



GREAT ADMISSIONS REDESIGN IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES PROFILE

**California State University
Direct Admissions Initiative**

March 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Lumina Foundation has supported the reshaping and simplifying of the admissions process to transform how potential students apply, enroll, and access institutions through [The Great Admissions Redesign](#). In partnership with the Foundation, Research for Action (RFA) conducted an evaluation of the three implementation grantees to foster learning and continuous improvement. To build our understanding about the work being done by each of the grantees, RFA conducted interviews with grantee leaders and institutional administrators and analyzed admissions and enrollment data to capture the strategies, outcomes, and lessons learned from the initiative. This implementation and outcomes profile provides early learnings for the field based on our analyses.

ADMISSIONS REDESIGN: CONTEXT AND CONDITIONS

Understanding the larger context and conditions in which postsecondary education reform takes place, as well as the resources and stakeholders involved in the work, is critical to make sense of the reform's design, as well as the larger lessons learned.

STATE POSTSECONDARY CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION FOR REDESIGN

The California State University (CSU) system is the nation's largest four-year public university system, comprised of 22¹ campuses around the state. The CSU system sits between the more selective University of California (UC) system and the open access California Community College (CCCs) system. With the demographic cliff expected in fall 2025², there is additional pressure on schools to compete for enrollment. The CCCs are widely viewed as the most affordable option in the state, particularly given that most provide free tuition for financially eligible students. Respondents suggested that many Californians do not understand the differences between the UC and CSU systems, and, believing that CSUs are too difficult to get into, do not apply. The Direct Admissions initiative is motivated by a desire to help more students understand the accessibility and value of a CSU education.

The initiative leverages the universal admissions requirements for the CSU system – a combination of specific high school coursework (referred to as the A-G requirements) and at least a 2.5 cumulative GPA – in partnership with the **California College Guidance Initiative (CCGI)**. CCGI manages [CaliforniaColleges.edu](https://www.calcolleges.edu), a state-funded comprehensive digital platform offering postsecondary planning tools to students. This platform allows students to track their A-G completion and GPA, as well as providing career, college, and financial aid planning tools, and direct access to the CSU application platform ([Cal State Apply](https://calstateapply.com)), as well as the FAFSA and the California Dream Act application.

The state's goal is to communicate with high school students early to promote A-G completion and encourage consideration of CSU as a postsecondary option. Three state policies and one pilot program facilitated CSU's direct admissions initiative:

- **[The Cradle to Career Initiative](#)**: In 2021, the Governor's initiative authorized CCGI to provide all public 6th–12th grade students with student accounts on the [CaliforniaColleges.edu](https://www.calcolleges.edu) platform to improve college and career outcomes for students, particularly those lacking resources or support.
- **Senate Bill 153**: Passed in the 2024 omnibus budget trailer bill, [Senate Bill 153](#) required all public schools serving 9th–12th grade students to submit transcript data to CCGI. Schools are required to be in compliance with the legislation by June 2026.
- **[Riverside County of Education Direct Admissions Pilot](#)**: In fall 2024, the CSU system piloted the Direct Admissions program with 10 of the 22 campuses for all public high school seniors in Riverside County. Riverside County was selected because they were the first county to have all district transcript data uploaded to CCGI.
- **Senate Bill 640**: Signed into law on October 6, 2025, the [Bill](#) directs the Chancellor's Office to designate campuses with available enrollment capacity (currently 16 of the 22 campuses) to participate in the program.

Because Senate Bill 640 does not take effect until fall 2027, the existing Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot Program was still in place at the time of the research and is the focus of the findings in this profile.

¹ CSU Maritime Academy merged with California Polytechnic State University on July 1, 2025.

² [U.S. colleges face enrollment drop, fewer high school seniors: NPR](#).

CONDITIONS FOR REDESIGN

Respondents described the institutional conditions for admissions redesign in California in the following ways:

- **Buy-in is generally high among under-enrolled CSU campuses.** Campuses struggling with enrollment have been supportive of this initiative, which aligns with their goals of providing greater access to students:

As one of the 10 CSUs that participated in this, I think we're all pretty driven, forward-thinking, and innovative in the way we seek to build our class because it's work, and we can't just rely on getting X amount of applications... no. We have to create it. We have to build it.

- **Six overenrolled CSU institutions have opted not to participate in the statewide initiative.** Long Beach State, Cal State Fullerton, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, Cal Poly Pomona, San Diego State, and San Jose State consistently receive more applications than they can accommodate. This is referred to as "impaction," at either the campus or program level. While the CSU system has universal minimum admissions criteria for admission, these impacted campuses typically use more selective admissions criteria.

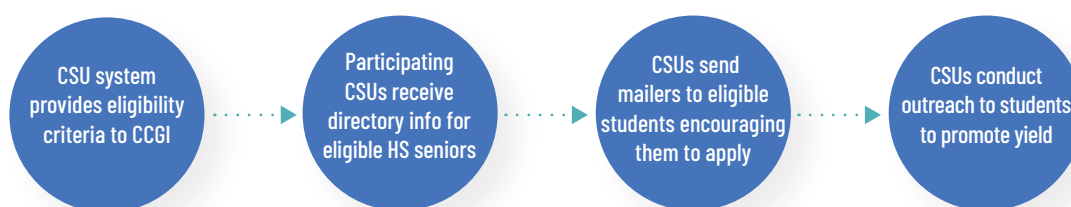


THE ADMISSIONS REDESIGN FOR CSU: RIVERSIDE COUNTY DIRECT ADMISSIONS PILOT

The CSU Direct Admissions initiative is aimed at improving student awareness of, and access to, higher education opportunities available in the CSU system and operates on three levels: the institutional level, the high school level, and the student level.

- CSU Institutions:** As shown in Figure 1 below, the CSU system provides eligibility criteria to CCGI and requests contact information for students deemed eligible based on A-G completion and GPA. The CSU sends mailers out to students informing them that they are admissible and encourages them to apply.

FIGURE 1 | CSU Direct Admissions Initiative activities at the Institution Level



In the **Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot**, the CSU provided one application waiver to students to offset the cost of their applications. The Pilot program also offered several events in Riverside County designed to promote the initiative and give institutions an opportunity to highlight their programs and distinctive characteristics to students.

- Public high schools in California:** As shown in Figure 2 below, all California public school districts are required to provide transcript data to CCGI as of June 2026. Housing this information on CCGI makes it accessible to high school counselors and students. School counselors, with data about students' A-G completion and GPA easily accessible, are expected to encourage 9th through 12th grade students to remain or get on track with A-G coursework so that they remain or become eligible for CSU admission. Counselors are also expected to support students who have received mailers from the CSU and encourage applications.

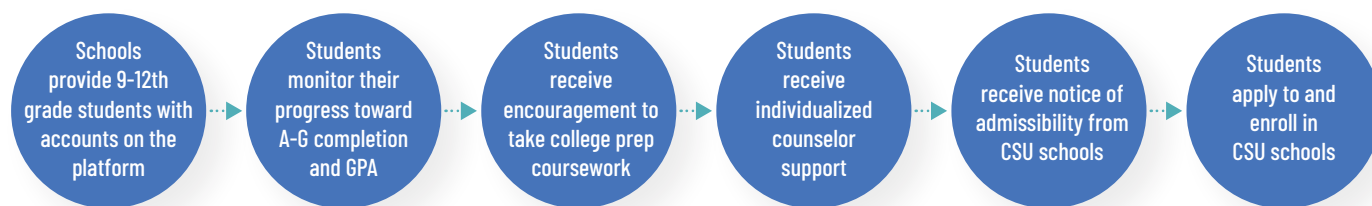
FIGURE 2 | CSU Direct Admissions Initiative activities at the High School Level



- Student level:** As displayed in Figure 3 below, the CaliforniaColleges.edu platform is designed to be student-facing, affording students the opportunity to track their completion of A-G coursework and GPA to support postsecondary planning. Reportedly, only 52% of high school graduates statewide complete A-G requirements, although eligible courses are available in every school district.

Beginning in 9th grade, students will be able to monitor their progress toward the universal admissions criteria, as well as receiving individualized support from their counselors to take rigorous coursework and remain on a college-preparatory path, if that is their postsecondary goal.

FIGURE 3 | CSU Direct Admissions Initiative activities at the Individual Student Level



IMPLEMENTATION AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Full-scale implementation of the CSU Direct Admissions Initiative, as codified in Senate Bill 640, takes effect in fall 2027. However, the Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot began in fall 2024 with a subset of CSU institutions. *This discussion highlights findings from the Pilot.*

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

In fall 2024, the CSU system launched the Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot for the high school graduating class of 2025. In describing their participation in the Pilot, interview respondents described the policies and practices they put in place, as well as the issues they faced.

- **Eight under-enrolled institutions were identified for participation in the Pilot; two additional campuses located in close proximity to Riverside County were soon added.** Initially, CSU San Bernardino and CSU San Marcos were not identified for the pilot, but their institutional leadership appealed to the CSU system office to allow them to be included, as their service areas include the county.
- **The CSU system provided eligibility criteria to CCGI and requested contact information for students meeting those criteria, and those “on the bubble.”** After signing a data sharing MOU, CSU received those lists and passed them on to participating CSU institutions. Eligible students were then sent letters from the CSU system office and individual CSU campuses, and “bubble” students received individualized outreach from the institution to review their application materials and make determinations about admissibility.
- **The Riverside Direct Admissions Pilot launched in fall 2024, in the middle of the CSU admissions cycle.**

Student lists were received by CSUs in November, when applications for impacted campuses are due. Participating, non-impacted campuses were able to extend their deadlines, and typically did, to accommodate students in the Pilot as well as other students throughout the state.

- **Campuses participating in the Riverside County Pilot received funding for travel and support with events.** The participating institutions are located throughout the state, some as many as 700 miles away from Riverside County. The CSU system provided funding to support institutional personnel to travel to Riverside County to support local events designed to promote the initiative and provide on-site admissions guarantees. The System also organized and publicized these events in partnership with the Riverside County Office of Education (RCOE). This logistical support was particularly helpful to smaller institutions who otherwise would have struggled to participate.
- **Participating CSU campuses emphasized the importance of making personal connections both with students and their families to support the initiative.** One campus reported that they reached out personally to all students whose data they received through CCGI, to review against their admission criteria, personalizing the experience so that more accepted students would decide to enroll. Institutions highlighted that it was critical to “connect on the emotional side of a student and family”:

We knew that we couldn't just, you know, depend on people coming in. We had to actively engage the students, which, in the end, worked really well for us, because we got really good results from the pilot.

- **Institutions recognize the value of relationships with school district leadership for the long-term sustainability of the initiative.** Some CSU institutions had existing relationships in the Riverside district that made their work easier and made other institutions “work harder.” Some participating institutions arranged for visits to district schools in conjunction with pilot events, during which they promoted their admitted student days and handed out special materials with QR codes directing students to the application portal.
- **Riverside district high schools received lists of eligible and “on the bubble” students in October and encouraged participation.** This timing meant that counselors had already completed outreach to seniors, and had to do subsequent follow-up with individual students to inform them about the opportunity and/or review their transcripts and make course enrollment modifications to help them become eligible. Counselors were strongly encouraged to help students use their application fee waiver codes, and were expected to deprioritize other tasks in order to focus on promoting the initiative: “we were pursuing kids well into March.” Counselors were directed to reach out to parents of students who indicated that they were not interested in applying to CSUs or becoming eligible, to confirm that parents supported their students’ plans. At least one high school offered a graduation honor cord for participation in the Pilot to motivate students.

STUDENT ADMISSIONS DATA

As with any admissions redesign, access to student data is a critical component. Sharing data between K12 systems and postsecondary institutions is a common challenge for direct admissions initiatives; the CSU initiative addresses this issue by relying on an intermediary (CCGI) to house transcript data, which is provided by school districts.

- **CCGI utilizes the universal CSU admissions criteria to identify students eligible for direct admissions.** CCGI allows schools, districts, and RCOE to run CSU eligibility reports to determine students who are on-track and those that need further review.

RCOE provided these lists to institutions and school districts to share with high school counseling staff. Institutions and districts reportedly could not receive lists directly from CCGI due to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) concerns. Individual CSUs are responsible for creating flags to identify students who receive auto-admit letters and track their application and enrollment behaviors.

- **Participating institutions had planned to leverage their Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems for student outreach in the pilot but were limited by the contact data provided through CCGI.** Institutions were expecting to use student email addresses, but only received physical addresses, so had to identify alternative strategies for outreach and tracking:

We wanted to use the new CRM to communicate in any way, shape or form with these students. Obviously, our hands were tied. We had no phone number. We had no email. But we could keep track of how many students apply based on the list that they gave us. So we took the list that they gave us, and we pulled all the applications that we were getting from Cal State Apply, and so we knew how many had participated or were offered direct admissions from the pilot.

- **Institutions are looking to develop MOUs with their feeder districts to obtain additional student contact information to facilitate more intrusive outreach.** Local partnerships would facilitate the development of relationships between institutions and district personnel, and would enable institutions to receive additional contact information (i.e., email addresses, phone numbers) for students and parents to support the initiative. Institutions are also eager to partner with schools to make presentations to students to promote the visibility of CSU options.



COMMUNICATIONS ABOUT THE ADMISSIONS REDESIGN

Admissions redesigns need to be clearly explained to many different stakeholder groups, including those in state and system governance, postsecondary institutions, the K12 sector, and students and their families. This can include marketing campaigns, advocacy efforts, and technological platforms, along with other strategies. California respondents offered multiple issues to consider based on their experience with the Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot.

- **Relying on print materials for student outreach had benefits and drawbacks.** Institutions had planned robust electronic communications campaigns that had to be abandoned due to the limited contact information they received from CCGI. They noted that print materials could be made bilingual and might reach families more directly than emails, but that print outreach was more expensive.
- **Most communication about the Pilot was coordinated by the CSU System office.** This was helpful for the pilot year, as institutions and districts required consistent messaging about the redesign, but participating CSUs expressed that they were eager to be more directly involved in messaging in the future, “to drum up more excitement and enthusiasm for the yield events” while avoiding “overwhelming students or parents.”
- **Participating CSUs were not aligned on the timing of student outreach.** CSUs were expected to wait until the System office had sent communications out to students before following up with their own materials. Some campuses were delayed in their outreach because they were waiting for final contact lists, but later learned that other campuses had already reached out to students:

- **School counselors reportedly provided inaccurate guidance to students.** Students eligible for the Pilot received application fee waivers that could be used at any CSU campus, not just those included in the Pilot. Institutions lamented that some students were encouraged to use them to apply to non-participating CSU campuses. In addition, some counselors reportedly told students that they did not need to complete applications after receiving notice that they were admissible:

I guess some school districts were having parent conferences or info sessions where they communicated to the parents that “Hey, you guys have been admitted. You don’t need to apply.” I’m like, “No, you do.”

- **Riverside COE developed webinars to share information about the Pilot with district and high school leadership.** District and high school respondents indicated that these were crucial, but that they would have liked to have an FAQ document for students and families.
- **Riverside district high schools sent information about the Pilot directly to students and families via email.** Information about the Pilot, including students’ application fee waiver codes, was sent directly to students and families to support participation.

It’s got to be better coordinated, otherwise the impact of the message we’re sending is diluted or just not really clearly understood.

FINANCIAL AID

Respondents universally recognized that students and families typically perceive the community colleges as the affordable option, and that an affordability message needs to be communicated in order for this initiative to fulfill its objectives. Over 80% of CSU students receive financial aid, and over 65% graduate with their bachelor's degree and no debt, but the CSU System has identified that more work needs to be done.

- **The CSU System is working with the California Student Aid Commission to focus on improving the financial aid process.** Respondents indicated that they want to communicate a clear message to students that if their families make less than \$80K, they will receive grants and waivers that cover tuition. Otherwise, respondents indicated that they were concerned that students would dismiss the option out of hand because they assume that they cannot afford it.
- **Participating CSUs brought financial aid staff to table at yield events to field questions from students and families.** They indicated that having financial aid professionals available on site facilitated a direct conversation about financial challenges in order to make the option feel more accessible:

So they were able to speak very robustly about all the ways that they're able to connect with students regarding their financial aid... I think that's the game changer.

- **Housing is the primary cost to students and is often limited at CSU campuses.** Participating CSUs included conversations about housing in their outreach communications in the Riverside Direct Admissions Pilot, and some institutions indicated that they planned to make priority housing available to pilot students. CSU campuses near Riverside County used housing as a part of their pitch to students:

We actually use that as part of our campaign to reach out to the students and say, "We're the affordable, excellent choice. We are local. You don't have to spend on housing. Yes, you got guaranteed admission to [another CSU campus], but do you really have the finances, or should you be borrowing just for housing, when you could just come down, you know, 30 minutes down the freeway and be at [our campus]."

- **Riverside district and high school respondents indicated that the application fee waivers were an important boost for many families.** Counselors reported that the CSU application fee represents a significant cost for many families, and waivers "gave them an accessibility that they didn't have before." Additionally, while students from low-income backgrounds often receive application fee waivers through other programs, students from more affluent backgrounds typically do not; making waivers available to these students motivated them to apply to CSUs. Application fee waivers also reportedly encouraged students to apply to more colleges than they might have otherwise.

EARLY REDESIGN OUTCOMES

The intended outcomes of this admissions redesign include the following:



Increased **automatic admissions offers** being generated and sent across the state to eligible 12th grade students;



Increased **applications and enrollments** among students who receive automatic admissions offers;



Increased **number of networked and linked K12 districts** in CCGI portal; and



Increased completion of **A-G requirements** among high school students.

Overall, the work in California should drive an **increase in enrollment and completion** among students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students; lead to an **increase in transfer** enrollments across the CSU system; reduce anxiety and uncertainty among students applying for college; improve the **financial aid application and packaging** process using CCGI data; and promote a greater awareness of the **value of the CSU system**.

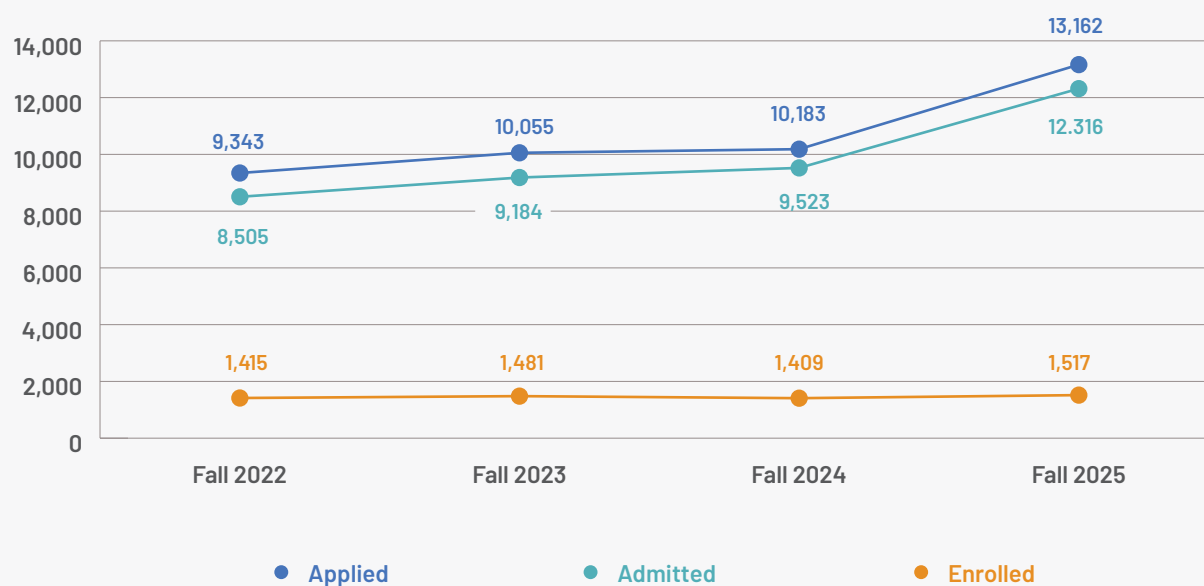
While the Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot has only impacted students entering CSU in fall 2025, this section leverages data published by CSU on their public [Applications & Admissions dashboard](#) to assess early changes in redesign outcomes. The analysis below illustrates the early impact of the Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot.



ALL RIVERSIDE COUNTY STUDENTS

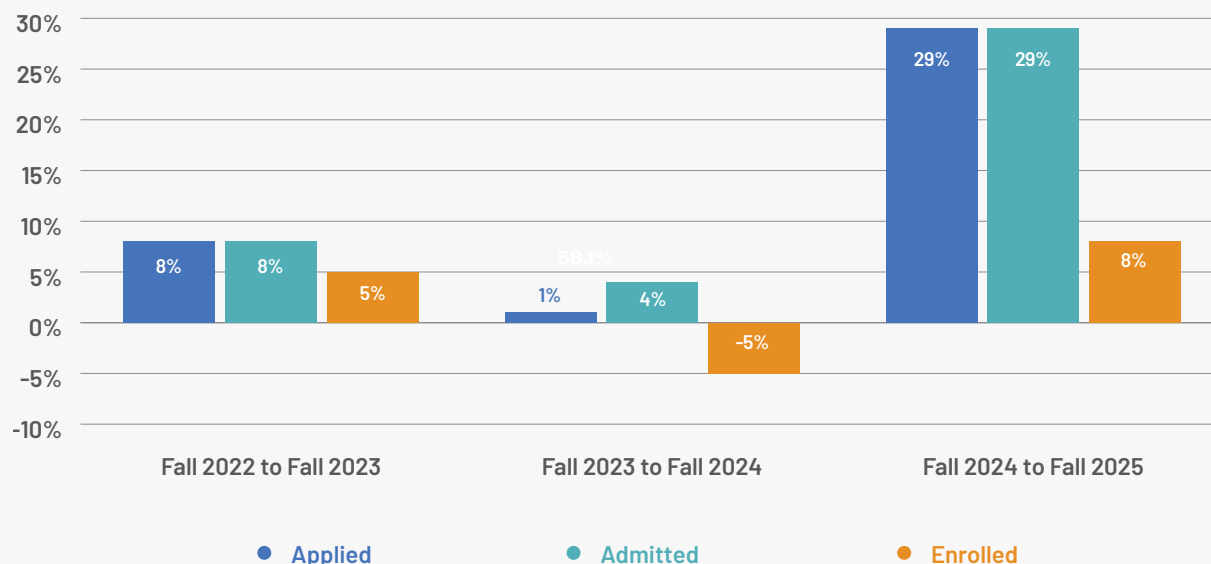
Figure 4 below displays trends in the number of applications, admissions, and enrollments of Riverside County students at seven of the ten CSU institutions involved in the pilot³ from fall 2022 through fall 2025. Figure 5 displays the year-over-year percent change in those same metrics. It is important to note that application and admission counts in this data are not deduplicated, meaning that the same individual may be counted more than once if they applied to or were admitted by multiple CSU institutions included here. Enrollment counts, by contrast, are assumed to be deduplicated. This distinction should be kept in mind when interpreting the figures, particularly when comparing application and admission volumes to enrollment figures.

FIGURE 4 | Number of applications, admissions, and enrollments from Riverside County students to CSU institutions involved in the pilot, Fall 2022 - 2025



³ The ten institutions involved in the pilot, according to the [CSU press release](#): Channel Islands, Chico, East Bay, Humboldt, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay, San Bernardino, San Francisco, San Marcos, and Sonoma. Enrollment data was not available for East Bay, Maritime Academy, and Sonoma campuses due to the dashboard restriction that groups smaller than 10 are not shown. Those three campuses are thus excluded from this analysis.

FIGURE 5 | Percentage change in applications, admissions, and enrollments of Riverside County students to CSU institutions involved in the pilot, 2022 – 2025



- Applications and admissions grew sharply from the fall of 2024 to the fall of 2025.** Prior to the launch of the Pilot, applications and admissions among all Riverside County students were growing at a modest, but slowing pace (8% each between fall 2022 and fall 2023 and 1% and 4% between fall 2023 and fall 2024). Following the launch of the Pilot, both metrics accelerated sharply, with both applications and admissions increasing by 29% between fall 2024 and fall 2025, representing the largest single-year gains in the period examined. In absolute terms, the number of applications grew from 10,183 in fall 2024 to 13,162 in fall 2025, and admissions grew from 9,523 to 12,316 over the same period.
- Enrollment also increased between fall 2024 and fall 2025.** Enrollment grew modestly by 5% between fall 2022 and fall 2023, declined by 5% between fall 2023 and fall 2024, and then recovered to 8% growth (from 1,409 to 1,517 enrolled students) between fall 2024 and fall 2025. While more modest than the sharp increases in applications and admissions, this represents a positive early signal given the compressed timeline of the Pilot's first year of implementation.
- Admission rates also rose over the period studied** (not displayed graphically). Admission rates (% of students admitted among those who applied), rose from 91% in fall 2023 to 94% in fall 2024 and held at 94% in fall 2025. This is consistent with the Pilot's goal of proactively identifying and admitting eligible students. Because application and admission counts are not deduplicated, yield rates (which compare enrollments to admissions) are not directly computable and are not emphasized here. The number of enrolled students is the more reliable indicator of student follow-through for this study.

STUDENTS OF COLOR FROM RIVERSIDE COUNTY

Figures 6 and 7 provide the same data as in the prior section (number of applications, admissions and enrollments and % change in each), but among students of color⁴ from Riverside County, rather than all students.

FIGURE 6 | Number of students of color from Riverside County who applied, were admitted, and enrolled in CSU institutions involved in the pilot, 2022 - 2025

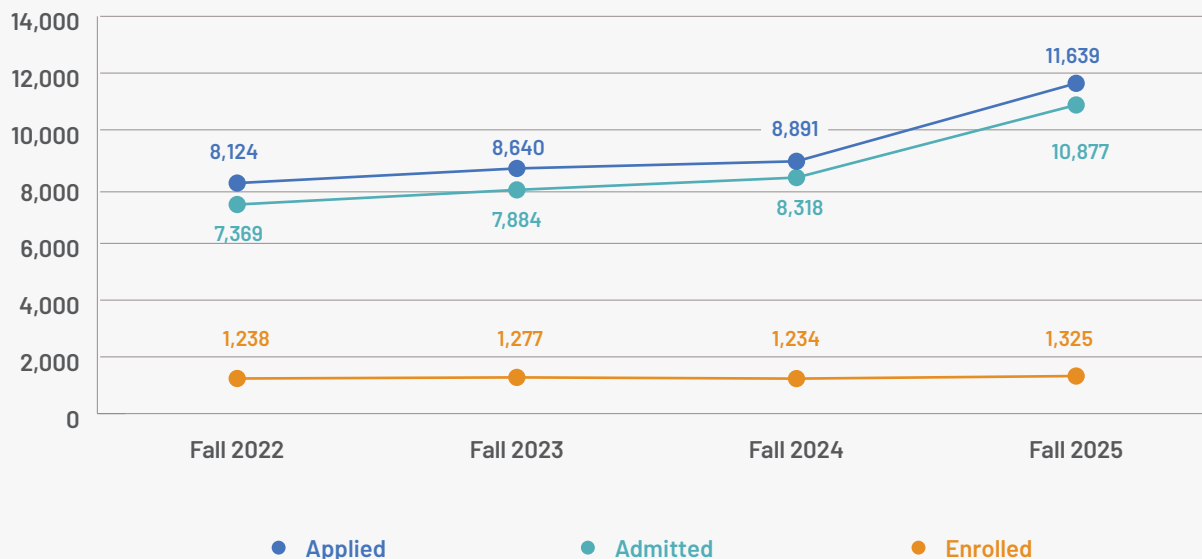
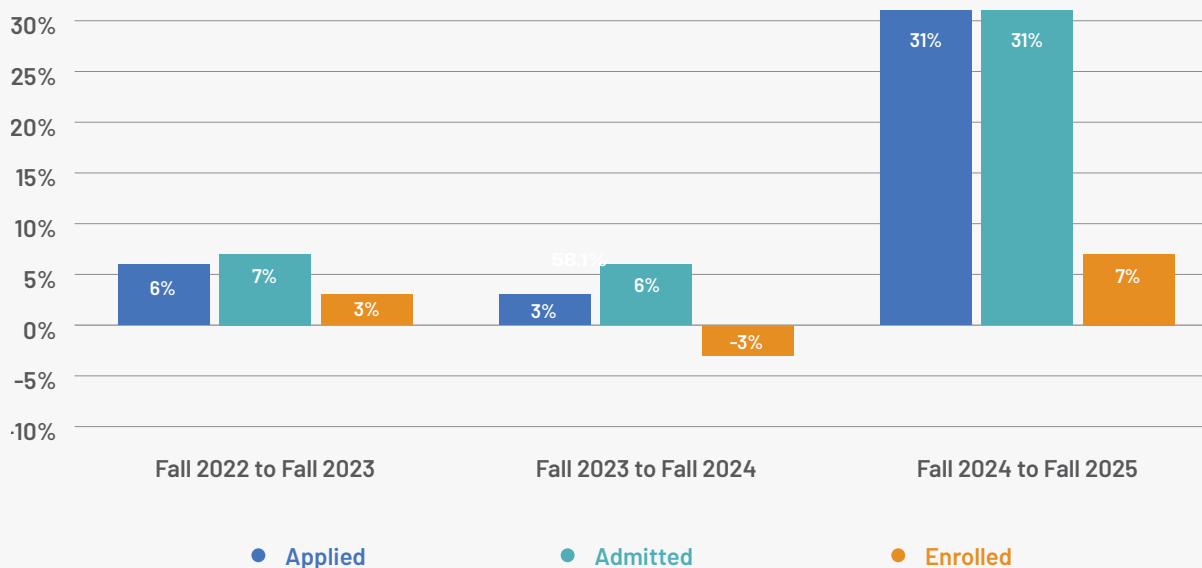


FIGURE 7 | Percentage change in applications, admissions, and enrollments of students of color from Riverside County to CSU institutions involved in the pilot, 2022 - 2025



⁴ Students of color includes students identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander or Two or More Races. Excluded are students identified as White or an International Student (since race / ethnicity is unknown in the latter case).

- **Trends among students of color from Riverside County closely mirrored, and in some respects exceeded those observed for all Riverside County students.** Applications and admissions grew modestly in the two years prior to the Pilot (6-7% and 3-6%, respectively), then accelerated to 31% growth in both applications and admissions between fall 2024 and fall 2025. The growth in applications and admissions of students of color exceeded the already substantial gains observed for all students (Figure 5). In absolute terms, applications from students of color grew from 8,891 in fall 2024 to 11,639 in fall 2025, and admissions grew from 8,318 to 10,877 over the same period.
- **As with the broader population, enrollment also increased from fall 2024 to fall 2025.** After modest growth of 3% between fall 2022 and fall 2023, enrollment declined by 3% the following year before recovering to 7% growth (from 1,234 to 1,325 enrolled students) between fall 2024 and fall 2025.
- **Admission rates for students of color rose following the Pilot's launch, similar to the trends for all students.** Admission rates for students of color rose from 91% in fall 2023 to 94% in fall 2024 and held at 94% in fall 2025. These patterns suggest that while the Pilot has been effective in generating applications and admissions for students of color, additional work is needed to support matriculation, particularly around personalized outreach, affordability messaging, and support through the enrollment process.

SUCSESSES, CHALLENGES, AND EQUITY

Respondents identified a number of successes and challenges that may help to inform the work being done in other states, and are discussed in this section, as well as the ways in which the CSU Direct Admissions Initiative has helped to address issues of equity for students.

ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION SUCCESSES

The success of the Riverside County Direct Admissions Pilot was instrumental in supporting legislation to expand the program statewide through Senate Bill 640.

- **There is broad support and excitement for the Initiative.** Respondents from the CSU System office, individual CSUs, and participating high school districts expressed strong support for the Initiative, believing that it will help the System work better together to provide affordable CSU options to students who may have otherwise believed that a four-year degree was out of reach:

We're really trying to break down the barriers and make sure that we're increasing access, which is part of the mission of the CSU as a state university, and also letting students know that we are a viable option for them in the state to receive their bachelor's degree.

This was a clear, deliberate, out of the norm approach that I love because it made us really go out there and tell [students]: "Hey, don't forget that you have guaranteed admission at a CSU and it could be as affordable as community college. We're here to support you."

- **Institutions who participated in the Pilot saw increases in applications and enrollment.** At the time of data collection, respondents were still waiting to see how enrollments may change over the summer, but were encouraged by strong growth in applications, enrollment confirmations, and transfers, as evidenced by the data above.
- **Early eligibility notification reduces anxiety and promotes the CSUs as an option.** Respondents from the System level, CSUs, and high schools reported that proactive notification to students about their admissibility to CSUs helps to reduce anxiety and uncertainty surrounding postsecondary options:

[The initiative helps to] demystify [the process] and bolster the confidence of students to move forward with their applications.

- **The collaboration across state offices, postsecondary agencies, K12 and CSU institutions has been successful.** The CSU System worked with CCGI, individual campuses, school districts, and vendors to move the pilot to launch quickly, which helped to provide the evidence that supported broader adoption statewide of the Direct Admissions Initiative.
- **Riverside district and high school respondents indicated that this initiative is making CSUs more accessible.** Counselors reported that the Pilot was increasing awareness of other CSU campuses that are not impacted and therefore more accessible. Counselors also indicated that the Pilot helped students realize that they could be admissible to a CSU with a 2.5 GPA; many had reportedly thought that they needed at least a 3.0 and had been deterred from considering a CSU.

- **High school counselors reported that the Pilot was changing parents’ minds about their students’ potential.** Counselors shared that some parents were dubious that their child was admissible to a CSU, even when they were informed about the initiative and received eligibility notification. Walking families through the application process and seeing their admission status change helped families understand what might be possible for their students.
- **Riverside high school personnel report that counselors and students are using the CCGI platform to monitor academic progress.** District and high school respondents reported that counselors were using the CaliforniaColleges platform to track students’ college applications to support follow-through, and that students were using CCGI to track their classes and flag transcript errors and inconsistencies.
- **The location of the yield events posed a challenge for some districts.** District and high school respondents indicated that Riverside County is large, and both yield events were held in the northern part of the county, an hour away from some districts. Counselors shared that while districts communicated the expectation that schools would participate in these events, the logistics of requesting a bus and staffing the trips created additional burdens, and some schools opted not to participate.
- **Communication and coordination were challenging due to the speed and timing of the launch.** High school counselors had already completed their outreach to seniors, so the initiative required them to do another round of outreach as well as extra transcript reviews. Participating CSUs felt that there was a lack of guidance regarding when to reach out to students and how to communicate effectively without overwhelming students and families.

ADOPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Any new policy comes with challenges; interview respondents identified the following in the adoption and implementation of the Direct Admissions Pilot:

- **The Pilot launched very rapidly in the middle of the admissions cycle.** Participating institutions had a very short on-ramp and had to quickly figure out how to market the opportunity to students. The timing of the launch meant that application deadlines had to shift, which compressed the institutional admissions processing schedule in the spring. Yield events were held in March, after the application deadline, and the purpose of those events was reportedly unclear. As one respondent explained, “We were kinda building the plane as it was flying... I think there were a lot of bumps.”

I think a similar playbook needs to be provided to the campuses, so we’re all aligned... having ten of us email the same student with the same message could create confusion or frustration. What do we do with that? Some framework will be helpful so that we’re not creating chaos or undermining the value of this program through mixed or conflicted messages.

- **Participating institutions shared concerns regarding clear messaging, noting that school personnel were not necessarily providing accurate information to students.** Respondents reported that some students were advised that they did not need to apply to take advantage of the opportunity:

[We need to] make sure that we are clear that “here’s the steps you need to take” because they may miss a deadline. They may say, “Well, I was admitted, so I didn’t think I had to do that.”

- **District and high school respondents reported confusion in utilizing the application fee waiver codes.** There was confusion on how to use the fee waiver codes. The codes could only be used with Cal State Apply, but students attempted to use them with other application platforms. In other cases, students received a fee waiver after already applying to four CSU campuses free of charge.
- **Relying on a print marketing campaign had limitations.** Print-based marketing materials are more expensive and therefore unsustainable, particularly for smaller institutions. The current CCGI data sharing agreement does not provide student email addresses, which is why institutions are looking to develop MOUs with feeder districts to obtain those data. District- and high school-level respondents indicated that mailing addresses are often unreliable, and many students did not appear to have received mailed information about the initiative.

A lot of kids don’t check the mail. Sometimes it’s down the street, and [they] never, never go over there. So they didn’t realize that they had [the mailing]. Or even if they did get it, not necessarily knowing what it was about, they might have thought, ‘Oh, this is trash’ and [threw] it out.

- **Parent outreach was not a strong component of the Pilot.** Participating CSUs were eager to communicate directly with parents but did not have access to parent contact information. There was one parent-facing evening event held in the County, but attendance was poor. Respondents suggested that there should be programming that gets parents excited about this opportunity, which will likely require additional parent outreach:

I think parent education is so important, and Riverside is prime for that. We did a parent event, and it was okay attended, but we need to get those parents more engaged. And we have some platforms that we use specifically for parents, but it requires an email.

- **District and high school respondents indicated that parents were skeptical of this initiative.** Parents were reportedly very confused about the initiative, and what direct admissions means. Counselors had to educate both students and families to explain how it works, and help parents trust that this initiative was legitimate. Parents were reportedly wary of a free application.

- **Pilot participants suggest that the admissions redesign does not necessarily remove the bureaucratic barriers that make college application difficult for students, nor does it address the transition to college.** Some suggested that more work should be done in thinking through the barriers students face in applying and following through to matriculation, as well as financial aid. Respondents from CSUs and high schools also shared concerns about summer melt. Proactive admissibility notification is just the first step:

There's still every single thing a student in this program had to do that other students outside of Riverside County had to do as well.

- **CSU campuses not involved in the Riverside Pilot will need clear communication.** Respondents indicated that there was limited information getting out to campuses not involved in the pilot, and that there remained a need to clearly articulate the vision of the Initiative to promote buy-in and keep it from being “more of another thing we have to do.”
- **Smaller and rural districts may struggle to comply with the CCGI mandate.** While rural superintendents are on board with the initiative because they think it will broaden access for their students, respondents noted that some schools and districts lack the data infrastructure that facilitates data sharing with CCGI.

EQUITY FOR STUDENTS

The CSU System office and participating institutions are unified in their belief that this initiative has the potential to break down barriers for students to promote college-going among first-generation, low-income, and BIPOC students, particularly if the affordability component can be successfully addressed:

[The redesign] is all about creating a system that is equitable... [giving students] confidence and preparation and support to be able to see themselves [at a CSU].

The Initiative is also aimed at changing the reputation of CSUs to be more accessible and inviting for students who may self-select out to community colleges. Respondents explained that:

My hope is that we're really hitting the underserved, the first-generation, low-income, underrepresented minority students that aren't really thinking about a four-year degree, to make them know that this is an option for them and that there's tools and support and a welcoming community.

I don't think that Cal States do a good enough job talking about ourselves beyond just our access and affordability... we're accessible to high achieving students, as we are with students that are the first in their families to go.



LESSONS LEARNED

In this final section of the profile, we will discuss the arguments that were effective in the state for admissions redesign, the collaboration and communication taking place, the unintended consequences of the reform, and overall lessons learned.

ARGUMENTS FOR ADMISSIONS REDESIGN

While admissions redesigns have developed in states and systems across the country, it can still be a challenge in some circumstances and with some constituencies to make the case for this type of reform, especially in light of common concerns around student data privacy. Respondents in California indicated that the following arguments supported buy-in for this initiative:

- Breaking down the barriers to admissions:**
 Respondents indicated that there were numerous “external and internal forces” interested in simplifying the admissions process to promote equitable access for students. The CSU System, individual CSUs, and K12 districts were easily aligned on the goal of improving college admissions access to students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students.
- Promoting the CSUs as “affordable excellence”:**
 CSU System level respondents as well as those from individual CSUs commonly used this phrase to describe the opportunity at the CSU to students, parents, and other stakeholders.
- Increasing college-going among those who do not consider themselves college material:** Respondents recognize that there are students who opt out of higher education altogether, due to concerns about cost, preparedness, or both. They clearly view this as an opportunity to connect with those students and provide an alternative path:

[The motivation is] to bring access to students who might not necessarily be aware of the opportunity to go to higher education.

- Increasing four-year college-going among those who would otherwise go to community college:**
 The CSUs perceive that they have been losing students to the community college, due to the tuition discounts offered at those institutions. They view this opportunity as a way to recruit those students to the CSUs:

For those who don't think they're college material: 'You are college material'... getting more students to think about college, because we're losing them out to the community college because of their two-years-free.

[Counselors] were just hoping they'd use the darn code. And had options, had a letter of acceptance and the option to be able to go to a four-year if they chose to do that.

COLLABORATION

State or system admissions redesigns cannot be developed in a bubble. It is critical that policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholder groups work together and learn from each other in designing, adopting and implementing the redesign. Collaboration was happening on a number of levels to support the CSU Direct Admissions Initiative.

- The CSU System is collaborating with individual campuses, CCGI, vendors, and Riverside COE to support this Initiative.** The System office was meeting regularly with each of these groups to manage various aspects of the Initiative, and then working closely with the Riverside County Office of Education to support the Direct Admissions pilot.



- **CCGI has been meeting with CSU campuses to promote district partnership.** There have been regional meetings focused on helping support K12 districts in getting their transcripts uploaded to CCGI, and supporting CSU campuses in navigating the CCGI system to support their outreach efforts.
- **CSUs involved in the Riverside Pilot had various levels of collaboration.** The participating campuses are spread out geographically throughout the state, so institutional collaboration was limited. However, some respondents noted that there was some collaboration between institutional representatives at county celebration events, which led to informal relationship building.
- **High schools have responded to the initiative by increasing their credit recovery options for students.** In reviewing “bubble” students’ transcripts for A-G eligibility, counselors were charged with identifying gaps and helping students enroll in courses that would satisfy the requirements through credit recovery. Some school respondents indicated that they have reviewed data on course completions to identify individual courses that students are most likely to struggle with, and adding sections of those courses in the schedule via credit recovery to support the initiative.
- **District and high school respondents indicated that undocumented students may not have had adequate exposure to the initiative.** Due to the current political climate, respondents shared that many undocumented students are less likely to be at school because parents are keeping them home for fear of deportation. These students are also more likely to have unreliable mailing addresses, and therefore may have only learned about the initiative through outreach done at school.
- **High school counselors reported that the heavy emphasis on participation in the Pilot meant that resources were directed away from other responsibilities.** High school counselors are responsible for supporting postsecondary planning as well as numerous other tasks, including mental health support. Some counselors indicated that exclusively focusing on supporting this initiative took time away from supporting students’ mental health, which undermines their college readiness.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Policies will often lead to outcomes no one expected or intended as part of a new initiative or program. Respondents identified the following actual or potential consequences from the Riverside Direct Admissions Pilot:

- **Representatives from participating institutions developed relationships at County events:** These respondents indicated that these relationships afforded the sharing of best practices and strategies across institutions.
- **Extending the application deadline for pilot participants meant that on-campus housing was likely already full before students committed.** Participating CSUs often extended their applications to accommodate the Riverside pilot students, as notification of eligibility was delayed as the pilot rolled out. Because the pilot participation was centered in the admissions and enrollment departments, not housing, there was little leverage that departments had to ensure that some housing was made available for pilot participants. Respondents indicated that there have been conversations about how to avoid this in the future.



- **Some respondents expressed concern that students on the bubble of eligibility might be dissuaded from applying.** Because these students would not have received notification of admissibility, some feared that they might be discouraged and would not persist in applications.
- **Participating in the Pilot helped institutions clean up internal processes.** Institutional respondents indicated that their engagement in the pilot helped them identify internal processes that could be streamlined to support the initiative.
- **Campuses believe that personalized outreach is important to maximize yield.** Respondents indicated that students appreciate a personalized approach. Campuses are interested in offering transportation and priority housing, along with holding local events to celebrate students' accomplishments and increasing their direct outreach, to support yield from this initiative:

Maybe getting a list of all the students who participated [in the event] and us circling back with them and saying, "It was really nice to meet you. Feel free to reach out with any other questions regarding your admissions to our institution."

OVERALL LESSONS LEARNED

In summarizing lessons learned, a number of themes emerge from the Riverside Pilot:

- **Clear communication is needed for school personnel supporting the Initiative.** Respondents shared that students, families, and school counselors did not fully understand the opportunity. Participating CSUs reported that some students were advised that they did not have to apply, and could use their application fee waivers at non-participating institutions. As the Initiative continues to scale, it is critical to develop clear informational materials and talking points to minimize confusion.
- **Participating institutions need additional contact information to mobilize communications campaigns.** Institutions are eager to develop MOUs with local feeder districts so that they can obtain email addresses for students and parents, enabling them to utilize their CRM systems and web-based engagement platforms to promote visibility and connection.
- **Parent outreach is an important component of the Initiative.** Respondents indicated that outreach to parents, especially for first-generation students, is important in explaining the value of a four-year degree and helping them support their student. School-level respondents indicated that they have made a concerted effort to update mailing addresses to support the initiative going forward.
- **Campus visits and conversations about affordability are critical to increasing yield:** Participating institutions were adamant that providing opportunities for students to visit campus and have honest conversations about cost and financial aid are critical to moving from enrollment to matriculation.

For additional information on this admissions redesign, see Research for Action's California State University logic model at researchforaction.org/admissions-redesign/5

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible with the generous financial support of Lumina Foundation. We want to thank Lumina Foundation's team for their ongoing input and feedback, especially Melanie Heath, Ph.D. and Wendy Sedlak, Ph.D. We also want to thank the research advisory team and those who participated in data collection activities in Arizona, California and Illinois for their assistance. Many colleagues at Research for Action contributed to this report, including project team members Kri Burkander, Ph.D., Mark Duffy, Molly Pileggi, and Alita Robinson, as well as Kim Glassman, project advisor.



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ENDNOTES

ⁱA-G requirements refer to a set of high school courses required for admission by the UCs and CSUs: <https://cacollegeguidance.org/resourcehub/help/what-are-a-g-requirements/>