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Issue Brief

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From Application to Enrollment: How Direct Admissions Programs Reduce Barriers to College

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

Traditional college admissions processes place the burden on students to seek out colleges and prove they are a good fit. However, research shows that some students do not apply to certain colleges, or to college at all, because they are uncertain about whether they will be admitted or because they face challenges navigating application requirements. Since 2015, more than 25 states have adopted or begun developing direct admissions programs to address these barriers and increase college enrollment. These programs reduce some of the burden on students by having states and colleges proactively identify students eligible for admission and notify them about their eligibility through letters and emails.

Direct admissions programs vary in how far they go to simplify the application process. Some pair an early guarantee of admission with a shortened or common application and fee waivers, while others retain more of the traditional application steps students must navigate. During the 2025–26 school year, Mathematica examined how these differences may affect students' experiences applying to college and making enrollment decisions by studying three direct admissions programs: Georgia MATCH, Idaho Campus Choice, and Direct Admissions Minnesota (see Box 1 for more details about the study). Although this study was not designed to establish causal effects, **the evidence indicates that programs that remove more barriers have greater potential to influence college enrollment.**

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 first in a three-part series sharing findings from Mathematica's study of direct admissions. The second brief explores how direct admissions can shape the colleges students consider and choose, and 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 study state (see Box 2 at the end of the brief for details about study participants). This information was supplemented by interviews with school counselors and program administrators in each 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.

This brief describes the direct admissions programs in the three states, students' experiences with the various program features, barriers students faced to college application and enrollment, differences in statewide enrollment changes before and after the start of each state's program, and implications for states looking to design or modify programs.

Direct admissions programs vary in how much they simplify application processes

Programs across the three states varied in four key areas, including how they communicate with students, what information they provide to students, and the steps and costs of applying and enrolling in college after receiving the information. These program features have the potential to address the barriers and concerns students face in navigating the college application process (Exhibit 1).

All three programs studied proactively tell students about their college options, but they differ in how much they simplify the next steps. Idaho Campus Choice goes the furthest to remove potential barriers for students: admission is guaranteed, students can apply to participating colleges through a streamlined 15-minute common application, and fees are waived year-round. Direct Admissions Minnesota also guarantees admission and waives application fees year-round, but at the time of the study, students were still required to complete separate applications for most colleges and meet those colleges' individual application requirements. Georgia MATCH provides a provisional acceptance; students receive notification that they are "eligible" for admission rather than *guaranteed* admission to the institutions listed in their letters.[1] Georgia MATCH requires separate applications for each college, and participating institutions offer fee waivers in November, with some choosing to offer them again in March.

Exhibit 1. How three direct admissions programs address application barriers

Feature	Student concern	Idaho Campus Choice	Direct Admissions Minnesota	Georgia MATCH
Proactive outreach	"What are my options?"	Yes	Yes	Yes
Guaranteed admission	"Am I admitted?"	Yes	Yes	Provisional
Streamlined/common application	"How do I apply?"	Yes	No	No
Fee waivers	"Can I afford to apply?"	Yes	Yes	Some months

Note: This exhibit summarizes the features of the models as of the 2025–26 school year. Some features will be implemented differently in future years. For example, beginning in 2026–27, many Minnesota institutions will use a simplified application tool.

Program design can shape student experiences

Students' experiences, as shared in focus groups and interviews, illustrate how each program feature can address different sources of uncertainty and burden in the application process, and where opportunities remain to further reduce barriers.

[1] Georgia MATCH states that the provisional acceptance is based on the student's grade point average [GPA] through grade 11, and colleges determine official admissions status using the student's final transcript and high school graduation status.



Proactive outreach can introduce students to colleges they did not know were options. Students across all three states described learning about colleges they had not previously considered or had ruled out because they did not think they could get in. Mathematica's brief 2, *Expanding Possibilities: How Direct Admissions Programs Shape Students' College Choices*, explores in greater depth how direct admissions can shape the colleges students consider. These experiences highlight how proactively identifying attainable college options can reduce the information burden, alleviate uncertainty, and dispel assumptions that may influence students' decisions about where to apply.

> "I think I ended up applying to Savannah State after…. I didn't know if my GPA was [high] enough to get in, but after seeing [the Georgia MATCH letter], I was like oh, I'm gonna go for it."
>
> — Georgia high school senior



Guaranteed admission can help students realize that college is attainable. Students in all three states consistently reported that knowing they were assured admission at certain schools gave them confidence to apply. Although Georgia MATCH technically offers provisional rather than guaranteed admission, interviewed Georgia students still generally interpreted their notifications as a strong signal that they would be admitted.

> "I think [Direct Admissions Minnesota] gives students hope. I have a pretty low GPA, and then I got this list of schools and realized there's a place for me."
>
> — Minnesota high school senior



A streamlined application can reduce the logistical challenges students face on the path to enrollment. Idaho Campus Choice provides the clearest example, as students can use Apply Idaho, a common application for all participating Idaho Campus Choice institutions that takes about 15 minutes to complete. One student said Apply Idaho made applying easier because it allowed them to avoid "all the more difficult steps of applying for college." In contrast, students in Georgia and Minnesota more frequently described frustration with having to complete separate institutional applications and requirements. Counselors emphasized that when programs present admission as easier or more accessible, the application process should reflect that promise by reducing the number of steps students must navigate. Both states recognize this barrier and are exploring options to simplify their application processes.

> "Filling out the application seemed kind of daunting to [students]. I wish there was a way they didn't have to do the same process that they would have had to do [without direct admissions]…. Not having the full application requirement would increase the number of students who complete theirs."
>
> — Minnesota school counselor



Fee waivers can encourage students to consider more college options. Students who were aware of free application opportunities described how waivers encouraged them to expand

their college lists.[2] In Georgia, however, the limited window for free applications prevented some students from taking advantage of this opportunity. Some students said the November application period began too soon after they received their Georgia MATCH letters, not allowing them enough time to research colleges and complete their submissions. Some who missed the free application window decided not to apply to certain colleges.

Students' experiences suggest a straightforward principle: **the fewer additional steps and costs a student encounters after receiving a direct admissions notification, the easier it is for them to act on it.**

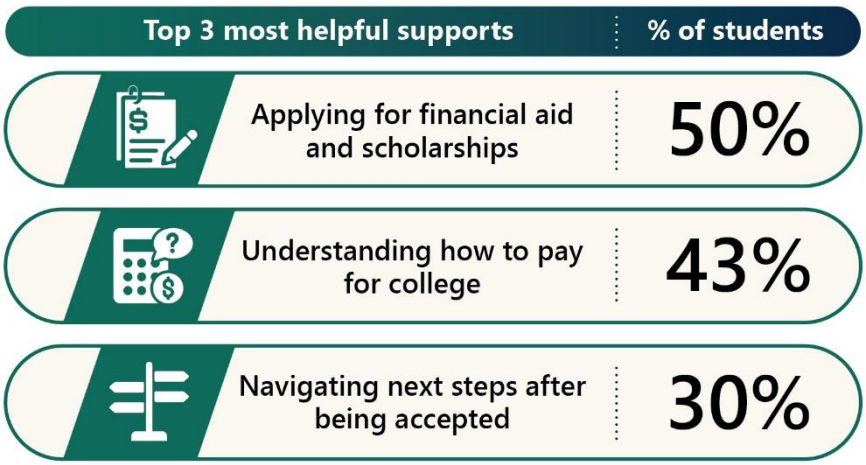
An easier application process does not remove all barriers to college enrollment

Although direct admissions programs can make it easier for students to apply to college, students still face barriers to enrollment. Students across all three states needed help understanding how to pay for college, navigating financial aid and scholarships, comparing college costs, deciding between colleges, and completing enrollment requirements. Exhibit 2 lists the top three types of supports students think would be most helpful in their college decision-making process, as reported in a survey fielded in February of their senior year.

> "We got a lot of help … applying and that [process] was very simple, and after that it was like, what do we do now? I needed help with enrollment."
>
> — Idaho high school senior

Across all three states, students most frequently wanted more information or support related to financial aid and college costs. Students also described needing help navigating next steps after acceptance, such as completing required enrollment paperwork. These findings suggest that direct admissions simplified some components of the college enrollment process but did not eliminate all of the logistical and informational barriers students encounter during senior year.

Exhibit 2. Supports that students would find most helpful in their college decision-making process



[2] Not all students were aware of their state's direct admissions program. Many did not notice direct admissions notifications in their mail or email. See Mathematica's brief 3, *Turning Opportunity into Action: How Direct Admissions Programs Can Reach Students*, for more information.

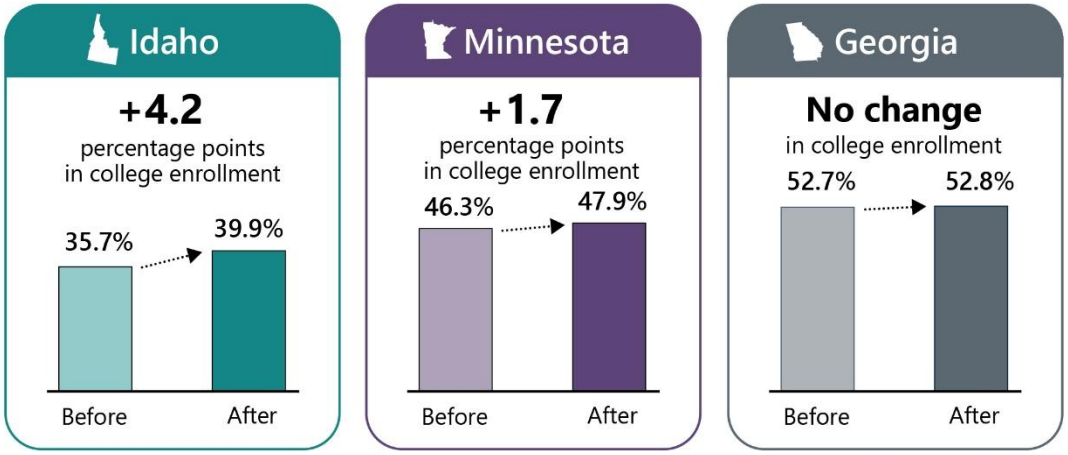
Source: February 2026 survey of 112 students across Georgia, Idaho, and Minnesota who received direct admissions notifications (70 students in Minnesota, 29 in Idaho, and 13 in Georgia).

Note: This exhibit captures responses to the question, "What kind of support would be most helpful to you right now in your college *decision-making* process?" Respondents could select up to two choices.

Enrollment patterns offer another lens to examine differences across state programs

Students' experiences suggest that program features can make admissions notifications easier to act on. Analysis of National Student Clearinghouse data provides additional evidence that differences in program design might matter. The study examined enrollment changes before and after states implemented direct admissions programs and found different patterns across the three states, with college enrollment rates increasing in tandem with the extent to which programs addressed barriers (Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3. Average enrollment rates before and after program implementation for high school seniors in each study state



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.

The study found the largest enrollment increase in Idaho, a smaller increase in Minnesota, and no change in Georgia over the analysis period (Exhibit 3).[3] This pattern is consistent with the possibility that programs that reduce more application barriers have greater potential to influence college enrollment. Even so, these findings should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that program features caused the observed differences, as the study was not designed to draw this type of conclusion. Idaho, Minnesota, and Georgia differ in many ways beyond direct admissions program features, including their higher education systems and college-going contexts. The programs were also implemented in different years,

[3] 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. The study team used t-tests to assess whether these differences were statistically significant. The differences between before and after were statistically significant in Idaho and Minnesota.

and other factors specific to those years could have influenced college enrollment independent of the programs themselves. The analysis shows how enrollment changed after program implementation, but it cannot determine how much of that change was because of direct admissions.

Insights for improvement, replication, and scale-up

The student experiences and enrollment trends suggest possible lessons for states, institutions, and funders considering how to design and modify direct admissions programs.



States and institutions should reduce application steps and costs wherever possible. Students consistently described streamlined applications and fee waivers as making it easier to act on admissions opportunities. When these features were missing, students described additional steps and costs that sometimes discouraged them from applying or limited the number of colleges they applied to. States that reduced more barriers also saw larger enrollment gains.



Funders can help states build toward more comprehensive models. Some states may need to begin with more limited approaches because of political, institutional, data, or capacity constraints. Funders could support states seeking to develop models that progressively reduce enrollment barriers and could provide resources and technical assistance needed to advance that work. This support could include investments in the data infrastructure, application portals, cross-agency and institutional coordination, and implementation capacity needed to expand programs over time.



States, institutions, and funders should treat direct admissions programs as one part of a broader suite of college access initiatives, not a panacea. Even when programs reduced uncertainty and made applying easier, students still encountered difficulties after application. Students described challenges applying for financial aid, understanding the costs of college, completing paperwork and enrollment requirements, and choosing between college options. While Idaho and Minnesota saw moderate enrollment changes among high school seniors after program implementation, states may see larger gains by also addressing other types of enrollment barriers.

Mathematica's study suggests that direct admissions can expand opportunities for students, and early evidence suggests ways that the programs improve college enrollment. As states implement and continue to refine their programs, the focus can shift from extending opportunities to designing a process that makes those opportunities easier for students to pursue.

Box 2. 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.[4] 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.

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