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Issue Brief

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Expanding Possibilities: How Direct Admissions Programs Shape Students' College Choices

Insights from three state programs: Georgia MATCH, Idaho Campus Choice, and Direct Admissions Minnesota.

Students considering college face many complex decisions: whether they want to go, where they should go, what they can afford, and where they can realistically expect to be admitted. Some students assume that no college will accept them; others underestimate their academic options; and many struggle to understand which colleges could be a good fit. Direct admissions programs aim to remove some of that guesswork by proactively telling students which colleges are likely to admit them. For students uncertain about college, that information can signal there is a place for them. For students already planning to attend, it can expand or reshape the list of colleges they consider.

During the 2025–26 school year, Mathematica studied three state programs that implemented direct admissions—Georgia MATCH, Idaho Campus Choice, and Direct Admissions Minnesota—to understand how receiving information from these programs may shape students' college exploration and decision making (see Box 1 for more details about the study and Box 2 for more details about direct admissions programs). Approximately three-quarters of the students in the study (76 percent of those surveyed) were already planning to attend college when they received their direct admissions notification, and only 7 percent said they decided to attend college because of the notification.[1] However, students still reported that the direct admissions notification shaped their decision making. For many, the notification changed the list of colleges they considered by introducing them to schools they had not known about or had not realized were within reach. For others, it reinforced their confidence and certainty in options they were already considering. **These findings point to an**

Box 1. About this study

This work supports Lumina Foundation's Great Admissions Redesign, which has awarded implementation and planning grants in seven states.

This brief is the second in a three-part series sharing findings from Mathematica's study of direct admissions. The first brief examines how the features of direct admissions programs can reduce barriers to applying and explores enrollment patterns across the three study states. The third examines the role communications and other supports play in helping students understand and act on direct admissions opportunities.

The three briefs draw on data collected during the 2025–26 school year, including fall focus groups, a winter survey, and spring interviews with high school seniors across multiple high schools in each state. This information on the student experience was accompanied by interviews with school counselors and program administrators in each study state. The study also uses data from the National Student Clearinghouse on high school seniors' college enrollment before and after the start of each state's program.

[1] See Box 3 at the end of the brief for details about study participants and how students were selected to participate in the study.

important role for direct admissions programs: helping students translate their intention to attend college into a clearer set of attainable options.

Box 2. What are direct admissions programs?

Direct admissions programs aim to reduce some of the burden students face in navigating the college choice process by having states and colleges proactively identify students eligible for admission. These programs can take many forms, but typically involve state education agencies or colleges reaching out to students through letters or emails about their admission or eligibility for admission. For more information on the program features in the three study states, please visit brief 1, *From Application to Enrollment: How Direct Admissions Programs Reduce Barriers to College*.

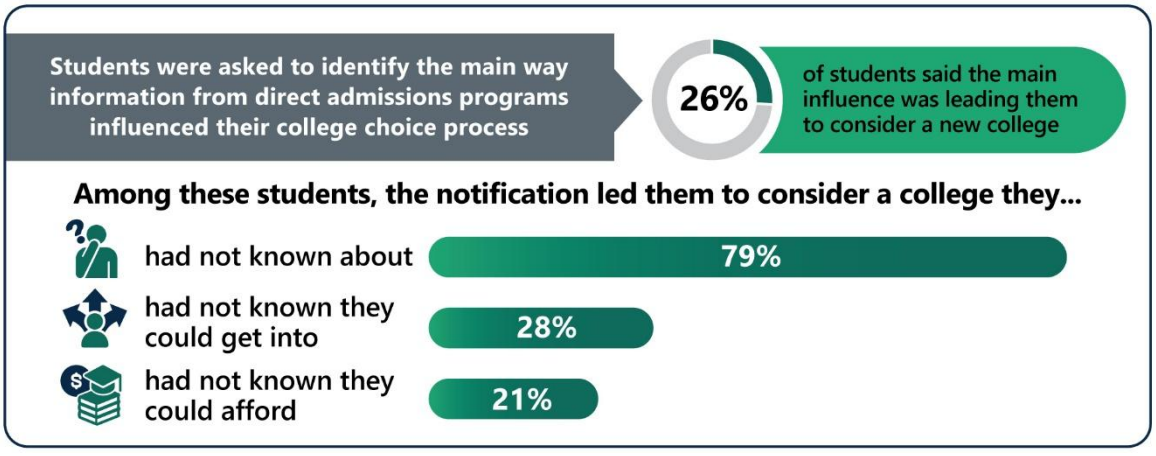
This brief explores the role of direct admissions in shaping the list of colleges students consider, their confidence about college, and the college-going pathways they pursue, and concludes with implications for program improvement and future research.

Direct admissions programs expanded students' college options and introduced them to new pathways

For many students in the study, the **value of direct admissions was not learning that college was an option but learning more about which colleges might be right for them.** Many interviewed students said direct admissions notifications introduced them to colleges they had not been aware of or considered an option. Twenty-six percent of surveyed students said the *main* way the notification influenced their college choices was by encouraging them to consider a college they had not thought about applying to before. More than three-quarters (79 percent) of the students who said the notification led them to consider a new college said the college was one they had not known about; 28 percent considered a college they had not known they could get into; and 21 percent considered a college they had not known they could afford (Exhibit 1).

> "I definitely wouldn't have known half of the colleges that I could get into [without Georgia MATCH]. I probably wouldn't have even applied to them because I didn't know they existed to begin with. It mainly helped me see that there [were] more options out there than what I thought there was."
>
> — Georgia high school senior

Exhibit 1. How direct admissions notifications influenced the colleges students considered



Source: February 2026 survey of 112 students across Georgia, Idaho, and Minnesota who received direct admissions notifications (70 students in Minnesota, 29 in Idaho, and 13 in Georgia).

Note: The 26 percent figure captures responses to the question, "Please select the main way that the information or [letter/email] from [PROGRAM NAME] influenced which colleges you are considering." Twenty-nine students selected "The [letter/email] made me consider a college I had not considered before." These students were then asked, "In what way did the information or [letter/email] from [PROGRAM NAME] lead you to consider a college you had not considered before?" The remaining percentages are based on responses from these 29 students. Responses are not mutually exclusive and will not sum to 100 percent.

Interviews showed that **some students had underestimated their college options and found out their academic records qualified them for more selective schools** than the ones they were considering. **After they received their notifications, they considered or applied to schools** they had assumed were out of reach.

Other students considered two-year or in-state options they had previously overlooked. One Minnesota student had not seriously considered a two-year college because she had thought attending community college meant she was a "failure." This student said Direct Admissions Minnesota reduced the stigma around this option and helped her see it as legitimate and affordable. Another Minnesota student who had initially planned to attend college out of state learned through the program that she could begin at a two-year college and then transfer out of state. Other students similarly gave more consideration to colleges closer to home, often because in-state options were more affordable.

> "It changed [the colleges that I considered] a little bit because at first I wanted to go out of state and then I learned I could do a two-year college and then transfer out of state."
>
> — Minnesota high school senior

Complementing data collected in interviews and surveys with students, Mathematica's analysis of National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data provides another window into how direct admissions might shape college choices. The study examined changes in the college enrollment patterns of high school seniors before and after the implementation of direct admissions. In Idaho, **enrollment increases following implementation of Idaho Campus Choice were concentrated in public two-year and in-state institutions**. Comparing average college enrollment rates of high school seniors before and after program implementation, the study found a 3.1 percentage point increase in enrollment at public two-year colleges and a 4.2 percentage point increase in enrollment at in-state institutions.[2] In contrast, there was no detectable change in enrollment at private and out-of-state institutions; increases were concentrated in the types of institutions participating in Idaho Campus Choice (Exhibit 2).[3] These enrollment patterns are consistent with students' reports of considering two-year and in-state college options after receiving direct admissions notifications.[4] Similar shifts toward two-year colleges were not

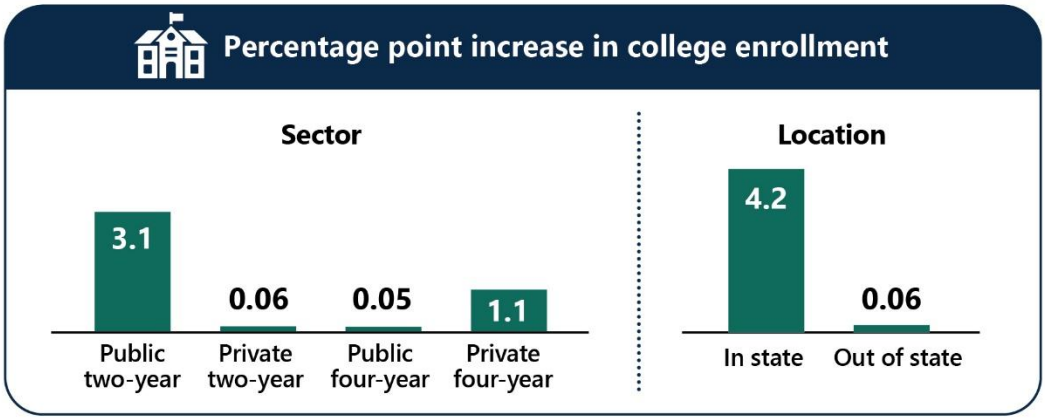
[2] Percentage-point changes compare the average enrollment rate in the three years immediately before program implementation with the average rate in the two years immediately after implementation. T-tests showed that these differences are statistically significant.

[3] Enrollment at public four-year institutions participating in Idaho Campus Choice also did not show a detectable change.

[4] Mathematica's brief 1, *From Application to Enrollment: How Direct Admissions Programs Reduce Barriers to College*, explores overall NSC enrollment trends for all three states in greater depth.

observed in NSC data from Georgia or Minnesota. This may be related to the fact that overall enrollment did not change in Georgia and increased only modestly in Minnesota.

Exhibit 2. Change in average enrollment rates after Idaho Campus Choice implementation, by institution sector and location

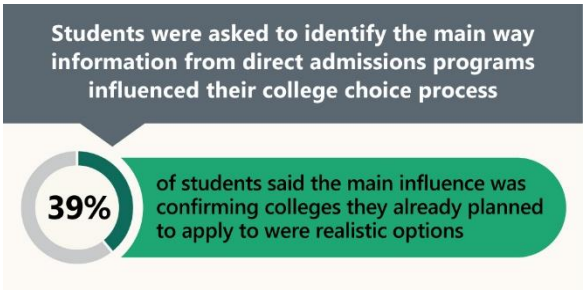


Source: National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)

Note: NSC data were used to calculate college enrollment rates among all grade 12 students in each study state, averaged across the three years before and two years after program implementation. For each cohort, the data capture students ages 18 and 19 who enrolled in college for the first time and at least half-time in the fall semester following their high school graduation. These comparisons are descriptive and do not adjust for other factors that may have influenced enrollment rates over time. These rates may differ from other publicly available measures, which may report total enrollment *counts* that include older or non-first-time students, or calculate enrollment rates among high school *graduates* rather than all grade 12 students.

Students reported feeling reassured and more confident about their college plans

In addition to introducing students to new college options, **direct admissions also provided reassurance for students who were already considering particular colleges**. For 39 percent of students, the notification's main influence was confirming the colleges they already planned to apply to were realistic options. Interviewed students said knowing these colleges viewed them as admissible made them feel more certain their plans were attainable.



Students who were uncertain about their admissions prospects were reassured by the notifications. One Minnesota student who had worried that her grades might keep her out of college said seeing a list of colleges willing to admit her was "relieving." An Idaho student also said the notification gave her confidence because it identified options she knew she could rely on.

"I had plans but they weren't set … getting the letter and knowing these are my options I can for sure rely on gave me a level of reassurance."

— Idaho high school senior

Because most students in the study already planned to attend college when they received their notification, this reassurance did not necessarily change whether they intended to enroll; instead, it strengthened their confidence that their plans were realistic. That distinction may be important for understanding how direct admissions could ultimately influence enrollment. Data shows that many high school seniors intend to go to college, but this often does not translate into enrollment. For students who

already plan to attend but are uncertain about where they can get in or whether their plans are attainable, **direct admissions could help turn an intention to attend college into a more concrete path to enrollment**. This study cannot determine whether helping students feel more confident in their college plans ultimately makes them more likely to enroll, but findings suggest this is one way that direct admissions could influence college-going.

A small number of students reported considering college for the first time after receiving a notification

For a small number of students, learning that they could be admitted to certain colleges brought college into consideration when they had not seen it as an option before.[5] Seven percent of surveyed students said they had not planned to attend college before receiving their notification, which made them consider college as a genuine option. One Minnesota student who had not planned to apply to or attend college at the beginning of the school year said the notification helped her realize that colleges were interested in her, prompting her to reconsider her plans and ultimately enroll. Another student who ultimately decided to pursue a career instead of attending college said Direct Admissions Minnesota encouraged her to consider college once she learned admission was a "guarantee." For these students, the program directly influenced their decisions to pursue college.

> "After seeing how many schools are actually interested in me, I thought if I give it a try it might work out … I probably wouldn't even think about college if I didn't get the email because I didn't know where to start."
>
> — Minnesota high school senior

Insights for improvement and future learning

Mathematica's findings suggest that direct admissions can influence students at multiple points in the college decision-making process. A small number of students said they considered college for the first time after receiving an admissions notification. More often, students reported that the programs helped them identify new options, consider different college pathways, or feel more confident in their plans. These findings have implications for how states design programs, how funders support the development of those programs, and how researchers can further study direct admissions.

States should design admissions notifications to speak to students across a range of college intentions and plans. High school seniors encounter direct admissions at different points in their postsecondary decision making. Some are unsure whether college is an option for them at all; others already plan to attend but are still exploring where to go; and some have particular colleges in mind. Direct admissions can support students across this spectrum. States can design communications that make college feel attainable for students who are uncertain while encouraging those with existing plans to use the information to explore and compare their options.

States and researchers should look beyond overall enrollment rates to understand the influence of direct admissions. Because many students already plan to attend college when they receive direct admissions notifications, changes in overall enrollment may capture only

[5] Mathematica's brief 3, *Turning Opportunity into Action: How Direct Admissions Programs Can Reach Students*, discusses barriers that may prevent students from understanding and acting on direct admissions notifications, including limited awareness of the notification and a lack of clarity on next steps. These barriers may help explain why few students reported that the notification changed their decision about whether to attend college.

part of these programs' influence. This study suggests that direct admissions does more than influence whether or not students attend college; it can influence the institutions and pathways they consider. Admissions notifications pushed some students to consider more selective institutions than they might have otherwise, whereas others discovered two-year or in-state pathways to higher education. Enrollment data in Idaho suggests that direct admissions may shift some students toward two-year colleges. To better understand the influence of direct admissions, states and researchers can examine a broader set of outcomes, including whether students enroll at different types of colleges or attend colleges that are a better academic or financial match than institutions they otherwise would have attended. Understanding these effects can provide a more comprehensive picture of how direct admissions shapes students' postsecondary outcomes and contribute to ongoing program design and improvement.

Box 3. Study participants

During the 2025–26 school year, this study examined students' experiences with direct admissions programs in Georgia, Idaho, and Minnesota. The study included 14 schools (eight urban, four rural, and two suburban) across 10 school districts. Eleven of the 14 schools were classified as low income.[6] School counselors and administrators recruited students to participate and were asked to prioritize students who were less academically motivated and include students with a range of backgrounds, including students from families with low incomes, first-generation college students, and students of color. In total, 136 students participated in focus groups; 112 of those students completed a survey, and 16 participated in follow-up interviews. The study team also interviewed school counselors from 13 of the 14 participating schools and five state administrators.

[6] Schools are considered low income if more than 40 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, per the Title I definition.