

POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
ADMISSIONS REDESIGN:

Lessons for the Field

March 2026



Mark Duffy, Kri Burkander, Ph.D. and Alita Robinson

Postsecondary Education Admissions Redesign: Lessons for the Field

Based on interviews with researchers in the field and policymakers and practitioners on the ground, a number of lessons learned were identified across both Great Admissions Design Implementation Grantees and the wider field involved in admissions redesign.

Motivations for Redesign and Arguments for Change

Admissions redesigns have become common across nearly half the states. It is important to understand what is motivating these shifts in traditional admissions policies and processes, as well as the arguments that can be used to encourage change in states that have yet to adopt similar programs. The following were identified:

- **Anticipated enrollment cliff:**

Due to both lower birthrates resulting in decreases in high school graduates, as well as current questions about the value of higher education, postsecondary institutions, especially regional universities and community colleges, are concerned about current and projected decreases in postsecondary enrollment. In response, they are looking for strategies to increase their applications and enrollment.

- **Focus on increasing college access and success:**

States across the country have set goals to increase the percentage of residents with a postsecondary degree or credential, at least in part to address workforce development needs in their states, as well as in response to data showing that those who complete a postsecondary education earn more over their lifetime than those with only a high school diploma.

- **Need to reflect the post-COVID environment:**

The pandemic changed the way many of our systems work, including college admissions, forcing postsecondary policymakers and administrators to question institutional priorities and processes. This dynamic led to shifts such as test-optional admissions, and have continued with redesigns such as direct admissions.

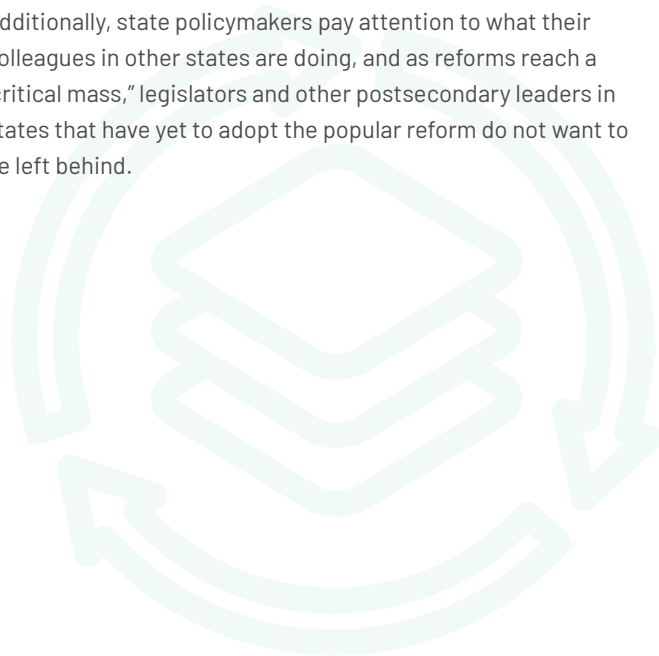
- **Relative simplicity of the redesign:**

While no reform is simple or free, admissions redesigns are less costly and complex than larger postsecondary policy shifts such as performance-based funding and promise programs, focusing instead on a single barrier to college access: the application process. At the same time, simplifying the admissions process for students often involves complex technological challenges for administrators around admissions platform designs and data access, as well as other issues.

- **Appeal to policymakers from both political parties:**

The rapid diffusion of admissions redesigns across so many states is supported by the fact that policymakers across the political spectrum can find reasons to support it. For progressives, these changes speak to college access and more equitable opportunities, while for conservatives, the cost-effectiveness and transparency of simplifying the admission process can be enticing.

Additionally, state policymakers pay attention to what their colleagues in other states are doing, and as reforms reach a “critical mass,” legislators and other postsecondary leaders in states that have yet to adopt the popular reform do not want to be left behind.



Critical Components for Redesign Adoption and Implementation

While there are multiple types of admissions redesigns as outlined in the **typology**, a number of critical elements and strategies for this type of reform were identified, including components at both the state or system and institutional levels:

- **Redesign managers who drive adoption and implementation:**

In order to successfully adopt and implement an admissions redesign, states and systems undertaking this type of reform need a point person who can devote their attention to the many aspects of redesign adoption and execution. Similarly, postsecondary institutions implementing an admissions redesign on their campus(es) also need an administrator to manage the work, coordinate implementation across offices and departments, and ensure success.

- **Engagement across state or system and institutional stakeholders:**

It is critical to engage all of the stakeholder groups involved in a state or postsecondary education system when designing, adopting, and implementing an admissions reform. These stakeholders include the governor's office, the state legislature, institutional leaders, and financial aid agencies, as well as other policymakers and advocates. While college admissions is a process most directly associated with the postsecondary sector, the K12 sector is also very involved and needs to have a voice at the table. Within institutions, admissions and enrollment management are just two of the key offices that will be involved in implementation; others that need to engage in the work may include academic advising, information technology, and the institutional effectiveness or research office, as well as the president's cabinet.

- **Awareness of and orientation to the redesign:**

State or system postsecondary agencies need to make the general public, postsecondary institutions, school districts, and other related state agencies aware of the changes in the admissions process and their role in the reform. This is especially critical within the K12 sector; school district and high school staff involved in helping students plan for their next steps after graduation need to be well oriented to the new redesigns so they can make their students aware of the opportunities being provided and answer questions from students and families.

- **Systems to measure the impact of admissions redesign:**

In a number of states and systems that have adopted admissions redesigns, available student data do not allow stakeholders to measure the impact of reform. The admissions processes put in place need to allow a state or postsecondary system to track which students: receive offers of admission through the program, complete the application process, and subsequently enroll and matriculate in participating postsecondary institutions as a result.

These processes will **facilitate the support necessary** to adopt an admissions redesign at the state or system level, implement the redesign at the local level, and sustain the redesign by providing data showing its impact on student access to and enrollment in postsecondary education.

Conditions that influence Admissions Redesign

While admissions redesigns have been adopted in many different states and systems with a variety of political and structural settings, the context in which an admissions redesign is developed can influence whether and to what degree adoption and implementation are successful. Understanding these dynamics can help policymakers create the conditions that can support reform. These conditions include:

- **Whether and how the redesign is supported by policy:**

Although state legislation, board regulation, or other policy mechanisms are not essential for a state or system to adopt an admissions redesign, such a mandate requiring the development of such reforms can facilitate implementation and compliance. At the same time, strict regulation can make amendments to the program difficult if changes are needed based on issues that arise during implementation.

- **Access to student data on high school achievement:**

While states have developed workarounds (i.e., school, district, and/or student opt-in) if privacy concerns or structural limitations do not allow postsecondary agencies to gain direct access to student high school records, strong P20 state longitudinal data systems can facilitate these types of reforms and more easily allow for proactive notification of student eligibility for admission.

- **Collaboration across educational agencies, sectors, and postsecondary institutions:**

The development or use of existing working groups, communities of practice, or other networks at the state or system level and across the K12 and postsecondary sectors helps to facilitate a shared design, broad support, and successful adoption of an admissions redesign. At the state or system level, collaboration across institutional administrators who play similar roles at their individual colleges and universities can create opportunities for problem solving and sharing best practices. Within institutions that can often be siloed by departments or offices, collaboration is similarly valuable to smooth implementation and develop shared systems.

Communication with Prospective College Students and their Families

On a daily basis, people are inundated with unsolicited information, sometimes from disreputable sources. This dynamic can make it difficult to break through the noise to convince prospective students and their families that an offer of admission from one or more postsecondary institutions in a state is legitimate and that they should take the next step in the admissions process. To address these realities, states and postsecondary systems can:

- **Keep the initial messaging simple and clear:**

While admissions redesign programs typically have multiple caveats and next steps before a student can enroll, the initial messaging to students needs to get their attention and get them excited about their postsecondary opportunities, without listing all of the details. The communication that students receive also needs to direct them to a one-stop website with next steps, including a simplified application with a fee waiver if applicable, an enrollment form, a link to the FAFSA and other financial aid opportunities, and contact information for an advisor to speak with to get any questions answered.

- **Communicate through multiple channels:**

The research is not yet clear on what communication strategies are most effective, and it may vary by student, so programs should leverage multiple communication vehicles, including texting, email, and traditional paper mailings in reaching out to students and families.

- **Notify trusted adults as well as students:**

Along with the students themselves, make sure to inform parents or other family members, guidance counselors, and other trusted adults that a student has been offered admissions to postsecondary institutions through an admission redesign program.

- **Make sure to use language that speaks to students:**

In order to reach students, the messaging needs to be written in ways that they will find accessible and credible. To ensure that this is the case, test initial messaging with student groups and use their feedback to craft and refine the language and graphics that are used in student outreach. Make sure to provide the materials in multiple languages as appropriate, and continue to test and adapt the language as needed to reflect changing times.

These materials will also be more successful in reaching students in state or postsecondary systems that have done the foundational work of **building community awareness about the program**, as was mentioned previously.



Challenges, Unintended Consequences, and Workarounds

As with any reform, challenges and unintended consequences arise. Understanding those issues can help policymakers and practitioners determine the best way to address them in their local context. These issues include the following:

- **Access to student data due to privacy and structural issues:**

Just as access to student achievement data is a condition that facilitates admissions redesign, limited access is a challenge in many states and systems. Both privacy concerns around FERPA and a lack of cross-sector data sharing infrastructures between K12 and postsecondary education create limitations. States and systems have developed multiple workarounds to address these data issues, such as:

- » Requiring students and/or schools/districts to **opt-into the program and agree to provide access to student data.**
- » Requesting their **state department of education or individual high schools** to identify eligible students.
- » Partnering with **state financial aid** agencies that have student data; and
- » Working with **individual data vendors.**

- **Loss of revenue from application fee waivers:**

While waiving application fees is a central component of admissions redesign, it was also commonly listed as an institutional challenge with this type of reform. Indeed, some states and systems with these programs only provide the waiver to students with financial need or during specific time periods in the application cycle. To address this issue, institutions have developed plans on how to offset the financial losses from this source of revenue, and in some cases, states have provided additional funding to institutions during the initial implementation phase to help them in transitioning away from relying on these funds.

- **Confusion around multiple related admissions programs:**

In many states, there are multiple admissions redesigns aimed to help students access a postsecondary education or transfer from a two- to a four-year institution, which can create confusion for high school counselors and college administrators as well as students and families. As state policy contexts change, individual programs also can shift over time, amending the elements and requirements of the program. These dynamics reemphasize the need for strong awareness and orientation campaigns so that practitioners and the general public clearly understand these programs and what is involved.

- **Institutional capacity to process additional applications:**

Some institutions, especially smaller universities and community colleges, have limited admissions staff, and therefore expressed concerns that substantial increases in the number of applications they receive will make processing difficult. While initial admissions offers are made based on limited data such as GPA, institutions often need to verify student information through transcript review, which can be time consuming. There is also concern that many of the students who apply to an institution through an admissions redesign program may have less interest in actually enrolling compared to students applying through a more traditional process.

Finally, admissions redesigns do not address one of the largest barriers to a postsecondary education: the **cost of tuition** and fees, as well as **housing** for students studying away from their home community. While application fees are sometimes waived, and offering admission to students who might not have considered college can help to increase access and enrollment, students and their families still need to be able to pay for a postsecondary education, an issue that admission redesigns do not typically address.

