DIRECT ADMISSIONS

Increasing Access to Post-Secondary Education through Proactive Admissions

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February 2024

INTRODUCTION

Direct admissions—also known as proactive, automatic, assured, guaranteed, or proactive direct admissions—is a system developed and piloted recently in the United States that defaults graduating high school students into post-secondary admittance by data-matching their profiles (which may include transcripts, standardized test scores, and prerequisites) with institutions' preset eligibility criteria.

The underlying process of direct admissions can be described as post-secondary institutions "applying" for prospective students (Crimson Education, 2023). Whereas the traditional admissions pipeline requires students to apply to universities and colleges and then wait for results, within direct admissions platforms—which may be statewide, institution-specific, or independently operated—students are prescreened against institutional entrance requirements based on their profile information and receive guaranteed-acceptance notifications from universities and colleges that they can then choose to respond to through a greatly simplified process.

Direct admissions applicants bypass entrance examinations, interviews, references, complicated forms, and other time-consuming requirements expected in traditional admissions, and in most cases, one can accept an offer of admission by completing one short form (a task that usually takes less than twenty minutes). Additionally, the process is low-cost or free of cost for applicants, and systems automatically apply fee waivers for those from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds; in many cases, applicants are alerted to scholarships awarded up front that can facilitate the decision to accept an offer.

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For institutions, direct admissions can be a low-cost, low-touch intervention with the potential to outperform traditional recruitment strategies: direct admissions platforms usually charge colleges and universities $75-100 (USD) per direct admissions student, and Minnesota ran its first two years of statewide direct admissions for about $1 million USD (Nietzel, 2021, as cited in Odle and Delaney, 2023, p. 8). Early results have been promising, with direct admissions and its associated supports meeting or modestly exceeding status quo application outcomes at a reduced cost; racially minoritized students' enrolment was improved most significantly by direct admissions, suggesting that direct admissions may be effective in creating more inclusive and equitable post-secondary campuses. Students who accept proactively guaranteed admissions offers also tend to be a better match for the institutions that invite them, and many indicate that they applied and enrolled in institutions not considered in their initial search. By circumventing many structural complexities associated with traditional admissions and encouraging more students to see themselves as college-ready, direct admissions can increase access to higher education, particularly for systemically marginalized and historically underserved students.

BACKGROUND

As educational attainment solves for both economic and community goals, improving college enrolment is a pressing governmental priority in the US, as it is in Canada and other jurisdictions. In basic financial terms, the return on investment (ROI) for post-secondary graduates is substantial, with four-year college graduates 24% more likely to be employed and earning, on average, an additional $32,000 (USD) per year, which also means these individuals can contribute more taxes (Odle and Delaney, 2022). Post-secondary graduates also draw less from the public purse, as communities with more education feature better health outcomes and lower incarceration rates overall, and higher educational attainment translates to important social benefits, including increased civic engagement and charitable donations (Odle and Delaney, 2022). Consequently, lower educational attainment poses significant, sustained losses for both individuals and societies.

Enrolment declines during the COVID-19 pandemic steeply escalated a decade-long downward trend in post-secondary participation. Where the decreases were concentrated also highlighted disparities within higher education, with four-year selective universities showing minimal changes while two-year access institutions went into full "enrolment shock" (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Fall 2021). At the time of this writing, the sector has shown signs of recovery, but the uneven distribution of these increases reflects continued systemic inequities. Through targeted and automated data-driven interventions, direct admissions is designed to lessen persistent equity gaps in admissions by meeting students—literally—where they are, and eliminate the need for "substantial levels of social and cultural capital to search for, apply to, and enroll in college" (Hoxby and Turner, 2013 as cited in Odle and Delaney, 2023, p. 2).

In 2015, the first statewide direct admissions initiative was launched in Idaho following a 2010 national study that revealed the state's college-going rate as the lowest in the US at that time (National Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis [NCHEMS], 2024). Motivated to nurture a "college-going culture," the Idaho government spent over $8.6 million on post-secondary student success initiatives, including the direct admissions experiment, as part of its "60 percent goal" commitment to increasing the state percentage of post-secondary graduates above the age of 25 from 42 percent to 60 percent by 2025 (Richert, 2018). With its single-board, centralized "K-16" education system, relatively small post-secondary ecosystem, and higher-than-average state appropriations [government subsidies], Idaho's educational infrastructure was also well-positioned to accommodate direct admissions (Odle and Delaney, 2022).

Idaho's proactive admissions program admits all qualifying students to a set of open-access institutions (Group of Six/Letter of Six)[1] and those who meet institutionally defined thresholds to additional, selective institutions (Group of Eight/Letter of Eight).[2] At last count, approximately 87,000 Idaho residents had been guaranteed admission (Idaho State Board of Education, 2020, as cited in Odle and Delaney, 2022, p. 3).

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Several other states have followed Idaho's example in adopting state-wide direct admissions programs. By 2023, Idaho, Hawaii, Minnesota, and Washington had statewide direct admissions systems in place. South Dakota's direct admissions program, launched in 2018, was suspended in 2021 due to pandemic restrictions. Georgia, New York, and Wisconsin were slated in late 2023 to commence statewide direct admissions, and Connecticut and Illinois were in the process of legislating statewide direct admissions (Odle and Delaney, 2023).

Institutional interest in direct admissions has also grown significantly post-pandemic, spurring demand for nongovernmental admissions services providers. Some institutions manage their own direct admissions systems, while others use third-party providers such as Concourse, Niche, or SAGE Scholars (FastTrak)—all US-based providers who moved into direct admissions services in the last three years. The largest and most established provider in this nascent marketplace, however, is the Common Application (or Common App), a nonprofit membership organization established in 1978 to support equitable access to post-secondary education through simplified, "one-stop" admissions: Common App implemented direct admissions in March 2021 and, in alignment with its core mission, focused on improving outcomes for applicant demographic groups historically under-served in higher education: low-income, racialized, and first-generation[3] students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Experimentation with direct admissions has attracted considerable attention in the US post-secondary sector and among educational policymakers, but the relative newness of the intervention has meant that very little research on its efficacy is currently available. In fact, the two first large-scale studies assessing direct admissions outcomes were led by the same researchers: Taylor K. Odle (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Jennifer A. Delaney (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign). Respectively, these studies focus on Idaho's direct admissions system and an interstate direct admissions project supported by the Common App platform.

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[1] College of Eastern Idaho, College of Southern Idaho, College of Western Idaho, ISU College of Technology, Lewis-Clark State College, and North Idaho College. The terms "Group" and "Letter" are used interchangeably by the Idaho State Board of Education (J. Eby, personal communication, October 6, 2023).

[2] Boise State University, College of Eastern Idaho, College of Southern Idaho, College of Western Idaho, Idaho State University, Lewis-Clark State College, and North Idaho College, University of Idaho.

[3] Defined as having no parents/legal guardians who completed a bachelor's degree or higher.

Odle and Delaney study #1: Idaho's statewide direct admissions project (2022)

Idaho's direct admissions system, as the earliest US model, mobilized a bold policy response to stubbornly low in-state post-secondary participation. Accepting that informational strategies to "nudge" prospective students toward open access institutions had not meaningfully impacted high school completers' college-going behaviours, and that more involved supports such as offering advanced coursework or college coaching were simply too expensive to implement evenly across the whole state, Idaho piloted direct admissions as a cost-effective alternative for widening access to its colleges and universities.

Odle and Delaney hypothesized that Idaho's version of direct admissions, which features a simplified process and fee waivers delivered in tandem with guaranteed admittance, would have a greater effect on applicants' college-going decisions than sending only admission offers and informational resources. Data collected over the first two years of the program (2015-2017) support the assertion that Idaho's direct admissions has been effective in increasing both first-time enrolments (4-8%) and in-state enrolments (8-12%), especially at two-year institutions. However, direct admissions did not impact the number of Pell-eligible applicants; as Federal Pell Grant eligibility is a proxy for low socioeconomic status, this finding points to a significant missing piece in Idaho direct admissions, since the system currently benefits better-resourced students ahead of those in financial need.[4]

Odle and Delaney study #2: Common App's use in four states[5] (2023)

In their second research project[6] to measure the performance of macro-level direct admissions programs, Odle and Delaney cross-referenced Common App's "national population" of over one million students' GPAs and SAT (Scholastic Aptitude/Assessment Test) and ACT (American College Testing) scores used for US college admissions with student enrolment and progression data available through National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) research to determine whether Common App-supported direct admissions features (early guarantee of admission; structural simplification of the application process; proactive information/"nudging"; and fee waivers) significantly impacted students' application and enrolment behaviours. Importantly, the interstate study sample of 31,481 students was sufficiently diverse to represent a typical American pre-college population: 57% female, 23% underrepresented racial minority (URM),[7] 25% first-generation, and 10-11% low-income (p.15).

Study results showed that direct admissions students were generally more likely to apply to a post-secondary institution (+12%) and twice as likely to apply to an institution that offered them guaranteed acceptance. This boost in application rates varied across the six institutions included in the study; however, on balance, increases in applications were significantly greater among Black (+12%), biracial/multiracial (+19.2%), first-generation (12.8%), and low-income students (8.8%), suggesting that direct admissions can help equity-deserving students navigate the application process.

Beyond these empirical data, applicants also reported positive changes in self-perception—that they saw themselves as more accomplished and better-prepared for post-secondary transition than they did before receiving proactive offers of admission.

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[4] Because of Idaho's relative racial homogeneity (with over 90% of the population identifying as White), this study did not include an examination of student racial subgroups (p. 901); in this context, underserved students are predominantly low-income, rural, and/or first-generation.

[5] These states are not identified in the report but were later revealed in various sources to be Maryland, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Virginia.

[6] Taylor Odle also helped develop and lead the Common App direct admissions system.

[7] In the context of American post-secondary education, underrepresented racial minorities (URMs) are broadly defined as "races or ethnicities whose representation...is smaller than their representation in the U.S. population" (National Science Foundation [NSF], 2023). Institutions maintain their own URM designations. In this study, the URM category includes "students who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Latinx, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" (p. 15).

This "signaling effect" can also explain the marked increase in equity-deserving students applying: direct admissions helps them feel seen in the admission process and capable of succeeding in higher education, thus "flip[ping] the script" and prompting many who otherwise would not have applied to accept offers (pp. 25-26).

Nevertheless, while application rates were moderately improved by direct admissions supports, there was no commensurate effect on enrolment in any of the study subgroups. This result helps define the limitations of direct admissions and the divergence in students' admissions-related needs from enrolment-related needs: despite the removal of barriers to admissions, students frequently struggle with the costs of post-secondary education. Fee waivers help students up to a point, but unless a scholarship is included at the time of guaranteed acceptance, many will remain unable to enroll and stay in college or university.

DISCUSSION

The challenge of attracting and retaining post-secondary students has been exacerbated by a litany of external factors, the most obvious and consequential so far being the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted earlier, the burden of that emergency was distributed unevenly in higher education (as it was in other areas), resulting in steep declines in student enrolment and persistence at US two-year institutions. The concentration of these losses in the open-access segment of the post-secondary sector makes it clear that direct admissions solutions must be applied in a considered and targeted fashion to reach the students most in need of support and avoid reinforcing equity gaps baked into the system.

Getting more students to apply is perhaps the easiest part of the enrolment puzzle to solve: the question of how to make the process of admissions and, by extension, the higher education ecosystem more *equitable and inclusive* is more difficult, and changes in the US political and economic climate may also complicate enrolment recovery in this regard. Social or family perceptions about the "uselessness" of a college education, for instance, and worsening affordability pressures may discourage students from enrolling (Brenan, 2023). Furthermore, the US Supreme Court decision in June of this year to end affirmative action ("race-conscious") initiatives at colleges and universities has far-reaching implications not only for admissions but also financial aid, in ways that may put racially minoritized students at even greater risk. Ultimately, the students who were equipped to participate in higher education all along are likely to find their way into or back to college with minimal assistance; indeed, privileged students able to move into pandemic-driven vacancies at highly selective institutions have benefited from recent system volatility at the expense of underserved students (National Student Clearinghouse, 2021). Improving access for all students, therefore, must start with addressing the biases that prevent more inclusive policies and practices from being adopted.

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CONCLUSION

Direct admissions, as an equity-informed approach to broadening post-secondary participation, has already yielded promising results in changing students' behaviours and perceptions toward college-readiness. Proactive acceptance into an institution, when supported by simplified processes and financial support (even if limited to fee waivers), can minimize barriers associated with a lack of social capital that can prevent students from completing the search-apply-enroll sequence. The psychological effects of encouragement and affirmative messaging are also potentially powerful in eliciting college-going attitudes and actions. While increased admissions rates are not in themselves reliable indicators of future enrolments, they indicate that at least some of the factors that preventing college-readiness in a postpandemic world can be mitigated with reasonably low-touch, low-cost intervention.

Direct admissions, as an equity-informed approach to broadening post-secondary participation, has already yielded promising results in changing students' behaviours and perceptions toward college-readiness.

Where direct admissions solutions require more refinement is in addressing frictions that stop students from enrolling and staying. With low-income students showing comparatively slow enrolment increases despite the removal of systemic and financial barriers, affordability remains the most serious barrier to post-secondary enrolment and participation. While direct admissions can help pre-college students connect with opportunities for further schooling, financial aid and related real-time supports will be necessary to assist students with their investment in higher education. As such, educational policymakers should consider direct admissions part of a systems strategy to improve post-secondary student success, not a "magic bullet" that can eliminate all barriers to college and university access.

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