



Reducing Red Tape through Simplification: How Idaho Radically Reimagined College Admissions¹

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There is a need for innovative, low-cost public policies to increase college access, particularly for ethnic and racial minorities, low-income students, and by geographic contexts. This brief explores **direct admissions** as a promising policy option. A direct admissions system side-steps the typical college admissions process by **proactively admitting students to college**. Students, guardians, 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 statewide common and free application. All students in a state are admitted to open-access institutions, and students who surpass a pre-identified threshold (based on 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 information and 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. 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).

DIRECT ADMISSIONS IN IDAHO

In 2015, Idaho developed the nation’s first state-level direct admissions program, admitting all high school graduates to the state’s public colleges. By leveraging existing data and proactively signaling college opportunities to

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students and families, Idaho **reversed declining postsecondary enrollments and out-of-state migration**. Idaho's plan focused on five primary objectives to promote 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.² Since fall 2015, nearly 87,000 Idahoans have been guaranteed admission to five or more state institutions, with the first cohort entering college in fall 2016.³

Two important features of Idaho's education system facilitated their implementation of direct admissions: **universal SAT testing** in high school and a **state longitudinal data system (SLDS)**.⁴ A college entrance exam is required for high school graduation in Idaho, and the state has funded universal SAT testing for all public high school students. Additionally, the state operates a robust P-20W+ SLDS system. Idaho's SLDS combines data from the Department of Education (K-12), the Office of the State Board of Education (K-12 and postsecondary), and the Idaho Department of Labor.⁵ Because of Idaho's centralized education governance structure, data sharing agreements between K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions were simple—both fall under the Office of the State Board of Education—allowing for a seamless introduction of the direct admissions policy. One state agency held access to students' high school transcripts, ACT/SAT scores, and grade-point averages (GPA), and had the authority to share that information with its own postsecondary arm for purposes of admission to college. Because the state already collects this data, state-level data sharing offers a large efficiency improvement over a traditional admissions system that has each individual student find and select colleges, then fill out this same information on each college application.

² Howell et al., 2019; Kelly, 2018.

³ Howell, 2018; OSBE, 2020.

⁴ Due to COVID-19, Idaho has announced that no ACT/SAT score will be considered for the 2019-20 high school senior cohort.

⁵ Howell et al., 2019.



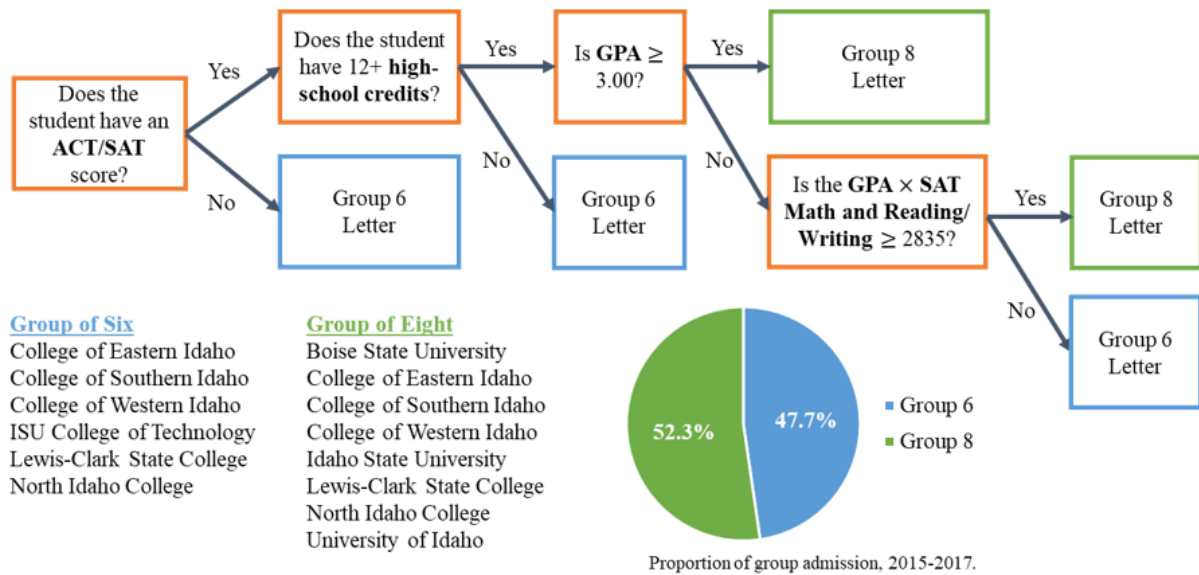


Figure 1. The direct admissions process in Idaho.

Academic affairs staff at each institution collaborated to develop thresholds to determine admission based upon students’ SAT/ACT score, unweighted GPA, and high school course credits at the end of their junior year.⁶ This is shown by Figure 1 above.⁷ Institutions were able to agree on common thresholds creating two groups of institutions where students can be admitted. The state compares students’ information to these predefined thresholds to determine admission. Students are either admitted to all 8 state institutions (including the selective Boise State University, Idaho State University, and University of Idaho) or to the remaining 5 institutions (College of Eastern Idaho, College of Southern Idaho, College of Western Idaho, Lewis-Clark State College, and North Idaho College) plus Idaho State University’s College of Technology. Admission to an institution is contingent upon high school graduation and does not guarantee admission into a specific program or to competitive majors. Students may still apply using a traditional admissions process to institutions to which they were not automatically admitted.

⁶ Howell et al., 2019.

⁷ Ibid.; Kelly, 2018.





Students and guardians receive an email in the fall of their senior year informing them of their admission, including information on how to apply and enroll in the college of their choice.⁸ High schools also receive a list of all students who have been automatically-admitted. Students must still complete a basic application (to collect additional information on majors etc., which does not determine admission) and submit an official final high school transcript. To further simplify this process, Idaho began a **statewide common and fee-free application** in 2017 so students could apply to all in-state public institutions via one application. The Apply Idaho application is simple since SLDS data are prepopulated for each student and takes only five minutes on average to complete.⁹ Students are also encouraged to apply for state scholarships and complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Students must accept an admissions offer by February of their senior year in order to use the offer of guaranteed admission.¹⁰

OUTCOMES FROM DIRECT ADMISSIONS IN IDAHO

Following the fall 2015 introduction of direct admissions, Idaho reported significant changes to 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**.¹¹

As shown in Figure 2, growth continued in fall 2017 with the new statewide common application, Apply Idaho, including an:

- 88% **increase in applications** to college completed (up by 12,937),
- 6.7% cumulative enrollment increase, and

⁸ Howell & Youde, 2015

⁹ Howell et al., 2019.

¹⁰ Kelly, 2018.

¹¹ Ibid.; Kovacs, 2016.



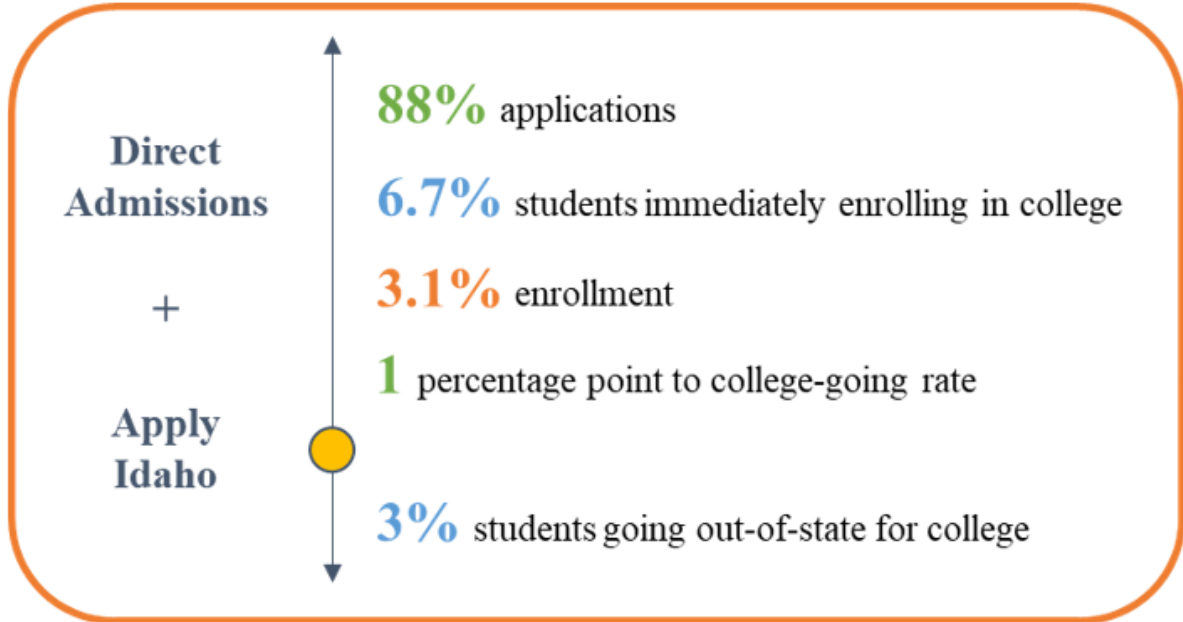


Figure 2. *Descriptive changes after direct admissions and Apply Idaho.*

- 3-percentage-point **decrease in students leaving Idaho for college.**¹²

In our early 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 11.09-16.30%.¹³ Similarly, direct admissions was associated with a statewide increase in full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment of 11.32%.¹⁴ It was hypothesized that direct admissions may also increase the enrollment of students who are Pell-eligible (i.e., low-income) and diversify the racial composition of institutions’ undergraduate student bodies. However, our results do not suggest direct admissions directly influenced these outcomes other than in a descriptive

¹² Howell et al., 2019.

¹³ Delaney et al., 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid.





way. In all, these findings suggest **direct admissions may be a low-cost and effective mechanism to increase institutional and statewide enrollment in postsecondary education, particularly for in-state students.**

TRANSLATING DIRECT ADMISSIONS TO OTHER STATES

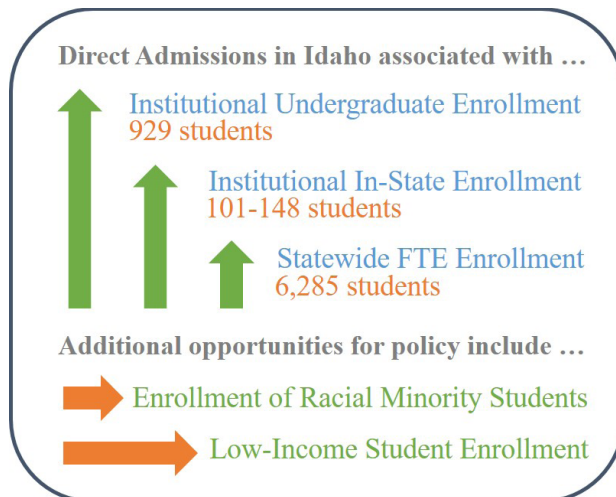


Figure 3. Summary of findings and policy opportunities.

A summary of our findings in Idaho are shown in Figure 3. In addition to Idaho, South Dakota began proactive admissions for the high school class of 2018.¹⁵ 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.

Extrapolating the effect in Idaho to Great Lakes states, our results show that, on average, these states could have increased FTE enrollment by 9,400 students using a direct admissions system.¹⁶ 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%.¹⁷ For statewide aggregated applications to college, Illinois might have increased applications by almost 6,050 (4.62%), and Minnesota by over 13.06% (nearly 10,800 applications).¹⁸

¹⁵ Gewertz, 2017; South Dakota Department of Education, 2019.

¹⁶ Delaney et al., 2019.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.





Direct admissions is an exceptionally low-cost policy option, only requiring a state longitudinal data system, which many states have already developed, and, if chosen, paper and postage for acceptance letters. Given the possibility to positively increase statewide FTE enrollment, as well as in-state and undergraduate student enrollment, the policy holds strong potential for states and their students. In all, our findings suggest direct admissions is a low-cost and effective mechanism to increase institutional and statewide enrollment in postsecondary education.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

By 2020, 65% of all jobs will require some postsecondary credential, with 35% of all jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree.¹⁹ Even in states where an individual can secure a "good job" without a bachelor's degree, the number of good jobs has fallen.²⁰ The lack of a more educated workforce has implications for local state economies and for national competitiveness in the global economy.²¹ Despite this pressing need, the nation and its states are met with college educational attainment rates that have moved little across the last decade. With a need to have 65% of individuals age 25-64 having attained some postsecondary credential, only 47.6% of Americans held at least a certificate in 2017, creating an "urgent and growing need for talent."²² As drivers of postsecondary educational attainment, states have a unique opportunity to contribute to national and local economic improvements by ensuring more individuals apply to and enroll in institutions of higher education—and ultimately earn a credential.

To support states in this area, we offer **two recommendations** guided by our research on direct admissions systems and by prior research on college access.

¹⁹ Carnevale et al., 2013.

²⁰ Carnevale et al., 2017.

²¹ Zumeta et al., 2012.

²² Lumina Foundation, 2019.





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 Great Lakes 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 postmarked or e-mailed acceptance letters.

The descriptive changes to students' application and enrollment behaviors observed in Idaho following direct admissions, as well as the significant findings from our research are in line with prior research studies. Targeted information for students and families can improve college knowledge and influence subsequent enrollment.²³ Additionally, in an experiment with elements of a direct admission system (where students, guardians, and principals received personalized mailings encouraging students to apply to a selective institution), high-achieving, low-income students in one state applied to college at rates more than 2.5 times that of peers who did not receive the mailings (67% compared to 26%), and 27% enrolled in a selective institution compared to only 12% in the control group.²⁴ For students who are low-income, first generation, from rural areas, and of color, these findings highlight the instrumentality of similar interventions on enrollment prospects. Finally, a study on Texas's automatic admissions policy (Top 10%) showed reduced income-based inequalities by helping students better match to higher-quality institutions.²⁵

²³ Bettinger et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2015.

²⁴ Dynarski et al., 2018.

²⁵ Cortes & Lincove, 2019.





States should partner with researchers, policy organizations, and admissions professionals in the design and evaluation of direct admissions 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, policy organizations, and practitioners 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?). Further, practitioners can provide useful information given extensive experience working with students and operating related programs.

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. To address its educational attainment rate, increase postsecondary enrollment, and reduce out-of-state migration, the state of Idaho leveraged its data capacity to create a direct admissions system. By proactively admitting high school graduates to public institutions through direct admissions, Idaho saw marked increases in college applications and enrollment. 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.





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