Leverage qualitative data for effective progress monitoring and program evaluation.

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ESG Education Strategy Group

Overall, direct admissions is a low-cost strategy to simplify the oftentimes intimidating and bureaucratic traditional college admissions process and thereby increase immediate college enrollment rates for students, particularly for those who typically would not have otherwise considered college a viable option. As education leaders continue to explore innovative equity-driven college access strategies in their states, direct admissions should be front and center. Using information gained from interviews with current and former direct admissions leaders in nine states, this report looks at promising planning and implementation strategies and highlights key considerations for education leaders to review before embarking on the implementation of a direct admissions policy.

An Introduction to DIRECT ADMISSIONS PROGRAMS

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated ongoing postsecondary enrollment declines at two- and four-year institutions nationwide. Concerningly, there has been an observable and negative shift in college-going rates across all racial and ethnic groups since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic[5]; while recent data has shown enrollment declines beginning to slow, students from populations traditionally underrepresented in higher education—namely students of color, low-income students, students from rural populations, and first-generation college-going students—are some of the least likely to immediately enroll in postsecondary education and training after high school graduation. To address declines in postsecondary enrollment, leaders across the country have been considering a variety of strategies aimed at increasing college access in their states.

Direct admissions programs automatically admit in-state high school seniors to participating colleges and universities based on predetermined criteria such as GPA, ACT/SAT scores, or class rank.

Direct admissions programs automatically admit in-state high school seniors to participating colleges and universities based on predetermined criteria such as GPA, ACT/SAT scores, or class rank. Unlike traditional merit-based guaranteed admissions programs, through which only top performers are admitted, all in-state students are directly admitted to open-access (i.e., non-selective) institutions, while those who meet other predetermined academic qualifications are proactively admitted to more selective institutions that participate in the program.

In most instances, students receive letters at the beginning of their senior year indicating they have met the criteria for admissions to participating colleges; the letters also outline further steps students are required to take to officially secure their spot, and if applicable, instructions on how to apply to the institution(s) using a common or universal application. Procedurally, all students in a state who are on-track to graduate from high school will be admitted to open-access institutions. By directly notifying all on-track students that they are admitted to open-access postsecondary institutions, direct admissions programs are also helping change the narrative for students who don't tend to see themselves as a college bound student. Students who then meet additional identified academic thresholds based on some combination of grade point average, class rank, or standardized test scores are admitted to more selective participating institutions as a general admittee. Institutions participating in direct admissions programs agree on these common academic benchmarks for the direct admissions initiative prior to implementation.

From an operational perspective, many of the costs to design a direct admissions program are one-time fixed costs to develop a state-specific common application system and/or to develop proper IT infrastructure, absent a pre-existing cross-sector data system. The yearly

operational costs for printing letters and postcards to send out to students and families has historically been minimal. Additionally, early efforts in the direct admissions space have already demonstrated positive impacts; in Idaho, the state experienced a 3.1 percent increase in overall college enrollment across two- and four-year institutions within the first two years of program implementation, and a 6.7 percent increase in the number of high school graduates immediately enrolling in college.

There is certainly no one-size-fits-all approach to direct admissions. Sometimes, these programs are formed through legislation, and in other instances, local communities, higher education systems, or specific institutions are driving this work. In the last several years, states and localities all across the country have started to experiment with direct admissions, and their approaches vary significantly in terms of scope, intent, implementation, and student eligibility criteria. See Appendix A for an overview of current direct admissions programs across the country.

The information included in this report is based on findings gathered from dozens of interviews with current and former direct admissions leaders, leaders of national education organizations, and existing research and analysis of direct programs throughout the country. This report seeks to highlight sound and established practices in the direct admissions space as well as elevate shared problems of practice and promising strategies taken by leaders to address common challenges to implementation; additionally, given the growing interest in direct admissions, key considerations for state leaders seeking to launch direct admissions initiatives in their states are also elevated.

We spoke with and learned from the following states as part of the research for this report:

- Arizona
- Connecticut
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Kentucky
- Minnesota
- South Dakota
- Texas
- Washington
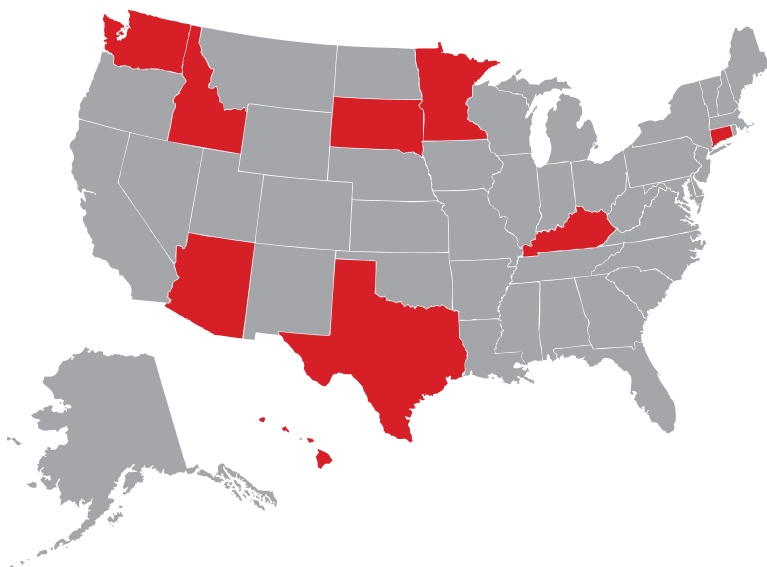
COMMON STEPS TO IMPLEMENTING A DIRECT ADMISSIONS PROGRAM
& Guiding Questions to Consider

State leaders must make several core decisions to move their direct admissions efforts from the brainstorming phase to and through implementation. While there is no single guide to designing a direct admissions program, there are seven core steps that state leaders have typically followed to get this work off the ground and common questions they have considered when beginning to structure their work.

STEP 1 **Determine the desired impact of and goals for the direct admissions program.** Who is the program aiming to serve and in what ways?

STEP 2 **Identify specific measures of success for the program.** What will need to happen for the program to be successful?

STEP 3 **Decide whether legislation would be helpful for establishing the program and which entity should lead the work.** Would legislative involvement strengthen buy-in for this program? Should the program be driven by the state, the higher education system, or someone else?

STEP 4 **Consider where and how data can be collected and used to evaluate the program for continuous improvement and learning.** How do sectors currently communicate about their data? What systems need to be in place to support cross-sector collaboration and data analysis?

STEP 5 **Investigate institutional application practices and determine which approach best balances student need and participating institutions' preferences.** How do potential participating institutions currently approach college admissions and how are their strategies similar or different from one another?

STEP 6 **Review research on common measures of academic readiness (e.g., GPA, class rank, standardized test scores) to determine the measure(s) most aligned to program-specific goals.** Which measure(s) of academic readiness are most aligned to the program's goals and to broader college access strategies in the state?

STEP 7 **Consider how students and families can best be made aware of the program, its goals, and the opportunity available to students through direct admissions.** How can students and families become core thought partners in the planning process and what mechanisms can be put in place to ensure core messaging about the program is effective for students and their families?

It is precisely because leaders are required to make difficult decisions about the approaches they believe are most efficient and effective for direct admissions that they are prone to encounter roadblocks to implementation. Several common challenges often arise as a result of divergent perspectives about the purposes of direct admissions writ large or regarding the best strategies to use to meet the needs of students through more standardized admissions practices. The next section discusses the most common challenges faced by leaders in this work in greater detail and spotlights relevant strategies currently used in states to address them.

CHALLENGE 1

There are multiple potential purposes for implementing a direct admissions program.

Nationwide, direct admissions programs have gained traction as a strategy implemented by leaders to do one or more of the following:

1) drive enrollment in their state,

2) mitigate brain drain (i.e., retain top talent in state), and

3) broaden access and eliminate systemic inequities.

In some states, direct admissions is a strategy intended to "lift all boats" and does not place intentional targets to reach specific subgroups of students from various subgroups with distinguishably different histories with higher education. In other states, direct admissions initiatives are intended to target specific groups of students who might face additional barriers or obstacles during college planning, application, selection, and enrollment processes as a result of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, rurality, urbanity, socioeconomic status, or family education background. When the purpose(s) of a direct admissions initiative are not clear, or the program lacks explicit targets for some or all of the subgroups mentioned above, students in these groups are unlikely to benefit from direct admissions efforts in ways they otherwise could or should.

STRATEGY: Set explicit programmatic goals that factor in a student's racial identity, socioeconomic status, and family education history to ensure intended outcomes are clearly articulable.

Establishing clear programmatic goals for any direct admissions initiatives is critical to both evaluating and monitoring success and determining ways to continuously improve programmatic elements over time. The goals of a direct admissions program have clear implications for the institutional capacity needed to staff and manage a direct admissions program. As a result, clear programmatic goals are crucial for building buy-in and support for the program and have strong implications for how the variety of partners involved in this work approach their respective roles. In particular, some state leaders have explicitly centered racial equity while others have focused on rurality and place-bound systems. Leaders with experience building these programs emphasized that making goals explicit is essential from an operational effectiveness and organizational efficiency perspective.

Guaranteed Admissions Program

WA

PROGRAM GOALS: "The goal [of GAP] is to reach students who had not considered going to college or themselves college ready…[and] will focus on increasing access and credential completion in Washington, especially for students who may not have considered going to college."

Direct Admissions Minnesota

MN

PROGRAM GOALS: "This pilot program aims to reduce self-selection bias and reduce equity gaps in college enrollment using four strategies: promoting a college-going culture; connecting students, families, and schools with colleges and universities earlier; giving families time to consider their options and plan, easing the transition from high school to college, and showing students that they have access to a certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree if they choose to further their education."

Proactive Admissions Initiative

SD

PROGRAM GOALS: "The purpose of the initiative is to provide more graduating seniors with access to a postsecondary certificate or degree. Connecting students with an in-state institution may help to keep them in South Dakota for postsecondary education and training, and ultimately, as contributing members of the workforce and their local communities."

CHALLENGE 2

Limited collaboration around and access to data across education sectors can severely slow down implementation.

Many states lack statewide data systems that connect data from education sectors or the full P-20 education continuum in a shared database, and this reality can greatly complicate and increase the difficulty of implementing direct admissions programs. Without cross-sector data systems or clear data sharing agreements in place to clearly articulate core responsibilities and data collection expectations between K-12 local education agencies (LEAs) and individual postsecondary institutions, there can be considerable variability in calculating and reporting key design metrics (e.g., GPA and class rank) and in reporting practices for personally identifiable information (e.g., social security numbers and student identification numbers). As variation and discrepancy in data collection and management practices between and among education sectors in a state increases, so too does the complexity of standardizing data for the purposes of direct admissions programs.

> **STRATEGY:** Identify data sharing capabilities and outstanding needs to obtain student performance data.

Direct admissions programs must be seen as continuously iterative strategies; there is room to build on existing or early infrastructure to continuously improve how data is collected, managed, and used in practice. No state with a direct admissions policy in place has kept the exact same strategies for direct admissions year over year as they work to expand data effectiveness and capacity on an ongoing basis.

Guaranteed Admissions Program

WA The first year of the guaranteed admissions program (GAP) pilot in Washington came with unique data challenges that needed to be addressed in order to improve the program and allow it to be scaled to better serve more LEAs. In the first year of the GAP pilot, each LEA was able to enter into unique agreements with each state higher education institution that participated in GAP. The variation across these agreements was unsustainable if the program was to grow and include many more interested LEAs. Committed to continuous improvement, leaders of the guaranteed admissions program came together to make two pivotal data decisions that have revolutionized this pilot program in its second year.

- Common data strategy: The purpose of this data strategy in Washington is to gather aggregate data at the sector and institutional level to inform the future of the Guaranteed Admissions Program (GAP) beyond the 2022-23 academic year, and to respond to requests from external audiences about the impact of GAP, while recognizing different systems and abilities.

- Common Data Sharing Agreement (DSA): Program leads recognized in year two of their pilot that absent a cross-sector data system, their state's more decentralized approach to data collection and management required them to codify common data practices for ease of implementation year over year. There is now one DSA that all six participating state higher education institutions have signed onto and all participating LEAs are required to enter into this agreement if they seek to participate.

Direct Admissions Initiative

ID On the other end of the governance spectrum from Washington is Idaho. Idaho's education system is uniquely centralized, with its PK-12 and higher education systems each governed by the Idaho State Board of Education (OSBE). The state had a cross-sector data system in place prior to the introduction of the direct admissions initiative, and had already instituted common data collection and reporting practices. However, a centralized system did not come without data challenges. For example, each year, institutions receive a test file of student-level data that they must import into their management systems before the application system is opened. In the first years, there were errors with the files that required significant IT effort to resolve. Furthermore, certain specific data points, such as social security numbers, were not originally collected, which led to difficulties in identifying duplicate applications. OSBE has worked to streamline this process each year with direct support and insight from individuals at each of the state's higher education institutions.

- Data governance committee: This committee, made up of data office staff from public institutions in Idaho and staff from OSBE, has met on a regular basis over the last two years. The purpose of the committee is to clarify practices in the direct admissions initiative process and answer questions about the information institutions need to do their work efficiently. Already, this committee has been able to identify and remove unneeded Apply Idaho application questions and has added in questions, such as one about social security numbers, to make the program more efficient.

Application practices and systems across institutions vary greatly, creating challenges to codifying a uniform approach.

The method and manner in which institutions structure and accept college applications varies greatly within and across states. There is little to no uniformity across public higher education institutions in application administration; additionally, in states with more decentralized higher education systems where statewide directives are difficult to impose, there tends to be a wide variation in institutional willingness to reduce or remove application fees, switch systems (i.e., from unique application to common application system), or standardize applications to match those of competing institutions. As a consequence, students are often left confused about what they actually need to submit after being directly admitted. These variations in expectations across institutions can serve as barriers to efficacy for these types of programs.

STRATEGY: Determine a student-friendly, affordable program-wide structure or system for students to submit applications to participating institutions to ensure clear expectations across institutions.

Direct admissions programs across the country approach the application process in dramatically different ways, and the perceived ability to pursue certain approaches varies state by state. Regardless of the approach ultimately taken, it is important to make a decision early, so that participating institutions have time to collaborate and coordinate with one another about the manner in which application processes can be made to be more systematized and streamlined to prevent them from unnecessarily and arbitrarily serving as a barrier for prospective students. For example, there is a common varying practice for how merit aid is distributed. Sometimes, aid is determined based on student essays; however, if the direct admissions offer does not require an essay, and institutions vary in their approaches to giving aid, it is possible for students to miss out on crucial financial aid because they were not aware of such a nuanced requirement.

Leaders often find themselves contemplating the pros and cons of three different approaches:

1) Allowing institutions to retain unique application processes;

2) Coupling the design and implementation of a state-based common application system with the rollout of the direct admissions program; or

3) Capitalizing on existing Common App infrastructure to get all participating institutions under a common system without having to develop their own state-based common application system.

In addition, whether and how much institutions will charge for their applications is also a common point of discussion; in most instances, college applications in a direct admissions program have been made free indefinitely or over a two-to-three-year time horizon. Each of the three approaches is viable, but each has distinct implications for program implementation and especially for subsequent outreach and communications strategies.

Direct Admissions Initiative

APPLY IDAHO: Apply Idaho is a college application website created and administered by the Idaho State Board of Education (OSBE), containing a free platform that students can use to apply to all public state institutions. The application is open from October through June, and is only available to current Idaho high school seniors. The state did not create Apply Idaho until the second year of the direct admissions program, but since then, OSBE has maintained that the common application system will remain free of charge to students and all state institutions will participate.

Guaranteed Admissions Program

COMMON APP: The Common Application, more commonly known as the Common App, serves as an easy-to-use online application form that gathers student information in a single space, enabling them to fill out one central application that goes to multiple member institutions of their choosing. The Common App allows students to create an account, track their progress, monitor deadlines, and send requests for financial aid. As of the second year of Washington's GAP pilot, all participating institutions have opted to become Common App member institutions.

Automatic Admissions Program

COMMON APP: All Connecticut public institutions who participate in Connecticut's Automatic Admissions Program (CAAP) are Common App member institutions. Notably, institutions in Connecticut experienced noticeable gains in racial and ethnic diversity of their applicant pool and incoming student cohorts as a result of participating in the Common App.

Direct Admissions and the Common App

Common App, a nonprofit organization of more than 1000 colleges and universities focused on streamlining the college application process, is currently facilitating its third cross-state direct admissions pilot. Common App has been leading this work with a goal of improving postsecondary access for students who might otherwise not apply to college, and helping remove uncertainty from the application process.

Early overall findings have shown that students who receive direct enrollment offers engage and respond at higher rates than students who are a part of control groups. In addition, participating students intended to apply to more institutions on average than the control group. The pilots have also helped demonstrate that strong, branded messages with clearly identifiable initiative letters (e.g. clear branding) can be a powerful tool to getting students to apply to college.

See below for an overview of Common App's first two direct admissions pilots alongside initial findings from these pilots. Initial findings from this year's pilot are expected to be released in summer 2023.

FIRST PILOT

In March 2021, Common App launched a direct admission pilot program that offered admission to students in Tennessee, Maryland, and Virginia. Approximately 3,300 students across these three states who created a Common App account and had provided sufficient academic information, but had not yet completed all of their open applications, were selected to receive direct admissions from a Common App member HBCU in their state. The three HBCUs who participated were the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Fisk University, and Norfolk State University.

Direct Admissions and the Common App *(continued)*

FINDINGS FROM FIRST PILOT:

Based on comparison with a control group, students who received a letter were four times more likely to submit an application to the institution that offered them direct admission. Additionally, out of the 66 students who responded to their offer of direct admission:

- 12% (8) enrolled at one of the institutions. These were students who had not yet submitted an application to the school that offered them direct admissions.
- 53% would be first generation college students
- 52% had not yet submitted any college application through the Common App by March of their senior year

SECOND PILOT

In January 2022, Common App launched the second year of its direct admission pilot program that offered admission to students in the states of Tennessee, Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey. Approximately 18,000 students across these four states who created a Common App account and met the requirements of a participating institution were offered direct admission. The six participating member institutions were Montclair State University, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, Middle Tennessee State University, Fisk University, Marymount University, and George Mason University. In this pilot, students received a branded letter indicating their direct admittance..

FINDINGS FROM SECOND PILOT:

From the nearly 18,000 students who received an offer letter at any one of the six Direct Admission partner institutions, 830 submitted an application, which is more than double the 308 students who applied to these schools in the control group. Additionally, direct admit students were ~2.7x as likely to apply to the target institution than students who did not receive the email and they submitted over 1,100 more applications than students in the control group (a ~10% increase in total applications submitted). This finding helps demonstrate the Direct Admission program did not simply redirect applications to target schools, but increased overall application behaviors.

Furthermore, 208 students who received direct admissions offers enrolled at the institution that offered them direct admission. Common App also further examined the extent to which different subgroups of students responded differently to the intervention. They found evidence that impacts of the intervention were strongest for Black or African American, Latinx, and First-generation students. Most notably, nearly 9% of Black or African American students, and 8% of Latinx students, responded to their direct admission offers by submitting an application. Effects were significant, but smaller for multiracial, Asian, and White students.

To learn more about Common App's direct admissions pilot program, please contact Emma Steele at esteele@commonapp.org.

Obtaining buy-in and support for a shared academic threshold from participating institutions can be difficult given unique institutional perspectives.

Institutions of higher education greatly value autonomy in decision-making, particularly as it relates to their level of admissions selectivity. Yet, there exist lingering debates around the effectiveness and fairness of using standardized assessment scores as a method for determining college preparedness which complicates the ability to design shared direct admissions thresholds statewide. As a result, and unsurprisingly, where institutions are the sole decision-makers in application practices, there are often competing perspectives on what determines a student's college readiness, complicating leaders' ability to align institutions on a uniform approach and threshold for direct admissions. This type of value-based point of contention is often heightened across open-access, regional, and research institutions which navigate very difficult political and financial pressures. For example, going into the 2022-2023 school year, Idaho adopted a program-wide cut score of a 2.6 GPA for all but one state institution. Boise State University (BSU), the institution with the highest GPA requirement at the adoption of the direct admissions initiative, adopted an institution-specific cut score of 2.8 and was given the flexibility to implement an additional vetting process for applicants seeking to go to BSU with GPAs between 2.6 and 2.79. This additional vetting process will look at other student factors, such as extracurriculars, to evaluate a student's college readiness.

STRATEGY: Balance varying institutional perspectives to collaboratively establish clear admissions criteria that offer flexibility where needed and desired.

The metrics used and thresholds established for direct admissions programs vary greatly across programs. This portion of the design process tends to rely entirely on state context.

Designing an Inclusive Direct Admissions Working Group

State leaders can take a variety of different approaches to structuring working groups tasked with developing the criteria and strategies used in their direct admissions program. One innovative and inclusive approach was organized by leaders of Minnesota's direct admissions program, Direct Admissions Minnesota.

DIRECT ADMISSIONS MINNESOTA

To launch the planning phase for Minnesota's direct admissions program, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) contacted stakeholders statewide to ask for a representative to serve on the planning and implementation work group for the program. Stakeholders from K-12 schools, education organizations, student groups, colleges, and college preparation programs agreed to serve on the work group which began meeting in December 2021.

In follow-up to the first implementation working group, OHE then formed two additional working groups to focus specifically on work needed for K-12 and postsecondary education aspects of the program. These implementation working groups had the following responsibilities:

The *K-12 Working Group* was responsible for: determining criteria for selecting pilot high schools and districts; identifying the target student population; identifying measures of success; integrating the Direct Admissions program with other college preparation and planning activities and documenting the work required for participating schools and districts.

The *Postsecondary Working Group* was responsible for: identifying the target student population; identifying measures of success; selecting academic benchmarks; integrating the Direct Admissions program with existing admissions processes and systems and documenting the work required for participating colleges.

Direct Admissions Minnesota

MN

GPA AND CORE COURSE GRADES: In Minnesota, the state has developed an approach to direct admissions that includes six academic tiers corresponding to specific GPA ranges and course grades in 10th and 11th grade English, Math, and Science. These bands were constructed by leaders at the Office of Higher Education, and participating institutions were able to select the band that most directly aligned with their unique institutional perspectives and overall mission, vision, and values. In SY 2022-2023, 51 participating institutions representing public and private two- and four-year colleges and tribal colleges self-selected into one of the six tiers.

Automatic Admissions Program

CT

GPA TO DETERMINE CLASS RANK: In Connecticut's Automatic Admissions Program (CAAP), the Connecticut Board of Regents has set the threshold for percentile ranking at 70, meaning that the top 30 percent of graduating seniors per high school are eligible to apply for automatic admission to participating institutions. The Board of Regents directs high schools to follow the College Board formula for calculating GPA in order to calculate each student's percentile ranking solely for the purpose of the CAAP. Districts may continue to use their existing methodologies for all other purposes except the CAAP. Importantly, this GPA is unweighted. Once schools calculate GPA to determine rank, and a student meets one of the institutions' thresholds, students receive a letter for only the schools they are accepted to; each student letter will include admission to between one to nine schools.

Proactive Admissions Program

SD

TEST SCORES: In South Dakota, students have two ways of demonstrating eligibility for guaranteed general acceptance through the Proactive Admissions Program: 1) Achieve a Level 3 or 4 on the 11th grade South Dakota state assessment (for both English and mathematics); or 2) Earn an ACT composite score of 18 or higher, with the exception of the South Dakota School of Mines, which requires an ACT score of 18 in English and 20 in mathematics. Notably, this approach directly aligns with current institutional placement practices for how students are expected to demonstrate "readiness" in South Dakota. The complexity of GPA calculations, given wide variation across school districts, also warranted this type of approach in the state.

Fast Pass Hawaii

HI

GPA AND CORE COURSE REQUIREMENTS: Eligible high school students in Hawaii receive a letter with instructions on using the Fast Pass application process from 1, 2, or 3 campuses. Based on each student's grade point average, UH Hilo and UH West O'ahu offer conditional letters of acceptance to their campuses, and UH Manoa offer a special invitation for students to apply to the institution. All three campuses automatically waive the application fee and provide expedited processing of applications for Fast Pass participants. Student GPAs fall into one of three categories: 3.5 or higher—students receive an invitation to apply to UH Manoa, an application fee waiver, and expedited application processing; 2.7 or higher—a conditional offer of acceptance from UH West O'ahu and UH Hilo, application fee waivers, and expedited application processing.

Personalized Admissions Program

AZ

GPA AND HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSIONS REQUIREMENTS: Eligible students are directly admitted to an Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) institution if they have a 3.0 GPA or higher and are on track with 14 out of 16 ABOR admissions eligible courses completed by the start of senior year. Notably, the GPA used to determine eligibility through the Personalized Admissions Program was not a student's overall GPA but a GPA that only considered courses that satisfy the sixteen ABOR admissions requirements. To support students near the 3.0 cutoff, students with a 2.8 GPA or higher and at least 12 out of 16 ABOR requirement eligible courses completed are notified that they are a possible admit and will receive a financial aid package contingent upon successful completion of ABOR-eligible courses and graduating with a 3.0 GPA.

CHALLENGE 5

The term "direct admissions" and the overall purpose(s) of these programs remains confusing for many students, families, and K-12 school staff.

In any direct admissions program, language matters. For example, what does it really mean to be 'directly' or 'proactively' admitted to college? The answer to this question likely depends on the remaining steps students will be required to take once they have received notice of their conditional acceptance. Political pressures can mean that the language political actors in a state (e.g., governors and mayors) want to use to define direct admissions terms differs in meaningful ways from the language institutional practitioners and K-12 staff prefer to use to support student understanding. Finally, many institutions across the country have selective programs of study or transfer-student specific "direct admissions" programs already in place, and overlapping or shared terminology only adds to the probability of confusion for students and families.

STRATEGY: Implement a clear and coherent communications strategy to inform students, families, and high school staff about the program and the steps to complete the application process.

Because the term "direct admissions" has the potential to be interpreted in a variety of different ways, a clear and coherent communications strategy is necessary for the success of any direct admissions program. In all direct admissions initiatives, it is crucial to have all key actors, especially K-12 and postsecondary practitioners, speak a common language and be able to similarly communicate about the program's goals, objectives, and expectations to students and families.

SHEEO Direct Admissions Community of Practice

Direct admissions work cannot and should not be done in silos. From Idaho to Minnesota to Connecticut to Hawaii, leaders have benefited greatly from engaging with one another on a routine basis. Notably, the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) is currently operating a two-year direct admissions community of practice and has involved state leaders in over a half-dozen states. One major goal of SHEEO's community of practice is to enhance policy development, knowledge-sharing, and ongoing conversations on common applications and direct admissions efforts across the country.

Guaranteed Admissions Program

WA

COORDINATED COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY: The GAP communication plan collectively designed by leaders of the GAP program describes the approach for communication and collaboration of participating institutions in the Guaranteed Admission Program (GAP). Specifically, this communication plan identifies 11th and 12th grade students and their families as well as districts and schools as the key focus audiences for GAP. The plan lays out key messages regarding Washington's 4-year higher education institutions; notably, the plan encourages that messages about GAP clearly note that Washington's 4-year colleges and universities want Washington high school students, are accessible and affordable, are welcoming, supportive, and career focused, and have demonstrate a clear value and return on investment for students who attend. Leaders also created a communications matrix that illustrates how participating institutions and, as appropriate, the Council of Presidents plan to communicate information to audiences. This includes the frequency of messages, responsible party, and method of communication. Finally, to go along with this communications plan, GAP leaders also created a social media toolkit and have shared suggested tweets and hashtags that all LEAs can use to ensure common messaging about the program.

Personalized Admissions Program

AZ

INNOVATIVE OUTREACH & ADMISSIONS LETTERS: Thanks to a direct partnership with the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), school districts are able to send transcript data directly to ADE. A university researcher, who is not affiliated with any of the Admissions Offices and who has been embedded at ADE for multiple years, is tasked with determining how many of the 16 requirements have been met, calculating the GPA based on the ABOR eligible courses, and sending mailing lists to the selected printing houses of those who have qualified or have the potential to qualify for admissions. To maintain student privacy, the Admissions Offices never know who received a letter or what type of letter it was, unless the student voluntarily offers that up during the paperwork process. The printing houses have pre-approved letter templates with all university logos and signatures; they do a mail merge with the mailing lists from the researcher. At the beginning of senior year, students receive a personalized letter saying they are admitted to the university (definitely qualified), or informing them that their admission is contingent upon completion of all 16 ABOR requirements with a GPA of 3.0 or higher by the end of 12th grade (potentially qualified). Students then receive another personalized letter asking them to consider attending an ABOR institution rather than simply confirming to students that they have or will soon qualify and be granted admissions. All letters (10th, 11th, 12th graders) go directly to home addresses; all letters are also jointly signed by the ABOR institution & the district superintendent.

Proactive Admissions Initiative

SD

MARKETING DIRECT ADMISSIONS ALONGSIDE OTHER COLLEGE ACCESS EFFORTS: South Dakota's proactive admissions program was rolled out with the statewide College Application Week—a designated week during the fall semester during which all college applications are made free for students—in mind and was seen as a complement to that statewide campaign. Leaders of the proactive admissions programs ensured that students received their letters before the College Application Week, as students would be most likely to have access to comprehensive support to complete their applications in one sitting during that time.

Opportunities for Further Study

Direct admissions is an emergent higher education enrollment strategy. It will be important to study the potential for impact. Given the wide variety of approaches to direct admissions, education researchers ought to consider evaluating these programs through mixed-methods analyses to begin to parse out best practices in this field.

In addition to examining comparative outcomes data on enrollment, persistence, and ultimately, completion, themes for continued research on direct admissions should center on

- ➔ Better understanding the effectiveness of various strategies to engage students and their families about these programs (i.e., mail vs email vs text)
- ➔ The interaction of direct admissions and financial aid notifications
- ➔ Examining which messages work for which students, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, geography, academic profile, etc.
- ➔ Student and family perceptions of the impact of these programs on their decisions to attend college generally vs a specific institution
- ➔ Faculty perceptions of students enrolling via direct admissions

As interest in direct admissions continues to grow, there is also considerable potential for leaders in the field to learn from one another. National education organizations should consider how to partner with one another to facilitate multi-year cross-state learning communities (like the SHEEO community referenced above) and routinely convene direct admissions leaders to gather additional insights about their approaches and implementation challenges.

CONCLUSION

To improve college access and disrupt the current downward trajectory of higher education enrollment rates nationwide, state leaders should consider new and innovative strategies to engage students who may feel excluded from the sector altogether. With 65 percent of today's jobs requiring a postsecondary degree or credential of value[6], and persistent enrollment disparities existing across racial and ethnic lines, sustaining and promoting a strong postsecondary mindset is not only crucial to meeting the needs of the modern workforce but to equitably serving students. Direct admissions has proven to be a low-cost strategy worth the consideration of education leaders; it holds the potential for states to not only increase college applications and postsecondary enrollment, including for students of color and those from low-income backgrounds, but also to change the college-going mindset of the next generation of scholars.

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APPENDIX A:
Overview of Direct Admissions Programs

ARIZONA	
PROGRAM NAME	Personalized Admissions Program
PROGRAM PURPOSE	This program intends to give students the opportunity to attend a four-year institution when they may have otherwise not considered it a possibility.
YEAR STARTED	2021
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) Institutions
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	This program began as a single-district pilot in partnership with Arizona State University (ASU) and the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). Today, the program is fully facilitated by all three Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) universities, more school districts (covering more than half of all 12th graders in Year 3). ADE does not receive any state funding, nor is there any legislation mandating this program. Staffing is provided by a sole data scientist, who is not affiliated with any of the Admissions Offices and who has been embedded at ADE for multiple years; the logistics of signing up school districts and negotiating with the 3 Admissions Offices are handled by the Director of the ASU/Helios Decision Center for Educational Excellence. Staffing is provided by ASU, with a data analyst embedded at ADE.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	Eligible students receive a letter in September if they have a 3.0 GPA or higher and are on track with 14 of 16 Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) admissions eligible courses completed by the beginning of senior year. Notably, the GPA used to determine eligibility was not a student's overall GPA but a GPA that only considered courses that satisfy the 16 ABOR admissions requirements. Students with a 2.8 GPA or higher and at least 12 of the ABOR requirements completed are also notified of the possibility to qualify if requirements are met.

CONNECTICUT	
PROGRAM NAME	Connecticut Automatic Admissions Program (CAAP)
PROGRAM PURPOSE	The Connecticut Automatic Admissions Program (CAAP) offers eligible students automatic admission to participating Connecticut Colleges and Universities based on high school grade point average (CAAP GPA) and/or percentile class ranking, both calculated using the College Board's formula for calculating GPA. The class of 2023 is the first class of students eligible for CAAP.
YEAR STARTED	2021
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	Central Connecticut State University, Eastern Connecticut State University, Southern Connecticut State University, Western Connecticut State University, Mitchell College, University of Bridgeport, University of New Haven, University of St Joseph, Goodwin University
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	CAAP was created by the Connecticut General Assembly in a June 2021 special session through Public Act 21-2ss. The state does not provide appropriations or staffing for the program, but the legislation does require public institutions in the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) system to participate in CAAP, have a common application system, and use a standardized GPA and class rank to determine students' eligibility.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	Students are eligible for CAAP based on high school grade point average (CAAP GPA) and/or percentile class ranking, both calculated using the College Board's formula for calculating GPA. The BOR has set the threshold for percentile ranking at 70, meaning that the top 30 percent of grade 12 students are eligible to apply for automatic admission under CAAP. The BOR directs high schools to follow the College Board formula for calculating grade point average in order to calculate each student's percentile ranking solely for the purpose of the CAAP. Districts may continue to use their existing GPA methodologies for all other purposes except the CAAP.

HAWAII	
PROGRAM NAME	Fast Pass Hawaii Program
PROGRAM PURPOSE	Through this program, the University of Hawaii seeks to make it easier for Hawaii public high students to attend a UH four-year campus. For academically prepared students, the UH Fast Pass Initiative offers a streamlined admissions process and in some cases conditional acceptance directly from high school.
YEAR STARTED	2021
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	All 10 University of Hawaii campuses
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	The Fast Pass Hawaii program is fully operated by the University of Hawaii system. There is no state appropriation or legislation attached to this program.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	Based on their GPA and successful completion of core course requirements, students receive a letter with instructions on using the Fast Pass application process from 1, 2, or 3 campuses. Based on each student's grade point average, UH Hilo and UH West O'ahu will offer conditional letters of acceptance to their campuses, and UH Manoa will offer a special invitation to apply. All three campuses will automatically waive the application fee and provide expedited processing of applications for Fast Pass participants. Student GPAs fall into one of three categories: 3.5 or higher—an invitation to apply to UH Manoa, application fee waiver, and expedited application processing; 2.7 or higher—a conditional offer of acceptance from UH West O'ahu and UH Hilo, application fee waivers, and expedited application processing; all students also have the option of attending a UH Community College through the Kama'ina App.

IDAHO	
PROGRAM NAME	Direct Admissions Initiative
PROGRAM PURPOSE	Through this initiative, the state of Idaho seeks to encourage a college-going culture; connect students, families, and K-12 schools with colleges early in the college choice process; ease the transition from high school to college; signal postsecondary opportunities to high school students; and reverse consistent enrollment declines at the state's public institutions.[7, 8]
YEAR STARTED	2015
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	Idaho's eight public colleges and universities
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	The Idaho Direct Admissions Initiative was formally adopted by the Idaho State Board of Education (OSBE) in 2015. OSBE has expansive power and authority in Idaho across K–12 and higher education, and as such, the adoption of this initiative carries the full force and effect of law. All public state institutions in Idaho are a part of this initiative. OSBE spends roughly $30,000 a year on printing and postage for admissions letters and dedicates several full-time staff members to help oversee and run the program.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	The first several years of the initiative came with a "conditional admittance" (for general admissions only; selective programs retained ability to have heightened requirements) benchmark based on a formula that utilized GPA and college entrance exam scores (ACT) to determine a shared admissions threshold for the state's eight public colleges and universities. Students that fell below the benchmark were conditionally admitted to the state's associate/certificate-granting institutions. Today, the initiative's admissions criteria only factors in GPA. The GPA threshold selected by participating institutions has modestly changed every year since the program began, and in 2022, the minimum GPA was a 2.6 for all institutions but one. Notably, Idaho's initiative was implemented as a universal program, which ensures that all students are conditionally admitted to either set of institutions based on their GPA, and not one student is left without a postsecondary option, so long as they satisfied all high school graduation requirements.

MINNESOTA	
PROGRAM NAME	Direct Admissions Minnesota
PROGRAM PURPOSE	This pilot program aims to reduce self-selection bias and reduce equity gaps in college enrollment using four strategies: promoting a college-going culture, connecting students, families, and schools with colleges and universities earlier, giving families time to consider their options and plan, easing the transition from high school to college, and showing students that they have access to a certificate, associate degree, or bachelor's degree if they choose to further their education. **Target Student Population:** Direct Admissions Minnesota has an explicit goal of helping to improve the ability of the state's higher education systems to serve Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color after high school and ultimately eliminate disparities in postsecondary attainment in Minnesota across racial and ethnic subgroups.
YEAR STARTED	2021
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	51 public and private colleges across Minnesota
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	Direct Admissions Minnesota received a $1,000,000 2-year legislative appropriation from the state in 2021. $500,000 was set aside to build out IT infrastructure and related services across the Office of Higher Education, participating colleges, and K-12 districts; $400,000 was set aside for reimbursing high schools for staff time, $50,000 was apportioned for communications (printing, design, and translation), and another $50,000 for miscellaneous expenses. The Minnesota Office of Higher Education (OHE) is legislatively-mandated to publish annual reports for the program. OHE also provides the staffing to run this program.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	Students in participating districts are eligible for direct admissions based on their GPA. This pilot program currently has six academic tiers, in which participating institutions were involved in creating and were able to opt into. The academic tiers are as follows: Tier 1 (less than 2.50 GPA); Tier 2 (2.5-2.74), Tier 3 (2.75-2.99), Tier 4 (2.75-2.99; C average or higher in all 3 course subjects); Tier 5 (3.00-4.00); Tier 6 (3.5-4.00; C average or higher in all 3 course subject areas).

SOUTH DAKOTA	
PROGRAM NAME	Proactive Admissions Initiative
PROGRAM PURPOSE	The purpose of South Dakota's initiative is to provide more graduating seniors with access to a postsecondary certificate or degree. The program seeks to connect students with an in-state institution to help keep them in South Dakota for postsecondary education and training, and ultimately, as contributing members of the workforce and their local communities.
YEAR STARTED	2017
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	Black Hills State University, Dakota State University, Lake Area Technical College, Mitchell Technical College, Northern State University, South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, South Dakota State University, Southeast Technical College, University of South Dakota, Western Dakota Technical College
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	South Dakota's Proactive Admissions Initiative was propped up by the South Dakota Board of Regents and the South Dakota Department of Education absent legislation and state appropriation. Up-front costs, including costs associated with postage and website development were covered by a previously secured grant from the Lumina Foundation.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	Students have two ways they can demonstrate eligibility for guaranteed general acceptance: Achieve a Level 3 or 4 on the 11th grade South Dakota state assessment (English and math) OR ACT composite score of 18 or higher (NOTE: SD School of Mines requires an ACT score of 18 in English and 20 in math).

TEXAS	
PROGRAM NAME	Top 10 Percent Rule
PROGRAM PURPOSE	Texas House Bill 588, also known as the Top 10 percent Rule, was created in hopes of leveling the playing field for college admissions. Recognizing that high schools across Texas have historically been divided both racially and economically, the goal of this policy was to increase diversity among college classes. **Target Student Populations:** underrepresented racial minority (URM) students and students from lower-income backgrounds.
YEAR STARTED	1997
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	All Texas public institutions
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	The Top 10 percent Rule requires public universities in Texas to admit all Texas high school students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school classes, with the exception of the University of Texas at Austin, which admits all students who graduate in the top 6 percent of their graduating class.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	In order to be eligible for HB588, a student must: attend a public or private high school in Texas, rank in the top 10 percent of their graduating class on or before the application deadline, apply to a state school in Texas, satisfy the State of Texas Uniform Admission Policy, complete the new foundation plan with the Distinguished Level of Achievement, and make sure all required documents are received by the application deadline.

WASHINGTON	
PROGRAM NAME	Guaranteed Admissions Program
PROGRAM PURPOSE	Washington's Guaranteed Admissions Program (GAP) focuses on 11th and 12th grade students who have not considered attending college or who do not see themselves as college ready. Through data sharing agreements with districts and schools, participating institutions engage with high school juniors to familiarize them with college admissions and ready them for college, and with seniors to admit them through guaranteed admissions or, if not eligible, through the general admissions process.
YEAR STARTED	2021
PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS	Central Washington University, Eastern Washington University, The Evergreen State College, Washington State University and Western Washington University
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH	The Washington State Council of Presidents, the association of Washington's public baccalaureate degree granting colleges and universities, oversees GAP. The Council intentionally designed the program to be run by the institutions themselves. As such, the program is not baked into legislation and receives no appropriations.
STUDENT ELIGIBILITY	To be eligible for guaranteed admissions to the five participating institutions, students must have or be on track to earn by graduation a 3.0 GPA and complete the college academic distribution requirement coursework.

Endnotes

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