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Mathematica Progress Together

Issue Brief

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Turning Opportunity into Action: How Direct Admissions Programs Can Reach Students

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

Traditionally, college-interested students have had to search for schools to apply to, gauge whether they are likely to be admitted, and complete each school's application requirements. Although some students receive help from school counselors, teachers, and college-access staff, many navigate the complex processes with little or no assistance. Direct admissions programs change this dynamic by proactively telling students about colleges where they have an opportunity for admission, rather than leaving students (and the adults supporting them) to identify those opportunities on their own. But that approach creates a different challenge: students have to notice the message, understand why they received it, and know what to do with the information.

During the 2025–26 school year, Mathematica studied students' experiences with three states' direct admissions programs: Georgia MATCH, Idaho Campus Choice, and Direct Admissions Minnesota (see Box 1 for more details about the study and Box 2 for more details about direct admissions programs). Although the programs communicated with students in different ways, students across the three states described similar barriers that prevented them from acting on the information. Some students overlooked emails or letters; some received notifications after they had already submitted applications or after early-action deadlines passed; and some were unsure what the notification meant or what they were expected to do next. [1] School counselors and staff often helped address these barriers by

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 third in a three-part series sharing findings from Mathematica's study of direct admissions. The first brief examines how features of direct admissions programs can reduce barriers to applying and explores enrollment patterns across the three study states. The second examines how direct admissions can shape the colleges that students consider and choose.

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 3 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.

[1] See Appendix A for examples of direct admissions notifications from the 2025–26 school year in all three study states. These examples reflect the notifications received by students in Mathematica's study, which may differ from those used in prior or future years as programs evolve. The institutions listed in each notification vary based on students' academic profiles.

drawing students' attention to the information, explaining the opportunities, and helping them determine how to respond.

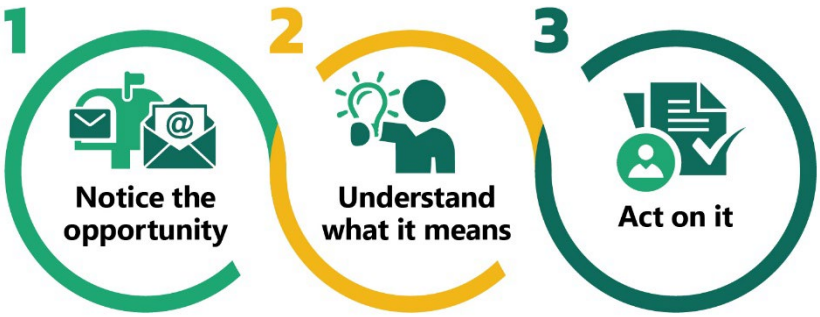
Box 2. What are direct admissions programs?

Direct admissions programs aim to reduce some of the burden students face in 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 of the three study states, please visit brief 1, *From Application to Enrollment: How Direct Admissions Programs Reduce Barriers to College.*

These experiences suggest that direct admissions programs are only as effective as the communications that support them. States can help ensure direct admissions notifications translate into meaningful opportunities for students by designing communications that are timely, clear, and action-oriented, and by equipping counselors, teachers, and other school staff to reinforce those messages.

This brief examines three stages in students' engagement with direct admissions—noticing, understanding, and acting on the opportunity—and draws on students' experiences across the study states to identify lessons for effective communication (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Three stages of student engagement with direct admissions



Students have to notice the opportunity

Proactively sending students information about their eligibility for admission does not necessarily mean that students will see or pay attention to it. High school seniors receive a large volume of college-related information. Students in the study described email inboxes crowded with messages from colleges and spam. They also received large amounts of physical college mailings they did not always open or read through.

No single communication channel reliably reached every student. Some students preferred physical mail because their mailboxes were less crowded than their email inboxes or because a physical letter seemed more important. Others preferred email because they checked their inboxes more often than their physical mailboxes. Students therefore frequently suggested using both email and physical mail rather than relying on a single communication channel.

> "I think email might be best… But not everyone checks their email, so another option for those people might be nice—[for example], like a letter. Maybe both, just in case."
>
> — Minnesota high school senior

Timing affected whether students saw the information as useful. Students sometimes received notifications after they had already developed their college lists, submitted applications, or missed early-action deadlines. The programs in the three study states varied in when and how they communicated with students. Idaho students received a state letter in late September. Georgia students received a state letter in late October followed by an email. The Minnesota students in the study generally received notifications by email in late October, although timing varied depending on when participating schools submitted student information to the state. Minnesota schools could also resend notifications after the initial email. Minnesota students had higher awareness of the direct admissions program than students in the other study states, which may have been related in part to this repeated outreach.

For many students, notifications arrived too late to be useful, even though the information itself might have been valuable had it come sooner. Most students said they would prefer receiving notifications in August (for example, a few suggested during open house) or early September, so they could use them as a starting point for building their college lists.

A notification that reaches students might not clearly communicate the opportunity and what steps students should take

Getting students to read a notification is only the first challenge. Students also have to recognize why they are receiving it, understand what the information means, and determine what they are expected to do next. Direct admissions notifications should not simply send students more information but instead should make college opportunities recognizable and actionable.

> "To me it just looked like a big list of colleges. I didn't know what it was."
>
> — Georgia high school senior

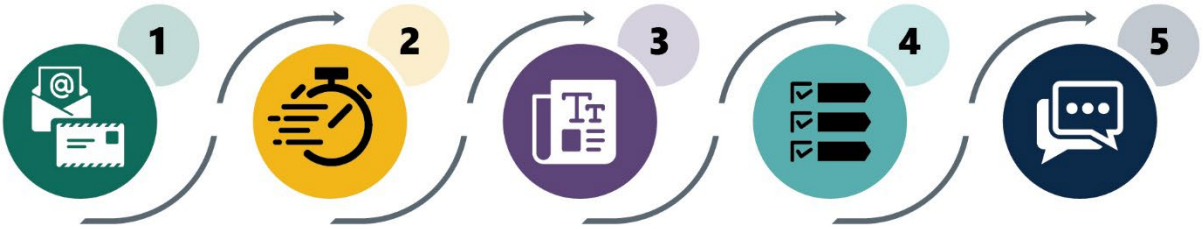
Some Georgia students initially interpreted their MATCH notifications as lists of colleges for their consideration rather than information about admissions eligibility. In Minnesota, students and counselors described the state email as long and text-heavy. Many Idaho students found the letter clear and easy to read, though some struggled to understand the concept of being eligible for admissions and turned to school counselors or teachers for more explanation.

Even when students understood that the notification identified colleges where they were eligible for admission, many were uncertain about next steps. Across all states, some students who received the notification thought mistakenly that they officially had a spot in the institutions on their list and did not need to apply. In Minnesota, some students noted that the action steps were difficult to identify or buried at the bottom of the email. Students were expected to complete a survey indicating which colleges they were interested in and then wait for those colleges to follow up with application information. In Idaho, students received notifications before the state common application opened, and some wanted to be able to apply right away. Students and counselors both suggested that notifications should provide immediate, action-oriented next steps, and clearly distinguish an admissions opportunity from an actual admission.

Students and counselors suggested several ways to make notifications easier to understand and use, as depicted in Exhibit 2. They recommended putting the key admissions message prominently at the beginning, providing clear step-by-step instructions, linking students directly to applications, and using visually engaging formats. Some students also suggested making lists of colleges easier to navigate, such

as by providing geographic context or even a map. Others suggested linking to tools that allow students to filter institutions.

Exhibit 2. Strategies for effective direct admissions notifications



Get their attention	Send it in time to matter	Make the opportunity obvious	Show the next step	Follow up
• Use email and physical mail • Use clear subject lines and branding • Post flyers and share announcements at school • Consider other digital channels	• Reach students while they're building college lists • Communicate before key application deadlines, including early action	• Put the key message at the top • Use clear, student-friendly language • Use headings or bold text • Make it clear what's guaranteed and what's not	• Provide step-by-step instructions • Link directly to the application or forms • Clearly denote all requirements and deadlines	• Send reminders after the initial notification

Source: Mathematica interviews and focus groups with high school seniors and counselors, 2025-2026

Trusted adults can help students understand the notification and take action

Across all three study states, school counselors and teachers helped students notice, understand, and know what to do with their direct admissions notifications. First, school staff often introduced students to the program before their notification arrived, which students said helped them recognize and understand it. Many counselors incorporated direct admissions presentations into existing college-planning activities and used or adapted state-provided materials to explain programs to students. Students who did not hear about the programs from counselors or teachers often did not remember receiving a notification or remembered receiving it but did not engage with it.

> "If [school counselor] didn't tell us about the letter, I would have ignored it."
>
> — Idaho high school senior

In addition to counselors and teachers telling students a notification was coming, many students said the counselors and teachers explained the information, helped the students think through the colleges listed, and clarified what the students needed to do next. In these cases, students said trusted adults helped make unfamiliar messages more legitimate, trustworthy, and salient. For example, some students in Minnesota thought the email was spam because it came from a "do not reply" state

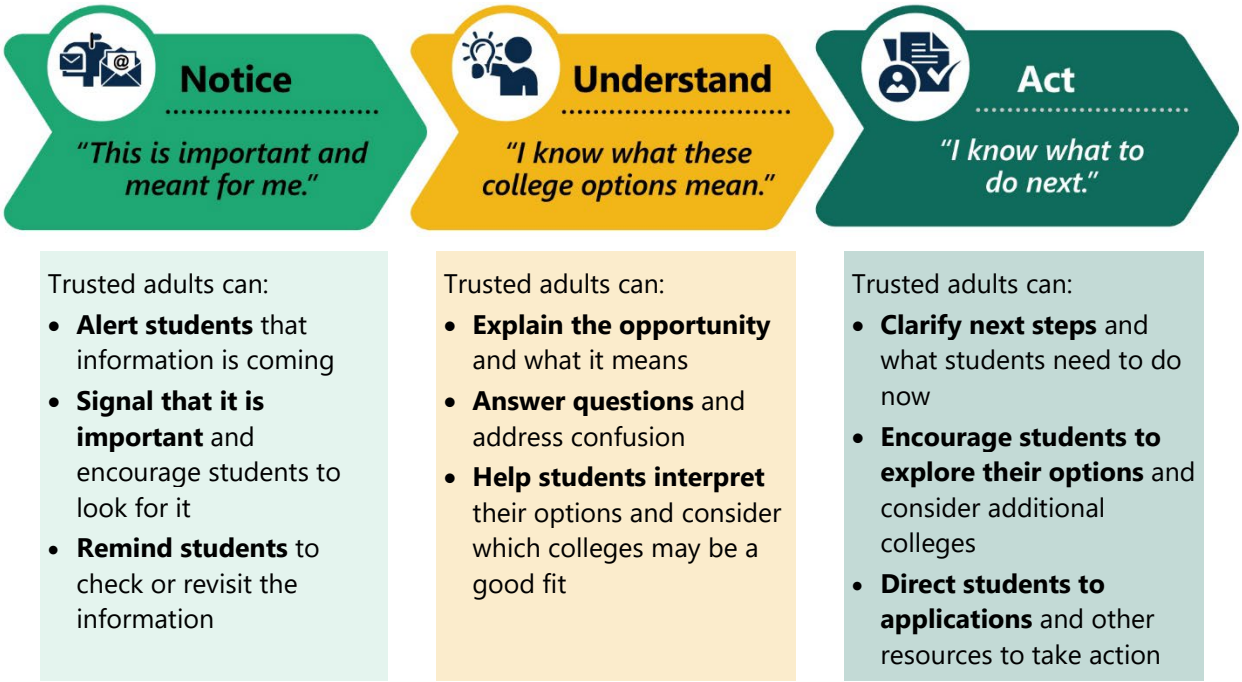
email domain, and their counselors corrected this misconception. Some students said they would have ignored the notification altogether if a counselor had not talked to them about it.

Counselors also reminded students to use the information to explore and act on their options. One Minnesota student described how their counselor encouraged them to apply to more colleges on their direct admissions list, which ultimately led to multiple scholarship offers. A Georgia student similarly said that counselors encouraged students to return to their Georgia MATCH letters, explore colleges they might have overlooked, and broaden the range of institutions they were considering. Students at one Georgia school said their counselor helped "demystify" Georgia MATCH before notifications arrived and later sent the students reminders to apply to the colleges on their lists.

> "At first, I was only going to apply to one or two colleges, but I talked to my counselor, and he said I should apply to more of the colleges I had direct admissions to. I think he was right, because I got a bunch of scholarships."
>
> — Minnesota high school senior

These experiences highlight several roles school staff can play as students move from receiving a direct admissions notification to acting on it, as shown in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3. How trusted adults can help students move through three key steps after receiving the direct admissions notification



Source: Mathematica interviews and focus groups with high school seniors and counselors, 2025–26

Counselors and teachers play a critical role, but capacity to help varies widely

School counselors and staff have important roles to play in making direct admissions work, but programs won't be successful if they place too much burden on school staff. Schools differ in the time and staff available for college advising, and there is often less capacity at the schools that serve students who could benefit the most from the proactive and streamlined college information that direct admissions aims to

deliver. Some schools in the study had dedicated college and career counselors and structured opportunities to help students understand their college options. Other counselors balanced college advising with large caseloads and competing responsibilities related to students' academic and social-emotional needs.

Interviews with counselors and state program administrators pointed to three ways states can reduce reliance on individual school staff members:

1. **Provide concise talking points, ready-to-use student communications, engaging presentation materials, and clear answers to common questions.** Some counselors in Idaho and Minnesota said that the state provided communication materials that were too text-heavy or difficult to use directly with students and reported reformatting materials themselves into more student-friendly versions.
2. **Provide resources that support incorporating direct admissions information into existing group activities at school.** This could include college-planning lessons, senior-year courses, assemblies, or dedicated application activities, rather than depending on individual counseling appointments. States could also create posters for display around the school or draft brief schoolwide announcements letting seniors know to look for their notifications.
3. **Use other communication channels to reach students and complement the efforts of school staff.** For example, Georgia has used social media (including Facebook and TikTok) and broader marketing (such as local television) alongside direct communications to raise awareness of Georgia MATCH. These approaches can help familiarize students with a program before or alongside more personalized conversations with school staff.

These efforts would help create a multifaceted, coordinated communication system in which counselors and teachers can reinforce clear program information rather than having to introduce, reinterpret, or recreate it themselves.

Insights for improvement, replication, and scale-up

Findings from the three states suggest several considerations for designing or refining communication around direct admissions. By making admissions notifications clearer and more action-oriented, states may reduce the need for some students to have additional supports, including school staff and other program resources. States can also refine program resources so that schools can more easily support students who still need help understanding and acting on the opportunity. The following considerations can help states strengthen both direct communication with students and the supports that reinforce it.



Reach students through more than one touchpoint. A single email or letter can easily be overlooked. Multiple channels and follow-up reminders create additional opportunities for students to encounter the information.



Communicate while students are still making decisions. Admissions information appears to have less potential to shape students' choices if the students have already developed college lists or submitted applications. Consider beginning outreach before application season. Some students wanted information before or very early in senior year.



Make the central message and immediate next steps obvious. Students should be able to quickly identify the opportunity they have received and why they received it. Communications

should clearly explain what students still need to do and provide an easy pathway to the next action.



Build awareness of direct admissions earlier in high school. Some students wanted to learn about direct admissions before senior year, to help reinforce the importance of maintaining a strong grade point average and to help them stay motivated, among other reasons. States and schools could incorporate this information into coursework and college-planning activities throughout high school, helping students understand how their academic performance can expand their college options.



Equip school staff to reinforce, not reconstruct, the message, and to reach many students at once. Concise, ready-to-use resources can help counselors and teachers reinforce program communications and facilitate group activities related to direct admissions without creating substantial additional work.



Coordinate communication across the system. State outreach and school reinforcement can complement one another, so students encounter a consistent message more than once and from more than one source.

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.[2] 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.

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

Appendix A. Examples of 2025-26 Direct Admissions Notifications in Each Study State

Georgia MATCH notification

GEORGIA MATCH

Dear Student Name,

October 20, 2025

Congratulations! GEORGIA MATCH recognizes your hard work in school, and I'm happy to say you're an academic match with the Georgia public colleges and universities listed below. Based on your most recent transcript data submitted by your high school to GAfutures.org, these colleges are holding a spot for you in their Fall 2026 class.

Use the QR code to request information from any colleges listed, and once you choose the one you want to attend, claim your spot to begin the admission and enrollment process. Now is the perfect time to explore your college options and apply. All TCSG and USG colleges and universities waive their application fee for Georgia's seniors during November's Apply to College Month.

TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM OF GEORGIA (TCSG)

Albany Technical College	Athens Technical College	Atlanta Technical College
Augusta Technical College	Central Georgia Technical College	Chattahoochee Technical College
Coastal Pines Technical College	Columbus Technical College	GA Northwestern Technical College
Georgia Piedmont Technical College	Gwinnett Technical College	Lanier Technical College
North Georgia Technical College	Oconee Fall Line Technical College	Ogeechee Technical College
Savannah Technical College	South Georgia Technical College	Southeastern Technical College
Southern Crescent Technical College	Southern Regional Technical College	West Georgia Technical College
Wiregrass Georgia Technical College		

UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA (USG)

Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College	Albany State University	Atlanta Metropolitan State College
Clayton State University	College of Coastal Georgia	Columbus State University
Dalton State College	East Georgia State College*	Fort Valley State University
Georgia Gwinnett College	Georgia Highlands College	Georgia Southern University
Georgia Southwestern State Univ.	Gordon State College	Kennesaw State University
Middle Georgia State University	Perimeter Colleges of Georgia State	Savannah State University
South Georgia State College	University of North Georgia	University of West Georgia
Valdosta State University		

USG requires students to meet Required High School Curriculum and testing standards. Scan the QR code to learn more.
**NOTE: East Georgia State College will become Georgia Southern University East Georgia Campus on January 1, 2026, pending approval by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.*

Attending a public college or university in Georgia is affordable. GAfutures.org can help you plan and pay for college in Georgia by connecting you to information about Georgia's HOPE & Zell Miller Scholarships and Grants as well as 15 additional state-funded financial aid programs and federal financial aid.

Congratulations on making Georgia proud! I look forward to seeing you on one of our college campuses next fall.

Brian P. Kemp Governor

LEARN MORE BY USING THIS QR CODE!

NEXT STEPS IN GAFUTURES

- Request Info
- Learn more about your academic matches
- Explore Plan&Pay4College on GAfutures
- Claim Your Spot
- Complete admissions application
- Fee waivers available in November

If you don't see the college or university you are most interested in attending on this list, you can still apply through that institution's application process. Use the QR code to visit the GEORGIA MATCH page and find links to College Search and Planning Resources.

Georgia College & State University, the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Georgia employ a selective and holistic admissions review process and, therefore, do not participate in GEORGIA MATCH direct admissions. These three universities have separate admissions applications on their respective websites.

For GEORGIA MATCH information in a different language access the QR code or GAfutures.org/GEORGIAMATCH and use the translation feature.

LEARN MORE ABOUT GEORGIA MATCH

MATCHING WITH THE RIGHT COLLEGE JUST GOT EASIER!

GaDOE Georgia Department of Education · GAfutures.org · Technical College System of Georgia · UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA

Idaho Campus Choice notification

Start your college journey in Idaho.

Apply today with Idaho Campus Choice.

Congratulations! As a member of the high school class of 2026, you are invited to participate in Idaho Campus Choice's pre-admission to college plan. This unique program allows Idaho high school students the chance to be pre-admitted to eight colleges within the state. You are eligible to attend one of the following colleges:

College of Southern Idaho
College of Western Idaho
College of Eastern Idaho
North Idaho College
Lewis Clark-State College
Idaho State University
University of Idaho
Boise State University

With access to world-renowned faculty and savings of close to 20% by attending college locally, it makes a lot of sense to attend college in Idaho.

Are you ready to get started?

Next steps:

- **Find schools that will be a good fit for you at the College Discovery Center (nextsteps.idaho.gov/apply-idaho-schools).**
- **Go to Apply Idaho (apply.nextsteps.idaho.gov) on October 1st to fill out a free application for up to 10 Idaho colleges.**
- **Receive confirmation of your acceptance.**
- **Contact the college of your choice to confirm your plan to enroll.**

IDAHO Campus Choice

Learn more about Idaho Campus Choice at ***nextsteps.idaho.gov/campus-choice.***

Visit ***apply.idaho.nextsteps.gov*** to submit an application to your Idaho Campus Choice schools and other Idaho colleges and universities.

Idaho State Board of Education



Idaho Campus Choice

Idaho State Board of Education

Name

Address

Idaho State Board of Education
P.O. Box 83720
Boise, Idaho 83720-0037

You're in!

Direct Admissions Minnesota notification

OFFICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
DIRECT ADMISSIONS

«Student_First_Name_Tier5» «Student_Last_Name_Tier5»
«Address_Line_1_Tier5»
«Address_Line_2_Tier5»
«City_Tier5», «State_Tier5» «Zipcode_Tier5»

Dear «Student_First_Name_Tier5»,

Congratulations! Based on a review of your high school transcript, you are on track to this school year and are eligible to participate in the Minnesota Direct Admissions* program! We want to make sure that you know **all Minnesota high school graduates are college material**. As you begin planning for your future, know that you have already met the admissions criteria for many colleges and universities in Minnesota. Below is a list of colleges and universities that want you to know that the answer will be "YES!" if you decide to apply.

The Direct Admissions program has taken the worry out of knowing where you stand. You can choose to apply to one or more of the colleges listed in this letter and know that you'll be granted admission. You have a couple of next steps:

- Review and research (https://myhighered.mn.gov/) your personalized list of college options below and reply to your Direct Admissions email confirming if you would like to move forward with one or more of the colleges and universities on your list, being sure to select them. If you're not sure where to begin, many students select a few colleges that they're interested in as a starting point. After you confirm interest, each college or university will email you information about what happens next. You don't have to decide where you want to go yet – this step just lets the colleges know you **are interested** in starting a FREE application.
- Speed up the FREE application process by **completing the short, optional survey** after you have made your college and university selections.
- Review the application deadlines for your choices and be sure to respond to the college or university's email to finalize your **FREE** application and interest of enrollment. If a college or university requires submission of additional materials (i.e. essay, test scores, or letters of recommendation), you must submit the required materials by their process. Please note: **You must still meet the application deadlines**, even if you are applying through Direct Admissions.
- **Get help paying for college!** You can apply for state and federal financial aid by completing your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or the MN Dream Act application. The FAFSA opens in October and can be filled out before you have selected the college you want to attend. Visit our FAQ for more information.
- Find more guidance on your next steps at the **Direct Admissions Student Center** (https://www.myhighered.mn.gov/direct-admissions-student-center). You can explore and compare your many options with the College Search Tool, create a student account to save your information and hear from other students about their experience with the program, and more.

*Please see the website and program FAQ for more information. Some restrictions may apply, or additional information may be required for admission into specific majors or programs.

Below is your personalized list of colleges and universities you can choose to be directly admitted to:

Central Minnesota
- **Minnesota Private Non-Profit College**
  - College of Saint Benedict
  - Saint John's University
- **Minnesota State College**
  - Pine Technical and Community College
  - Ridgewater College
  - St. Cloud Technical & Community College
- **Minnesota State University**
  - St. Cloud State University

Northeast Minnesota
- **Minnesota Private Non-Profit College**
  - The College of St. Scholastica
- **Minnesota State College**
  - Lake Superior College
  - Minnesota North College
- **Minnesota State College/Tribal College**
  - Fond du Lac Tribal & Community College
- **University of Minnesota**
  - University of Minnesota Duluth

Northwest Minnesota
- **Minnesota Private Non-Profit College**
  - Concordia College
- **Minnesota State College**
  - Alexandria Technical & Community College
  - Central Lakes College
  - Minnesota State Community and Technical College
  - Northland Community and Technical College
  - Northwest Technical College
- **Minnesota State University**
  - Bemidji State University
  - Minnesota State University Moorhead
- **Tribal College**
  - Red Lake Nation College
  - White Earth Tribal and Community College

- **University of Minnesota**
  - University of Minnesota Crookston
  - University of Minnesota Morris

Seven County Mpls-St Paul, MN

- **Minnesota Private Non-Profit College**
  - Augsburg University
  - Bethel University
  - Bethel University Online
  - Concordia University St. Paul
  - Dunwoody College of Technology
  - Hamline University
  - Minneapolis College of Art and Design
  - Northwestern Health Sciences University
  - St. Catherine University
  - University of St. Thomas
- **Minnesota State College**
  - Anoka Technical College
  - Anoka-Ramsey Community College
  - Century College
  - Dakota County Technical College
  - Hennepin Technical College
  - Inver Hills Community College
  - Minneapolis College
  - Normandale College
  - North Hennepin Community College
  - Saint Paul College
- **Minnesota State University**
  - Metropolitan State University

Southeast Minnesota

- **Minnesota Private Non-Profit College**
  - Saint Mary's University of Minnesota
- **Minnesota State College**
  - Minnesota State College Southeast
  - Riverland Community College
  - Rochester Community and Technical College
- **Minnesota State University**
  - Winona State University
- **University of Minnesota**
  - University of Minnesota Rochester

Southwest Minnesota

- **Minnesota Private Non-Profit College**
  - Bethany Lutheran College
  - Gustavus Adolphus College
- **Minnesota State College**
  - Minnesota West Community & Technical College
  - South Central College
- **Minnesota State University**
  - Minnesota State University, Mankato
  - Southwest Minnesota State University

You can also look into the other great higher education options in Minnesota if you are interested in other colleges or universities that don't appear on this list.

Your future is bright and on behalf of the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, we congratulate you for being on the right track for college!

Sincerely,

Dennis W. Olson

Commissioner, Office of Higher Education